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からのきょうつかい

空の境界
the Garden of sinners 上



Kara no Kyoukai Volume 01

The Garden of Sinners

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Translation at Baka-Tsuki

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1/俯瞰風景

*Chapter 1
Overlooking View -
Fujoh Kirie*

Chanatos.



Overlooking View (Thanatos) -Fujoh Kirie-

That day, I chose to take the main street home.

It was just a whim, and a very rare thing for me to do.

Walking woodenly along the building-lined street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down.

It was a squishing sound that isn't usually heard.

The person lying on the pavement, broken, had obviously died from falling off a building.

A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete.

The only features that remained were the dark black hair and the pale, thin, fragile-looking limbs.

And that featureless, crushed face.

The whole scene reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the covers of a heavy tome.

Probably because the corpse, with only its neck bent like a fetus, looked like a broken lily to me.

On a night at the beginning of August, Mikiya came by without any notice.

"Good evening. You look lazy as always, Shiki."

The sudden visitor stands by the entrance as he gives a boring greeting with a smile.

"I passed an accident on my way here. A girl jumped from the top of a building: a suicide. Though I heard it's been happening a lot recently I never thought I'd see one myself. Here, freezer."

He throws me a plastic bag from a convenience store as he unties his shoes by the door. Inside are two strawberry [Häagen-Dazs](#). I guess he means I should put them in the freezer before they melt.

While I was slowly checking out the contents of the bag, Mikiya had finished taking off his shoes and was stepping across the threshold.

My house is a one room apartment. If you go past the hallway, which isn't even a meter long, from the entrance you get to the room serving as both bedroom and living room.

Staring at the back of Mikiya, who was stepping quickly into the room, I followed him into my room.

"Shiki. You skipped school again today, right? You can do something later about your grades, but you won't be able to pass unless you attend at least the required number of days. Did you forget about our promise to go to college together?"

"Do you have the right to lecture me about school? I don't remember such a promise, and what's more, you've already dropped out of college."

"Uh, if you say 'rights', there aren't any rights for anybody."

Sounding sophisticated, Mikiya sits down. He tends to let out his true feelings when he's on the defensive; it's something I remembered just recently.

Mikiya sat in the middle of the room.

I sit on the bed behind him and lay down horizontally. He keeps his back turned towards me.

I look at that back, which is a bit small compared to the average guy, absent-mindedly.

This young man named Kokuto Mikiya seems to be my friend from back in high school.

In the midst of youngsters nowadays — where so many fads appear one after another, gain speed, and finally dash out of control into disappearance — he was a "rare kind" that boringly kept the image of a student.

He doesn't dye his hair or let it grow long. He doesn't get a tan or wear accessories. He doesn't carry a cell phone or play around with women. His height is around 170cm or so. His kind-looking face is more on the cute side and his black-rimmed glasses make that feature stand out even more.

Even though he has graduated from high school, he dresses ordinarily. If he were to dress up a bit, he would likely catch a few eyes.

"Shiki, are you listening? I met your mother too. Shouldn't you show up at the Ryougi House at least once? I heard that you haven't even contacted them since you got out of the hospital two months ago."

"No. Especially when there's no need."

"Hey, even if there's no need you should be happy just to be together, they're your family after all."

I paused a bit before replying. "I don't know. It can't be helped 'cause I can't really think of it as real. We'll just feel more distant even if we see each other. I still feel weird talking to you, so there's no way I'll be able to keep up a conversation with those strangers."

"Geez, things will never settle if you keep it this way. It'll be like this your whole life if you don't open up your heart to them. It's not right for parents and children to live so close together and yet not even meet each other."

I frown at those reproachful words.

Not right, he says. What exactly is "not right"? There's nothing illegal in what's happening between me and my parents. It's just that the child was involved in a traffic accident and lost all its memories. We are proven to be family by law and by blood, so I'd assume there's nothing wrong with the current situation.

Mikiya always worries about how other people feel. Although I think that is just pointless.



Ryougi Shiki has been my friend since high school. Our school was a famous private high school which taught a lot of students who went to a good college. When I went to see if I was admitted, the name Ryougi Shiki stood out so much

that it was stuck in my head. Ironically, we ended up being in the same class. Since then, I became one of the few friends Shiki had.

Our school did not have uniforms so everyone expressed themselves by how they dressed. Within these people, Shiki stood out. This is because Shiki always wears a kimono. Always.

The simple flowing form of the kimono fit Shiki's sloping shoulders so much it made the classroom feel like a samurai-style house just by having Shiki walk through it. It was not just the looks of Shiki, either. No unnecessary movements. Shiki rarely talked, except when in class. I think this alone explains what kind of a person Shiki is.

Shiki's figure is almost too perfect. Hair, beautiful as silk, cut with scissors like it was a bother and left just like that. It is a short cut just long enough to hide the ears, which suits Shiki so much that many students mistake Shiki's sex. Shiki looks so handsome that she looks like a female to men and is mistaken as a male by women. The word beautiful doesn't quite fit her, though. It's more like she looks dignified.

But much more than Shiki's looks, what captivated me the most were her eyes. Those eyes have a sharp yet calm look, and her thin brows intensify it. With her eyes, she gazed upon things invisible to us, and that is what made the person named Ryougi Shiki so special to me.

Yes.

Until that thing happened to Shiki.



"Jumping down."

"Er— Sorry, didn't hear what you said."

"Suicide by jumping off something. Would that be considered an accident, Mikiya?" He gathered his thoughts after that meaningless muttering and seriously started thinking about the question.

"Hm, I'm sure it's an accident, but you're right. I wonder what that is. So long as it's the person's will to do so, the blame is only on that person. But falling from a high place could be considered an accident."

"Then it's not a murder, nor is it an accidental death. It's really ambiguous, if you say it this way. Though they should have picked a way that wouldn't trouble others if they were going to kill themselves."

"Shiki, it's not right to talk ill of the dead," Mikiya said flatly. His words are so utterly predictable.

"Kokuto, I hate your common sense talk." Naturally, my response gets a bit harsh, but Mikiya does not seem upset by it.

"Wow, it's been a long time since you called me that."

"Really?"

Mikiya nods.

He can be called two ways: Kokuto and Mikiya. I don't like the sound of Kokuto, although I don't exactly know why. In the small silence that formed during my pondering, Mikiya clapped his hand as if he remembered something.

"Oh, speaking of uncommon things, my sister Azaka saw it."

"Saw what?"

"That thing. The girl at the Fujiyoh building, the one they say is flying in the air. You said you saw it once too."

Oh, I remember now. The ghost story that started around three weeks ago. As the story has it, there's an expensive mansion in the office district called the Fujiyoh building. At night, a human-like form can be seen floating above the building. The fact that not only I, but Azaka as well, saw it must mean the thing is real.

After being in a coma for two years from that traffic accident, I was able to see things that were not supposed to be there. As Touko would put it, I am not seeing them but rather "observing" them. In other words, it seems that I am able to perceive things at a higher level with my eyes and brain, but I don't care about all the reasons or explanations behind this.

"The thing at the Fujiyoh building, I've seen it not only once but many times. Though I haven't been around there for a while, so I don't know if it can still be observed or not."

Mikiya responded, "I see. I go by there a lot, but I never saw the ghost."

"You can't see it 'cause you're wearing glasses."

"I don't think glasses matter," Mikiya frowns. His reaction was so warm and pure. That's probably why it's harder for him to see those kinds of things. Even so, boring incidents keep on happening like people falling and flying.

I didn't understand the meaning behind the thought, so I said a question out loud, "Mikiya, do you know why people fly?"

Mikiya shrugs.

"I don't know why they fly or fall," he said, "because I've never done any of them, not even once."

So matter-of-factly, and so coolly said.

On the night at the end of August, I decided to take a walk.

The air is a bit cold for the end of a summer. The last train has already left and the town is quiet.

It's cold, quiet and old, just like a dead city. Even the passing people seem cold and artificial like photos. It reminded me of an incurable disease.

... Disease, illness, sickening.

Everything, the dim houses, the illuminated convenience stores... everything seemed as if it would crumble if it let its guard down.

In it all, the moon shines through the night.

In this world where everything is lifeless, it seems like the moon is the only thing alive, and it hurts my eyes.

... That's what I mean by sickening

When I left the house, I put on a red leather jacket over my light blue kimono.

The kimono gets trapped inside the jacket and burns my body.

But it's still not hot... no, rather...

For me, it was never cold to begin with.

---- Even though it's midnight, if you walk, you see some people.

A man hurrying down the street with his face down.

A young man pondering in front of a vending machine.

Many people hanging out in front of the convenience store.

I tried to figure out what reasons they had for being there, but I never did figure it out, being just an outsider.

First of all, there was no meaning behind me walking by myself out late at night.

I'm just repeating what I used to do before.

... Two years ago.

I, Ryougi Shiki, was about to head up to my second year in high school when I got in an accident. I was carried straight to the hospital.

I heard that my body didn't get any serious wounds, but the damage was concentrated on my head.

Since then, I was in a coma.

Maybe because my body was uninjured, the hospital kept me alive, and my meaningless body also tried to live on.

And finally, about two months ago, Ryougi Shiki recovered.

I guess the doctors were shocked - it was as if a corpse had come back to life. I see, that tells me how much they expected my recovery.

And myself too, I was shocked for another reason.

My memory before my waking up is a bit weird.

To put it simply, I cannot trust the memories I have.

This is different from memory disorder, or rather what people usually call amnesia.

According to Tohko, memory is composed of four systems that the brain operates: writing, saving, replaying, and recognizing.

"Writing" is to take what you see and to write it into your brain as information.

"Saving" is to keep that information stored.

"Replaying" is to recall the stored information. In other words, remembering.

"Recognizing" is to confirm that the information recalled is the same as the event that actually occurred.

If one cannot perform any one of these processes, one has a memory disorder. Of course, depending on which system is dysfunctional, the case of memory disorder will vary.

But in my case, all these functions are working properly. I can't really feel my previous memories as my own, but the function of "recognizing" is working properly as I can tell that the memory is indeed the same as what I've experienced before.

But still, I could not be confident about my previous self. I could not feel that I am who I was.

Even if I do remember my memory as Ryougi Shiki, I can only recognize the memory as someone else's. Even though there's no doubt that I'm Ryougi Shiki.

The two years of emptiness has reduced Ryougi Shiki into nothing.

Unlike what society thinks, it has caused what's inside of me to crumble into nothing. My memory and the personality I should have had... the connection was utterly destroyed.

With that being the case, my memory became nothing but an image.

But because of that image, I am able to act like I used to. I can communicate with the people I knew and my parents as the Ryougi Shiki they knew, but without any concern for my real feelings.

To be honest, that troubles me so much that I can almost not stand the pain.

..... It's just mimicry I'm not living at all.

Just like a newborn baby. I don't know anything and I haven't experienced anything. But the memory of the past eighteen years has made me into a complete human.

I already have the emotions people originally learn from experiencing many events as my memory. But I have not actually experienced them. But even if I wanted to experience them, I already know about them. There is no amazement, no feeling of being alive. ... Just like being unable to be surprised by a magic trick which you already know.

And just like that, I continue to act like I used to without feeling that I'm alive.

The reason is simple.

Because if I do so, I might be able to return to my previous self.

Because if I act like that, I might figure out the reason why I take these walks late at night.

... Oh, I see.

Then you could say that I am in love with my previous self.



Looking up after noticing that I have walked a long way, I find out that I am in the office district.

Buildings of the same height are standing side-by-side along the road in a well-mannered fashion. The surface of the buildings is filled with glass windows, and they are only reflecting the moonlight right now.

In the darkness, the large mirrors created by the buildings are reflecting each others' figures hazily.

It's a quiet night tonight.

The group of buildings by the main street is like a world of shadows in which monsters roam around.

Deep in it, there is a shadow taller than the rest. That building, like a twenty-story-high ladder, looked like a tower reaching for the moon.

The name of the tower is Fujiyoh.

There are no lights on in the mansion called the Fujiyoh building. The residents are probably all asleep. Probably because it's already almost two in the morning.

At that instant, an uninteresting shadow caught my eyes.

A silhouette of a girl floats into my vision. Not metaphorically, the girl is literally floating.

There is no wind.

The coldness in the air is abnormal for summer.

The bone in my nape creaks from the cold.

Of course, it's just my imagination.

"I see. So you're here today too."

I don't like it, but nothing can be done about what I can see.

And like that, the girl we were talking about was flying as if she were lying on the moon.

／Overlooking View／

-----The image is that of a dragonfly. Busily flying.

A butterfly came to follow, but I didn't slow down. The butterfly eventually could not keep up and fell as it was about to go out of my vision.

It falls in an arc.

The falling motion like that of a snake; it looked like a broken lily.

That image is a really sad one.

Even though we cannot go together, I should have at least stayed by its side a bit longer.

But that is impossible. Because, since I do not have my feet on the ground, I do not even have the freedom to stand and stop.

Since I could hear someone talking, I decide to get up.

... My eyelids are pretty heavy. This is proof that I still need two more hours of sleep.

As I think to myself that I am petty for still trying to wake up in that state, my will has won over my sleepiness.

... Really, I'm troubled at how simple I am.

I think I finished up writing the drawing plan after working on it all night, and went to sleep in Tohko-san's room.

When I raised myself from the sofa, I was indeed in the office. In the summer sunlight, Shiki and Tohko-san seem to be talking about something.

Shiki is leaning on a wall while standing up, and Tohko-san is sitting cross-legged on a chair.

"Morning, Kokuto"

The look on Tohko-san's face, which is more like a glare, is normal. ... Seeing that she has her glasses off, I guess she was talking with Shiki about "those" kinds of things.

On the note of being usual, she is dressed like the usual too.

With her hair short and her neck showing, Tohko-san looks like a secretary. But since her glare looks so scary, I bet she won't ever get that kind of a position.

The black thin pants and the seemingly new white shirt suit her.

"Sorry, I guess I fell asleep."

I try to make up an excuse.

"Don't explain the obvious. I can tell."

Cutting me off like that, she takes her cigarette to her mouth.

"If you're awake, go make something to drink. It should be a good rehabilitation."

".....?"

She must mean reformation when she says rehabilitation.

I don't know why she would say that to me, but since Tohko-san is always like that, I decide not to question her.

"Do you want anything, Shiki?"

"I'm fine. I'm going to bed soon."

Saying so, Shiki does indeed seem to be lacking sleep.

Maybe she took a walk last night after I left.



Next to the room which is Tohko-san's room and the office is a room like a kitchen.

The sink has three faucets in a row - maybe it used to be a lab or something. Two of those have metal wires wrapped around them and are not for use. The reason for that is unknown to me; under closer examination, it makes me feel slightly the way boxers feel when they are trying to lose weight, but they don't get many thanks because they start to feel violent.

Well, I turn the coffee maker on to make coffee for the two of us. I do so very efficiently. I'm already a master at brewing coffee. But it's not like I'm working here to make tea or coffee...

It's been half a year since I got employed here.

No, the word "employed" is not right because this place is not even a functional workplace.

To come here prepared even for that, it is probably because I fell in love with that person's work.

After Shiki stopped time at the age of seventeen, I graduated high school and entered college without a purpose.

It was a promise made with Shiki to enter that college.

Even if Shiki had little hope of recovery, I still wanted to keep that promise.

But nothing was there for me after that. After I became a college student, I just lived through the days.

While I was living aimlessly like that, I went to an exhibit I was invited to, and ended up finding a doll.

It was a doll made so delicately, it seemed to be at the limits of a man's skills. It was like a frozen human, yet at the same time it was clear that it was simply a human-shaped mannequin which would never move.

But it was just too beautiful...

A human about to start moving any second now. But a doll which does not have any life to begin with. A place where only things with life can reach, yet a place where no human can reach...

I fell in love with that ambivalence.

Probably because everything about its existence was exactly like Shiki back then.

It was unknown where the doll came from.

The pamphlet did not even mention its existence.

When I desperately looked for the source, I found out that it was made by a volunteer and the crafter was one surrounded by much rumor in the industry.

The crafter - whose name is Aozaki Tohko - is a hermit, to put it simply. I guess her true job is doll-making, but it seems she designs buildings too.

She will do anything that involves making something, but never accepts any requests. She will always go to someone and show them what she will make; she would start making it once she has received the payment up front.

She is either an eminent virtuoso, or just a big weirdo.

I got more and more curious, and I knew I shouldn't have, but I found out the address of this weirdo (A claim which I can now assert with the utmost confidence...)

It was away from the city and it was an ambiguous address not in the residential district or the industrial district.

It wasn't even a house.

It was an abandoned building.

And it's not just a normal abandoned building. Its construction was started a few years ago, but came to a halt halfway through when the previously prolific economy began to fail. Its shape as a building is present, but the interior is totally unfurnished, and the walls and the floors are completely bare.

It would have been six stories high upon completion, but there's nothing above the fourth floor. Nowadays, it's more efficient to start building from the top floor, but I guess it was still using the old construction method back then. Since the construction was stopped halfway, the half-done fifth floor became like the rooftop.

Even though the building is surrounded by a tall concrete wall, it's easy to get into. It's a miracle some kids didn't make a secret base out of it.

Anyway, I guess Aozaki Tohko bought this abandoned building.

The kitchen-like room I'm in right now is on the fourth floor. The second and the third floors are like Tohko-san's workspace, so we usually talk on the fourth floor.

...Let's get back on topic.

After that, I got to know Tohko-san and I ended up working here, quitting the college I had just gotten into.

Incredibly, I get paid here.

As Tohko-san puts it, there are two types of people with one of two attributes: the one to make and the one to search, the one to use and the one to destroy.

She told me frankly that I had no hope as the one to make, but she still hired me. She said that I had the ability as the one to search or whatnot.

"You're slow, Kokuto."

...I hear that from the next room.

Looking, I notice that the coffee maker is already filled with the black liquid.



"I guess the one yesterday makes eight. People should start to notice the similarities by now."

Putting out her cigarette, Tohko-san suddenly says.

She must be talking about the recent recurrent suicides of female high-school students, throwing themselves off high buildings.

I think so because there's nothing else she would want to talk about, this summer being free as it is of any issues such as water shortages.

"Huh? Wasn't it six?"

"There were more while you were dozing off. It started in June, and it's averaging about three per month. Maybe there'll be one more within the next three days."

Tohko-san says something sickening. Taking a look at the calendar, August will come to an end in three days. Three more days...?

Something about that caught my attention, but it faded away quickly.

"But I heard they are all unrelated. The girls who committed suicide are all supposedly from different schools with no connection to each other. It might be that the police are hiding the facts, though."

"You're not trusting people? That's unlike you."

Tohko-san grins.

...With her glasses off, she can be infinitely mean.

"Because not one will has been televised. Six, no, eight people. If there're that many, at least one should have left behind a will. But if the police have not said anything about it, you'd think they are hiding them."

"I'm saying that's the relation. Or I should say "the connection point". Out of the eight, more than half are seen jumping off by themselves, by several people, but they are unable to find anything wrong with their private lives. It's not like they were doing drugs or affiliated with a weird religion. It's definitely a case of suicide where they felt uneasy about themselves and selfishly took their own lives. That's probably why the cops aren't taking a big interest in this matter."

"Are you saying that there was no will from the beginning?"

After I say so doubtfully, Tohko-san nods but says that she can't be too sure.

But could that be possible?

There's an inconsistency somewhere, I think as I take the coffee mug and taste the bitterness of the liquid inside.

Why would there be no will? If there is no will, people usually wouldn't kill themselves.

A will is an attachment to the real world. When a person who does not like to die is forced to die, the will is what they leave behind as a reason for their death.

A suicide without a will.

To have no need to write a will means they have nothing to leave to this world, and are willing to disappear without a trace. That would be the perfect suicide. I think a perfect suicide would be one without a will and even the death itself would not be found out.

But committing suicide by jumping off a building is not a perfect suicide. To die in a way to catch people's attention seems in itself a will.

Then what?

Maybe it's for a different reason... like someone stole their will? No, then that would not be a suicide.

Then what?

There's only one logical answer I can think of.

Like it sounds, maybe those were just accidents.

The girls had no intention of dying from the beginning. Then there would be no reason to write a will. It's like getting involved in an unfortunate accident while going outside for a bit.

Just like what Shiki said last night.

...But I could not come up with a reason why they would jump off a building when they were just going out for a bit.

"The suicides will end at eight. There won't be any more for a while."

Shiki comes into the conversation as if to interrupt my raging thoughts.

Even though Shiki seems to be uninterested in this subject.

"You can tell?"

I had to ask.

Shiki nods while looking far away.

"I went and looked. There were eight flying about."

The well-shaped lips let out those words.

"Oh, so there were that many at that building. You knew from the beginning how many there were, Shiki?"

"Yeah, I finished it off but I think those girls will stay there for a while, even though I don't like that idea. Hey, Tohko. Do all the people end up that way when they can fly a bit like that?"

"I don't know. You can't say for sure since everyone's different but in the past, of those who have attempted to fly with just human powers, none have succeeded. The words "fly" and "fall" are tied together. But the more you're hooked to flying, the more you forget about that fact. As a result, you end up trying to reach the skies even after you die. Not falling to the ground, but falling toward the sky."

Shiki frowns at Tohko-san's response.

Shiki's angry... but at what?

"Sorry, but I don't quite follow the conversation."

"Hmm? We're talking about the ghost of the Fujiyoh building. Although I can't say for sure if it's just an image or a real thing unless I take a look at it. I was thinking of going to take a look at it if I had the time, but if Shiki's already killed it, there's no way for me to check now."

... I see. As I expected, they were talking about "those" kinds of things.

When Shiki and Tohko-san without her glasses talk together, they usually talk about these occult-like things.

"You heard the story that Shiki saw the girl floating at the Fujiyoh building, right? That story had more to it and it seems there's a human-like figure flying around those floating girls. We were thinking that since they won't stray from the Fujiyoh building, maybe that place was like a net or something."

I'm troubled at how complex and weird the story has become.

As if Tohko-san can tell my confusion, she sums up the whole thing.

"In other words, there's one floating human at the Fujiyoh building and around it are the girls who died by suicide. These girls are probably something like ghosts. That's pretty much it."

I nod.

I understand the story but I guess I'm hearing it after it's all over.

Judging from the way Shiki talked, it seems the ghost thing was already taken care of.

It's been two month since I let these two meet. I'm starting to become the one to hear about the results when it comes to these kinds of tales.

As a normal human being different from these two, I'd like to stay away from those stories. On the other hand, since it doesn't suit me to be ignored, I think this neutral stance I'm holding right now is perfect.

I guess people call this good news within bad news.



".....?"

Shiki gets angrier and starts to glare at me.

Have I done something to make Shiki mad?

"Huh? But Shiki saw the ghosts there at the beginning of July, right? Then there were only four ghosts back then?"

I say the obvious just to confirm, but Shiki says no.

"Eight. There were eight from the beginning. Like I told you, there won't be any more after eight. In their case, the order is the opposite."

"Then you're saying you saw eight ghosts from the start? Like that one clairvoyant girl?"

"No way. I'm normal. It's just that the air there is abnormal. Let's see... it feels weird. Like hot and cold water right next to each other."

Tohko-san follows-up Shiki's ambiguous words.

"So in other words, time there is not working properly. It's not like there's only one way for time to pass by. The time it takes for something to rot away is unfairly different for everything. Then, it should follow that a human individual and its memory take different times to disappear. When someone dies, does that person's memory disappear? It doesn't, right? As long as there are observers, ones to remember, nothing disappears instantly, but gradually fades away.

"Memories, or rather, "records". If an observer happens to be in the environment around that person, people like those girls will be preserved by their memories and walk the earth as "illusions" even after their deaths. This is part of the phenomenon which we know as "ghosts". The only ones who see these projections are the ones that share the memories with these ghosts, namely their parents and friends. Shiki, however, is an exception.

"Of course, the passage of time does affect these "records", but at the top of that building, it seems to occur at a much slower rate. The girls' memories from when they were alive have not caught up to their true state yet.

"As a result, the memories stay alive. What can be seen there are the actions and the existences of those girls whose time happens to be passing by slowly."

Then, Tohko-san lights another cigarette.

So she is saying that when something goes away, as long as I remember it, it has not disappeared. Thus, the very act of me remembering it causes it to be alive. So if it's alive, it can be seen?

That's just like hallucination... No, Tohko-san probably used the word "illusion" because it is defined as something that isn't real.

"I don't care about all that explanation - there's no danger in that. The problem is *her*. I know I got that thing good, but if there's a main body somewhere else, we'll just end up repeating this over and over again. I'm tired of being Mikiya's bodyguard."

"I feel the same way. I'll take care of Fujoh Kirie. You can just take Kokuto home. There's about five more hours until he's off work. If you're going to sleep, you can use the floor there."

The place Tohko-san points at is a place that has not been cleaned for the past year and is like a dirty furnace.

Of course, Shiki ignores her.

"So, what was that anyway?"

Shiki glares at Tohko-san.

The wizard with a cigarette in her mouth thinks to herself and walks over to the window.

From there, she looks outside.

There is no lighting in this room. We only get the light from outside and it's hard to tell if it's morning or afternoon in here.

In contrast, the view outside the window is clearly mid-day. You could almost see the blazing-hot white sunlight.

Tohko-san stares at the summer scenery for a while.

"Before, you could classify her as flying."

The smoke she blows out mixes in with the white sunlight.

I stare at her back as she looks outside... She's like a mirage in all this white.

"Kokuto, what do you think a view from a high place reminds you of?"

This sudden question pulls me back into reality.

I haven't really been at a high place since I went to the Tokyo Tower as a child. I don't really remember what I thought about it then. The only thing I know is that I tried so hard to spot the place where I lived, but ended up not being able to find it.

"Maybe, something small?"

"That's too shrewd of a remark, Kokuto."

A cold response comes back. Well, I was a bit doubtful about my remark myself. I pull myself together and try to think of something else.

"Let's see. There isn't much that it reminds me of, but I do think it's beautiful. A view from a high place is overwhelming."

Probably because this response was more from my heart, Tohko-san nods in agreement.

While still staring outside, Tohko-san continues to talk.

"The scenery you see is magnificent: even an ordinarily boring landscape would look beautiful. But that's not the impulse you feel when you look down onto the world you live in. The overlooking view only gives you one impulse..."

Saying the word "impulse", Tohko-san cuts off her sentence.

Impulse is not something that comes from within you like feelings, but rather something that attacks you from the outside. Even if the one attacked by it doesn't want it.

Something like violence that attacks you without warning, that is what we call an "impulse".

Then what is the violence that is brought by an overlooking view?

"That is being 'far'. A vision too big creates a vivid separation between you and the world. People can only feel safe around things close to them. Even if one has the most detailed map and knows exactly where they are, it's only information, right?

"For us, the world is only something we can feel ourselves. The boundaries between cities, countries, and the world can only be unconsciously recognized by our brains, and we ourselves cannot feel them unless we actually go to those. And in reality, there is nothing wrong with that way of recognition.

"But if the vision is too large, discrepancy occurs. The ten meter area around you, that you actually feel, and the ten kilometer area that you are looking down on. They are both the world you live in, yet you feel the first to be more real.

"See? There's already an inconsistency. It's more correct for you to recognize the larger world you see as the world you live in rather than the small space around you. But no matter how hard you try, you cannot feel that you are living on this big world.

"The reason being, what feels more real is always something that is around you. Your reasoning as your knowledge and your experience as your feelings crash against each other and eventually, one will lose and confusion will start.

"...How small the city is from up here. I can't even imagine my house was down there. Was that park shaped that way? I didn't even know that was there. This is like a town I don't know about. It feels like I've come to a place far away.

"... A high perspective brings these kinds of thoughts. Even though the person is still standing on a part of that city they're looking down on..."

A high place is a place far away. That is true, distance-wise. But Tohko-san must mean the mental aspect of it.

Two places apart horizontally and vertically. The only difference between the two is if you can or can't look down on the other place.

"So you mean it's not good to keep your vision at a high place?"

"If you go too far. In the ancient times, the sky was considered to be another world. To fly meant going to the other world. You will be drowned in another

will if you do not protect yourself by means of technology. Just like it sounds, you go crazy.

"Well, if you do have the right protection on your recognition, you won't be affected that much. It won't be a problem if you have a firm place to stand on. You'll be back to normal when you get back on the ground."

... Now that she mentions it, when I was looking down on the school ground from the rooftop once, I suddenly wondered what would happen if I jumped down.

Of course, it was just a joke.

I had no intention of actually doing so, but why did I get that thought when it obviously leads to death?

Tohko-san says there are individual differences, but I think it's common for people to think about falling when at high places.

"Does it mean your mind goes crazy for just an instant?"

Tohko-san laughs after I blurt out my question.

"Everyone dreams about the taboo, Kokuto. Humans have the ability to gain pleasure from imagining things they cannot do. But... yeah, that's pretty close. The important thing is that the thought only comes at a specific place - at that place itself. Well, I guess that's pretty obvious. To speak in your case, I think your mind isn't crazy, but rather numb."

"Tohko, you've been talking for too long."

Shiki interrupts as if to say she can't stand it anymore. Come to think of it, we might have strayed off the main topic.

"It's not long at all. If you're talking in terms of constructing a discussion topic, we're only on the second part."

"I only want to hear the end. I don't want to hear you guys talk."

"Shiki..."

It's mean, but I guess she also has a point.

Shiki continues to complain, ignoring me.

"And, you say there's a problem with views from high places. Then what is a normal view? Even when we're walking, we have a higher view than the ground."

In contrast to Shiki's attitude of trying to find holes, I thought the argument did have a point.

A person's eyes are certainly at a higher level than the ground. Then that would mean our view is somewhat overlooking the world.

Tohko-san nods at Shiki's words. I guess she's just going straight to the conclusion.

"But the ground you think is flat is actually slightly curved. Even taking that into account, you can't say our normal vision has an overlooking view of things.

"A vision is not what your eyes see, but it's an image that your brain comprehends. Our vision is protected by common sense, so we never feel our height to be high, and it's even considered normal. There's no notion that it's high.

"But on the other hand, everyone is living with a vision that is overlooking. Not a physical vision, but I mean our mental vision. Everyone is different, but a larger mind will try to go higher. But still, it will never leave its box.

"Humans are made to live in a box, and they can only survive in the box. Humans cannot have the views of the Gods.

"However, when one's mental vision surpasses a certain boundary, one becomes not so much a God as a monster. *Hypnos*, that is, "illusion", turns into *Thanatos* - real death."

As she says so, Tohko-san herself is overlooking the world. She is looking down at the earth with her feet set on the ground. It seems significant, somehow.

And then, I remember the dream I had. The butterfly fell at the end.

Maybe she could have flown more gracefully if she had not tried to follow me.

Yes, if she fluttered as if to float, she should have been able to fly longer.

But since the butterfly knew about flying, it could not stand the lightness of its floating body.

That's why it flew instead of floating.

Thinking that much, I question myself if I was that poetic.

Tohko-san, by the window, throws her cigarette away.

"The flicker at the Fujiyoh building might be the world she was seeing. I can guess that the difference in the air Shiki felt was the boundary between the outside world and the inside of the box. That is a discontinuity that only a human mind can perceive."

With Tohko-san's talk finished, Shiki finally seemed to relax.

Shiki lets out a breath and looks around.

"Discontinuity, huh? I wonder which side was the warm side and which side was the cold side for her."

In contrast to the serious tone, Shiki acts like it doesn't matter.

Tohko-san also acts like she doesn't care.

"Of course, the opposite of you."

And answered so.

-----*The bone in my nape creaks.*

Is the cold that's making me shiver coming from outside or inside my body?

Leaving what can't be distinguished aside, Shiki keeps walking.

There's no sign of human activity at the Fujiyoh building.

It's two in the morning. Only the white light illuminates the hallway of the mansion. The cream-colored walls are bathed in light and I can see to the end of the hallway. The light which steals away the darkness feels eerily artificial and unnatural.

Passing by the card checker at the entrance, I enter the elevator.

It's empty inside. A mirror is bolted to the rear panel of the elevator for the convenience of the passenger. Watching me with lazy eyes from the inside of the mirror is someone wearing a black leather jacket over a light blue kimono. Eyes that look like they care about nothing.

Shiki glances at the figure in the mirror, and pushes the button that says "R". With a small start-up sound, the world around Shiki rises. The motor-driven box will reach the top floor in a matter of seconds.

It is a closed-off room for the time being. Nothing occurring outside right now concerns Shiki, and it is impossible to be concerned with the outside world. That feeling seeps into the supposedly empty mind. This small box is the only world I'm supposed to feel right now.

The door opens without a sound. What's outside is a totally different world, a world of darkness.

After arriving at the annex, containing only the door leading to the rooftop, the elevator leaves Shiki and descends back towards the first floor. There are no lights, and the surroundings are painfully dark.

Heading across the small room, Shiki pushes open the door to the rooftop.

... The deep darkness becomes faint.

The outline of the city fills my vision.

The rooftop of the Fujiyoh building is a plain one. The floor is made of flat concrete, and there is a fence that surrounds the perimeter of the roof. A solitary water tower stands atop the annex, but there is nothing else particularly significant.

The rooftop itself is a plain one, but the view from it is out of this world.

The view of the night town from this building that is at least ten stories higher than its surroundings feels perhaps more lonely than beautiful. It feels like you're on top of a tall ladder looking down onto the world. The depths of this sea view, however, are certainly beautiful. The electric lights dotted here and there give off a warm luminescence like that of an anglerfish.

If my view right now is that of the whole world, then the world right now is indeed asleep, as if eternally, but fortunately it's only temporary. The silence tightens my heart more than any coldness, and it is rather painful...

The coldness of the night sky stands out just much as the coldness below. If the town is the deep sea, then the sky is just pure darkness. In the darkness, stars glitter like jewels. The moon is a void in this darkness - a large hole in a big black canvas known as the night sky. So that thing is really not a mirror of the sun, but rather a view of "the other side"... That's what I heard at the house of the Ryougi. According to them, the moon is a gate to another world.

Since ancient times, the moon has carried magic, women, and death. And with that moon behind it, a human form is floating...

... With eight girls flying around it.



The white figure in the night sky is that of a woman. She wears a fancy white garment that one might mistake for a dress, and has long black hair reaching down to her waist. Her arms and legs are slender, and they make this woman look even more beautiful.

The thin brow and the cold eyes are beautiful. I can estimate she's in her twenties. Although it's doubtful that you can fit an age meant for a living being onto something like a ghost.

But the white woman is not abstract like a ghost. She is really there. The girls aimlessly flocking around the woman seem to match the definition of "ghost" better than her; their lazy floating makes them seem more like they are swimming than flying. Even their figures and forms are abstract, as they flicker into transparency from time to time.

What's above Shiki right now are the white woman and the girls floating as if to protect her.

The whole sight is not horrifying. No, this is more like...

"Hmph, this is indeed demonic."

Shiki sneers.

This woman's beauty is no longer that of a human's. Her black hair is especially luxurious, each strand with a silken sheen and texture. If the wind were stronger, her figure with hair flowing about it would have been a profoundly beautiful image.

"Then I shall have to kill you"

Perhaps hearing Shiki's murmur, the woman looks down. The woman is four meters above this rooftop which is already over forty meters high. The woman's and Shiki's gazes meet.

There are no words to speak, nor is there a language to communicate with.

Shiki reaches a hand into her leather jacket and draws a knife. A small sword by any other name, with a blade perhaps some eighteen centimeters long.

Shiki's consciousness is filled by the killing intent of the gaze piercing down from above her.

The white figure sways. Her arm flows and a slender finger points at Shiki. That slender, fragile arm does not remind Shiki of *white*.

"... More like bones, or a lily"

In the windless night, her voice hung in the air for a long time.

---- The will put into the fingertip is the intent to kill.

The white fingertip points at Shiki.

Shiki's head sways. The thin body steps once to regain its balance. But only once.

"-----"

The woman overhead hesitated a bit from that.

The *suggestion* that "you can fly" is not working on this person.

Her power can give someone the impression that "they were flying" - more of a brainwashing than a "suggestion" by any normal definition. There is no way to fight it, and as a result, one actually tries to fly, or conversely runs away from the fear of being able to fly. But Shiki was able to withstand it with just a small daze.

"-----"

The woman wonders if the contact was too weak, and decides to use *suggestion* again.

But this time, stronger. Not a weak impression like "You can fly" but she orders firmly: "You have to fly!"

But before that, Shiki looks at the woman.

One on each of her legs, one on her back, and one point on her left chest. The cutting section named death can be certainly seen. The one on her chest would be a good one to aim for. That would be an instant kill. Whether this woman is an illusion or something else, as long as it's alive, even if it were a god, I'll kill it.

Bringing the knife to bear in a firm reverse grip, Shiki glares at the enemy in the sky.

The impulse assails Shiki once more.

...I can fly. I can fly. I liked the sky from before. I was flying yesterday too. I could probably fly higher today. Freely. Feeling peaceful. Laughing. I have to go quickly...

Where? To the sky? Free? ... That's...

Escape from reality. Yearn for the sky. Reaction to gravity. No feet on ground. Flight under unconsciousness.

Let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go----- GO!

"You've got to be kidding me."

Saying that, Shiki raises the empty left hand.

The suggestion does not work anymore. Shiki is not even fazed.

"I don't have that kind of admiration for the sky. I don't feel alive, so I don't know the pain of living. To be honest, I don't care about you at all."

...A murmur more like singing.

Shiki does not feel any restraint, joy or sorrow in life.

That's why Shiki is not attracted to the liberation from pain.

"But I don't like you keeping him. I got him first, so I'm taking him back."

Shiki's left hand grabs the empty air and pulls back.

As if being pulled by the left hand, the woman and the girls are pulled toward Shiki like fish being reeled in with a net.

"-----!"

The woman's expression changes. She puts more resolve into her will and pounds it against Shiki.

If she could communicate with Shiki, she would have screamed

"Fall!"

Ignoring the curse, Shiki responds in an icy tone.

"You fall."

The knife drives into the chest of the woman as she is forced downwards. As simply and swiftly as slicing through a fruit, and with such precision that even the woman feels a brief glimpse of admiration.

There is no blood.

The woman, unable to move from the shock of the knife transfixing her chest, convulses just once.

Shiki casually throws the corpse over the tall fence, into the depths of the dark city.

The woman tumbles past the bounds of the rooftop and falls without a sound. Her dark, silken hair does not flutter, even during the fall, and fades into the night as her white robes are lost to the wind.

Like a white flower sinking deep into the ocean.

Shiki leaves the rooftop.

Above, the floating girls still remain...

I wake up after having a knife stabbed through my chest. The impact was tremendous. That person must have been really strong to pierce someone's chest that easily. That said, it was not a violent excess of power. It did not do anything unnecessary, and slipped straight between the bones and the muscle as if they were nothing. What a sense of unity!

The feeling of death that runs through my body. I hear the sound of my heart being pierced and ripped. The "feeling" of it hurt me more than the pain itself, because that sensation was a fear and pleasure incomparable to anything else.

The chill running through my spine is mind-boggling, and my whole body is trembling. There exists uneasiness, loneliness, and the will to live, and I cried without a sound.

Not because of fear or pain.

It's because this unfamiliar feeling of death was there... Even for me, who every night wishes to be alive come sunrise.

I will never be able to escape this feeling

Since I have fallen in love with this feeling...



I hear the door open. The clock shows the time to be two in the afternoon, and it feels as if the sun is blazing through the closed window. It's not yet time for the examination, so maybe it's a visitor.

I have my own hospital room and there is no one else in here. What's here is the bright sunlight, curtains that never flutter in the wind, and this bed.

"Excuse me, Are you Fujoh Kirie?"

It seems the visitor is a woman. Greeting me with a husky voice, she comes near me without sitting down or anything. It seems she's looking down at me. Her stare feels cold.

...This person is a scary person. She will probably bring about my destruction.

But I actually feel happy inside, since it's been many years since I've had a visitor. I cannot bear to turn anyone away, even if the one who comes visiting was Death himself to finish me off.

"You are my enemy, right?"

The woman nods.

I try to focus and somehow see this visitor.

...It may be because of the strong sunlight, but I can only see her silhouette. She is not wearing a jacket, but her pressed, wrinkle-free suit makes her look like a teacher and causes me to relax somewhat. Nonetheless, her orange tie is rather flashy for her white shirt, so I have to take some points off for that.

"Do you know that person, or are you that person?"

"No, I'm an acquaintance of both the one who attacked you and the one you attacked. We, you included, made contact with the weirdest people. We must be pretty unlucky."

Saying that, the woman takes out something from her pocket and puts it right back.

"I forgot you can't smoke in here. In addition, it seems your lungs are bad. The smoke would do you nothing but harm."

She sounds regretful. I guess it was a cigarette box she took out. I've never even touched one before, but I wanted to see this person smoke. Probably... no, surely it would suit her well. Like a pair of lizard-skin pants on a showcase mannequin.

"It's not just your lungs that are bad. That must be the reason, but there are lots of tumors all over your body. Starting with sarcoma, it's worse inside. It seems that hair of yours is the only thing normal. But it's amazing how much strength you have left. A normal person would have died before it got this bad. ... How many years has it been, Fujoh Kirie?"

She is probably asking about my hospitalization, but I cannot answer her.

"I don't know. I stopped keeping track."

Because it's meaningless. Because I won't be getting out of here until I die.

The woman nods and says, "I see."

I don't like her tone, as it contains no sympathy or dislike. The only thing I get from people is sympathy, but this person is not willing to give me even that.

"Is the place Shiki cut all right? I heard Shiki cut you around the heart area, near the main artery... I would assume it was in your bicuspid valve."

She says an amazing thing with a normal tone. I let out a smile as a testament to her weirdness.

"What a strange person. I wouldn't be able to talk to you like this if my heart had been cut."

"Of course. That was just for confirmation."

I see. With that question she confirmed if I was the woman stabbed by that person who I couldn't classify as Japanese-styled or Western-styled.

"But the effect will come in time, Shiki's eyes are strong. Even if that thing was your second existence, the destruction will reach you in time. I wanted to ask you a few things before that... which is why I came here."

Second existence... She must mean that other me.

"I haven't seen you actually floating. Can you tell me what that was?"

"I don't know either. The only view I can see is this view out of this window.

"But maybe that was bad.

"I've been looking down at the world from here. The trees showing the colors of the four seasons, people coming to the hospital in turns.

"They cannot hear me even if I talk, and I cannot reach them no matter how far I stretch out my hands. I have been suffering all this time inside this room. I have been loathing this view for a long time. Isn't that what you would call curseing?"

"I see, it must be your Fujoh blood. Your bloodline is that of an old pure family. It seems they were specialized in prayers, but I see that their true powers were in curses. The name 'Fujoh' might come from the word 'impure'"

Bloodline.

My family. But that came to an end a few years ago. Soon after I was hospitalized, my parents and my brother died in an accident. Since then, a friend of my father has been paying for my medical expenses.

"A curse is not something that is woven unconsciously. What did you wish for?"

...I don't know myself. Even she wouldn't know.

"...Have you ever longed for the outside world for a long time? For so many years that you lose touch with reality? I hated, despised, and feared the outside world. I was overlooking it all the time. After a while, my eyes became weird. I was in the sky above that garden, and was overlooking the world below. It was a feeling like my eyes were flying around while my body and mind were still here. But since I can't move from here, all I can do is to overlook the area around here."

"You must have imprinted the surrounding scenery into your mind. If that's the case, you should be able to think that you can see it from all directions... You started to lose your vision around that time too?"

I'm surprised. She knows I'm on the verge of losing my vision.

I nod.

"That's right. The world turned white and in the end, nothing was there. At first, I thought everything turned into darkness, but that was wrong."

Everything disappeared, or at least everything that could be seen.

But I have no problem with that, because my eyes are already flying around. I can only see the scenery around this hospital, and I can't get out of here anyway.

"Nothing changed, nothing..."

Then, I cough. It's been a long time since I've talked this much, so my throat is burning.

"I see. So your mind was up in the sky. But then... why are you alive? If that ghost at the Fujiyoh building was your mind, you should have been killed by Shiki."

Yes, I am wondering the same thing.

That person... I guess the name is Shiki... How was that person able to cut me?

That floating me cannot touch anything. In return, I cannot be touched by anything, but that person killed me as if I had a real body.

"Answer me. The you at the Fujiyoh building, was that really Fujoh Kirie?"

"The me at the Fujiyoh building isn't me. Myself looking at the sky and myself in the sky, 'that me' gave up on me and flew away. I have been left behind even by myself."

The woman gasps. For the first time, she showed her emotion.

"So it's not that your personality split up. There was someone that gave you, who had one container, a second container. I see, you controlled two bodies with one mind. This is indeed nothing like before."

Now that she says so, that might have been the case.

I gave up on myself and was looking down on the world. But neither one of us could put our feet on the ground, and just ended up floating around. Since I am rejected by the world outside this window, there is no way for me to go out there no matter how much I wish for it.

It must mean that we were connected in the end.

"That makes sense. But why weren't you happy with just imagining the outside world? I don't think there was a need to let those girls fall."

Those girls...? Oh, I see, the girls I was jealous of. They were unfortunate. But I did not do anything, because the girls fell on their own.

"The you at the Fujiyoh building was more like a will. You used that, huh? Those girls were able to fly from the beginning, right? Even if it was just an image in their head, or if they really had the power to fly. People flying in their sleep isn't rare, but it never gets to be a problem. Why? Because they only do so in their sleep and they never even think about flying when they are awake. Since they are unconscious, they have no evil will when they are flying.

"Those girls were special even in that case. We're not talking Peter Pan, but it's easier to fly when you're small. Maybe one or two might have actually floated, but most of them should have floated only in their dreams.

"But you made them think about it. You gave them the impression they had while they were dreaming when they were awake.

"As a result, they found out they could fly. Yes, they can fly... but only unconsciously. Flight with only human power is difficult. Even I cannot fly without a broom. The chance of flight under consciousness is about thirty percent. The girls tried to fly as usual, and fell as they were supposed to."

Yes, they were flying around me. I thought they could be my friends. But all they did was float around me like fishes without noticing me.

It was shortly after that I found out they had no consciousness. I just thought they would notice me if they had consciousness. That was the only reason, so why...

"Are you cold? You're trembling."

The woman's voice is cold like plastic.

I embrace myself as the chill does not go away.

"Let me ask you one more thing. Why did you admire the sky? You hated the outside world."

That's probably because...

"There is no end to the sky. I thought there would be a world I wouldn't hate if I could go as far as I wanted, if I could fly as far as I wanted."

The voice asks me if I found that world.

My chill does not stop. I tremble as if someone's shaking me, and my eyes are getting hotter.

I nod.

"...Every night, I feared I wouldn't be able to wake up the next day, I was scared I wouldn't live until tomorrow. I knew I wouldn't have the strength to wake up if I fell asleep.

“The days like a tightrope were only filled with fear of death. But because of that, I could feel that I was alive.

“I could only smell death every day, but to live, only that smell was reliable.

“Since I am nothing but a discarded shell, I can only feel alive when I am facing death.”

That's right. That is why I like death more than life.

To fly anywhere, to go to anywhere I want...

"You took my boy as a companion to death?"

"No. At that time, I didn't know. I was attached to life and I wanted to fly while being alive. I should have been able to do so with him."

"You and Shiki are similar. You guys have a bit of salvation in that you guys both chose Kokuto. It's not a bad thing to search for the feeling of being alive in someone else."

Kokuto. I see, so that Shiki person came to take him back.

I guess my savior was also my death. I have no regret in that though.

"That person is really childish. He is always so straight. That's why he should be able to fly to anywhere he wants if he tries.

“... I wanted for him to take me.”

My eyes are hot. I don't get it, but I'm probably crying.

Not because I'm sad... If I could really go somewhere with him, how much happiness would that have been? It's something that wouldn't come true, because it's a dream that shouldn't come true, that's why it's so beautiful that it makes me cry. That is the only dream I've had in the past few years.

"But Kokuto has no interest in the sky. The more one wants the sky, the farther they are from it, huh? How ironic."

"You're right. I have heard that humans have many things they don't need. I was only able to float. I could not fly, and all I managed was to stay floating."

The burning in my eyes disappeared. Probably, this will never again happen in the future.

What's controlling me right now is only this chill inside of me.

"Sorry to be a bother. This is the last question, but what will you do now? I can heal that wound Shiki gave you."

Without answering, I shake my head. It seems the woman frowned a bit.

"I see..."

“There are two ways to escape. Escape without purpose, and escape with a purpose. You call the former floating and the latter flight.

“You are the one to decide which one your overlooking view was. But if you choose one out of guilt, that's wrong. You shouldn't choose the path ahead of you based on the sins you carry, but rather, you should carry the sins on the path you choose.”

Then the woman leaves. The woman has not told me her name, but I know there was no need to.

... She must have known what I would choose from the beginning. Because I could not fly, and all I could do was to float.

Since I'm weak, I cannot do as she said. That's why I cannot overcome this temptation. The flash of light I felt when I was stabbed in my heart. The overwhelming torrent of death and the beat of life. I always thought I had nothing, but there is still that simple thing left in me.

What's there is death.

This fear that sends a chill down my spine. I have to feel the most death I can to feel the happiness of life. For everything in my life I have ignored until now. But it probably would be impossible to die like I did that night. I probably cannot hope for such a striking end. That death pierced me like lightning, like a needle, like a sword. That's why I will try to come as close to that as possible. I don't have any idea right now but I still have a few days to think about it. And I've already decided on the method. I don't think I even need to say this, but I think my end should be a long fall from a place overlooking the earth.

／Overlooking View／

The sun has set and we leave Tohko-san's abandoned building. Shiki's apartment is in the area but my place is twenty minutes away from here by train. Tiredness shows in Shiki, who is walking a bit shakily, but nonetheless stays by my side.

"Do you think suicide is right, Mikiya?"

Shiki suddenly asks me that out of the blue. That downcast expression looks a bit touching.

"Hmm, I don't know. Let's say I get this virus that will kill everybody in Tokyo just by me staying alive. If everyone would be saved if I die, then I'd probably kill myself."

"What is that? That's so unlikely that it's not even a what-if story."

"Let me finish, I think I'd do that because I'm weak.

"I'm going to kill myself because I don't have the courage to keep on living and turn all of Tokyo into my enemy. That's easier, right? Courage for an instant and courage that needs to continue throughout your life. You know which one is harder.

"It's an extreme argument, but I think death is running away, no matter what kind of determination is behind it. But there are times when the concerned person wants to run away. I can't deny it or refute it, because I'm a weak person as well."

Hmm, but this seems like I'm saying it's all right for someone to do so because I'd do so too. Self-sacrifice in that case is probably the right thing to do, and that action would be called heroic. But that's wrong. It's foolish to choose death no matter how noble or right it is. No matter how wrong or low it is, we have to keep on living to make right our wrongs.

We have to live on and accept the end of the things we've caused. That is something that takes a lot of courage. I don't think I could do that myself, and it sounds too cocky, so I decide not to say it.

"...Well, anyways... I think it's just different for everyone."

I end rather vaguely and Shiki looks at me doubtfully.

"But you're different."

Shiki says so as if seeing inside my mind. Whilst initially cold-sounding, the words feel warm somehow. It's a bit embarrassing, so I walk on for a while in

silence. The clamor of the main street is getting closer. Sounds, bright lights, engine sounds. Flooding waves of people and the many sounds they make. If we pass the department stores, we'll be able to see the station right ahead.

Then, Shiki stops.

"Mikiya, come over to my place tonight."

"Huh? Why, all of a sudden?"

Shiki grabs me, saying that it doesn't matter.

It is indeed easier to stay at Shiki's place since it's nearby, but I don't feel like doing so, on moral grounds.

"It's fine. You don't have anything in your room either. It's boring even if I do go. Or are you telling me there's something I have to do there?"

I know there's no such thing. I said so knowing that, so there shouldn't be anything for Shiki to say back... or at least I think so. But Shiki looks at me as if I'm the cause of the problem.

"Strawberry."

"Huh?"

"Two strawberry Häagen-Dazs. They're still there from when you bought them. Finish those things off, man."

"...I guess I did buy those."

Yes I did. They were something I bought because of how hot it is while walking to Shiki's place. Then again, it's almost September after all, so I wonder why I bothered...

Well, I don't care about small things. I guess my only choice is to obey Shiki. But just obeying is a bit irritating, so I decide to strike back a little.

Shiki has a vulnerable point where, when I say this, Shiki gets mad but can't say anything back.

Even though it is a wish from the bottom of my heart, Shiki still has yet to take my advice.

"All right, I'll spend the night. But Shiki..."

Shiki looks at me as I advise with a straight face.

"You shouldn't talk like that. You're a girl, you know."

Shiki looks away, angrily.

Overlooking View / Finish

Epilogue

That day, I chose to take the main street home. It was just a whim, and a very rare thing for me to do.

Walking woodenly along the building street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down. It was a squishing sound that you should never hear. The person lying on the pavement, broken, had obviously died from falling off a building. A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete. The only features that remained were the dark black hair and the pale, thin, fragile looking limbs.

And that featureless, crushed face.

The whole scene was surrounded by the old summer, and it reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the covers of a heavy tome.

I knew who it was. *Hypnos* returned after all by turning into *Thanatos*. I ignore the rapidly-growing swarm of bystanders and continue walking. Azaka catches up to me.

"Tohko-san. She committed suicide by jumping off that building."

"Yeah, I guess so," I answer vaguely.

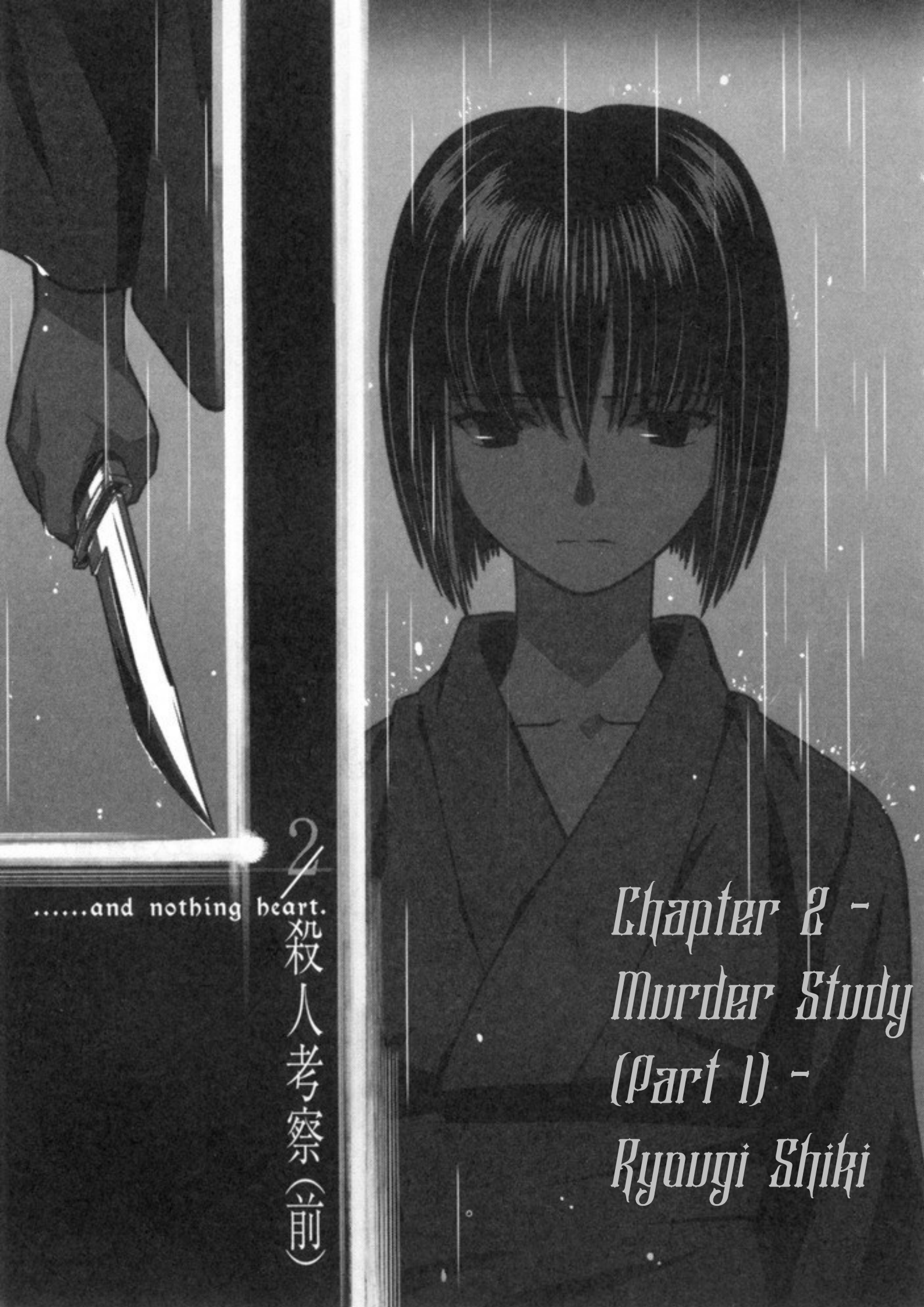
To be honest, I had no interest. No matter what the will of the person is, a suicide will be treated as a suicide. Her last will can be summed up with one word, not "flight" or "floating", but by the word "fall". What's there is only nothingness, and there's no way anyone can have an interest in that.

"I heard there was a lot of that last year, but is it still occurring a lot? I don't get what goes on in these peoples' minds. Do you know, Tohko-san?"

"Yeah,"

I again answer vaguely while gazing up at the sky, as if looking at an image not there.

"There's no reason for suicide. It's just that she wasn't able to fly today."



.....and nothing heart.

2
殺人考察(前)

*Chapter 2 -
Murder Study
(Part 1) -
Ryougi Shiki*

／ Murder Study (Part 1)

----1995, April. I met her.

／ 1

I decide to take a walk tonight again; it's pretty cool for the end of the summer and it feels like autumn is coming.

"Ojou-sama, please come home early tonight."

Akitaka, my servant, says while I am putting on my shoes at the entrance. How uninteresting. Ignoring his monotonous voice, I head out of the entrance.

Trudging past the garden, I continue through the gate. Once I exit the mansion, there are no streetlights; only darkness surrounds me. A deep darkness without any sound. The date is about to change from August 31 to September 1. The bamboo around the mansion rustles in the light wind, as if to frighten me. A walk in this kind of silence is the only thing I, Shiki, like to do.

As the night gets deeper, so does the darkness. I think I walk through the empty town because I want to be alone. Or is it because I want to think I'm alone?

...Either way, it's a stupid question. It's impossible for me to be alone in this world.

...Walking away from the main street, I enter a small alley.

I will be turning sixteen this year. In school terms, I am a first year in an ordinary private high school. But, no matter where I go for school, I will have to remain at the mansion in the future, thus my education seems almost meaningless. I had decided upon that school simply because it was nearby: a short commute was clearly the most efficient option.

Perhaps that turned out to be a mistake.

...The alley is darker than the main street. Only one streetlight flickers nervously.

Someone's face suddenly pops into my mind and I clench my teeth. I feel restless lately, even during one of these walks. It's because, out of nowhere, I remember that guy from time to time.

...Even in high school, my environment didn't change. No matter what grade they were in, people did not come near me. I don't exactly know why - maybe because I tend to wear my heart on a sleeve. I don't like people. I have not been able to like them since I was a child. I even dislike myself because, unfortunately, I am a person too. That's why I cannot be nice to people when they talk to me... It's not that I despised them, but that's what the people around me thought. The word spread across campus quickly and within a month, nobody tried to communicate with me. I like a quiet environment too, so I had ended up in an ideal situation.

But the ideal was not to last. There was one student in my class that treated me, Ryougi Shiki, as a friend. That guy with a last name like a French poet was a nuisance to me. A real nuisance indeed.

...I saw a person under a streetlight far away.

---What a strange thing for me, I remembered that guy's smile.

...That person's behavior was suspicious.

---Thinking back on it later, why did I...

...I followed the person for some reason.

---Why did I feel such a surge of violent excitement?



Deep in the back alley, it is another world. The dead end serves more as an enclosed room than a road - this narrow backstreet, engulfed by the walls of buildings, must be an area devoid of sunlight even during the daytime. I half expect to see a homeless guy, living in here in the town's blind spot, but it is not so. Fresh paint coats the surrounding walls, and this small alley is lined with something wet. The rancid smell of trash usually present in here is masked by an ever more overwhelming stench.

The sea of blood roils around me. What appeared to be red paint is in fact human blood; flowing and filling up the alley. The smell is from this red liquid. In the middle of it all is a man's corpse. I can't see his expression. It seems his

arms and legs have been cut off and he looks more like a sprinkler spitting up a shower of blood.

This place is not normal. Even the blackness of the night is stained with the redness of blood.

-----Amidst it all, Shiki is smiling. The sleeves of her light blue kimono are tainted red. Kneeling down and touching the blood flowing on the ground, Shiki streaks it across her lips. The blood drips down her lips and her body trembles in ecstasy. This is the first lipstick that Shiki has ever worn.

Summer vacation has ended and the new term has started.

Nothing has really changed in my school life. I guess the only thing that changed is how the students are dressed, as they start to wear thicker clothing as Autumn approaches. As for me, I have never worn anything other than a kimono. Akitaka would bring me cute clothes that a sixteen year old girl might wear, but I never thought about actually wearing them.

Fortunately, this school doesn't have uniforms, so I can stay in my kimono. I actually wanted a long-sleeved kimono, but with one of those I'd have to waste entire PE classes just changing in and out of them. In the end, I made do with a Yukata-like single-piece kimono. I wondered what I should do about the cold during winter time, but I found a solution to that problem yesterday.

...It happened during the breaks in between classes. I was questioned when I was in my seat.

"Aren't you cold, Shiki?"

"I'm not cold right now, but I guess it should start to feel cold soon."

The person in front of me frowns, as if he's figured out I'm planning to be in my kimono during the winter too.

"You're gonna be wearing that thing even during winter?"

"Probably, but I'll be fine because I'll be wearing something over it,"

I said abruptly, trying to bring a halt to the conversation. He walks away, seemingly surprised at the thought of something being worn over a kimono, and I too was caught rather off-guard by this solution that I had spontaneously developed. In the end, I went out to buy a coat. I bought a leather blouse as it seemed to be the warmest. I'll wear it in the wintertime, but it will stay in my closet until then.



I end up eating lunch together with this guy, being invited and all. We're on the rooftop of the main school building, and many other groups of students surround me - A man and woman in a couple; a group just like ours - as I observe them, he talks to me. I make as if to ignore him, but a single word catches my attention.

"...Huh?"

"I said "Murder". It happened on the last day of the summer vacation, in the western part of the shopping district. It's not on the news yet though."

"Murder... that's harsh..."

"Yeah, and the method was sick too. The killer cut off this guy's arms and legs and just left him there. I heard the whole place was such a sea of blood that they had to board off the alley, and that the killer is still on the loose."

"Only the arms and legs? Can a human die from just that?"

"Of course, from loss of blood. In this case, though, I would assume that death from shock occurred first."

He continues to eat while he talks. In contrast to his calm-looking face, he likes to talk about this kind of stuff. I guess one of his relatives is in the police force or something... I bet he isn't in that high of a rank though, since he's leaking confidential matters.

"Oh, sorry Shiki. I guess it doesn't concern you."

"It's not that it concerns me. But Kokuto-kun..."

I complain to the guy questioning me as I close my eyes.

"That's not something we should discuss during meals."

"You're right," nods Kokuto.

Geez... Now I don't have any appetite for this tomato sandwich I just bought.



The first summer in high school ended by hearing a strange rumor like that one. The season slowly moves into autumn. For Ryougi Shiki, the life that seems just a bit different than what it used to be is about to head into the cold winter.



It has been raining since this morning. Accompanied by the sound of the falling rain, I am walking in the hallway. There aren't many students in the school building now that classes are over. Since the "Killer" incident that Kokuto was talking about has been publicized, the school has banned all club activities. According to Akitaka in the car this morning, it's the fourth case this month.

The authorities have no idea of the identity or motives of the killer. None of the victims are connected, except for the fact that they were all out late at night. I guess it wouldn't be that big of a deal if it had happened somewhere far away, but it's a different story when it happens in the very town you live in. All the students go home before dark and everyone, including the boys, goes home together in groups. Since the cops start patrolling at around nine, I haven't been able to take any night walks to my satisfaction.

"Four victims..."

I murmur.

All the four scenes, I have...

"Ryougi-san."

Someone suddenly calls my name. Turning around, I see a guy I have never seen before. He's wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, very plain. He has a calm face too... He must be an upperclassman.

"Yes? What is it?"

"You don't have to glare at me like that. Are you looking for Kokuto-kun?"

He asks, with an artificially amiable smile accompanying his ridiculous statement.

"I'm about to go home. Kokuto-kun has nothing to do with this."

"Really? You're wrong. You don't understand, that's why you're irritated. You shouldn't take it out on others too much because of that. It's easy to blame things on someone... It grows to be a habit. Hahaha, isn't four times a bit too much though?"

"-----Huh?"

Confused, I take a step back.

His false smile persists. A smile just like my own - how satisfied he looks. And yet...

"I just came here to talk to you. Now that I've done that, I need to go. Bye."

The man walks away. I don't watch him depart, but I hear the sound of his footsteps fading away into the rain. I head to the entrance. Changing shoes and going outside, I am met only by the rain: Akitaka, who is supposed to pick me up, is not here yet. He usually drives me home on rainy days, but I guess he's late today. It's too troublesome to change my shoes again, so I decide to wait by the stairs to the entrance.

The faint rain is clouding the school grounds. My breath mists white in the December cold... I don't know how long it had been before I noticed, but Kokuto is beside me.

"I have an umbrella."

"I'm fine, I have a ride home. You can go home."

"I'll get going in a bit. I want to stay here until then... Can I?"

I don't answer. He nods and leans against the wall. He's not the type who cares about his clothes getting dirty. I am not in the mood to talk with Kokuto. I'm determined to ignore anything he says, so it would make no difference whether he's here or not.

In the rain, I just wait. It's strangely quiet... only the raindrops fill my ears. Kokuto does not talk. Leaning on the wall, he has his eyes closed. I thought he was asleep, but it seems he's singing in a soft voice. I guess it's a popular song. Later, when I asked Akitaka, I found out it was called "Singing in the Rain".

Kokuto doesn't talk. There's less than one meter between us. Being this close together without a conversation makes me a bit restless. It was surprisingly painful...

How strange, why is this silence so heart wrenching?

I suddenly begin to feel scared... As if, if we stay like this, he will appear.

"...Kokuto-kun!"

"Yes!?"

He jolts up from the wall.

"What? Is something wrong?"

I can see myself in his eyes looking back at me. It's probably at this moment that I actually look at this person called Kokuto Mikiya for the first time, and not as a passing observation. He has soft facial features which look somewhat childish. He has big, deep black eyes. In a manner befitting his character, he has natural hair... not dyed or gelled. He wears black glasses that even kids would not wear nowadays. His plain clothing is black from top to bottom. I guess that's his style. I just wonder... Why is this person always meddling with me?

"Until now..."

Looking down, I try not to meet his eyes.

"Where were you?"

"I was in the student council room before I came here. Since our Senpai is withdrawing from school, we kind of had this small going-away party. He's called Shirazumi Rio, but it sure took me by surprise. He requested to withdraw from school, 'cause he said he found something he wanted to do, and he was a quiet person and all."

Shirazumi Rio... I don't think I've heard that name. But I do know how Kokuto would know a lot of people that would get him into parties like that. He's not only seen as a friend of classmates, but he is also somewhat popular among older girls.

"I invited you too. I told you yesterday but you never showed up at the student council room. I even went to the classroom to look, but you weren't there."

Certainly, he told me something like that yesterday. But I would have only spoiled the party had I gone... and I thought he was just being polite when he asked.

"I'm surprised. You were serious with that invitation?"

"Of course. What were you thinking, Shiki?"

Kokuto gets mad. Not because his promise was broken, but probably because I thought that way. I can only dislike his anger because it's something I have never experienced before.

I grow quiet from that moment on. On a day like today, I have never wanted Akitaka to show up so much. A bit later, the car drives up to me, and I bid goodbye to Kokuto.



The rain finally stops during the night. Shiki puts on the red leather blouse on and goes outside. A dark cloudy sky looms overhead, with only occasional glimpses of moonlight breaking through the cover. The police are busily patrolling the city. It would be a bit troublesome to run into them, so I decide to go to the riverside.

The wet ground reflects the light from the street lamps, glowing like the remains of a slug. I hear a train pass in the distance. The echoing sound tells me that the viaduct is near, built to let trains past, but not pedestrians.

...I find someone there.

Slowly, Shiki heads to the viaduct.

The train passes by once again. It's probably the last one for today. The sound now is much louder than before and echoes in the surrounding. She covers her ears as if to protect herself from the deepness of the sound. As the train races away, it grows strangely quiet under the viaduct. Without any street lamps and no way for the moonlight to get in, it is pitch black.

That might be why even the red liquid spilled around this riverside looks black. This is the fifth murder scene. The corpse has been arranged to resemble a flower. With the face at the center, the arms and legs are splayed around it like petals... Severed limbs, neck bent upwards at an inhuman angle. It's easy to see that the intention was to create something like a flower...But it's a shame, it still looks more like a manji.

Amid the grass, an artificial flower is cast away. Because of the spilling blood, the flower is red in color.

... Getting used to this...

That's what she thought to herself. Swallowing dryly, she notices she is extremely thirsty. Is it because of the tension or the excitement? The burning in her throat is incredibly hot. This place is filled with death and Shiki's lips curl into a smile. Barely suppressing her ecstasy, she continues to stare at the corpse.

...Feeling that just at this instant, she is alive.

It is a custom for the successor to the Ryougi family to have a match with the master using a real sword at the beginning of each month. The head of the Ryougi household many generations ago got tired of inviting many masters from abroad, so he made a dojo in his own house and made many new schools. This has been passed on until today and unfortunately, even a girl like me is required to wield a sword.

After finishing the match against my father, who surpassed me in both skill and strength, I head to my room. The distance between the dojo and the main house building is as far as, for example, a gym would be from a school building. I walk along the wooden floor, which does not creak even once. On the way, Akitaka is waiting for me. Akitaka, who is my servant, should be at least ten years older than me. He is probably waiting to help me change out of my sweaty clothes.

"Good job! Did your father say anything?"

"Same as always. Get lost, Akitaka. I can change by myself. You too, you're not like my personal servant. It's better for you to go to my older brother. In the end, it's the man that's succeeding."

Akitaka smiles at my harsh words.

"No, there can be no other successor than you. Your brother did not inherit your nature."

"What's so good about this nature?"

I leave Akitaka and head back to the building. Locking myself up in my room, I take off my gi. I stare at the mirror... A woman's body is reflected back at me. If I were to put on some make-up, and pull a scary face, I might be able to look like a guy; but there's nothing that can be done about the body. My body, that grows every day, that is sending SHIKI into despair.

"Maybe I should have been born a guy."

I talk aloud to no one. No, there is someone I can talk to. Inside me, another personality called SHIKI. All children of the Ryougi family are prepared two different names with the same pronunciation. The name of the yin, a name as a man. The name of the yang, a name as a woman. Since I was born female, I was named Shiki, which means "equation" or "form". If I would have been born

male, I would have been named SHIKI, which means "to weave". Why do we do this? It's because the Ryougi family produces children with a high probability of having split personalities.

Just like me.

Father said the Ryougi family has the heredity of a transcendent race. He also mentioned that it is a curse. It is indeed a curse. To me, this is not transcendent, but just abnormal. Fortunately, no successor has been of this nature for several generations. The reason is simple... they all ended up in the mental hospital before maturity. It's very dangerous to have two personalities in one body. The boundary between realities becomes vague and there have been many cases of suicide. But despite it all, I grew up without showing any sign of insanity. It's because me and SHIKI ignored each other.

The right to the ownership of the body is completely mine. SHIKI is only a substitute personality, one that I switched to for the match earlier, since his aggressive personality fits the situation more suitably. Come to think of it, SHIKI and I exist at the same time. This is different from what people know as a "split personality". I am Shiki, but at the same time, I am also SHIKI. It's just that I have the ownership of the body.

Father was happy that he could produce the rightful successor of the Ryougi family in his generation. That's why I'm treated as the successor, disregarding my male brother. That's fine, I take what's given to me. I probably thought I would lead this somewhat distorted normal life forever. I knew I could only lead such a life...

...Yes, even if SHIKI is a killing monster, I am not able to make him disappear. Since I have "SHIKI" in me, I am Shiki just like him.

Murder Study (Part 1) /

Murder Study (Part 1) / 1 /

"Mikiya, is it true that you're going out with Ryougi?"

I almost spew out my coffee milk to Gakuto's words. Spluttering, I look around: Fortunately, the classroom at lunchtime is loud and no one seems to have heard Gakuto's nonsense.

"What do you mean by that, Gakuto?"

Gakuto looks rather amazed when I question him.

"What are you saying? It's a fact known to everyone that Kokuto of class 1-C has a crush on Ryougi. The only ones who don't know are you two."

I frown at those words.

It's been seven months since I first met Shiki. It's already November, right near winter.

...Certainly it's not weird for anyone to start going out after that much time.

"Gakuto, that's just a misunderstanding. We're just friends, and nothing more."

"Really?"

The hopeful judo club member frowns. In contrast to his name, which means "educated person", this guy, who has been my friend since elementary school, is the athletic type. Thanks to our strong relationship, he must have figured out I wasn't lying.

"But you call her by her first name. There's no way that Ryougi would allow a simple classmate to address her like that."

"Hey now. Shiki doesn't like that. She glared at me when I called her Ryougi-san before. People say you can kill someone by looking at them, but Shiki definitely has that potential. Anyways, she says she hates people calling her by her last name, so she says it's fine if I just call her "you". But since I didn't like that, I compromised with "Shiki-san". She didn't like that either, so it ended up with just Shiki. That is the boring truth."

Telling Gakuto about what happened in April, he agrees that it was indeed a boring development.

"I see. That sure is an unromantic story."

Gakuto says this disappointedly... What kind of an answer was he hoping for?

"So that thing last week at the school entrance was nothing either? Damn, it was a waste of time coming here. I should have just eaten lunch in my classroom."

"...Hold on. How do you know about that?"

"I told you, you guys are famous. Everyone at the school already knows you and Ryougi were getting shelter from the rain together by the entrance last Saturday. Since it's Ryougi, even small things like that catch everyone's attention."

I sigh and look up. All I can hope for now is that Shiki will never hear about this.

"This is a school to get you ready for college right? I'm starting to wonder if everyone's really studying..."

"According to the teachers, employment rate is good for students who graduate from here."

...I have to question how this school is run.

"But man, why Ryougi? It just doesn't fit you."

I remember being told something like that by my Senpais.

They told me a quiet, gentle girl would suit me. I guess Gakuto thinks along the same lines too.

...I get a bit angry.

"Shiki isn't such a scary girl."

I let my tongue slip...

Gakuto grins... He looks like he knows I didn't mean to say that out loud.

"What do you mean she's just your friend? She's definitely a hard girl. The fact that you don't see that is proof that you're head-over-heels about her."

He must mean hard-headed when he says hard. I know he's right, but I don't want to just give in and nod.

"I already know that."

"Then what's so good about her? Her looks?"

Gakuto is holding nothing back.

Indeed Shiki is beautiful. But with that aside, I am attracted to Shiki. She always seems like she's about to be hurt. In reality, she's firm enough not to get hurt, but she is also more fragile than she looks. That's probably why I can't ignore her. I don't want to see her get hurt.

"It's just something that you don't notice. Even Shiki has her cute points... Let's see, if I think of her as an animal, she's cute enough to be a rabbit."

Suddenly, I regret saying that.

"Don't be stupid. She's definitely in the cat family, and probably the wild ones too. A rabbit is too far off, way too far. Ryougi is more like the type that would die out of loneliness, isn't she?"

Gakuto laughs his ass off.

But I think she's like a rabbit in that she doesn't become attached to people, and in the way she observes others from a distance. Huh... if that's just me, then fine.

"All right. I won't talk to you about girls anymore."

Gakuto quits laughing once I tell him that.

"You might be right. A rabbit suits her well."

"Gakuto, a frank agreement is rather offensive."

"I mean it. I remembered that rabbits were dangerous too. In this world, there are rabbits that chop off your head if you're unlucky."

I stall at the serious voice in which he delivers this statement.

"That's a pretty amazing rabbit."

Gakuto nods.

"Of course, 'cause I'm talking about the world of gaming."

Murder Study (Part 1) / 2 /

I saw an unbelievable thing on the day the exam for the second quarter ended.

There was a letter in my desk. No, that itself wasn't too weird. The problem was the sender and its content. To put it simply, it was from Shiki, asking me out on a date.

It sounded like a threat telling me to take her out somewhere tomorrow. Bewildered, I headed home and waited apprehensively for the next day to come, feeling like a samurai ordered to kill himself the following sunrise.



"Yo, Kokuto."

Shiki greets me as she arrives. She came to our meeting-place, the dog statue in front of the station, with a red leather jacket over her kimono. More than her outfit, I was confused by how she spoke.

"Did ya wait? Sorry man. It took me awhile to shake off Akitaka."

She says this as if it's perfectly natural for her.

She sounds like a guy, not like the Shiki I know. Not being able to answer, I check her figure again. There's nothing different in her looks. She has a graceful, somewhat diminutive body, but her confident stance and composure lend her a certain measure of strength. This unstable contradiction creates an almost marionette-like atmosphere around here. She is a puppet. Made well, but just on the outside.

"What? You angry just 'cause I'm an hour late? You're pretty intolerant, man."

Shiki engages me with her dark eyes. Her beautiful short black hair frames that small face, and big, beautiful eyes. Nevertheless, whilst those deep eyes reflect the outline of Kokuto Mikiya on the surface, it seems that they are focused on something much further away. Perhaps in the distance...

Come to think of it, I was attracted to these eyes since that snowy day when we first met.

"Um... You're Shiki, right?"

"Yeah," Shiki laughs. A strange smile that's more like a grin.

"What else do I look like? We're wasting time like this. Come on, take me somewhere. I'll let you decide, Kokuto."

Saying that, Shiki seizes my arms forcefully and starts to walk.

...She'd said she'd let me decide, but in my confusion I didn't even notice that she was leading the way...

We walked a lot.

Shiki didn't do much shopping, but she would go into various boutiques to look around, heading into another whenever she got bored. My requests to take a rest

at the cafe or a movie theater were denied, but she was in the right. It would have been boring to go to such places with the way Shiki was acting at the moment.

Shiki talked a lot. If I'm not mistaken, she seemed excited somehow. How should I say this... a mental high?

Most of the stores she went to were fashion-oriented, but I was relieved that they were all for women's clothing. Eventually, Shiki must have become tired from looking through four department stores in four hours, as she told me that she wanted to get something to eat.

We wander around and end up in a fast food joint. Shiki takes off her jacket once she takes a seat. Her out-of-place kimono garb draws glances from all around, but this fact does not seem to faze her. Steeling my nerves, I ask her about what I've been wondering all this time.

"Shiki, you actually talk like that all the time?"

"In my case. But there's no meaning in how someone talks. Even you can change that."

Shiki eats at her hamburger disinterestedly.

"Well, this kind of thing never happened before. Today's the first day that I came outside. I didn't say anything until now 'cause I had the same opinion as Shiki."

...I don't get it at all.

"Let's see... It's a split personality, to put it simply. I'm SHIKI and the normal one is Shiki. SHIKI is from the word, "woven cloth." But Shiki and I are not different people. The only difference between us is our priorities of things. The hierarchy of our interests is different."

Saying that, she writes on her napkin with her wet hands. Her white finger traces the words "Shiki" and "SHIKI".

"I wanted to talk with you, Kokuto, that's all. Since it's not something Shiki wanted to do, I'm doing it in her place. Do ya understand?"

"Well, kind of."

I answer uneasily, but I actually have felt what SHIKI is talking about. I think something similar to that happened to me before. Before I entered high school, I met Shiki, but she said she didn't remember it. At that time I thought she said that because she hated me, but after hearing this, it makes sense.

No, more than that. After spending all day with her I can tell she is the same Shiki. As Shiki, no, as SHIKI says, she only talks differently, but her actions are the same. They are so similar I'm starting to feel there's nothing different about her now.

"But why did you tell me about that?"

"I thought I wouldn't be able to hide it from ya much longer."

Shiki takes another drink. She puts the straw to her mouth briefly, and quickly lets go... Shiki doesn't like cold things.

"To be honest, I'm like Shiki's subversive impulse. This was something that she really wanted to do. But up to now, there was no one I wanted to do it with, because Ryougi Shiki was uninterested in everyone."

SHIKI says so like she's not interested. I could not move, being entranced by those deep black eyes.

"Yeah, but you rest assured, I'm still Shiki. I'm just saying what Shiki thinks. Like I told ya, we just talk differently... Well, we're beginning to get out of line, so don't take me too seriously."

"Out of line?... You mean, you and Shiki get into fights?"

"Hey, how can you get in a fight with yourself? No matter what I do, it has to be something we both wanted, so we both have no complaints. No matter how much I fight, Shiki has control over this body. I'm seeing you like this because Shiki thought it was all right too. Anyway, she'll probably regret having talked this way. It's not something Shiki would do, right?"

I agree.

SHIKI laughs.

"I like those kind of things about you. But Shiki doesn't. That's what I mean by being out of line."

...What does that mean? Does Shiki not like the fact that I don't think too much? Or does Shiki not like the fact that she likes that part of me? I don't know why, but I somehow thought it had to be the latter.

"Well, that's enough explanation for today."

Standing up suddenly, SHIKI puts on the leather jacket.

"Bye~. I like you, so I'll see you again pretty soon."

Putting the money for the hamburger on the table, SHIKI leaves quickly.



I part with SHIKI and return to my neighborhood, the sun is setting already. Because of all the recent murder incidents not many people are out, even though the sun's only setting.

When I get home, my cousin, Daisuke Nii-san is there. I feel exhausted from all that talk with SHIKI, so I go to the kotatsu and put my legs in it. Daisuke Nii-san also has his legs in there so we end up fighting for the small space inside without a word. In the end, I couldn't lay down, so I just had to get up again.

"Aren't you busy, Daisuke-san?"

I ask him while taking a mandarin orange off the table. Daisuke Nii-san answers:

"Yeah. It's five people in three months, of course we're busy. I'm so busy I can't even go home to sleep. I have to get going again in about an hour."

Daisuke Nii-san is a police officer. It's an unfitting job for such a lazy person.

"How's the investigation going?"

"It's all right. There weren't any clues until now but the killer finally left us something. Well, it does seem intentional though." Saying that, Daisuke Nii-san lifts up his face. His serious face is right in front of mine.

"What I'm telling you is confidential. I'm going to tell you because this is something that's important to you. I told you about the first victim, right?"

Daisuke Nii-san begins to describe the second and the third murder scene... I listen closely while hoping not all policemen in this world let out confidential matters so easily.

The second victim had their body bisected vertically. From their head down to their groin. The weapon used is unknown. One of the cut halves was stuck to the wall.

The third victim had their arms and legs amputated, with the severed arms sewn onto the legs.

The fourth victim had their body cut into pieces and had some word-like symbol stamped on it.

The fifth victim was made to resemble a manji using its arms and legs.

"It's easy to understand that the killer is abnormal."

I say this while trying to hold back the rapidly rising wave of nausea. Daisuke Nii-san agrees.

"I think it's clearly intentional when it's so easy to understand, but what do you think?"

"...Let's see. I don't think it matters that every one of them is killed by being cut apart. I can't say anything else, but..."

"But?"

"I just think the killer is getting used to this. The next one might not be outside."

"You're right." Daisuke Nii-san covers his face with his hands.

"There's no motive and there's no pattern. It's only happening outside right now but, this is a kind of a guy that would even come indoors. If this killer can't find anyone out at night, there's more motive for them to go into someone's house. I just wish the higher ranking guys would take that into consideration and be prepared for it."

"Well..." Daisuke Nii-san changes the subject.

"We found this by the fifth victim."

Daisuke Nii-san places our school badge on the table. It's considered unimportant, seeing as we don't have uniforms or anything, but we are in fact required to wear this somewhere on our person when going to school.

"I don't know if the killer didn't notice this because the scene of the crime was a grassy field or if the killer intentionally put this there. But either way, there has to be a meaning behind this. I might go over to your place sometime soon."

Frowning, he delivers this ominous statement.

Murder Study (Part 1) / 3 /

The winter vacation ended in a flash. The only thing that happened was I went to the shrine on new year with Shiki. But I think I led a normal life other than that.

When the third term started, Shiki isolated herself even more. She radiated an aura of rejection that even I could feel.

After making sure everyone else has left and going to the classroom, I always find SHIKI there. She doesn't do anything, she just stares out of the window. I haven't been invited or called to come here. But I just can't leave this fragile girl alone, so I keep her company meaninglessly.

The sun sets early in the wintertime and the classroom is tinted red. In this red and black, SHIKI is leaning against the window.

"Did I tell you that I hate people?"

Today, SHIKI starts to talk mindlessly.

"That's the first time I heard that... do you mean that?"

"Yeah, Shiki hates people. She's been like that since she was small. ... You see, when you're a child, you don't know anything. You think the whole world will love you unconditionally. Since you like them, they must like you... That feels like common sense."

"You're right. You never doubt anything when you're small. You unconditionally love them and you think it's only natural for them to love you back. The only things I was scared of were ghosts. Though, I'm scared of people now."

SHIKI nods in agreement.

"But that's a very important thing. You need to be pure, Kokuto. Since you only worry about yourself when you're small, you won't notice the evil minds of other people. Even if it's just a misunderstanding, the feeling of love you receive makes you able to be kind to others, hence people can only express the emotions they're familiar with."

The sunset casts a red hue across her face. At this moment, I cannot tell if she is SHIKI or Shiki, yet it does not make any difference either way, this is just Shiki's monologue.

"But I'm different. I have known someone else since I was born. Since Shiki has SHIKI inside of her, she knew of others. She found out that there're other people who think differently and that they do not love you unconditionally. Since she found out as a child how ugly other people are, she could not love them. In time, she grew to pay them no attention. The only emotion Shiki knows is rejection."

... That's why she hates people. SHIKI says so with her eyes... I feel like crying for no reason.

"But wasn't she lonely like that?"

"Why? Shiki has me. It's certainly lonely by yourself but Shiki isn't alone. She was isolated, but she wasn't alone."

SHIKI says so with a resolute face. There's no deceit in that expression, and it seems she really is satisfied with that.

But really...?

Yet really...?

"But Shiki is acting weird recently. She has an abnormality in her called "me", but she wants to deny me. Denying is my domain, and Shiki is supposed to be only able to affirm."

SHIKI laughs asking why that might be. It's a brutal looking smile.

"Kokuto, have you ever wanted to kill someone?"

At that instant, the sun paints her face in vermilion and makes my heart jump.

"Not so far. The most I've ever wanted was to punch someone."

"I see. But I only have that feeling."

Her voice echoes through the classroom.

"....."

Huh?"

"I told you. Humans can only show emotions that they have experienced. I take on the forbidden taboos inside Shiki. What's low on Shiki's priorities is high on mine. I am content with that and I know that's why I exist. I am the personality that takes on Shiki's suppressed intentions. That's why I've always killed my will. I have been killing the dark side called SHIKI. I have killed myself over and over. See? The only thing I've experienced is killing things."

Then, she walks away from the window. Why... do I suddenly find the person silently walking toward me so terrifying?

"So Kokuto, the definition of murder for Shiki is..."

A voice murmuring by my ear...

"... Is to eliminate, in self defense, anything that tries to open her up."

Smiling, SHIKI leaves the classroom. It was an innocent smile that one would give after playing a trick on you...



During lunch break the next day...

When I asked Shiki if she wanted to have lunch with me, she looked really surprised. At this time, she showed me her surprised expression for the first time since I have met her.

"What a strange thing to ask..."

Saying that, Shiki accepts my request. Shiki asks that we go to the rooftop. She is following silently behind me. Her silent stare is stabbing into my back. Maybe she's mad at me... no, she definitely is... Even I know what she meant by those words yesterday. It was her last warning to me not to be involved with her, and that she doesn't know what she might do if I don't comply.

But Shiki does not understand. That's something Shiki has always unconsciously told me, and I have already gotten used to it. When we get to the rooftop, no one is there. I guess being January and all, nobody else wanted to eat in this cold weather.

"It's cold, do you want to eat somewhere else?"

"No, I want to eat here. If you want to go somewhere else, please go ahead."

I tilt my head to Shiki's polite tone. We sit by the wall to avoid the wind. Shiki just sits there without opening her bread. In contrast, I have already finished my second sandwich.

"Why did you talk to me?"

Shiki's murmur is so sudden that I could not catch her words.

"Did you say something, Shiki?"

"I said, why are you so carefree?"

She says so with piercing eyes.

"That's harsh. I've been called excessively honest, but I've never been called carefree."

"I guess everyone was holding back."

Selfishly convinced, Shiki opens her egg sandwich. The stark crunch of the wrapper suited the frosty rooftop. Shiki sits there silently and nibbles on her sandwich. I have nothing to do as I'm already done. I think a meal needs to be accompanied by a conversation.

"Shiki, you must be a bit mad."

"...A bit?"

She glares at me. I scold myself for not thinking before I spoke.

"I don't understand, but I get irritated when you're around. Why you involve yourself with me, why you don't act differently after being told all that yesterday, these are all things I don't understand."

"I don't know the reason either. It's fun being with you, but if you ask me why it's fun, I can't answer. Well, if you talk about yesterday, I guess you can say I'm optimistic."

"Kokuto-kun, do you understand that I'm abnormal?"

I can only nod to those words. Her split personality is real and it is indeed not normal.

"Yeah, it's indeed not normal."

"Right. So then you should understand that I am not someone you could associate with normally."

"Abnormal or not, it doesn't matter when we're hanging out."

Shiki stops all movement. She stops time as if she's even forgotten how to breathe.

"But I cannot be like you."

Saying that, Shiki slides her fingers through her hair. Her kimono sways and I notice the bandage wrapped around her thin arm, near her right elbow. The fabric looks clean and new.

"Shiki, that wound..."

Before I get a chance to finish, Shiki stands up.

"If you don't understand with SHIKI's words, I'll tell you myself."

Shiki talks while gazing away into the distance.

"If we keep this up, I will probably end up killing you."

... How could I have replied to those words?

After that, Shiki returns to the classroom, leaving her trash behind. On my own again, I begin to pick up the litter.

"...Geez, this is just like Gakuto said."

I remember the conversation I had with Gakuto. Like he told me, I might be stupid. I could not hate Shiki even after she completely rejected me. Rather, my

mind has been cleared. There can only be one reason why it's fun being with Shiki.

"I already went mad a long time ago."

...Yeah, why didn't I notice this earlier?

...I love Shiki so much that I can even laugh off her telling me she wants to kill me.

Murder Study (Part 1) / 4 /

It's the first Sunday in February. I wake up and go to the dining room. Daisuke Nii-san is there, getting ready to leave.

"Oh, you were here?"

"Yo. I just came to sleep 'cause I missed the last train, but I've gotta go to work now. I envy you students, your promises of vacation are always kept."

He looks like he hasn't had enough sleep. I bet he's busy with all the new information on that serial killer.

"You were talking about coming to my school, but what happened to that?"

"It seems we'll have to go there again. To tell you the truth, there was a sixth victim three days ago. I guess this victim struggled hard and we found evidence of the killer's skin in her nails. Women have long nails so I guess she scratched the killer's arm pretty bad. Maybe it was a desperate move but the scratch has to be deep; she clawed out almost three centimeters of skin."

This development is a new one, it's not even on TV or in the newspapers yet. But I am shocked for a different reason... I think it's because in the past few days, Shiki has been using the ominous word "killing" quite a number of times. Why else would I imagine for an instant that Shiki would be this killer?

"A scratch... you mean the killer has a wound?"

"Of course. Do you think the victim would scratch her own arm? We've already figured out the skin is from around the elbow area, and the blood's been analyzed, so the killer is done for."

Daisuke Nii-san leaves. With power escaping my legs, I crumble onto the chair. Three days ago was the day I had that conversation with SHIKI in the setting sun. I think when I saw her the next day, the bandage was around her elbow...

Right around mid-day, I figure out it's no good just sitting here and thinking. Instead, I should just go to Shiki and ask her. If she tells me her wound is nothing related to it, this uneasiness will go away.

I decide to visit Shiki's house using the school's contact guide. Her house is on the outskirts of town, one station away from here. When I finally find her house, the sun is already setting. The mansion with bamboo trees surrounding it is oriental-styled. It's impossible to tell the size of this place from where I am - I wouldn't be able to tell exactly how big it is unless I got in a plane to have an overhead view. I walk through the bamboo woods along a path and reach a big gate: I'm slightly relieved that this ancient-looking place has an intercom. After pushing it and declaring my intentions, a man in a black suit appears. I find out that this man, in around his thirties, is Shiki's servant. This person called Akitaka talks politely, even to a stranger such as myself. Unfortunately, Shiki isn't home. He offers for me to stay and wait, but I refuse. To be honest, I don't have the guts to go into this place alone.

I decide to go home since the sun has already set. I get to the station after an hour's walk and happen to run into Senpai. At his invitation, we eat at a nearby restaurant and end up talking until ten. Unlike Senpai, I am a student so I have to start heading home soon: I say goodbye to Senpai and buy a train ticket at the station. It's almost eleven o'clock now. For a second I wonder if Shiki has arrived home already.

"What the hell am I doing?"

I question myself as I walk through the residential district, which appears absent of any sign of life this late at night. I can't understand why I'm heading toward Shiki's house in this unfamiliar town. Even though I know I won't be able to see her, I at least want to see the lights in her house. Trudging through the chilly winter air, I exit the residential district and end up facing a group of trees. I walk through the small road in the middle of it. Since there's no wind, the bamboo is silent. There are no streetlights, so the moon is my only guide.

I half-jokingly think what would happen if I got attacked here, and the thought begins to eat at me. The image grows stronger in my head even as my consciousness struggles to discard the thought. When I was a kid, I was scared of ghosts. The shadows in between the bamboo looked like ghosts and I would

be frightened. But now, I'm scared of other people. I'm only scared of the fact that someone might be hiding in the bushes.

...Since when did the unknown ghosts turn into other humans?

The more I try to calm down, the more the feeling creeps into me. ...Really, this dreadful feeling does not go away. Oh yeah, I think Shiki was saying the same thing before. I think that was... While I try to recall, I see something ahead of me.

"....."

I stop dead in my tracks. It's not my will, because right now... my mind is totally empty.

A white figure stands a few meters ahead. The white kimono that looks bright is covered with red spots. The red spots on the kimono expand. It's because the thing in front of her is spilling red liquid everywhere. The one in the white kimono is Shiki and the thing is not a fountain, but a dead person.

"....."

I cannot say anything. But I always thought about this somewhere in my mind, this image of Shiki standing in front of a dead body. That's why I'm not surprised or making a commotion. My mind is just completely blank. The body must have recently died... the blood would not be flowing out with such a force unless its arteries were slashed while it was alive. There is a gaping wound in its neck and an angled cut transecting its torso. Shiki is silently staring at the dead body. The color of the spilled blood alone is enough to make one faint, yet its organs spill and bulge grotesquely out from the wound, transforming it into something inhuman. It appears as if some slimy, primitive being is trying to assume a human form, but the resemblance is so horrific that it's difficult to look at... A normal human being would not be able to stand the sight, but Shiki is staring at the dead body. Blood splatters her ghostly-white kimono.

The spots look like red butterflies.

The butterflies are flying toward Shiki's face.

The blood-covered face is twisted and deformed.

Is it because of fear or pleasure?

Is she Shiki... or SHIKI?

"....."

I try to say something and I collapse onto the ground. I vomit. I vomit out everything in my stomach, stomach acid, as if to try and rid myself of this memory... I vomit until I start to cry. But it's no good. It doesn't even make me feel better. The amount of blood is so vast and the smell so overwhelming that it seeps into my brain.

Eventually, Shiki notices me. Her head turns to look at me. The expressionless face shows a smile. It's so pure it makes me rather calm. The smile reminds me of a mother. That smile is so unfitting to this whole scene that...

It makes me shiver.

My consciousness begins to fade as she draws closer. I remember Shiki's words at the last moment.

..."Be careful Kokuto-kun. A bad premonition tends to attract bad reality."

... I guess I was stupid indeed. Because I tried not to think about this evil reality until the moment I saw it with my own eyes...

Murder Study (Part 1) / 5 /

I end up missing school the following day. I was found by a policeman, standing absent-mindedly at the scene of the crime, and was taken in for questioning.

I heard I could not say anything for a few hours. It took me about four hours before my mind returned... I guess my brain doesn't have that good of a recovery system. Anyways, after I was questioned and released, it was too late to go to school.

The manner in which the man was killed would have made it impossible for the killer not to have blood on their clothes: fortunately, I did not; and being a relative of Daisuke Nii-san, I think my questioning went rather smoothly. Daisuke Nii-san offered me a ride home, which I accepted.

"So you didn't see anyone, Mikiya?"

"You're being too persistent. I said I didn't see anyone."

I glare at Daisuke Nii-san and sit deep in my seat.

"I see. Damn! It would have helped if you'd seen the killer... but I guess he wouldn't have let you go alive if you saw him. I can't let you die, so I guess it's a good thing for me you didn't see anyone."

"You're not a good policeman, Daisuke-san."

I hate myself for being able to respond to him in such a normal tone. My mind scornfully brands me a liar. I can't believe that I can lie with such a straight face, especially considering these are police matters we're talking about here. If I don't tell the truth, things will only get worse... But still, I do not say anything about Shiki being at the scene of the crime.

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt. So, what's your impression of your first dead body?"

He asks me a cruel question.

"Terrible. I don't ever want to see it again."

"This one is special. It's not as bad as what is normally seen so relax."

What does he want me to be relaxed about?

"But, it's a small world we live in. I didn't know you knew the daughter of the Ryougi family."

The fact that might make him happy gets me more depressed... The murder that happened in front of Ryougi's house is treated as the same killer's work but the investigation stopped from there. Even the police left the territory of the Ryougis after their inspection. From what he says, it's because of the pressure from the Ryougis. It was recorded that this murder happened in between eleven and twelve at night on February third (Sunday), and the only witness was Kokuto Mikiya. But it's also recorded that I was there only after the crime had occurred and that I was in a state of shock after seeing the scene of the crime. Neither I nor the Ryougi family have said anything about Shiki.

"But didn't you investigate the people of the Ryougi?"

Daisuke-san shakes his head to my question.

"The daughter of that place goes to your high school, so I wanted to ask them about it, but they refused. They said they didn't care about what happened outside their house. The way I see it, they are innocent, they have nothing to do with the crime."

"Huh?"

I let it out without thinking. I trust Daisuke Nii-san even if it seems like I don't. It's commonly known in his workplace that this person keeps his hold on his job due to his superior skill; so that's why I thought he might suspect Shiki.

"Why do you think so?"

"Hmm, well... do you think such a beautiful girl would kill someone? You don't, right? I don't think so too. This is an obvious answer for a guy."

...Why did he ever decide to be a policeman? No, more than that, I sigh at how much more carefree he is than me.

"I see. You'll be single for the rest of your life."

"Hey now, I could put you in jail, you know."

I'd be released due to lack of any convicting evidence... But I agree with his opinion. Even though I don't have the hunch like he does, it is my opinion that Shiki is not the killer. Even if she admits it herself, I believe she is not the one. So now, there is something I must do.

The crime neared its solution.

From then on, until that day three years later, the killer would cease to appear. For me at that time, that incident seemed like it did not concern me.

It happened to be the first and the last incident which involved both Shiki and me.

Murder Study (Part 1) • Finish

A murder occurred in front of my house. My memory of the night after I went to take a walk is vague. But if you connect the parts that I remember, what I must have done is obvious. SHIKI is the same way too, but I do not deal with blood too well. Just looking at it makes my mind go blank. The flowing blood of this victim was really beautiful. The stone road to my mansion, the space between the stones are like a maze and the red liquid navigating that labyrinth was filled with a beauty I had never encountered before.

But that caused the misfortune. When I regained my senses, someone was throwing up behind me. It was Kokuto Mikiya. I didn't know why he was there and, at that time, I didn't even wonder why he was there. After that, I think... I went back to the mansion, but it seems the crime was found out much later than that and nobody knew I was at the scene of the crime. Then, was what I saw just a dream? There's no way that my honest classmate would not say anything about the killer. But why did it have to be in front of my house?

"SHIKI, is it you?"

I ask aloud, but there's no answer. SHIKI and I are out of sync. That feeling grows stronger every day. Even if I let SHIKI use my body, the one who decides is me, but why is it that my memory is vague when I do so?

... Maybe I just don't realize it, but I might be insane like everyone else of the Ryougi bloodline. SHIKI would say: "If you think you're abnormal, then you're not." For an abnormal person, everyone else seems abnormal, so they would not question themselves. At least that's the way I was. Then that must mean I finally figured out the difference between me and the rest of the world after sixteen years. But who caused that?

"Please excuse me, Ojou-sama."

Akitaka says after knocking on the door.

"What is it?"

Akitaka opens the door with my permission. It's almost bedtime, so he does not enter the room.

"It seems there's someone checking out the mansion."

"I heard from father that he got all the policemen out."

Akitaka nods.

"All the police have been off the property since last night. I think it is someone else tonight."

"Do as you wish. It has nothing to do with me."

"It seems the one outside is your friend from your school."

After hearing that, I immediately get up from my bed. I go to the window facing the mansion's gate and look outside. In the bamboo woods, there is a figure that I wish would hide more cleverly. ... It pisses me off.

"I can get him to go home if you wish."

"You can let it be."

I quickly make my way to the bed and lay down. Akitaka leaves after wishing me goodnight. I cannot sleep even after turning off the lights and closing my eyes. There's nothing to do so I check outside the window again. Wearing a brown coat, Mikiya is shivering in the cold. It seems he's looking at the gate. He has a pot of coffee by his feet. What a great guy.

I have to reject the idea that seeing Mikiya at that place is only a dream. Since he was actually there, he's here right now to check on me. I don't know what his motives are, but I think he's probably out to check who the killer is... Anyway, I get mad and unconsciously bite at my nail.



The day after such this incident, Mikiya was acting normally.

"Shiki, wanna eat lunch together?"

He would say that and go to the rooftop. I feel like I'm being trained using food as I always accept his offer of lunch. I would have decided to ignore him, but I was curious about what he thought of that night. I followed him up to the rooftop thinking he would question me about it, but Mikiya was the same as always.

"Isn't your house too big? I can brag about seeing a servant just by going to see you."

Mikiya has no right to use the word "servant".

"Akitaka is my father's secretary. And we call them caretakers, not servants, Kokuto-kun."

"I see, so you do have people like that at your place."

... That's the only time my house comes up in the conversation. With his personality, I don't think he realizes that we saw him checking out the mansion; but still, he is acting too strangely. He must have seen me covered in blood that night, so why can he still laugh like it never happened? I bring the topic up myself.

"Kokutoh-kun, on the night of February third..."

"Don't talk about that."

He avoids my question just like that.

"What is it, Kokuto?"

... I can't believe it, I'm talking like SHIKI without noticing. Mikiya is a bit startled at being addressed so, while I am obviously still Shiki.

"Tell me, why didn't you tell the police about me?"

"...Because I didn't see anything."

That's a lie. There's no way. At that time, SHIKI went towards him and...

"You just happened to be there, right? At least, that's what I saw, so I decided to believe in you."

That's a lie. Otherwise, why would he be checking on the mansion?

...SHIKI went towards him and...

"Well, to be honest, it's a bit difficult for me to think about it right now. If I can have confidence in myself, I should be able to hear you out; so let's not talk about that for now."

His expression makes me feel like running away.

...SHIKI definitely tried to kill Kokuto Mikiya...

I did not want such a thing. Mikiya said he would believe me. If I could also believe in myself, I wouldn't feel this unknown pain either...



From that day on, I decide to ignore Mikiya completely. About two days into it, he stopped talking to me, but he doesn't stop coming to the mansion to check on me. Under the cold winter sky, he would stay in the bamboo woods until about three in the morning. As a result, I'm no longer able to take my nightly walks. It's been about two weeks since it started. I gaze outside the window, wondering if he really wants to figure out the identity of the killer that badly.

He is really persistent.

It's almost three in the morning, but he just keeps staring at the gate. There's no sign of desperation in his expression - in fact, he seems to be smiling as he leaves.

"....."

I get irritated. I finally understand. He isn't out to find the killer. For him, it's only natural to trust me, and that's why he doesn't suspect me. He's there knowing from the beginning that I would not go out during the night. He's only there to prove my innocence. That's why he smiles happily when the night ends without anything happening, believing that the true killer is really innocent.

"... What a happy guy."

I murmur to myself. Being with Mikiya calms me down. Being with Mikiya makes me think I'm like him. Being with Mikiya makes me think I could go over to their side. But definitely, that bright side of the world is a world I should never be in. A world I cannot exist in, a world without a place for me... He drags me in with his smile...

That's why I am irritated by Mikiya, making me think all that. I have inside me a killer called SHIKI. That boy that lets me know that I am abnormal...

"I am fine by myself. You're getting in my way, Kokuto."

Shiki does not want to go crazy.

SHIKI does not want to be broken.

Everything would have been fine if I had never had the dream of living normally.



March comes and the cold starts to ebb away. I look outside from my classroom. The overlooking view from here makes a person like me feel safe. A view that I cannot reach precludes me from having any semblance of hope. Mikiya comes as usual into the red-washed classroom. SHIKI likes to talk like this... and I don't dislike it either.

"I never thought you'd invite me. Are you going to stop ignoring me?"

"I wanted to talk because it's impossible to continue that."

Mikiya makes a frowning face. I continue, feeling as if SHIKI's personality is being ever more strongly intermixed with my own.

"You said that I am not the killer."

The sunset is so red and vivid that I cannot see his face.

"I'm sorry. I am a killer. Why do you let me go even after seeing that scene?"

Mikiya looks dumbstruck.

"There's nothing to let go, because you never did such a thing."

"Even if I admit it myself?"

Mikiya nods.

"You're the one who told me not to listen to you too seriously. And you're definitely incapable of doing such a thing... ever."

I grow angry at Mikiya for saying something such as this, even though he has no idea of my true situation.

"What do you mean "definitely"?! What about me can you understand?! What about me can you trust?!"

I vent my anger at him. Mikiya makes a troubled face but smiles nevertheless.

"I have no basis for it, but I will continue to believe in you. I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you."

That did it. A pure power... these words erase all else with their purity.

This unassuming phrase to him is happiness for Shiki and the destruction that she could never get away from. I was just shown the world I could never live in by this happy person.

...A world in which you can live with someone else must be a happy world.

...But I do not know such a world.

...But I probably do not know such a world.

If I get to know someone, SHIKI will kill that person because SHIKI's reason for existence is to deny. And since my reason is to affirm, I cannot exist without denial. Since I have never been attracted to anything, I was able to distance myself from this contradiction. Now that I know, the more I wish for it, the more I know this wish is hopeless. That fact really hurts and I detest it. For the first time, I detest Mikiya from the bottom of my heart.

... Mikiya laughs like it's nothing.

Even though I can never be there.

I cannot stand his existence. I know for sure now. Mikiya will bring forth my destruction...

"You're stupid."

I tell him from the bottom of my heart.

"Yeah, I get told that a lot."

I exit the classroom. The sunset blazes red behind me. As I leave, I ask him without turning.

"Are you going to come again tonight?"

"Huh.....?"

He sounds surprised. I guess he didn't know I had noticed his "stake-outs". Mikiya tries to shrug it off but I stop him.

"Answer me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll go if I feel like it."

I leave the classroom. Gray clouds loom across in the red sky. From the look of the dark, heavy clouds...

I think it will rain tonight.

Night.

The dark clouds start to shower rain upon the earth. The countless droplets pattering against the ground send a clamor against the hazy night, and the cold air belies the typical March weather. Among the wet bamboo leaves, Kokuto Mikiya stares at the Ryougi mansion. The hand holding his umbrella grows red and sore, and he heaves a great sigh - even he doesn't plan on continuing this voyeuristic charade for much longer. It would be great if the killer were to be caught in the time that he was doing this, but Mikiya has decided to quit if nothing happens for another week.

...Standing in the rain sure is tiring. The coldness and the rain hit hard. Mikiya is just barely getting used to all this.

....Sigh

Not because of the rain but rather as a result of Shiki's actions today. What can Mikiya get across to her when she thinks he doesn't trust her? At that time, Shiki seemed really fragile, so much so that Mikiya thought she was crying.

The rain does not stop.

The black puddles on the ground ripple endlessly.

A tremendous splash.

Mikiya turns in the direction of the sound.

A red figure is standing facing him.

A girl in red. Sodden with rain.

Not even holding an umbrella, the girl is drenched as if she has just come out of the ocean. Her black hair clings to her forehead and her eyes look empty.

"...Shiki"

Mikiya quickly runs to her. How long has this girl been out in the rain? The red kimono is sticking to her ice-cold body. Mikiya hands her the umbrella and takes out a towel from his bag.

"Here, wipe yourself with this. What are you doing? Your house is right there."

Mikiya reaches out his hand. She laughs at his defenselessness.

"..... Huh?"

It happens even before he notices. The hand that reached out to her feels something hot, and Mikiya recoils. A warm sensation flows down his arm.

Cut? On the arm? Why? It doesn't move?

The pain is so sharp, it cannot be perceived as normal pain. It hurts so much that his senses begin to go numb. There's no time for Mikiya to think. The girl in red he thought of as "Shiki" moves. Maybe it's because Mikiya has seen something terrible here already, but his mind is not panicking yet. Jumping back calmly, he runs off.

...No, there was no way he could get away.

The instant Mikiya moves, she dashes towards him. Her speed is beast-like. Mikiya hears a slicing sound from around his feet. Red liquid intermixes with the pooled rainwater. Noticing that it is his own blood, Mikiya falls to the floor, face-up.

"Agh..."

He groans as his back slams into the ground. The girl in red straddles Mikiya's body, determination burning in her eyes. She places her knife at Mikiya's throat. Mikiya can do naught but look up at the events unfolding in front of him.

There is only darkness... and her.

There's no emotion in those black eyes. She is serious, resolute. The tip of the knife touches Mikiya's throat. Maybe because the rain is pouring down on her, the girl looks like she's crying.

But there's no expression. No emotion.

That blank, crying mask of a face is frightening, and at the same time, pitiful.

"Kokuto, say something."

She'll listen to his last words. In spite of his trembling body, Mikiya looks unwaveringly into Shiki's eyes.

"I... don't want to... die..."

These words are not directed at Shiki, but rather at the rapidly impending death itself.

Not at Shiki.

She smiles.

"I want to kill you."

A warm smile.

Kara no Kyokai / Opening

July, 1998.

I safely finish my first job since being employed at Tohko-san's office. It was really more of a secretary's job; all I had done was get a lawyer to approve a stack of contracts for me. I'm discontent with being treated like a beginner, but I know that it's all I really deserve after having dropped out of college.

"Mikiya-kun, isn't today supposed to be the day you go to the hospital?"

"Yes, I'll go after work."

"You can take your leave early, there's nothing to do anyway."

Tohko-san is always a really nice person when she has her glasses on. Today is one of those lucky days and she is cleaning the handle of her magnificent vehicle.

"I'll head off then. I should be back in about two hours."

"Bring me back something nice!"

Leaving Tohko-san behind, I leave the office.

Once a week, on Saturday afternoon, I go to visit her. I go visit Ryougi Shiki, the girl that has been unable to speak since that night. I don't know what kind of trouble she was going through or what she tried to do. I don't even know why she tried to kill me, but her smile at the very last moment was enough for me. As Gakuto said, I have been crazy about Shiki for a very long time; a single close call with death isn't going to change that.

Shiki, who's sleeping in the hospital room, has remained unchanged since that night.

I remember that day when Shiki and I were talking in the classroom as the sun set. She asked me what part of her I could believe in. I repeat my answer from back then.

... I have no basis for it, but I will continue to believe in you. I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you...

...What an immature answer. I had said I had no basis, but of course I did. I can declare with confidence that she would never kill anyone, because Shiki herself knows the pain of murder.

She is the victim and the assailant. She knows more than anyone how grievous murder is.

That's why I believe in her. Shiki, who cannot be harmed; and SHIKI, who only knows harm.

She was always so fragile, like she was about to be hurt.

You could not let out your true feelings even once...


The three pieces are in place.

A person with two bodies that floats with reliance on death.

A non-adaptable existence which takes pleasure from being in contact with death.

A person with an awakened origin who turns to its ego by running away to death.

They all intertwine with one another and wait at the spiral of conflict.



Chapter 3 -
Remaining
Sense of
Pain -

3 / 痛覚残留

ever cry, never life.

／ Remaining Sense of Pain (Ever cry, never life) -
Asagami Fujino-

When I was still small, I once cut my hand while playing house.

Borrowed things, imitated things, fabricated things...

A real one was mixed in with all those cooking utensils.

While I was playing with this sharp toy, I cut myself between the fingers.

I returned to my mother with my hand red and painful,

I remember her scolding me, then crying, and then kindly embracing me.

Mother said it must have hurt.

I was happy, not because of those words that I did not understand; rather, I was happier about the fact that mother embraced me, so I started crying with my mother.

"Fujino, the pain will go away once the cut heals..."

Mother said so as she wrapped bandages around me.

I do not know what those words meant...

Because not even once did I feel any pain.

"You brought an unusual letter of introduction."

I'm at a university laboratory. An old man, whose white lab coat suited him well, offers me a handshake with a reptilian smile.

"Wow, supernatural powers? You're interested in such things?"

"No, I just want to know what kind of things they are."

"That's what you call "interest". Doesn't matter. To use her card as a letter... that's just like her. She was an outstanding student of mine, so I'm concerned about her. This place is getting fewer competent people, so we don't have enough human resources. Yup, not enough is not good."

"Um, about the supernatural powers..."

"Oh yeah, supernatural powers... But, there are many different kinds of powers. We don't measure them genuinely here, so I don't know if I can help you. In my occupation, this is an ominous subject, so only a few laboratories study it in Japan. This thing is a black box, you know, so the real details don't get to me. Yeah, I heard it's getting practical, but I have to wonder. That thing is, you know, something you have to have when you are born..."

"I really don't care about the classification. Either way, I think of them as psionic powers. What I want to know is how people end up with these powers."

"They're like channels. You watch TV?"

"Well, yeah... but what about it?"

"You can compare the human brain to channels. Which channel do you usually watch?"

"...Let's see... I guess it's channel 8."

"That's it. That should be the channel with the highest rating, right? Let's say there are 12 channels in a human brain. The brains of you and me are always on channel 8, the channel with the highest rating. There are other channels but we can't go there. The channel that everyone watches... should I say "common sense"? Channel 8 is the channel we have to be on in order to live within that common sense. Do you understand?"

"...Um, so you're saying we're made to watch the safest programs?"

"No no. It's for the best. The common sense of the 20th century, the channel with the highest rating is channel 8. Since we can be on it, that's the most peaceful channel, right? We live in that common sense and we are protected by that common sense... isn't it beautiful?"

"You're saying other channels are not peaceful?"

"I don't know. Let's say channel 3 is a channel that receives the words of plants instead of people. Let's say that on channel 4, the brain waves making your body move actually move something else. It's amazing to have these kinds of channels. There, the common sense airing on channel 8 doesn't exist. Since the most popular channel shows the common sense needed to live in this current world, other channels do not show such a thing. At the very least, the morals of channel 8 are not shown."

"So you mean not having channel 8 would make you mentally abnormal?"

"Yup. Say there's someone that only has channel 3. That person can talk to plants, but in turn, cannot talk to people. As a result, society treats that person as mentally disabled and locks them up in a sanitarium. That's what it means for a person to have supernatural powers. It's a person who has had different channels compared to everyone else since the time the person was born. But, most people with supernatural powers have such channels as 4 and 8 at the same time and can switch between them. They're channels that you can switch between when you want to, right? When you watch channel 4, you can't watch channel 8. When you watch channel 8, you can't watch channel 4. People with supernatural powers in society live by using both of them, the usual self and the abnormal self."

"I see. So that's why common sense is useless for the person who only has channel 4... because there wouldn't be such a thing to begin with."

"That's right. Society calls these people maniacs or killers but we think of them as an "unfit existence". There are many people who are unfit for society, but these people are unfit right from the start of their existence. They are people who shouldn't exist... no, they cannot exist. This is a "what-if" story, okay? If there was someone who had both channel 4 and 8 and something happened to that person to destroy his or her body, causing that person to be permanently on channel 4, that would be the end. Even though the person may have had all the common sense, if unable to be on the same channel as us, communicating with us becomes impossible... because the person is on a different channel."

"Is there a way to make the unfit into a fit existence?"

"You can just end their life. To put it more precisely, you have to destroy the abnormal channel. But to do so means to destroy their brain, so it comes down to killing them. There's no such thing as killing the channel without killing the body. If there is, that's what you would really call a supernatural power. That's around channel 12, I think? That channel can pretty much do anything."

The professor laughs like it is really funny.

"That was helpful. By the way, is spoon bending the most popular psionic power?"

"What? Spoons can bend?"

"I don't know about spoons, but at least human arms."

"You mean the arms of an adult? That's pretty amazing. "Distortion" depends on the object's size rather than its hardness. I would think it should take about seven days to bend something like the human arm. So, which way is it? Right? Left?"

"Does that matter?"

"Of course. It has something to do with the fulcrum. Even Earth has a direction of rotation, right? What, it's not constant? Hmm... does such a power actually exist? Then you shouldn't have anything to do with this person. This person has more than two channels. That unfit existence can probably rotate things in both directions. I have never heard of a case of someone having two channels and able to use them both at once; it's too powerful."

"Um... I don't have much time, so I should get going. I have to get to Nagano by today... so thank you for all your help."

"It's all right. You can come as often as you want, since it's her introduction. Oh, and by the way... is Aozaki-kun doing well?"

1

Still a bit dazed, Asagami Fujino raises herself up. There is no one in this room except Fujino. The light is off... no, there was no such thing to begin with. Only deep darkness surrounds her.

"Hmm..."

Letting out a breath, Fujino feels her own hair. The tuft on the left side has been cut off. It was probably by that guy with a knife who was on top of her a second ago. Remembering that, she finally looks around the room. This place is a bar built into a basement. It was abandoned half a year ago due to bankruptcy and became a place where the bad kids would hang out. ...In the corner of the room is a pipe chair. ...In the middle of the room is a pool table. ...Food from convenience stores is scattered around, and a pile of trash is stacked up. It seems these things are creating the disturbing odor. Fujino becomes displeased by the sickening smell in the room. This place is a ruin... or is it some back-alley slum in a faraway country? One cannot even imagine that a normal city exists on the other side of the stairway. The only normal thing here is the smell of the alcohol lamp they brought in.

"Umm..."

She looks around in a rather well-mannered fashion. Fujino's mind is not fully functional yet. ...She still has not taken in what has been happening until now. She picks up a wrist that happens to be by her feet. There is a watch on the severed wrist. The digital screen shows "July 20, 1998". Time is 8PM, not even an hour after that incident.

"Guh...!"

Fujino groans from the sudden agony. There is a great pain in her stomach area. She twists her body, not able to withstand the squeezing pain. Her hands touch the floor, making a splashing sound. She looks and realizes the whole room is filled with liquid.

"Yes, come to think of it, it is raining today."

Talking to herself, Fujino stands up. She looks at her stomach. There is a trace of blood there... the place where she was stabbed by these people scattered around here.



The one who stabbed Fujino was an infamous person in town. He stood out more than most of the others that dropped out of high school and was seen as the leader of the misfits in the area. He gathered people that liked the same things as him, and did what they wanted. As part of the fun, they raped Fujino. Not for any particular reason. Probably because Fujino was a student of the Reien Ladies' Academy and also quite beautiful. As they were violent and selfish, they were not satisfied with abusing her just once. It seems they knew they could be accused for their actions, but they changed their minds when they found out that Fujino hadn't told anyone and was agonizing over it by herself. They found out they were the ones in power and they brought Fujino into this place many times. Tonight was another one of those times, and they were completely relaxed, but also getting bored of the banal act. The guy probably brought out the knife to bring some excitement into this routine. The leader of the kids' pride had been hurt since Fujino had lived normally even after they had raped her. He wanted definite proof that he was the one who ruled over her. In preparation for an act of extreme violence, he readied a knife, but the girl only made a cool face. He got angry at the girl whose expression didn't change, even after having a knife pressed to her face, so he pushed her down and...



"I can't go outside like this."

Fujino downcasts her eyes as she feels her blood-soaked self. Her blood is only on her stomach, but she is dirtied by someone else's blood from the top of her hair to the bottom of her shoes. It seems it cannot be easily washed off. Fujino murmurs to herself.

"How stupid of me... getting this dirty."

She kicks at one of the limbs scattered around the floor.

Am I angrier at getting dirtied by their blood than at the fact that they have violated me up to now?

Fujino thinks, as she is surprised by her own rage. It's raining outside... there should be less people walking around in about an hour. Even though it's raining, it's summertime so it shouldn't be too cold. I'll soak myself in the rain and then wash off the blood at some park. ...As she reaches that solution, she suddenly

calms down. She walks away from the pool of blood and finally counts the corpses scattered around. One, two, three, four... four..... four..... four, no matter how many times I count!! She is astonished. ...One is missing...

"One has gotten away, huh...?"

She murmurs faintly.

Then I will be caught by the police. If he goes to them, I will be arrested. But... will he go to the police? How will he be able to explain the situation? Will he start by telling them about raping me, Asagami Fujino, and threatening me not to tell anyone? Not possible. Such a thing is impossible, and these people should not have the brains to come up with a convincing story.

Fujino relaxes a bit and lights the lamp on the pool table. The light from the lamp lights the whole room. The 16 scattered arms and legs show up clearly. If you look for them, you should also be able to find four bodies and heads. Brightened by the orange light, the room is washed anew with red paint, as if it has gone mad. Fujino does not care much about this disastrous scene. ... One has escaped. Her revenge is not complete yet... Fortunately, it has not ended.

"Would I have to take revenge...?"

Fujino fears the idea of having to kill another person. Her body trembles, telling her such a thing is impossible to do; but she herself will be in danger if she doesn't. Still, she does not want to do any more bad things... Those are her true feelings.

...The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Remaining Sense of Pain / 1

July nears its end and my surroundings have started to fill with all sorts of weird events, like a friend who has been in a coma for two years finally regaining consciousness; like finishing the second big job at my workplace; and like my sister whom I haven't seen for five years coming to see me. The nineteenth summer of me, Kokutou Mikiya, started in such a commotion.

Today was one of my rare days off, but I accompanied my high school friend to go drinking. I noticed I had missed the last train. Others took cabs home, but as my payday is tomorrow, I do not have such extra money. It can't be helped, so I decide to walk home. Fortunately, my house is only two stations away from here. The date has just changed from July 20 to July 21.

Past midnight, I walk through the night town alone. Since tomorrow is a weekday, the shopping district is fast asleep. It rained hard tonight. It had stopped before midnight, but the asphalt still shows signs of the rain as the wet ground makes splashing sounds. It is the middle of summer and the temperature is way above 30 degrees. The hot night air and the humidity from the rain irritate me. I see a girl crouched on the sidewalk. A girl wearing a black school uniform is holding her stomach in pain as she crouches at the guardrail. ... I notice the nun-like uniform. That plain but party dress-like fancy design is of the Reien Ladies' Academy. According to Gakuto, it's really famous to those kinds of people, as they say it's like a maid's outfit. ...It's not that I'm one of those people, but I know because my sister goes there.

"I heard all the students there lived in dorms..."

But to see her here at this time is too strange. She must be in some kind of trouble, or is just a bad student who doesn't follow the school rules. With my sister going to the same school and all, I decide to talk to her. When I call to her, she slowly turns to me and her long hair sways.

"....."

It seems the girl gasped really faintly. She has really long hair. Her eyes look calm and she too looks calm. Her face is small... it's cute but she also has some handsome features. That balance is more like Japanese beauty. Her long hair is cast straight behind her and a small section of it is separated around her ears to drape down to her breast. It seems the left side of her hair has been cut though.

Her fringe is cut straight and it reminds me of a good lady from a respected family.

"Yes? What is it?"

The girl asks with a pale face. Her lips are purple. It's obvious she has cyanosis. She has one of her hands on her stomach, her face twisted in pain.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"No, um... I, um..."

She tries to act calm yet her words are not. The girl looks rather fragile. She gives the impression that she's going to break down any second, just like Shiki when I first met her.

"You're a student of the Reien Academy, right? Did you miss your train? That place is far from here. Do you want me to go get a taxi for you?"

"No, it's all right. I don't have any money."

"Yeah, I don't have any either."

The girl looks at me in surprise. ... I realize that I gave a surprisingly stupid reply.

"I see. Then your house must be near here. I heard everyone there lived in a dorm but I guess you're allowed to go out."

"No, my house is a long way away."

I tilt my head in wonder.

"Then is it something like running away?"

"Yes, I think that is what I have to resort to."

... I'm troubled. Looking at her, the girl is soaked. Maybe she didn't find cover in that rain earlier but she is dripping wet. ... Since that time, I've hated girls wet with rain. That must be why these words came out of my mouth.

"You want to come to my place just for tonight?"

"Can I...?"

Still sitting down, she looks at me as if she's desperate. I nod.

"I live alone, so there's no problem. But I won't make any guarantees. I don't have any bad intentions, but if anything weird happens, I might get "in the

mood." I'm a healthy man so take that into consideration too. If you're still okay with that, then come along. Unfortunately, it's before my payday so I can't give you much, but I should at least have some painkillers."

The girl becomes happy. That defenseless and pure smile also makes me happy. When I extend my hands to her, she gracefully gets up.

... It seemed there are red stains where the girl has been sitting...

I take this unknown girl with me and start walking through the night town again.

"We're going to walk a bit, but tell me if you're suffering. I should at least be able to carry a girl on my back."

"Yes, but my wound is healed so it doesn't hurt."

She says so, but her hand is still on her stomach. It's obvious she's in some kind of pain. I ask her again.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

The girl denies it and grows quiet again. We walk a bit more. After a small silence, the girl shakes her head.

"... Yes. It really, really hurts. I'm about to cry... can I cry?"

When I nod, the girl closes her eyes looking satisfied. It looks as if she is watching a dream.



The girl did not tell me her name so I decide not to tell her mine either. I feel that it's more romantic that way. Once we get to the apartment, the girl says she wants to borrow the shower. She also says she wants to dry her clothes so I decide to stay outside. Giving her a cheap excuse that I'm going to go buy some smokes, I leave the room. I feel that I am really good natured as I'm going out to buy these things that I would not smoke.

After spending about an hour outside and coming back, I find her asleep on the sofa. I set my alarm clock to seven thirty and lie on my bed. As I fall asleep, I worry about the cut in her uniform near her stomach.



When I wake up the next morning, the girl is sitting in the living room as she has nothing to do. She gives me a bow once she notices I'm awake.

"Thank you for last night. I cannot do anything in return but I am really thankful."

The girl gets up and starts to leave. ... I feel a bit guilty about making her sit and wait just to say that to me.

"Wait, at least stay and get some breakfast."

The girl obediently follows what I say. The only things left are pasta and olive oil so naturally, our breakfast becomes spaghetti. I quickly make it for the two of us and carry it to the table to eat. Since it's so quiet, I turn on the TV and see a terrible news broadcast.

"... Wow, this is the kind of story Touko-san would like."

I murmur something aloud, so that if she were here, she would be throwing something at me. ... But that's how weird the contents of the news are. I listen to the newscaster who talks about what happened last night.

Last night, in the basement of a bar that has been abandoned for half a year, four dead bodies were found. It seems all four victims had their limbs torn off and the scene of the crime was soaked in a pool of blood. The place is pretty close to here, maybe around four stations away from last night's place. It's strange that they said the limbs were torn off rather than cut off, but the news does not elaborate much on it, and rather goes into the information on the victims.

All four of the victims were high-schoolers, and they were just kids that played around near that place. It seems they did some drugs too, and a person who the newscaster is interviewing is talking about the victims' personal lives.

.....I think they deserved to die, those kids.

Those words flow from the TV and I get annoyed by this speaking ill of the dead, so I turn off the television. Looking at the girl, she is placing her hand painfully on her stomach. Seeing that she hasn't taken a bite of food, she might be really hurt. I can't see her expression as she is looking down.

"..... There's nobody that deserves to die."

She says so with ragged breath.

"Why... I'm healed, so why...?!"

The girl gets up from the chair and runs to the door. I quickly follow her but she raises her hand to stop me. It seems she does not want me to go near her.

"Wait. I think you should calm down."

"It's all right. I knew it... I cannot go back."

Her face twists in pain. The face that bears a pain seems similar to Shiki. The girl calms down and bows at me before she opens the door.

"Good bye. I never want to see you again."

The girl leaves just like that. Her face is that of a Japanese doll, with the exception of her eyes.

They seemed like she was about to cry.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 2

After the incident with the unknown girl, I head to my workplace. There is no official name for the place where I work. Its specialty is doll-making, but most of the jobs we get are construction-related. The president, Aozaki Touko, is a woman in her late twenties and she is a weirdo that would buy an abandoned building to make her office. It means that this is not a company, but rather an extension of her hobby. There are many reasons why I decided to work here, but this is my daily life now. I have complaints but I have no troubles. I think I am rather fortunate. There are problems but they are all things I can bear.

... While thinking, I arrive at the building. It is four stories high, and the office is on the fourth floor. This building situated between the residential and the industrial districts feels rather empty. It's not that tall, yet it seems to put pressure on the ones looking up to it. There are no elevators, so I go up the stairs.

When I enter the office, I see an unusual person amongst the usual junk scattered about. A girl with sharp eyes wearing a black kimono turns towards me. ... The kimono has a fish pattern on it...

"Huh, Shiki? Why are you here at such a place?"

"Sorry that this place is "such a place". It happens to be your workplace, Kokutou."

Touko-san, who is sitting behind Shiki, glares at me. She is dressed as plainly as always with a cigarette in her mouth. She is wearing black pants with a white shirt, and an earring in one of her ears: orange, of course. I don't know why, but she seems to have this habit of always wearing something orange.

"But you sure are here early today. I told you there are no jobs for a while, so you should show up around noon."

"No, I can't do that."

That's right. My wallet is not allowing me to do that. I feel rather uneasy when the only things in my wallet are my train pass and a telephone card.

"By the way, why is Shiki here?"

"I called for her. I've got something I need her for."

Shiki does not say anything, but rubs her eyes sleepily. ... Was she walking around at night again? ... It's only been about a month since she recovered from her coma. For some reason, we're finding it rather uncomfortable to talk to each other. It seems Shiki does not want to talk so I sit down at my own desk. ...There's nothing to do, so I decide to talk. Fortunately, there is a topic handy.

"Touko-san, did you see the news this morning?"

"You must mean the Broad Bridge. It's not like some foreign country, I don't think Japan needs that big of a bridge."

I recoil at her comment. What she is talking about is a big bridge, about 800 meters long, that is planned to finish construction next year. The town we live in is close to the port. If you drive for about 20 minutes, you can get to the port, but the shape itself is troublesome. To put it simply, there is another side to it. If you look at it on a map, it looks like a crescent moon, and a long roundabout is forced if you want to get from the top to the bottom. The city's construction group teamed up with a big construction company and put into action what they said was the solution to the public complaints. They are building a straight route across the tips of the crescent shape in the form of a bridge. ... Of course, most of the money to build this is coming from our taxes. I think it is a typical case of the government saying they are solving public complaints which did not exist from the start, only resulting in more public complaints. The bridge is also to have museums, aquariums, big parking lots and such, and you can't really tell whether it's a bridge or an amusement park. It was called Baybridge until recently but according to what Touko-san is saying, I guess its name has officially been announced as Broad Bridge. Both Touko-san and I do not like the idea of this bridge.

"But Touko-san, even though you hate the idea, you already have a space in there for your gallery."

"It's not of my will. A person I know just gave me that space as a payment. I could just sell it off but since I have some relations with the Asagami construction company, I can't just do that. Geez, a place that won't make me money is worthless."

From the way she's talking, she seems to be having trouble with money. I get a really bad feeling.

"Um, I don't want to say this so bluntly, but can I have my pay?"

"Kokutou, about that... unfortunately, I don't have any money. It's unfortunate, but I'll have to pay you all next month."

Touko-san declares so calmly. She sounds like I'm the bad guy instead.

"Wait a minute! You had 1.12 million yen in the bank yesterday! How could you say it's all gone!?"

Touko-san replies, while rocking on her chair, that it's because she used it all. Shiki is looking at Touko-san with some jealousy. ...Certainly, Touko-san looks like she's having fun in that chair. No, I don't care about that right now.

"What did you use the money on, Touko-san?"

"Oh, what I bought was this boring thing. It's an Ouija board from the Victorian age. I can't expect much out of its effect, but it's not totally worthless because it's over a hundred years old. No matter how uninteresting it is, some mana and a large amount of time will give it some additional value. Well, it still makes no difference even if it's useless. If I have to give a reason for buying it, you could say it's part of my hobby."

I just don't understand this person. This person called Aozaki Touko is a magus. I always think how much better it would have been if she was just a magician or something, but that's the truth so I have to accept it. The magus continues her excuse.

"It suddenly appeared on sale, so I bought it on impulse. Don't get so angry. I'm out of money too."

... Don't be angry? That's asking too much. As I have seen many miracles from her, I'd thought this part of her was rather playful, but I cannot be that tolerant today.

"So is that it? I'm not getting paid this month?"

"Yeah. Get some money from somewhere else."

I get up from my seat.

"Then I'm going to go find some money to live off of this month so I'm leaving early. Is that all right?"

"Fine. By the way, Kokutou, I need to ask you a favor."

Touko-san says this in a different tone. Maybe it has to do something with the fact that Shiki is here... I calm down and stop.

"What is it, Touko-san?"

"Can you lend me some money? I'm broke as you can see."

"..... I refuse with all my might."

I close the door hard and leave the office.



After looking at the conversation between Mikiya and Touko for a while, Shiki finally opens her mouth.

"Touko, about that thing."

"That's right. I don't really like to accept this kind of a job but I won't be able to live without money.Geez, I'm going mad over money when I'm not an alchemist. This is all because Kokutou won't lend me any money."

Touko sticks her cigarette into the ashtray saying she's in a bad mood. Shiki thinks Mikiya is probably in a worse mood than her.

"Well, about that incident last night..."

"I've heard enough. I know what's going on."

"I see..... I only explained to you the scene of the crime, but you already know? You're pretty sharp."

Touko looks meaningfully at Shiki. Touko has only explained the results of the murder that occurred between 7PM and 8PM last night and Shiki is saying she understood what kind of crime it was. This is definite proof that Shiki is a person closer to the world Touko lives in.

"The client has some idea of the killer. Your job is to take her under your care if possible, but if she happens to fight back even slightly... the client said to kill her."

Shiki nods. The job description is easy. Find the killer, and kill her.

"But what about after that?"

"If you happen to kill her, they will clean it up and treat it as an accident. For the client, she is already socially dead. It is not against the law to kill a dead person. What do you want to do? I think this job rather suits you."

"I don't even need to answer that question."

Saying that, Shiki starts to walk out the office.

"You're in such a hurry. Were you hungry, Shiki?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Here's her picture and her status. What were you going to do without knowing what she looks like?"

Shiki looks at Touko, who throws her the file containing the information. It drops to the floor.

"I don't need it. That killer is definitely of my kind. ... So if we were to meet, we'd try to kill each other at that very instant."

Shiki departs from the office, leaving only the sound of her kimono and a cold glare.



It can't be helped. After leaving the office, I decide to borrow some money from a friend of mine. We choose to meet at the cafeteria of the college that I quit in June. A bit after noon, Gakuto arrives. He has grown much bigger since high school. When I tell him what I came for, he makes a troubled face.

"I'm surprised. Calling for someone just to borrow money? Are you really Kokutou Mikiya?"

"Yeah. You're special to me. You should be happy about that."

"Heh, who would be? Besides, why don't you go borrow from your relatives?"

"I haven't seen my parents ever since that fight I got into with them when I dropped out of college. How do you expect me to go back and ask such a thing now?"

"Haha, you're pretty stubborn. Was it a big fight?"

"That has nothing to do with you. So, are you going to lend me some money or not?"

"Hm? You're in a pretty bad mood today."

I glare at him saying that it's none of his business, but Gakuto agrees to lend me some money.

"If I put your name out, I bet I would be able to collect fifty or sixty thousand yen quite quickly... and if you still need more, I could lend you some of my money. But, not for free."

... It seems he also has a favor to ask of me. Gakuto looks around, and makes sure no one is listening.

"Well, to put it simply, I want you to look for someone. It's one of our underclassmen, but he hasn't returned home. It seems he's been involved in a strange crime."

Gakuto's story is unsettling. The name of the missing underclassman is Minato Keita. He has been missing since last night and Gakuto says that he was a member of the group that was killed last night. Minato Keita contacted one of his friends last night, but it seems he was acting strangely, so that friend went to Gakuto for help.

"Keita was saying something like he was going to be killed. That's the only call he made and he doesn't even answer his cell phone now. According to the guy who talked to him, he was really screwed up."

Screwed up... he must mean drugs... Easy drugs for beginners are cheap and relatively easy to get nowadays. Even a high schooler could get their hands on L if they tried; but they shouldn't be trying in the first place...

"... Hey now. Do you think such a violent world suits me?"

"What are you saying? Looking for people is your specialty."

I grow quiet.

"That guy Keita, does he do drugs?"

"No, the ones who used them were the ones who were killed. Don't you remember Keita? He's one of the kids that liked you."

... During high school, I was liked by some underclassmen for some reason. Maybe because I'm a friend of Gakuto or something.

"It would make things easier if he were just tripping on a new drug. What kind of drugs do they use? Uppers or Downers?"

There are two types of drugs: Uppers, the ones that make you mentally high and feel good; and Downers, the ones that make you depressed. The one Gakuto names is an Upper.

"It's terrible if he's using drugs to escape his fears. The killer really might be after this kid. All right, I'll look into this. Tell me about his friends."

Gakuto hands me an address book as if he was ready for me to say so. Having lots of friends is characteristic of the members of that group and it seems he's no

exception. Many names with their cell phone numbers; along with each group's hangout place, are written.

"I'll contact you once I find him. I might be able to get him under my protection but you wouldn't care, would you?"

By "protection", I mean handing him over to Daisuke Nii-san, a cop. Gakuto nods, understanding. We reach an agreement. To start off my search, I borrow about twenty thousand yen from him.

After saying goodbye to Gakuto, I decide to go to the murder scene. I feel that I'll have to really try if I'm to find him. Even though I know I shouldn't concern myself with these matters, I also know that this kid is in danger, so I could not decline Gakuto.

The phone starts to ring. It stops after five rings and switches to the answering machine. After a beeping noise, I hear a familiar voice leaving a message.

"Good morning, Shiki. Can you do me a favor? I'm supposed to meet Azaka at a cafe called Ahnen erbe near the station at noon but I don't think I can make it. You have nothing to do, right? Can you go there and tell her I can't come?"

The caller hangs up. ... I move my tired body and look at the clock by the bed... "July 22, 7:23AM". It's only been about four hours since I came home. My body still wants sleep, maybe because I've been walking around town until three in the morning ever since I accepted Touko's job. I pull up my sheets. The summer heat does not really matter to me. I was able to tolerate hot and cold weather rather well as a kid, and it still seems that way now. As I lie there for a while, the phone rings again. It switches to the answering machine and this time, I hear a voice I'd rather not hear.

"It's me. Did you see the news? You didn't see it, right? You don't have to see it. I didn't see it either."

... I always thought so, but now I'm confident. The way she thinks is far removed from the way I think. One should not understand the real meaning behind Touko's words.

"There were three deaths last night. Another one of those suicides jumping off a building and two "crimes of passion". None of these are in the news so I'm guessing they were all treated as accidents. But there's one strange case. If you want to know more, come to my place. Actually, you don't have to. Come to think of it, this will do. All right... I'll put it simply so even you'll understand with that sleepy head of yours. Just now, there was another victim."

The caller hangs up. I get pissed off. It has nothing to do with me, even if there is another victim. Even the things around me are uncertain, so this information is useless to me. The death of someone I don't even know about makes less impression on me than the sunlight striking my body.

I finally get up when the weariness in me goes away. I make breakfast the same way the previous Shiki has done for 16 years of her life. I eat it and get ready to go outside. I put on a simple orange kimono today. Since I'll be walking around town, this is what I prefer. Even my choice of clothing is only a habit from

the past. I bite my tongue at the feeling that I'm looking at someone else from outside. Two years ago, when Ryougi Shiki was still 17, I wasn't like this. It's not that the two years of coma changed me. ... The empty two years brought me something else. It feels like I am not moving of my own volition. I always get this feeling that the strings called "16 years as Ryougi Shiki" are moving me like a puppet. But it has to be just my feelings. No matter how much I curse myself for being empty and fictitious, in the end, I am moving of my own will. It is impossible for anything other than me to interfere with that.

When I finish changing, the time is almost eleven. I repeat the first message on the answering machine. The voice I have heard many times in the past repeats itself. The voice that was lost in the air is recorded like this.

...Kokutou Mikiya

The last person I saw two years ago...

The classmate that saw me let my guard down two years ago...

I know my past with him, but only the vision of our last moment is not there. No, the memory of the year since I got to know him is full of holes. Many important parts are missing. Why Shiki got in that accident.... Why she was looking at Mikiya's face at that moment... It would be really handy if the forgotten memories were recorded somewhere. I am concerned about the missing memories and it is causing me to not be able to talk to Mikiya naturally.

... The answering machine stops. It's strange that my worries go away a bit when I hear his voice. It makes me feel like I have a firm foundation, but there's no way something like a voice could be a foundation. That should be an illusion too. It probably is an illusion. The only reality I can feel now is the burning excitement I get when I kill people.



Ahnen erbe turns out to be an antique cafe. I check the name written in German and go inside. It's past noon but there aren't many customers inside. I don't know how they built it, but it is dark inside. Only the tables near the door are lit - the back of the cafe, with the counters, is rather dark. The only light is coming through the four square windows in the walls. The tables by those windows are also lit, as if cut out of the darkness. Maybe it's because of the strong sunlight but the contrast feels rather majestic. Kokutou Azaka is sitting at the table in the

very back. Two girls in western-style uniform are waiting for Mikiya, side by side.

"Two...?"

That's not what I heard. According to Mikiya, only Azaka should be waiting. I didn't hear about this other girl. I look at them as I walk towards them. They both have long straight black hair. They have similar features and they are beautiful, fit for students at a Ladies Academy, even though their atmospheres are totally the opposite. Azaka has firm eyes and the strength to face up anything: even her ladylike attitude can't hide this. Mikiya was liked because of his personal charm, but Azaka would be the one that would be admired because of her strictness. The girl next to Azaka looks rather weak. Her posture looks firm and graceful, but she gives the impression that she might break down any second.

"Azaka."

I come close to their table and call out. Azaka looks at me and frowns.

"Ryougi... Shiki."

The voice is filled with enmity. She doesn't even try to hide it. That ladylike exterior is just a facade.

"I am waiting for Nii-san. I have nothing to do with you."

Azaka says, staying calm.

"I have a message from that Nii-san of yours. He said he can't make it. He ditched you."

Azaka gasps. Maybe because the fact that he could not come is a big shock, or maybe because I was the one to come tell her that.

"Shiki, it must be your doing...!"

Azaka's fist trembles. I guess she's shocked that I came.

"Don't be stupid. I'm a victim too. He just selfishly told me to inform you that he can't make it."

Azaka looks at me with fire in her eyes. The girl next to her tries to calm Azaka, as though she might start throwing things if she weren't placated.

"Kokutou-san, everyone's surprised."

A thin voice. I step back.

"..... You're right, today was supposed to be for you. Sorry Fujino, it was wrong for me to get angry."

Azaka apologizes to the girl called Fujino. I look at the calm-looking girl. She is looking at me too.

"Does it..... not hurt?"

I say so unconsciously. The girl does not answer but just stares at me. Showing no interest, like watching a scenery, and inorganic like a bug. I now have two convictions in me. The intuition that this girl is my enemy and the actual feeling that she cannot be.

"... No, it can't be you."

In the end, I decide to trust my feelings. There is no way this girl, Fujino, would be able to enjoy murder. There is no reason for her to. No, first of all, it would be impossible for her thin arms to tear off things like human limbs. It would be a different story if she had abnormal eyes like me... I quickly lose interest in this girl and talk to Azaka.

"That's all. Do you have any messages for him?"

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""



Azaka really leaves this kind of message.

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""

Azaka seriously told the woman in the kimono, the one called Shiki. I feel rather uneasy due to the thick and heavy air surrounding them. It feels like they have knives aimed at each other's throats and are looking for openings to actually cut each other. I get timid within this tight atmosphere. Now, I can only pray that nothing will occur. Fortunately, they stop talking and the woman wearing the kimono leaves gracefully. I stare at her back as she leaves. Shiki spoke with a very masculine tone. I couldn't tell her age because of that, but maybe she's around my age. Her last name was Ryougi... maybe it's that Ryougi; then her expensive looking kimono makes sense. I could see some designs worked into her kimono. If she is of the Ryougi, it's no surprise that she would have her own kimono maker.

"..... She was a beautiful person."

Azaka nods to my murmur. I think she's amazing for answering honestly even when she hates that person.

"But she is just as scary. ... I don't like that person."

Azaka looks surprised. Her surprise is completely natural. Even I am surprised at this feeling. Because probably for the first time in my life, I feel repulsion toward someone.

"That's unexpected. I thought you were someone that wouldn't hate anybody, but I guess I was wrong."

"Hate.....?"

... Dislike is the same as hate? I never thought so. I just feel that I cannot get along with that person. I try closing my eyes. Ryougi Shiki. Her ominous black hair, ominous white skin, and those ominous, bottomless, empty eyes. She was looking at me, so I looked back at her. That's why we saw what was hiding behind us. She only knows blood. She kills of her own will. She tries to hurt others. ... That woman is a killer.

But I am different. I think I am different. It's because I have never wanted to do such a thing. In the darkness behind my closed eyes, I repeat this over and over. But her figure would not disappear. ... We have not talked even once, but her figure is engraved into my mind.

"I'm sorry, Fujino. I ruined your day off."

I open my eyes to Azaka's words. I smile, like I have practiced.

"It's all right. I did not feel like it anyways."

"You do look quite pale. It's hard to tell because you're pretty white to begin with."

I did not feel like it for another reason, but I nod at her words anyways. ... I know my body is not doing well by its reaction, but I did not notice that it was bad enough to show on my face.

"I guess it can't be helped. I'll ask Mikiya myself, so do you want to go home for today?"

Azaka is worried about my health. I thank her.

"But is that message to your brother all right?"

"It's fine. I don't even know how many times I told him that anyways. He should be used to it. To tell you the truth, this a curse. Words that are repeated over and over can twist reality to lean towards that word. Really, a girly curse. It's sad and pitiful."

I don't know how serious she is but she explains so. I'm used to her impulsiveness. I decide to listen quietly to Azaka's beautiful voice. ... She is always number one academically in our school and she even ranks in the top ten nationwide. Azaka is a bit strange and has this gentlemanly side to her. Azaka is one of my friends from Reien Academy. Both of us entered that school from our high school. Since Reien is an "escalator" school from elementary school, it's rare for people to come starting from high school like us. We met because of that and are close enough that we even go out sometimes on weekends. Today, I was supposed, through Azaka, to have her brother look for someone.

I went to a local middle school and when I was there, a Senpai from a different school talked to me at an event. ... I had been depressed recently, but I was saved by thinking about this Senpai. When I told Azaka about it, she said we should look for this person. It happens that her brother is also from this area and he knows a lot of people around here. She said he is really good at looking for people our age. ... It's not that I really wanted to see him, but we ended up deciding to look for this person with me not being able to refuse the pushy Azaka. We were waiting for her brother today but it seems he could not come. ... I am relieved in a way.

I am not really into this whole thing because... I accidentally ran into him two days ago. At that time, I was able to say what I couldn't say three years ago. Since I have done what I wanted to do, there is no point in looking for this person anymore. Maybe Azaka's brother couldn't come because God knew I didn't need him anymore.

"Let's get going. It's hard to stay here over an hour buying just drinks."

Azaka gets up. Even though she should be sad about not being able to see her brother, she still gets up gracefully. Sometimes, she is really manly. Maybe because of the way she talks. Her formal tone disappears like just now and becomes cool like a man. It's not that she's disguising herself, but that's just a part of her. I really like this friend of mine. That's why I shouldn't see her anymore.

"Azaka. Please go back to the dorm by yourself. I will be staying at my parents' house tonight again."

"Really? That's fine but Sister will be glaring at you if you stay out too much. You should restrain yourself."

Waving her hand, Azaka leaves the cafe. Being alone, I take a glance at the sign. "Ahnen erbe": it means "ancestral inheritance" in German.



After Azaka leaves, I start walking aimlessly. It is a lie that I am going back to my parents' house. There is no place for me to go back to now. From that night two days ago, I have not even been going to school. My father has probably been contacted already for unexcused absences. They will ask me what I was doing if I go back home. I am not good at telling lies so I might slip everything out. If that happens... father will contempt me.

I am my mother's child from her former marriage. Father only needed mother's house and land, so I was just something on the side since that time. That is why I worked hard not to be hated. A faithful woman like my mother, a student my father can be proud of, a normal girl nobody would be suspicious of..... I always wanted to be that way.

Not for someone else, but for myself. I always dreamed that, and it has protected me. But it came to an end. Such magic is not around me no matter how much I look. I continue walking, the sun is starting to set. I walk past many irrelevant people and many stoplights which blink insensibly. People older than me, people younger than me, everyone looks so happy. My heart contracts in pain. I think of something and pinch my cheek. I do not feel anything. I pinch harder. Nothing. When I give up and let go, I notice that my fingertips are red. I guess I pinched hard enough that my nails dug into my skin. But I still feel nothing. I do not feel that I am alive.

"Fufu..."

I laugh thinking it's funny. Why does my heart feel pain when I myself do not feel any pain? First of all, what is heart? Is it my heart that's hurt or my brain? When the brain receives any words that are directed to attack an individual called Asagami Fujino, it creates a wound as protection. Since a wound lets a person know it hurts, whatever story I come up with is only a medicine that soothes the pain. That is why even though I cannot feel pain, I still understand pain in my heart. But that is probably just an illusion. Definitely an illusion. Real pain cannot be cured just by words. One quickly forgets a pain in their

heart because it is so trivial; but a wound on your body gives you pain as long as the wound is there. That is a strong proof of life.

If my heart is my brain, then my brain should get a wound. Then I should be able to feel pain; like my days up to now. If the memories of the days I was violated by those people became wounds...

..... I remember again their laughter and their scary faces. All those times I was violated and threatened. When that guy with the knife jumped on me, my stomach felt hot and the clothes around my stomach area were cut. When I thought I was going to get stabbed, I became violent. After I was done with them, I realized that the heat in my stomach was pain. My heart shrinks once more. "I won't forgive them." Those words repeat in my head over and over.

"Guh....."

My knee wobbles. It comes again. My stomach is burning. It feels like an invisible hand is clutching at my insides.

I feel like vomiting. I do not feel that way normally. I feel dizzy. I abruptly lose consciousness in this situation normally. My arm is numb. I confirm it is there by looking at it normally. It really hurts. Yes, I feel alive.

The place I was stabbed is starting to hurt. The pain of the already-healed wound breaks out unexpectedly like this. A long time ago, mother said that wounds will not hurt once they heal. But that is a lie. The wound made by that knife is still hurting me even after the wound has healed.

... But mother, I like this pain. For me who has never felt that I was alive, there is nothing else that makes me feel more alive than this sensation. This remaining sense of pain is not an illusion.

"I have to look for him quickly."

I murmur under my ragged breath. I have to get my revenge. I have to kill the boy that got away. It is irritating, but if I don't do so, people will find out that I am a murderer. I don't want that since I finally have obtained the sense of pain. I want to keep on feeling the pleasure of being alive. I take this body, that hurts every time I move it, and start to walk toward their hangout place. I cry at the remaining sense of pain in my stomach. But right now, even that discomfort is lovely.

/3

After parting with Azaka, I return to my place. When night comes, I go out into town. There have been five people killed so far. Four of them were in that basement bar two days ago. According to Touko, another was at a construction site yesterday night. Aside from the four killed two days ago, I do not see any relation with the one killed last night; but I cannot say it is a total stranger. Mikiya once said those that hang around at night have many connections. Maybe there is a high probability that the four, and the one killed last night are connected.

"That girl..."

I suddenly recall the girl that was with Azaka. That aura of death creeping out of her like capillaries. Since I am not used to my eyes yet, I saw it without any prior preparation. ... That was abnormal. It might be more abnormal than me. But that girl was normal. She smelled of blood, and she had eyes like mine that made her seem unaware of which boundary she was standing on. She must surely be my prey, but I still cannot be confident in myself. That girl has no cause. She has no reason to kill for pleasure like I do, no darkness that takes pleasure in murder.

Take pleasure in murder... What would Kokutou Mikiya think if he were to hear that? Would he scold me, telling me that murder is bad?

"Idiot."

I do not really know whether that word is directed at him or me. Kokutou Mikiya said I have not changed from before. I guess I am no different from before I went into that coma. Then, did I always take walks at night? ... Was I always this abnormal person, searching for someone to kill?

"....."

No, that's wrong. Shiki did not have such taste. She did, but it was not prioritized. Then this is SHIKI's sensibility. That of the man, Ryougi SHIKI - the yin; inside the woman, Ryougi Shiki - the yang. I dwell on my conclusion. I used to have him inside of me, but he is not there anymore. Not being there must mean that he is dead. Then..... this desire to kill can only be mine. As Touko said, this job is just for me; because I am certainly happy about being able to kill someone.

..... It's almost midnight. I take the train and arrive at a station I rarely visit. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.



After I part with Azaka, I change my destination. I do not know where the last one would run to, but I think there is a way to search for him. The only ones directly involved with me were the four that I killed and the one that escaped, but I was taken to many places by them. If I go there and ask where the last one went, I should be able to find where he escaped to. Since they cannot trust the police or the school, the only ones they can depend on should be their kind. I hold my burning stomach as I walk through the night town. I had some hesitations about going into indecent places, but they are now trivial to me as I am tormented by the pain and my memories of being violated.

At the third place I visit, I meet a guy that says he is a friend of Minato Keita. He is working at a big building converted into a karaoke club and gives me an unpleasant smile as he agrees to talk with me for a while. He sneaks out of his work and starts to walk, telling me we should go to a quiet place to talk. ... From the long experience I had, I can tell this man is taking me to their hangout place. These people can sniff out the weak. This person with the good, false smile must have seen through me as an easy victim to violate. ... He probably knows I was violated by Minato Keita's group too. That is why he takes me without any concern. Even though I know that, I still did not refuse to follow him. This man that is a few years older than me heads to a quieter area. I hold my stomach as it starts to hurt even more, and I prepare myself.

..... The time is almost midnight. I walk with this man as I curse the repeated violations in my head. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.



The man can feel his good fortune. He knows from Keita's boasting that his group was playing around with this girl from an all-girls school. It was Keita's habit to do as he wanted to that girl and then brag about it; but this man has nothing to do with it. He does not have any strong connections with Keita's group, and they are from different areas. That's why he always listened to Keita's story without concern. But for that girl to actually come to him!

You have to take what is given to you. The man decides to get out of work and take Fujino somewhere. ... It's not that the man is hungry for sex. It's not an unusual event for people like him to rape a girl with four or five other guys. There is a reason why this man does not call for his friends. It is because Fujino is the daughter of Asagami Construction's president. He should be able to get lots of money if he violates her and threatens to make the matter public. The group Keita is in is rather stupid when it comes to such matters. Maybe because their leader is not that smart. Or is it that they did not need money because they were smart? Well, it does not matter. Either way, the man is happy right now. He does not contact his friends because he thinks that he will get the largest payout if he does not share it.

Asagami Fujino, the girl who came to ask about Minato Keita, is following him silently. It would be bad to take her to the usual hangout place. The man heads to the warehouse area of the port. Since it's almost midnight, the warehouse area is empty. As all warehouses are made the same way and arranged the same way, it seems like a giant factory. There aren't many streetlights and nobody should come if he were to go in between the warehouses. The only things that will be irritating will be the sound of waves, and the lights from Broad Bridge currently under construction on the other side of the water. Bringing Fujino into this darkness, the man finally opens his mouth.

"This should be fine. So, what did you want to ask about?"

The man decides to answer her question first. It is his intuition that it's not smart to attack from the start.

"Yes, would you happen to know where Keita-san is?"

Fujino is looking down while holding her stomach. Her cleanly-cut hair hangs down in front of her, and the man cannot see her face.

"I haven't seen him lately. He doesn't even have his own place so he's been going around people's places. You won't be able to contact him either, 'cause he doesn't have a cell phone."

"No..... I can contact him."

"Huh?"

This girl's words are strange. She can contact him but doesn't know where he is? Has this girl gone crazy from being raped so much? Well, if that's the case, it should make things easier, but it's also true that the man is somewhat disappointed. He calms down again.

"All right. If you can contact him, then just ask where he is."

"Well..... Keita-san does not want to tell me where he is hiding. That is why I am going around asking his friends. Please answer me... I do not care if you know or do not know."

"Whoa, wait a sec. What do you mean he's hiding? Did he get into some deep shit?"

The man gets irritated by the girl's strange words. He's hiding... does that mean that the cops know about them raping Fujino? No, if that was the case, she wouldn't come herself. The man thinks, but cannot come up with an answer, because... .. Because he has not seen the news.

"Well, who cares. But what do you mean you don't care if I know or not? Was that your intention to begin with? Keita's not who you're after, but you came to find a new man or something?!"

The man laughs from his heart this time - "I really am in luck, I should be able to get the money without even making any threats." And besides, Asagami Fujino is a beautiful girl that he would not be able to easily obtain otherwise. A prize of money and beauty. What else can you call this but luck?

"Sorry, I should have taken you to my place from the start, then. Or do you like this kinda place better, perhaps?"

The girl in the black uniform nods.

"But before that, please tell me if you know where Keita-san is."

"Hey, dumbass, you can quit your excuse for coming here. First of all, I wouldn't know where he would go."

The girl looks up with a satisfied expression. The eyes looking at the man are abnormal. There is no emotion in those amber eyes that glow, and spiral.

..... It is not normal....

".....?"

The man, oblivious to those eyes, encounters something strange. His arm is moving on its own! His joint bends. His elbow stretches to about 90 degrees, and keeps bending... .. And finally, breaks.

"W-what.....!?"

A stupid scream. The fate of the man ends here. Certainly, he did have luck. Bad luck is luck indeed.

In a dark alley not even lit up by the moonlight, a tragedy raises its curtains.



".....!!"

The scream only becomes a beast-like groan. The man's arms are no longer recognizable as arms. A puzzle ring... or a rubber band twisted around to make a model airplane fly. ... Either way, they cannot function as human arms anymore.

"H-h-help...!"

The man runs away from the girl, who is just standing in front of him. In that instant, his body is lifted off the ground and his right leg is torn away at the knee. Blood splashes as if emptying it from a full bucket. The blood that sprays along the wall seems like some sort of painting. Asagami Fujino keeps watching with her emotionless eyes.

"I-i-it's twi... twist-t-t-t-ed...!!!"

His words are incomprehensible. Fujino decides to ignore them.

..... She murmurs, "Bend."

That is the same word she has been saying all this time. Her friend has told her that a repeated word can become a curse. The man is on the ground, only moving his neck. Both his hands are twisted and his right leg is gone. The blood from his leg is soaking the ground. Fujino steps into it. A red carpet. Her shoes sink into the red liquid. The summer night is hot and the humid air sticks to her skin and becomes annoying. The blood in the air had a similar feeling.

"..... *Sigh*"

As she looks down at the man squirming like a green caterpillar, Fujino sighs. She hates herself for doing such a thing; but she also thinks this is what she intended to do from the start. She knew from the way he acted that this man did not know what happened in that basement bar. But he would find out in time. Then, he would grow suspicious of Fujino for searching Keita. So this is something that cannot be helped. This man intended to do that from the start. It is indirect, but this is part of Asagami Fujino's revenge. A revenge to those who violated her.

But her ability to violate far surpasses their ability to violate.

"I am sorry.... but I have to do this."

The man's remaining left leg is ripped away, causing the last of the life remaining in him to be cut off as well. Fujino looks down at the convulsing body. Right now she knows how the man feels. Until now, she did not know. She could not understand people's reaction to pain. But now that she knows pain, she can strongly sympathize with this man. That makes her happy. To be alive means to be hurt.

"And finally... I can be normal."

My pain, others' pain. I am the one who made him this way. I am the one that gave him these wounds. It means Asagami Fujino is superior. This is what it means to be alive, having this ugly self that cannot feel the pleasure of life unless committing such atrocities.

"..... Mother. Am I so ugly that I have to go this far?"

The thing in her stomach becomes unbearable. Her heart starts to beat rapidly. A chill runs up her spine...

"I do not want to kill people..."

"You're wrong."

Fujino turns around to the sudden voice. At the entrance of the alley between the warehouses, a girl in a kimono stands, with the port reflecting the quiet moonlight behind her...

... Ryougi Shiki is there...

"Shiki..... san?"

"Asagami Fujino... I see, you must have a connection with the Asagami God."

With a light footstep, Shiki takes a step forward. Shiki narrows her eyes at the smell of blood. Not in detest, but in happiness.

"Since when...."

Fujino stops her question. The answer is obvious.

"All this time. I followed you since you brought that piece of meat out here."

Fujino feels a chill at her cold voice. Shiki has seen it all. She saw it, but she still came out. She saw it, but did not stop it. She knew this was going to happen, but just watched...

..... This person is abnormal.....

"Please do not say "piece of meat". This is a person. This is a human corpse."

Fujino argues so in spite of what she is thinking about. She feels that Shiki is saying too much to call that man a piece of meat. Shiki nods.

"Yeah, a human is still a human even when it's dead. It doesn't become a piece of meat just by dying. But that's not a human death, is it? Humans don't die that way."

Shiki takes another step forward.

"A human who did not end his life like a human is not human anymore. Even if the people you've killed are left with their head intact or their body unwounded, you can't think of it as being normal. Those removed from the boundary are deprived of all their meaning. That's why that thing is just a piece of meat."

Suddenly, Fujino feels repulsion towards this person. Shiki is saying that she and the corpse are out of the ordinary, just like Ryougi Shiki, who is watching this tragedy right now without a change of expression.

"..... No. I am sane. I am not like you!"

Fujino screams out for no reason. Shiki laughs, like it is truly funny.

"We are alike, Asagami."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Fujino stares at Shiki. The vision in her eyes starts to distort. ... The "power" she had as a child comes into effect.

But the power suddenly fades away.

".....!?"

But the surprise is for both Shiki and Fujino. Asagami Fujino is surprised at her disappeared power. Ryougi Shiki is surprised at the suddenly-changed Asagami Fujino.

"Again...? What the hell is up with you?"

Shiki gets angry. She scratches her head like everything is ruined.

"I would have killed you if you stayed that way. You were like that too at the cafe. ... Fine. You let me down. I don't care about you now."

Saying that, Shiki turns and walks away. The sound of her footsteps gets farther away.

"Go home. If you do so, we shouldn't see each other again."

Then her figure disappears. Fujino stands still in the pool of blood.

..... I'm back to my previous self. I feel nothing again.

Fujino looks down at the man once more. There is no remnant of the feeling that was in her before. Only the sense of guilt enters her brain. What remains are the words Shiki left. Those words saying that Fujino and Shiki are both alike, both killers.

"No..... I am not like you."

Fujino murmurs as if crying. Truthfully, Fujino hates murder. She starts to tremble at the thought that she would have to continue such an act in order to find Minato Keita. Because killing people would be unforgivable. Those are her true emotions.

... The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Sense of Pain / Stay Behind 3

In the early morning on July 23, I finally get to Minato Keita's place. From the information from his friends, his average radius of action, and his way of thinking, I was finally able to narrow down his hiding place after a whole day. In one of the mansions located far from the residential district... he is trespassing and staying in a room on the sixth floor. I ring the doorbell and call out in a semi-loud voice.

"Keita-kun. I came to help you on request from your Senpai. I'm coming in."

The door is not locked so I enter quietly. There is no light on inside the room and it's dark, even though it is morning. I walk through the wooden hallway and reach the living room. From the empty living room, you can see the kitchen and the bedroom.

"You're in the back, right? I'm coming in."

There is another room beside the bedroom. I open the door and find that it's pitch black inside, as all of the curtains are drawn. A small scream comes out when I open the door. ... Like I thought, there's nothing in the room. A room without furniture is just like a box, there is no sign of life. In this room is a boy who looks to be about 16, trash from food, and a cell phone.

"You are Minato Keita-kun, right? It's unhealthy for you to stay in here. And it's wrong to use this room even when nobody is using it. This could be treated as burglary, you know?"

When I enter the room, Keita backs up against the wall. ... His face is terribly thin and worn-out. It's only been three days since that incident but his cheeks are hollow and his eyes are red. It's obvious he has not slept. I heard that he was doing drugs, but that was wrong. He is going insane without the help of drugs. ... He just doesn't want to face reality after seeing such a tragic scene. He is barely maintaining his sanity by staying in this dark room. It's a really dangerous way for him to defend himself, but it might be useful at least for a few days. I let out a sigh of relief in my head since I made it in time.

"..... Who are you?"

There is still a bit of sensibility left in his voice. I stop. He is still confused after facing such a tragedy. He might be scared of the killer, so who knows what he

would do if I were to get closer. Doubt will make him think I am his enemy. But... it should be different if we can talk. If we talk, his intelligence should return. I decide to stand and talk instead of trying to calm him down from close by.

"Who are you?"

I raise both my hands at his question.

"I'm a friend of Gakuto. I am a Senpai too. I'm Kokuto Mikiya, do you remember me?"

"Kokuto..... Senpai?"

I must have been an unexpected visitor for him. He stands dumbfounded for a second and then starts to cry.

"Senpai. Why would you come for me?"

"I came to protect you since Gakuto came and asked me. We're worried that you're in some kind of trouble."

I ask him if I can come closer Keita shakes his head violently.

"I'm not going out of here. I'll be killed if I do."

"You'll be killed if you stay in here too."

Keita's eyes widen. He glares at me with enmity. I take a cigarette out and light it. ... I don't smoke but it's a useful gesture to make you seem relaxed and help the other person calm down.

"I heard about it. You know the killer, right Keita-kun?"

I ask him while exhaling smoke, but he still stays quiet.

"Then I'll just talk to myself for a while. On the night of the 20th, you guys were at your hangout place, the Shinkirou Bar. It was raining that night. I also happened to be out drinking that night, but I guess that doesn't matter. I've heard a lot of stories since Gakuto asked me to look for you. I think I know what you guys were doing on the night of the incident. I don't think the cops know about it yet. Those people prefer not to help the cops."

I shrug saying it's troublesome. Keita is showing a different kind of fear now. It's not fear of what is going to happen, but fear of his doings being found out.

"On the night of the incident, there was one other person beside you guys. The high school girl you guys were threatening. I don't know her name but someone

saw her going down to the bar. That girl has not showed up at the police station, or anywhere for that matter, since that incident. But it's not like her corpse was found like the other four. Do you know what happened to her?"

"I don't know... I don't know such a person."

"Then that would make you the killer. I'll go call the police."

"Wait, I didn't do that...! There's no way I could do such a thing..."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. So the girl was really there?"

After a brief silence, Keita nods.

"But that brings another question. That incident is not something a girl can accomplish by herself. Were you guys drugged?"

The boy shakes his head. Not to the question that the girl is the killer, but to the question of whether they were insane or not.

"It's impossible for five guys to be taken out by just one girl."

"But that's the truth...! I thought she was weird from the start, but she was mad! Monster... she was a monster!"

He starts to tremble and covers his face with his hands. I guess he is recalling the incident.

"She was just standing there and everyone started to twist up. I heard their bones breaking and I didn't know what the hell was going on. ... After she killed two of us, I knew Fujino wasn't normal; I knew that I'd be killed if I stayed there!"

Keita's words are certainly abnormal. He is saying that the girl - the one called Fujino - tore off everyone's limbs just by standing there and staring at them. I don't know why he thinks so, but I guess Keita felt it immediately ... the difference between the one doing the killing and the ones getting killed. But... she bends things just by looking at them? I can't quite believe it but I take the fact in. What can I deny after knowing Shiki, the one with killer eyes, and Touko-san, the magus? Well, leaving that aside, there's one word that caught my attention.

"All right. I'll believe that this Fujino girl did it."

"..... Huh?"

Keita raises his head in surprise.

"But... that's a lie. No one would believe such a story! Please, tell me you're lying!"

"Then let's just assume it's a trick, or should I say, "hypnosis" or something? Either way, don't think too hard about it. Don't try to accept what you really don't understand. But... what do you mean she was weird from the start?"

It seems Keita is regaining his sanity. The tension in him starts to fade away.

"It's just she's... weird. It seems like she's acting out everything, like her reactions are always late. She won't change her expression even when Leader threatens her. She won't change even when she's drugged and she won't even show pain when being punched."

"..... I see."

I knew they were violating Fujino but when he comes out and says that, I'm speechless. That girl called Fujino was violated by them for half a year and killed them as revenge. Is there justice in that, or do "what's just" and "what's lawful" contradict each other in this situation? Well, I don't want to think about it right now.

"So she looked great, but it wasn't fun doing her. It felt like doing a doll. Oh yeah, but that time was different. It's recent but there was this messed up guy in our group. He found her fun because she wouldn't change her expression no matter how much he punched her, so he finally brought out a bat and smacked her across her back. He was like "WHACK!" and smacked away. She did make a painful face. I felt a bit relieved 'cause I knew she was feeling pain too. I remember it 'cause she was human that night."

"You, shut up for a while."

Keita shuts his mouth. I don't think I can keep my composure if I hear any more of this.

"I get the situation. I know someone in the police so we can go there. That's about the second safest place I know."

I approach him to make him stand up, but Keita jumps back.

"No, I won't go to the cops. Besides... I'll be killed if I go out. I'd rather stay here if I'm going to be torn to pieces!"

"Killed if you go out...?"

It's worded a bit strangely. It seems there's still one big misunderstanding between us. ... I can understand him saying that he'll be found if he goes out. But it's strange for him to skip that and say he's going to be killed. That's like he's being... watched. Then I finally realize what the cell phone by his feet means.

"..... You're getting calls from Asagami Fujino."

Keita starts to tremble once again at those words.

"Does she know of this place yet?"

The boy answers that he doesn't know.

"I had Leader's cell phone when I ran away. She called me after everyone was killed. She said she's going to look for me no matter what! So I have to hide!"

"Why do you still have that cell phone?"

I know the answer but I still ask.

"Because she says she's going to kill me if I get rid of it! She says I should hang on to it if I don't wanna die! She says she's gonna let me go as long as I have this!"

..... How callous... Her curse is so strong.

"But she still calls me every night. ... She's insane. She saw Shono two days ago, Kouhei yesterday... she said she killed them because they didn't know where I was. And she said kindly that it was good for me! She tells me I should go see her if I don't want my friends killed... no way I can do that!!"

... What kind of fear would that be? The phone calls he receives every night are messages from the one trying to kill him.

... I could not find you today.

One of your friends died in your place.

Come see me if you don't want them killed. You don't have to come, but these murders will continue...

... and I will eventually find you...

"What should I do? I don't wanna die. I don't want to die like that! They were crying in pain! They were coughing up blood and their necks were twisted like nothing!"

"Let's get rid of that phone. Or there will be more victims."

"Don't you get it!? I'm saying I'll be killed if I do that!"

Two innocent people were killed because of that. Asagami Fujino had to commit two meaningless murders because of that.

"You'll be killed anyway if you stay like this."

I push my cigarette into the ground and start to walk towards him. I forcefully pull on his arm.

"Senpai, please don't do this. I can't do anything now. Please leave me alone... leave me alone..... no, really, I'm scared. I don't wanna be by myself anymore. Please help me...!"

I nod.

"I'll help you. I won't go to the cops. I'll take you to the safest place I know."

The only place that will be able to take him in will be Touko-san's place. Believing that is the best option, I leave the mansion with Keita.

Sense of Pain / Stay Behind 4

I tell Touko-san about the situation, and have her protect Keita. She leaves the boy, who hasn't slept since the night of the incident, on her sofa and comes back into the office where Shiki and I are waiting. Touko-san sits on her chair and Shiki is leaning up against the wall. I am sitting on the sofa directly in front of Touko-san. Finally calming down after Keita falls asleep, they both tell me that I am too good-natured. I take their words of criticism with a sullen face.

"I knew you guys were going to make fun of me like that."

"If you knew, you shouldn't have involved yourself in this mess. You're easily taken advantage of by those kinds of guys."

"It can't be helped. The situation was special."

Touko-san ponders my response. She is using offensive words, but she did agree to take Keita in for protection. Shiki, however, is against it. She might be really mad, as she is glaring at me wordlessly.

"Special, huh? I do admit this is an abnormal case, but what are you going to do now? Are you thinking about looking for her and persuading her?"

"..... That's what I was thinking. We can't have him here forever and Asagami Fujino might continue killing people. I think I can only go see her and talk to her."

"You idiot. That's why we say you're too good-natured."

Shiki holds nothing back. She never does, but she is rather offensive today. She really is mad.

"You won't be able to talk to her, it's too late. She won't stop until she accomplishes her goal. No, I don't even know if she'll stop then. Her means and intention are reversed."

"Shiki, you sound like you know her."

"I know her, and I've met her too. She was there with Azaka yesterday."

I'm surprised. I wonder why Azaka would be with Asagami Fujino. They are totally unrelat--.... I guess not. I only heard that she is a high schooler, but it's a different story if she is from Reien Ladies Academy.

"You're pretty slow, Kokutou. You haven't investigated Asagami Fujino yet?"

"Hey now, I only heard her name for the first time two hours ago. My role was to protect Minato Keita, so I didn't have time to do anything like that."

... But I have a bad feeling about this. It's not that I'm worried that Azaka might be involved... it feels more like the impatience you feel when you are forced to think about something you've been avoiding.

"... Then is Asagami Fujino still going to school?"

"No, she hasn't been home or back at the dorms since the night of the incident. She's been skipping school too: she has completely disappeared. Azaka said she hasn't seen her since yesterday."

"Touko-san, when did you research this?"

"Just a while ago. I received a search request from her parents. I heard Azaka was with Asagami Fujino yesterday from Shiki but it seems Azaka didn't notice anything wrong with her friend."

What irony, if my promise with Azaka was a day later or if I had found Keita faster, yesterday's victim might not have been killed.

"So the protection of Minato Keita is not meaningless to us. If we cannot find her, we can use him as bait. It'll get rough from there so you and Keita should stay here."

With that, I finally understand... the reason why Shiki is here.

"Rough.....? What are you going to do with Asagami Fujino?"

"Depending on the circumstances, we'll probably have to resort to combat. First of all, even the client wishes it. He doesn't want his daughter reported as a killer. He told us to get rid of her before it all goes public."

"What? It's not like she's committing meaningless murders...! I think a discussion is possible."

"That's impossible. You haven't heard the whole truth. You don't know the final blow she took when she killed them. I made Keita confess when I put him to sleep. I heard that his leader attacked Fujino on the last night with a knife. It seems she was stabbed. That's what triggered her revenge."

... Knife... so she was threatened with a knife even after being violated? So why would that be the reason she's beyond help?

"The problem is right there. She was stabbed in her stomach on the night of the 20th. Shiki saw her two days later. At that time, she had no wound... she was completely healed."

"Stabbed in the stomach....."

Hold on. Don't think anymore. My mind tries to stop me but fails. On the night of 20th, student of the Reien Academy, stabbed in the stomach.....

"I heard it from Keita, but she says on the phone that she cannot forget because the wound keeps on hurting. The wound that healed starts to hurt. Probably, whenever she has a flashback of the times when she was violated, the pain of being stabbed returns. The horrible memory brings back the terrible pain. I believe the pain is an illusion, but it must be real for her. This is no different than a fit. Every time Asagami Fujino has a flashback of the pain that doesn't even exist, she kills. Who can be sure that won't happen while you're talking with her?"

But that means we can talk to her if she doesn't feel the pain. But before I can say so, Shiki speaks out.

"That's wrong, Touko. She really feels pain. It's still in her body."

"That can't be. Then, Shiki, is it your mistake that her wound is completely healed?"

"Her stab wound is healed. There's nothing like a piece of metal in her. Her pain really did appear and disappear. It's already too late when she's in pain, but when she's not, she's too boring. I told you that I came back 'cause she wasn't even worth killing."

"Well, she would be already dead if a fragment of metal were still inside her... but a wound that still hurts after it's healed, huh?"

Touko-san takes out a cigarette as if saying she doesn't understand. I too can only wonder at Shiki's words. It's normal to be in pain until the wound heals. But why would the pain of a wound that's already healed come back from time to time? That's like having only the sense of pain remaining in your body.

"... Oh."

And it hits me. It's not an answer to her unknown symptoms, but I am able to understand why Keita called her weird.

"Kokutou, is that some new way of staying healthy by saying vowels out loud?"

... I don't think anyone would do such a thing, even if it existed.

"No, about Asagami Fujino being weird."

Touko-san raises her brow. Oh, I only told her the summary of the story, so I guess I haven't told her about this yet. I tell her about the strange condition of Fujino.

"Isn't something strange? It was in the conversation with Minato Keita, but it seems she was unaffected by anything they did to her. I thought she was a strong girl at first, but I was wrong. She isn't that resolute of a person."

"..... You sound like you know her, Mikiya."

Shiki glares at me. My instincts tell me to ignore her. ... I might be digging myself a hole if I didn't.

"It's possible... I don't know that much about it, but I think she might have something like Paresthesia, or pain insensitivity."

Pain insensitivity is just as it sounds, a disorder where one cannot feel any pain. It's a very rare condition, so you never encounter it, but if that happens to be the case, her strange symptoms might be possible.

"I see. Then that can explain some things, but there should be a reason. Even if she did get stabbed, if she is pain insensitive, there wouldn't be any pain to start out with. You also need to check if she was born with it and you also have to know if her nerves are dissociated. Well, assuming that she is pain insensitive, is there anything that might cause this insensitivity to malfunction, like hitting her back hard or taking lots of steroids?"

Hitting her back hard... it must be that.

"I don't know how hard, but I heard they hit her in the back with a bat."

I say this as unemotionally as possible. Touko-san just laughs.

"I see. As it's them, they probably took a full swing. Her backbone might have been broken. Even a small fracture is considered a broken bone. And she was still violated even after her backbone was broken, not knowing what that feeling is. Geez, that's the first pain she feels, huh? She must not have understood what her irritation was. Wow, I'm surprised you decided to protect Minato Keita."

Touko-san says so, grinning. She has this bad habit of cornering someone with her words. I guess she likes to attack people mentally, and it usually ends up

being me. I usually fight back, but I cannot answer right now. ... I don't have the confidence to. All I could do is look down and reject her response.

"... So, Touko-san, are the backbone and pain insensitivity related somehow?"

"Yeah, your spine controls your nerves, right? When you have a problem with your sense of pain, you usually have something wrong in your spine. Do you know of Syringomyelia?"

... I would not know of such a technical medical term. Touko-san lowers her shoulders in disappointment when I shake my head.

"Syringomyelia is the most common case of pain insensitivity. Listen, Kokuto, there are two types of sense: Superficial sensation that lets you feel such things as pain, temperature and touch, and deep sensation that tells you of your body movements and general area. Normally, these two senses work at the same time. Do you know what it means to have no senses at all?"

"I can put it in words. You don't feel anything that you touch, and you don't taste anything that you eat, right?"

Touko-san nods with a smile.

"That's a natural response of a person with senses. You think they don't have senses but have a body, so they are like you. But that's wrong. To have no sense means that you cannot gain anything, Kokutou."

Cannot gain anything...? No way. They should still be able to hold things and talk to others. Then that would only mean that they cannot feel what they are touching. Why would that lead to not being able to gain anything? It's not like they don't have their body. I think it's better than someone missing a part of their body or something.

Then I realize. No body. Even when they touch, they cannot feel that they are touching. They just look at it and confirm that they are "touching". That is the same as reading a book. What's so different about it from reading a book or imagining a story? Even when they walk, they are only moving their body. They do not feel the ground, but only feel their feet moving. No, even that feeling is barely confirmed by looking at their own feet. To have no sense means not having a body. That would make them no different from ghosts. For them, all reality is what they see through their eyes. That's the same as not being able to touch anything even if they really can touch...!

"So that's pain insensitivity, huh?"

... That night, I met a girl who was uncertain about reality.

"That's right. Let's assume Asagami Fujino's pain insensitivity temporarily went away from being hit in her back. Then that would mean she knows what pain feels like. That sense she has never felt before must be her impulse for murder."

Would that girl, who found out what pain feels like, hate such a sensation? No, it would be impossible for her to think so. ... Since she is like a ghost, I can only imagine how happy she must have been when she felt the sensation of pain. She would not have understood the feeling of happiness either, though.

"... Maybe the pain insensitivity went away temporarily, and her experiencing pain might have caused her to figure out the emotion of hate. The feeling of pain she finally obtained triggered her revenge..."

... What irony.

"That's the question. Fujino said that she is taking revenge because her wound is hurting, but I have to wonder. To be more accurate, her pain makes her recall the violations done to her, which makes her want to take revenge. I think this is how it is but it just doesn't feel right. First of all, according to Shiki, she's back to pain insensitivity, right? Then that would take away her reason for revenge. Her wound should not hurt, since it's healed."

"That's wrong, Touko-san. To have no feelings must mean she cannot experience sexual stimulation either, so she could not feel anything even when they raped her. To her, it only means that her body was raped. But... no, because of that, instead of her body hurting, her heart was taking the pain. I think her wounds are not on her body but rather in her soul. That's why the pain comes back with the memory, because her heart is in pain."

Touko-san does not answer. In her place, Shiki starts to laugh.

"That's impossible. There's no such thing as a soul . How can something that's not there hurt?"

I can't think of any comebacks to what she says. Surely, something sentimental, such as a soul, is not something you can prove to exist. When I am just standing there silently, Touko-san disagrees with Shiki.

"But people's hearts, their minds, are easily broken. I don't think you can conclude that it can't be hurt just because it has no form. In reality, some people die because they are hurt mentally. No matter how poor of an illusion it is, as long as it is true for the person, the illusion can be called "pain"."

That's a rather ambiguous answer for her. But now, I have someone on my side. Shiki gets angry.

"What, Touko, are you siding with Asagami Fujino too? She's not like that."

"Yeah, I feel the same way with respect to that. I don't think Asagami Fujino would be that sentimental. She takes revenge because her heart hurts? I don't think so. Because, if you're pain insensitive, even your heart won't feel pain."

She instantly sides against me.

"Look, personality is medically defined as "a phenomenon by which a person reacts to outside force". A person's emotions... such things as "kindness" and "hate" cannot just come from within. They would not function unless something from outside stimulates them. That's why there is pain. To not have pain means this cannot happen. People with pain insensitivity lack personality. They do not think like you or have tastes similar to us. They do not understand common sense. That's why talking with her is meaningless."

She casually tells me the conclusion of the suggestion of talking to her. Her indifference seems rather like a last warning and puts me on the edge.

"... Please don't say that when you haven't even met her."

I stand up from the sofa, not being able to take it any longer.

"That's all under the assumption that Asagami Fujino has been pain insensitive since she was born. This might not be the case."

"You're the one who said she might be pain insensitive."

She says so coldly. ... This person really does not care about others. How can she be so cold to Asagami Fujino when she's a woman? Or is it that she can be this cold because she is a woman?

"Well, I do have things that I'm concerned about too. Asagami Fujino might be just a victim. The question is which was first."

... What does she mean by "which was first"? Touko-san starts to ponder and does not explain anymore.

"What do you think, Shiki?"

I ask her without turning around. Shiki answers exactly as I expected.

"Same as Touko. But I can't allow Asagami Fujino to continue, regardless of what Touko thinks. I feel sick just from thinking that she might commit another murder."

"Hate towards those similar to you, huh? It does seem true that your kind doesn't like to form groups."

Touko-san hears Shiki's words. I know why Shiki said so. ... When will Shiki realize herself that she really does not like murder? Asagami Fujino and Ryougi Shiki, I do think the two are alike. Since they are similar, they cannot ignore the crucial difference. If the two did end up in combat... would Shiki realize her true feelings? No, I can't let them fight.

"..... I understand. I'll look into her information my way. Can I see any data on her if you have any?"

Touko-san hands it to me. Shiki looks away telling me to do as I please. Looking at the information, Asagami Fujino lived in Nagano until elementary school. Her surname there was not Asagami as in "Shallow Top" but Asagami as in "Shallow God". Her father right now is not her real father, meaning that she followed her mother when she remarried. I guess this would be the place to start my investigation.

"I have to travel quite a long way. I may not come back today or tomorrow. Oh, and Touko-san, is there really any such thing as supernatural power?"

"You don't believe what Minato Keita said? Asagami Fujino surely has some sort of power to that effect. That, the term "supernatural power", is too broad, so it's not really that accurate. If you want to know about it, I can introduce you to a specialist."

Saying that, Touko-san writes the address of this supernatural power specialist on the back of her business card.

"Wait, you don't know much about it?"

"Of course not. Magic is a study. How can we associate ourselves with something inherent without history or theory violating the rule? Those kinds of powers only given to the chosen ones are what I hate the most."

She really must hate it, as she sounds like she has her glasses on. I take her business card and then speak to Shiki.

"Shiki, I'm going, but make sure you don't push yourself."

"You're the one pushing yourself. I guess it really is true that stupidity can't be fixed."

Shiki uses these offensive words, but then nods, saying she'll try. I leave the office with relief. It's all right, I've never died, but I was almost killed once. I haven't told her that the one who almost killed me was Shiki herself. She forgot about that incident after she recovered from her coma - it's fine if she does not remember.

I will probably never tell her about it.

July 24th. It has been one day since Kokutou Mikiya went to investigate Asagami Fujino. Not much has happened in this time. The only significant events are a big hurricane coming later tonight up to tomorrow morning and a 17 year old driving without a license dying in a collision. At least, that's all that happened publicly. Ryougi Shiki is staring aimlessly outside from Aozaki Touko's office. The summer sky is so huge that one instantly gets weary of looking at it. In the cloudless sky lies the shining sun. It seems like a bad dream that this clear sky is going to be covered by storm clouds later tonight.

Clang! Clang!

The noise echoes. There is a metal factory beside this office. Since Shiki is beside the window, the noise assaults her ears endlessly. Shiki looks at Touko, who is making a phone call. She's wearing her glasses.

"Yes, that is right. About that accident. ... I see, so he was indeed dead before the collision. Is his cause of death strangulation? That isn't wrong. If the neck has been twisted, it is strangulation. It does not matter how strongly it was done. How have you people treated this, as an accident? A collision, I see... That would seem right. There was only the victim in the car. No detective can solve the mystery of a moving sealed room. No, that's all the information I wanted. Thank you very much. I will repay you for this somehow, Officer Akimi."

Touko sounds very formal and kind. It is so different from her usual tone, which causes people to shiver when they hear it. After hanging up the phone, Touko adjusts her glasses, to sit in front of those emotionless eyes.

"Shiki, the 7th victim appeared. This is more than the killer two years ago."

Shiki walks away from the window, slightly upset. She wanted to see the sky be taken over by dark clouds.

"I told you. It has to be a meaningless murder this time."

"It seems so. Minato Keita doesn't know this Takagi Shouichi guy who died in the accident. This murder has nothing to do with her revenge."

Shiki, who is wearing a white kimono, grits her teeth in anger. She puts on a red leather jacket.

"I see. Then I can't wait any longer. Touko, do you know where she is?"

"Nope. I can guess a few places where she might be hiding. If you're going to look for her, you'll just have to go look at all those places."

Touko takes out a few cards from her desk and throws them at Shiki, who grabs them swiftly.

"... These are... Asagami group's personal identification cards? Who is this Araya Souren guy?"

All three cards are entrance cards to the construction areas which the Asagami construction group is involved in. It must be a magnetic lock since there is a magnetic stripe on each card.

"That alias is the name of one of my acquaintances. I couldn't think of a random name. I used it when I had someone make these ID cards. Well, that doesn't matter. Asagami Fujino should be hiding in one of those places. It'll be troublesome, so finish this off before Kokutou gets back."

Shiki glares at Touko. Her usually hollow eyes sharpen. She directs a silent complaint to Touko but turns around without saying anything. She has the same opinion as Touko. Shiki does not hurry out, but leaves with her usual graceful steps. Now that she's alone, Touko looks outside the window.

"Looks like Kokutou didn't make it. Well, will a storm come first or will a storm come first? Shiki by herself might not make it out alive, Ryougi."

The magus murmurs to no one.



Right after noon, the weather starts to change. The blue sky is now already covered with gray clouds. The wind is getting stronger too. Talk of a coming storm is exchanged between those walking around.

"Guh....."

I keep walking, holding my burning stomach. I didn't know about the storm. Probably because I was so caught up looking for someone. The town is rowdy but there are fewer and fewer people out on the streets. It looks like I won't be able to do it tonight. I think I should go back for today.

After many hours, I finally reach the port on foot. The sky is already dark even though it's still seven in the summertime. A storm can even mess up the usual times of seasons. I move my body, whose reactions are beginning to lag more and more as time goes on, and reach the entrance of the bridge. This bridge is

the bridge my father is working hardest on. A big bridge that connects this port and the port on the other side. The bridge is a four-laned road with many pathways beneath it. The underground is like a shopping mall. Even though it is floating on the ocean, I call it "underground" because it's under the bridge. There are guards on the upper part of the bridge, so I can't get in there; but the entrance to the underground mall is unmanned and I can go inside if I have a card. I take out one of the cards that I took from my house and open the door.

... It's dark inside. Even though most of the interior design work is finished, there isn't any electricity running yet. The empty mall seems like a station about to close up for the day. Many different stores straddle the sides of the corridors that seem to stretch on forever. I walk for about 500 meters and end up in a parking lot. This place is still under construction and is really messy. The walls are unfinished and the bags to keep out the rain are making noise in the wind. It's almost eight o'clock. The wind is strong. I want to plug my ears against the sound of the wind and the crashing of the waves. The sound of rain striking the walls is fiercer than the machine guns I see in movies.

"Rain....."

It was raining on that day too. After my first murder, I washed myself off in the rain. After that, I was able to meet that person. That person who I met only once in middle school and with whom I only talked for the briefest of moments.

... Yes, I remember. It was a time when the sun was setting. After an event at school, a Senpai from a different school talked to me, who was still on the field. I could not move because I had sprained my ankle. Since I am pain insensitive, I actually could move and even if I shouldn't move, it had no effect on me mentally. But my swollen ankle was telling me that it would get worse if I moved any more. All I could do was watch the sunset without feeling anything. At that time, I did not call for help. I did not want to call for help. If I did, everyone would tell me... "You endured quite a bit of pain." "Does it hurt?" "Doesn't it hurt?" "Don't you think it hurts?" I did not want that. That is why I was sitting down with a normal expression. I was being a bit stubborn not to let anyone notice. My mother, father, teacher, friends... nobody noticed. I had to let everyone think that Fujino was normal. At that time, somebody tapped me on my shoulder. I did not feel it but I heard a sound by my ear. When I turned around, that person was standing there. He looked kind, without knowing what I was thinking. I think my first impression of him was that I did not like him.

"Does it hurt?"

That person greeted me with unbelievable words. How did he know about the wound that nobody should know about? I shook my head. I was being stubborn not to admit it. He looked at the name tag on my gym uniform and said my name. He then felt my sore ankle and made a sour face. I knew he was going to say something I would not like, so I closed my eyes. I did not want to hear insensitive words from people with normal senses such as "does it hurt?" or "is the pain bad?"; but he said something completely different.

"You're stupid. Look, pain is not something you should bear. Pain is something you have to announce, Fujino-chan."

...That is what Senpai told me when I was in middle school. After that, Senpai carried me to the nurse's office and that was that. It was like a vague dream. Come to think of it, Asagami Fujino might have fallen in love with him at that time. That smile that worried about the suffering that nobody else noticed.....

Throb.

My stomach aches, rousing me from my dream. There is no way I can be dreaming when I'm covered in people's blood. But... the rain might wash away my impurity. I want to go up to the bridge. The storm is already here. It should be like a spilled bucket, out there on the bridge. I start to get excited. I drag my body, which now feels constant pain, and go up the slope in the parking lot.

Asagami Fujino goes up onto the bridge. To be soaked in the familiar summer rain.



The big bridge has turned into a shallow lake. The four-lanes of asphalt are covered with rain water and it goes up to one's ankles. The smashing rain comes down at an angle and the wind is raging as if to knock the street lamps down. The sky is dark. The light of the port is far away and unreachable like watching the moon from the ground. Asagami Fujino comes out into this storm. The black uniform blends into the night. She walks soaked in rain, breathing out from her purple lips. When she reaches a street lamp, she meets Death.

"I finally found you, Asagami." In the sea of the storm, Ryougi Shiki stands dressed in a white kimono. The red leather jacket repels the rain. She is also soaked.

She looks like a ghost.

Shiki and Fujino both stand under the street lamp. There are about ten meters of ground between them. She finds it strange that they can see each other and hear each other through the driving rain, and the raging wind.

"Ryougi..... Shiki."

"You should have just gone back home like I told you. You're a beast that knows only the taste of blood. You enjoy murder."

"..... That is you. I do not enjoy murder."

Fujino, still breathing hard, stares at Shiki.

Hostility. Killing intent.

Fujino quietly covers her face with her left hand.Her eyes glare from between her fingers. As if to answer, Shiki raises a knife with her right hand. This is their third meeting. Shiki laughs, thinking of the idiom that "third time's the charm". This Asagami Fujino is more than sufficient to be her target.

"... I feel it. Yes, we are alike. Yeah..... I can kill you as you are now."

With those words, the two's restraints are completely removed.

Shiki starts to run. Her speed is incredible, despite the pooling water and violent wind. It should not take more than three seconds to reduce the distance between them from ten meters to zero. Enough time to bring Fujino's frail body to the ground and stab her in her heart. But even that speed cannot match the speed of sight. Shiki has to close in on her target while Fujino only has to look at her target. For the two, that difference of three seconds is too long.

"....."

Fujino's eyes glimmer. The left eye for a rotation to the left. The right eye for a rotation to the right. Taking Shiki's head and left leg as the fulcrums, she twists. A strange sensation occurs instantaneously. The moment Shiki feels the invisible power upon her, she jumps explosively to one side. But the power on Shiki does not weaken. Fujino's power is not a projectile weapon. Even if one gets away from one round, it is impossible to get completely away from it whilst in her vision.

..... Damn.....!!

Shiki realizes Fujino's power is stronger than she thought. She runs. As if to escape from her vision, Shiki runs in a circle around Fujino.

"Do you think you can get away-"

Fujino murmurs, but then is astonished. Shiki did get away! Unbelievably, Shiki has jumped off the bridge down to the ocean. The sound of a window being broken is heard. What athletic ability... Shiki went off the bridge and into the parking lot right underneath it.

"What a ridiculous person you are."

Shiki did get away. But Fujino saw Shiki's left arm until the end. She did see Shiki's leather jacket twist. Shiki's left arm cannot be used anymore. Fujino realizes...

"I am..... stronger."

The pain in her stomach gets worse by the second. Withstanding the pain, Fujino makes her way down. She has to settle her match with Ryougi Shiki now.

Darkness engulfs the parking lot. Visibility is bad, making it hard to walk. It feels like being in a miniature town. The metal poles and the stacks of materials are arranged like buildings. A few minutes after following Shiki down here, Fujino regrets choosing this place as the battleground. Her ability has to have the target in her vision to set the fulcrum of the twist. Even if Fujino knows that Shiki is hiding behind a metal pole, if she cannot see Shiki, then only the pole can be twisted. In that slight instant on top of the bridge, Shiki understood Fujino's power. That is why she ran away, here, the place where she has a chance of winning. ...Fujino realizes how inferior she is at fighting. But still..... She is stronger in terms of power. If she cannot see, she'll just have to destroy everything blocking her view. Fujino takes every metallic pole that might get in her way and bends them. As she twists each one, the pain in her stomach gets worse and the shaking in the parking lot gets harder.

"You really are ridiculous."

Shiki's voice echoes through the darkness. Fujino turns in the direction of the sound. The stack of materials Shiki is hiding behind is instantly smashed. At that instant... a white figure streaks out of the wreckage

"... There!!!"

Fujino's eyes get a hold on Shiki. The girl in the white kimono and the red leather jacket runs toward Fujino, holding her left arm out.

".....!!!"

Fujino hesitates a bit and then bends. With a cracking sound, Shiki's left arm breaks. Her neck is next; but when Fujino looks... Shiki is already within range. The path that the knife takes is like a flash of light. A bright swing that leaves a lingering trace in the darkness. The knife that strikes without hesitation, however, does not hit Fujino. She ducks, avoiding the swing that was aimed at her neck... no, it was just an accident. Asagami Fujino only looked away because she was scared of Shiki, who was running towards her with a broken arm.

"Damn..."

Shiki readies her knife again. Fujino frantically stares at Shiki's body.

"... Go away...!"

Shiki's movement is faster than Fujino's scream. Shiki runs unhesitatingly into the darkness. One should be surprised not at her athletic ability, but at her quick thinking in choosing to escape.

"..... What a person....."

Fujino murmurs. Her rough breathing is not from the pain in her stomach. Fujino carefully checks the darkness around her. She does not know when Shiki will jump out of it again. Fujino feels her neck. There is a slight scratch from the last attack. A wound of about 4mm that isn't bleeding. ... It is not bleeding, but her breathing is hard.

"Why does she not stop, even when her arm is broken...?"

Fujino says so aloud, unable to contain the fear in that question. She cannot forget that moment. Those eyes of Shiki, who still came at her after having her arm broken. Shiki was having fun. That person is enjoying this situation where even I, the one with the advantage, am overwhelmed with tension. Maybe... for Ryougi Shiki, having her arm broken is not pain, but happiness. Fujino has not enjoyed murder so far. She does not want to kill. But that person is different. That person must like murder. The more extreme the situation is, the happier she becomes. Fujino thinks... if Ryougi Shiki is a person that lacks any sense of feeling towards life itself, what will she do to substitute for that? For Fujino, it was murder. When she sees other humans die, she gets this indescribable feeling... Since Fujino found out what pain feels like, she is able to sympathize with others in pain. The reality that she is the one in control of others makes her feel that she really does exist. A "ruthless murder" is Fujino's substitute. She does not know it herself, but Fujino takes pleasure in murder. Then what is Ryougi Shiki's substitute.....?



"That was bad"

Hiding behind a stack of debris, Shiki murmurs to herself. The arm had no power when it was twisted on the bridge. Since it was useless, she decided to use it as a shield and rely on one decisive strike; but the plan failed because of the fact that Fujino was more cowardly than Shiki thought she would be. Shiki takes off her jacket and cuts away the sleeve. She wraps the cloth around her left upper arm to staunch the bleeding. A crude treatment. There's no feeling in the arm that was twisted. It will probably never move. Shiki feels a chill at that fact.

"You're great, Asagami. You're the best...!"

She is losing blood quickly. She feels her consciousness slipping away.

...I'm hot-blooded anyway. If I lose some, it will just make me think more clearly...

Shiki concentrates. Asagami Fujino is a strong enemy that might be the best she'll ever meet. One mistake could cost her her life. That is pleasant, that makes Shiki feel that she is alive. For Shiki, normally bound by her past, only this moment is real. This sensation that she is able to feel only when putting her life in danger. That small life of hers that she can declare as her own. Kill or be killed. Since even her normal life is vague, Shiki can feel life only by such primal methods as this. If Asagami Fujino seeks pleasure in murder... Ryougi Shiki seeks the sensation of life by relating with murder. Fujino fears this situation.... and Shiki wishes for this situation. That is the difference between the hunter and the hunted. The difference between the two is definite now.

... Fujino's breathing echoes in the air. ... Roughly, strongly, painfully, as if in fear...

She is breathing hard, like Shiki, even though she has not been hurt yet. In the dark, they breathe in unison. Are their heartbeats, minds, and even their lives the same? The bridge swinging in the storm feels like a crib. Shiki, for the first time, feels some affection toward Fujino. So much that she feels she must take Fujino's life with her own hands.

"I know it's useless though....."

Shiki murmurs. She knew from the time she saw her at the cafe. She knows that the inside of Asagami Fujino is on the verge of breaking down. It's meaningless to finish off Fujino right now. But, that's life. Shiki thinks some things should come out of meaningless actions. She remembers Touko saying that humans are creatures that do meaningless things. Shiki feels the same way now. Exactly like this bridge. People decry one uselessness as stupidity while praising another uselessness as art. Where does the boundary lie? Boundaries are uncertain. It is the person that establishes them, but it's always external influences that determine them. Then there is no such thing as a boundary to begin with. The world is full of empty boundaries. That is why there are no walls in society to separate the abnormal from the normal.

... The ones to make the wall are us. Like me wanting to get away from the world. Like the way Mikiya thinks I'm not abnormal. ... Like the way Asagami Fujino is running away to death...

In that sense, Shiki and Fujino are alike. They are similar. In this small space, two of the same kind are not needed.

"Let's go. I can see the trick to your magic show now."

After shaking her head clear of the effect of the blood loss, Shiki gets up. She grips her knife tightly in her right hand. If Fujino does not lay her own boundary... then she will just have to eliminate her.

Shiki slowly appears. Fujino cannot believe her eyes. Shiki comes out directly in front of her, and a long distance away, too. Fujino does not notice but her fever is over 39 degrees now. She does not realize that the pain in her stomach is from a "certain condition".

"... I see. You must be abnormal."

Fujino can only think this. She looks at Shiki and bends. Her vision distorts. The fulcrums created on Shiki's head and leg each rotate in opposite directions and twist Shiki's body like a piece of carpet.

... It should have twisted her.

Shiki, whose left arm is bleeding, nullifies Fujino's "distortion" just by swinging the knife in her right hand. No..... she kills it.

"It's hard to see that without form, but you used your power too many times. Now I can finally see it. Your power is a spiral of red and green. It's really... beautiful."

Fujino does not understand what Shiki is saying. The only thing she realizes is that Shiki will surely kill her now. Fujino repeatedly prays.

Bend, bend, bend, bend!

As Fujino glares, Shiki swings her knife and eliminates the power. The pain in Fujino's stomach is about to go over its limit.

"Who..... are you?"

Shiki answers Fujino's fear with infinitely deep eyes.

"Everything in existence has an imperfection. Especially humans, but even in air, will, and time. It's natural to have an end if it has a beginning. My eyes can see the death of things. They're special, like yours."

Shiki looks at Fujino with those ominous eyes that Fujino felt before.

"That's why... if one exists, I could even kill a God."

Shiki runs. As gracefully as if she were walking. She approaches Fujino and pushes her down to the ground. Shiki straddles her. Fujino's throat trembles at facing Death so close to her.

"Are you... going to kill me?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Why are you going to kill me? I only killed because my wound was hurting."

Shiki laughs.

"That's a lie. Then why are you laughing? That time before, and even now. Why do you seem so happy?"

Fujino hesitates. She quietly places her hand over her mouth.

..... It's bent.

She did not know because she does not feel anything, but she is certainly smiling.....

My first murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

My second murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

I do not know why, but there was always an irritation. I was always irritated when I killed. Was that emotion... happiness? I could not feel anything even when I was raped, so I took pleasure in murder.....?

"In the end, you were enjoying it. You like hurting others. That's why that pain would never go away."

If the pain were to go away, Fujino would have no reason to kill. The wound will continue hurting, for the sake of Fujino herself.

"..... That is..... the answer?"

Fujino murmurs. She does not want to accept it. She does not want to think about it. She must be different to Shiki.....

"I told you, we are alike."

Shiki's knife moves. Fujino screams at the top of her lungs... For everything to bend.

The parking lot shakes. The ocean in the middle of the storm appears inside of Fujino's mind. Withstanding the burning in her brain, Fujino creates a fulcrum on either side of the bridge...

... And bends...



BOOM!

A tumultuous roar, like the crash of lightning, is heard. The metal foundation creaks and screams. The ground tilts and the ceiling starts to collapse. Fujino blankly stares at the building that is about to give way. The girl on top of her fell away as the world suddenly tilted. There is a storm outside, with the ocean below. If she falls without being able to grab onto something, she will surely die. Fujino takes command of her body, which is even having trouble breathing. She tells it that this place is going to collapse, so she has to get away from here. Dragging her nearly burned-out body, Fujino exits the parking lot. The shopping mall is relatively free of damage. The square corridor is now a rhombus.

Fujino walks, or at least she thinks she is walking... then falls. She cannot breathe. Her legs will not move. Her head is in a daze and she cannot think. What is there is..... yes, only the strong pain inside of her. For the first time, Fujino thinks she is going to die. It hurts so much. It is unbearable. It's better to just die than live on with this pain.

"..... Cough"

Laying face down, Fujino coughs out blood. On the ground, she is in a daze. In her whitewashed vision, she can only make out her blood. Red blood... red vision. The setting sun seems like it is burning...it always seems like it is burning...

"No..... I do not... want to die."

Fujino reaches out her arms. If her legs will not move, she will have to use her arms. Dragging her body, she inches forward. If she doesn't do so, Death will come for her. Fujino keeps moving. She can only sense pain. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts... those are the only words she can think about. It is the feeling of pain she finally obtained, but she hates it now. But..... It is true. It hurts... It really hurts, so she continues wishing. She does not want to die. She does not want to disappear. She has to keep living and do something. Because she has not done anything, or left anything behind...

That is too miserable.

That is too empty.

... That is too sad.

But it hurts. It hurts so much that the will to continue living might go numb and disappear . It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts. It hurts, but... ... Fujino moves her arms while still coughing up blood. What she repeats are the same words. For the first time in her life, Fujino wishes strongly.

... I want to live longer.

... I want to talk longer.

... I want to love longer.

... I want to stay here longer.....

But nothing moves now. Only the pain repeats. This is the true form of what she was enjoying. The truth hurts more than anything for Asagami Fujino. Now she truly understands the sins she has committed, the meaning of the blood she has spilled. The meaning is so heavy that she cannot even apologize. She only recalls the kind smile. If that person were here... would he still hug me? Her body convulses. The blood rolling up her throat tells her of the final pain about to come. That impact causes her light to go away. Now she can only see what is left in her. No, even that is fading away..... Not being able to stand the loneliness of disappearing, Fujino talks aloud. Her true will that she has hidden so stubbornly. ... A small wish that she has dreamed of since she was small.

"..... It hurts. It hurts, Senpai. It really hurts... It hurts so much... I might cry... Mother, can I cry?"

... This is what she wanted to tell someone.

... If she could have said that on that day three years ago...

She cries. It hurts, it's sad, and it's so lonely that she can only cry. But just doing that eases the pain. That person has told her that pain is not something one bears but something one appeals to someone who loves them. Fujino is thankful she met him... really thankful for being able to see him once again before this...

"Are you in pain?"

At the end of the pain, Shiki is standing. She has a knife in one hand. Fujino turns over to face Shiki.

"You should have said so, if you were hurting."

Shiki says so in the end. ... The same words as in Fujino's memories. Certainly, Fujino thinks. Even if she could say that starting now, she might not have come

down this road. That inconvenient, but normal life dances through her mind, but she cannot go back. She has committed too many sins. She has killed too many people. ... She has killed many people for the sake of her own happiness.

Asagami Fujino slowly stops her own breathing. Her sense of pain quickly disappears. It's fast.

She does not feel the pain of the knife that pierces her chest.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 5

As the storm is hitting town, I return to the office. I enter, wet with rain, and Touko-san greets me by dropping her cigarette.

"You're fast. It's only been a day."

"I heard a storm was coming so I came back before public transportation stopped."

Touko-san nods while making a difficult face. I wonder if something is wrong... No, right now.....

"Touko-san, about Asagami Fujino. She was not born with her pain insensitivity. She was normal until she was six years old."

"What? That can't be true. Look, even though she has pain insensitivity, it's not affecting her physical activities. If you say the pain insensitivity came after she was born, a hollow spine would be the cause; but that causes problems with physical activities. A rare case where she only lacks the sense of pain can only mean that she was born without it."

"Yes, that's what her personal doctor said too."

I want to tell her what happened in Nagano from the beginning but there's no time. I tell her about the Asagami family... no, the AsaGAMI family in a short summary.

"The AsaGAMI family was a respected family, but it went bankrupt when Fujino was around twelve years old. Fujino and her mother went to what is now the Asagami family. It seems the Asagami family is branched off from the AsaGAMI family, and they took care of the borrowed money out of greed for their land. Fujino had her sense of pain when she was small; but with it, she also had a strange power. They say she could bend things without touching them."

"... And?"

"She was hated as the devil. She received oppression too. But from the time Fujino turned six, the power had disappeared, along with her sense of pain."

"....."

Touko-san's expression changes. I can tell she's getting excited from her smile.

"After that she got a personal doctor, but there is no record of that at the AsaGAMI house. That place is empty now."

"That's all? You didn't investigate further!?"

"Of course I did. I found the personal doctor and talked to him."

"..... You're a smart worker, Kokutou."

"Yes, I followed the records and went to Akita. He is an underground doctor without a license, so it took me a whole day to get the story out of him."

"... I'm amazed. If you get fired from here you should become a detective. I'd even hire you as my personal detective."

I reply that I'll think about it, and continue on with my story.

"It seems this doctor only provided medicine. He said he doesn't know why Fujino became pain insensitive. He said that it was her father's doing alone."

"Her father did it himself? Do you mean curing her, or giving her the medicine?"

I nod to the small difference between the two.

"Giving her the medicine of course. According to the doctor, Fujino's father had no intention of curing Fujino's pain insensitivity. Most of the medicine that the doctor provided was Aspirin and Indomethacin, steroids. According to the examination by the doctor, he says Fujino probably has Neuromyelitis Optica."

"Neuromyelitis optica..... Devic's disease, huh?"

Devic's disease. It is a type of myelitis and is a disease that causes numbness of the senses. Common symptoms are numbness in the lower legs and eyesight going bad. It even has the danger of making one blind. This disease requires early treatment with steroids. The steroids are what Touko-san mentioned before... what they call adrenocorticosteroid.

"In addition, they use Indomethacin which numbs the sense of pain. I see. That would indeed make her like that. She's not inherent or posteriori. Asagami Fujino lost her senses artificially. It's the exact opposite of Shiki!"

Touko-san starts to laugh. It's a bit scary, she is like the professor I saw yesterday.

"Touko-san, what is this Indomethacin?"

"It's a painkiller. It doesn't matter if it's peripheral or referred pain, pain occurs from reactions to "outside forces that might endanger life". An algescic substance is made inside your body which stimulates the nerves relating to pain. This triggers pain to your brain. It tells the brain that the body will die if it doesn't do something. You know what algescic substances are, right? There are things such as Kinin and Amin, as well as Arachidonic Acid metabolites which strengthen the two. Things such as Aspirin and Indomethacin control the Prostaglandin which is in this Arachidon. The pain from Kinin and Amin isn't much, so taking in a lot of Indomethacin would take away most of the pain."

Touko-san seems really happy, as she is relatively hyper.

To be honest, these Arachidon and Kinindon things seems like names of monsters to me.

"So it's a medicine to erase pain?"

"Not directly. If you want to erase the pain, a drug called opioid would do much better. There's the endorphin thing, right? It's that thing that the brain secretes to ease the pain. It works like that and opioid kills the pain in the central nervous system. Well, I guess all this has nothing to do with the subject. I see. Asagami Fujino's father decided to seal her power by sealing her senses. A family totally opposite of that of Ryougi, which tries so hard to make ones with power. But what's sad is that her power became stronger by doing that. Magi from in and around Egypt stitch their eyes shut to keep their Mana within them. What's the difference between them and Asagami Fujino?"

... I was prepared for Touko-san's words, but I'm still shocked. I knew already that the Asagami family has children with special powers, like those of Asagami Fujino... ones born with different channels. They despised those children and tried to seal their power by any means possible. The result of that is... pain insensitivity. To turn off the channel for "special powers", they also closed the function of senses. That is why Asagami Fujino operates her power when her pain returns... because her sealed senses return.

"That's terrible. The only way for her to stay normal is to be abnormal."

That's right. Asagami Fujino could be in our world only by being abnormal in the form of pain insensitivity. But as long as she cannot feel anything, she cannot earn anything. She is only a ghost allowed to live in our world.

"If she did not feel pain, she would not have killed anyone."

"Hey now, don't treat pain like it's a bad thing. Pain is a good thing. The bad thing is the wound, you shouldn't get this wrong. We need pain, no matter how much it hurts. People can recognize danger because they have pain. Do we move away from fire simply because it sets our hands on fire? No. It is because your hand is burning, and it hurts. If that's not the case, we would not know the danger of fire until our hand burnt off. It is right for pain to be painful, Kokutou. Anything that doesn't have that cannot understand other people's pain. Asagami Fujino was hit in the back and got her sense of pain back temporarily. She defended herself for the first time from the pain she received after that. Those people that she didn't notice as dangerous before, she was able to recognize as dangerous because of pain. ... Still, killing them was too much."

... But Fujino does not feel pain. Those people died because of her defending herself, but they are partly responsible as they attacked her. You cannot make her bear all the responsibility.

"Touko-san, can she be cured?"

"There is no wound that cannot be cured. A wound that cannot be cured should be called "death"."

Touko-san indirectly calls Asagami Fujino's wound death. But the cause of these incidents is the stab wound in her stomach. If that pain comes back, if the cause of that pain is known.....

"Kokutou, her wound cannot be cured. It will only continue to hurt."

"Huh?"

"She had no wound to begin with, Kokutou."

.....Touko-san says something unexpected.

"Um... what do you mean by that?"

"Think about it. If you got stabbed in the stomach, would the wound heal by itself in a day or two?"

... That... is true but...

I get confused at the point Touko-san is making. It goes against all assumptions. Touko-san tries to hold back her laughter.

"Like you investigating Asagami Fujino's past, I also investigated Asagami Fujino's present. Fujino has not gone to any hospitals since the 20th. She did not even go to the personal doctor that she sees secretly."

"Personal... what!?"

Touko-san frowns in amazement.

"... You're good at searching for things but lack in insight. Look, the scariest thing for a pain insensitive person is something wrong with their body. Since they do not have pain, they cannot know of any sicknesses they might have. As a result, they have a doctor look at them from time to time."

I see. She is completely right. Then... do Asagami Fujino's current parents not know of her pain insensitivity?

"The trigger was a trivial misunderstanding, Kokutou. Fujino was taken down by a guy with a knife and thought she was going to get stabbed. No, I bet she did almost get stabbed. Since her sense of pain returned at that time, she could use her power too. Cut or twist... Fujino happened to be first. As a result, the guy's neck was twisted off and his blood spilled onto Fujino's body. Fujino must have thought that she had been stabbed in the stomach."

I can clearly imagine the scene... I shake my head.

"But that's strange. If her sense of pain is back, she wouldn't make that kind of a mistake. She would not feel pain if she was not stabbed.

"Fujino was in pain from the start."

..... Huh?

"I was shown her status by her doctor. She has chronic Cecitis... what people mistakenly call Appendicitis. Well, I guess that is why she went to the doctor. The pain in the stomach is not the pain from the knife, but rather an internal pain. Her pain ached from time to time. If her sense of pain returned right before being stabbed, she would surely think that she was stabbed. If you are raised not knowing pain, you wouldn't even make sure if the wound is there or not. Fujino would look at the stabbed stomach, and even if it didn't have a wound, she would think that the wound must have healed."

"So... it's a misunderstanding?"

I say so weakly.

"The wound itself is. But the truth does not change. She was indeed on the edge. It doesn't matter if the knife was there or not. Her only way out was to kill them. If she did not kill, she would have been killed. Not her body but her mind. But unfortunately, Minato Keita got away. I don't think it would have turned out this bad if her revenge was completed then. It's just like Shiki said. It's too late."

Come to think of it, Shiki did repeat that. Why would it be too late? Is it because Fujino has committed murder? But then, that would be when she killed those four guys. I don't understand.

"Why is it too late?"

"Shiki must mean the mental part. Her murder is murder for up to five people. A murder other than those is not murder, but a massacre. It is not justified. That is what Shiki was angry about. ... Shiki has a taste for murder but she still understands unconsciously how important death is. That is why she does not kill indiscriminately like Asagami Fujino. Shiki cannot forgive Fujino for just doing as she wishes."

Is Asagami Fujino really doing as she wishes? To me, it seems like she is running away desperately. Touko-san continues.

"But what I mean by too late is the physical part. Cecitis perforate when left alone and become peritonitis. Inflammation comes with pain incomparable to that of the vermiform appendix. You could say it matches the pain of being stabbed with a knife. Then, one would start getting fevers and cyanosis. They may even go into shock from lowered blood pressure. If it reaches the duodenum, you could die in half a day. It's been five days since the 20th. It should already have perforated. It's a shame, but it's fatal for her already."

How can this person say that with such a cool face?

"It's not too late yet. We have to find her quickly...!"

"Kokutou, our client for this is Asagami Fujino's father. He must have known about Fujino's power. That is why he heard about the incident and thought it must be Fujino's doing. The father said to "kill that monster". The only one that can protect her is wishing for her death. See, Kokutou, she has no salvation in any sense. And besides, Shiki already left."

"..... You idiot...!"

I scream at no one.

Remaining Sense of Pain / 6

Broad Bridge is distorted like it has been squeezed by a giant hand. After coming here in the storm in Touko-san's buggy and arguing with the guard, Shiki shows up from under the bridge with a blood-soaked arm. The guard runs up to Shiki, but she tackles him and knocks him unconscious.

"Yo. For some reason, I thought you'd be here."

Shiki says this with a pale face. There were many things I wanted to say, but they all disappear when I see how weak she is. I run to help her, but Shiki refuses and does not even let me support her.

"So you managed with just one arm, huh, Shiki?"

Touko-san seems surprised. Shiki glares in discontent.

"Touko, she came up with clairvoyance in the end. She'll have a ridiculous amount of power if you leave her be."

"Clairvoyance, huh? Certainly, if you add that to her power, she'll be invincible. She would be able to make a fulcrum even if you are hiding... Huh? If you leave her be...?"

"She returned to pain insensitivity at the very end. That's cheating. Asagami Fujino in that state can't be my target. I couldn't do anything else so I just killed the disease in her stomach. She might make it if you hurry."

Shiki did not kill Asagami Fujino. Understanding that, I quickly call the hospital. I'm not sure if they would be willing to come in this storm, but if they won't, I'll just take her there myself. Fortunately, her doctor agrees to come. He was worried when Fujino disappeared, and it seemed he was crying over the phone. There may not be many, but Fujino still has people on her side. I am moved. Behind me, those two are having a dangerous conversation.

"Did you stop the bleeding on that arm? It doesn't seem to be, at least."

"Yeah, I killed it 'cause it was useless. You can make an arm, right? You're a puppet master, after all."

"All right. That will be your pay for this job. I always thought that your body was too normal in contrast to your eyes. I can make that left arm able to grab spirits and such."

... I don't want them talking about such things.

"An ambulance is going to come here. It'll be lots of trouble to stay here, so do you want to get away?"

Touko-san nods, but Shiki is silent. ...She probably wants to make sure that Asagami Fujino does get taken away safely.

"Since I contacted them, I'll stay here. I'll tell you what happened, so you can go back."

"In this strong rain? You sure are strange. All right, let's go back, Shiki."

Shiki refuses Touko-san's offer. Touko-san smiles somewhat meanly and gets in her off-road buggy, which seems totally illegal.

"Shiki. Don't kill Kokutou just because you couldn't kill Asagami Fujino."

Touko-san says so seriously and drives off. In the summer rain, Shiki and I end up seeking shelter in the nearby warehouse.



The ambulance comes in no time and carries off Asagami Fujino. In this storm, I cannot see her face. I cannot make sure that she's the girl from that one night, but I think that's for the best. Shiki blankly stares into the night, wet from the rain. She was glaring at Fujino all this time. I inquire as to her feelings amid the sound of rain.

"Shiki, you still can't forgive Asagami Fujino?"

"..... I don't care about the one I already killed."

Shiki declares so. There's no hate or anything there. For Shiki, Fujino must be someone she does not know anymore. ... It's sad but that might be the best for these two. Shiki casts a glance at me.

"How about you? You say murder is wrong no matter what the reason is."

She seems like she's asking herself the question.

"... Yeah, but I sympathize with her. To be honest, I couldn't care less about Fujino killing the guys who violated her."

"That's unexpected. I was hoping for your popular opinion."

... Do you want to be blamed, Shiki? You didn't kill anyone. I close my eyes and listen to the rain.

"Really? But that is my opinion. Because, Shiki, even though she lost herself, Asagami Fujino is a normal girl. She will take in what she's done without changing the facts to suit her. Even if she does give herself up to the police, no one can prove what she's done and she won't be socially responsible for her sins. That's what makes it more difficult."

"Why?"

"..... I think sins are things people willingly burden themselves with. A burden that one casts on themselves according to their views, that is what a sin is. The more compassion you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. The more common sense you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. Asagami Fujino's sins become heavier and more painful as she gets happier."

Shiki tells me I'm too good-natured.

"Then does that mean those without compassion have no sense of what sin is?"

"I don't think anyone exists without a sense of sin. It just means that their sins are lighter to bear, but they are still there. A small sin within their small scope of compassion. For us it might seem trivial, like tripping on a road; but for that person, it becomes a burden. Even the small pain for us becomes an unpleasant feeling for those with small compassion. No matter the weight, the meaning of a sin is the same."

... Yes. For example, Minato Keita was probably frightened to the point of insanity because of the realization of his sins. He cannot atone for his regret, sense of guilt, fear, or impatience; all he can do is try to atone for them.

"Certainly, it must be easier to not be responsible for your sins socially. But if no one punishes you for your sins, you have to carry them yourself. A guilty conscience is not something that goes away, right? You have memories of it. Since no one forgave you for it, you cannot forgive yourself. The wound in your heart never heals and will continue to hurt. Like her sense of pain remaining, the wound would never heal. As you say, a soul does not have a physical form..... so I don't think a wound on it can be treated.

Shiki is listening silently. Maybe because I looked up Fujino's past, I'm unusually poetic. Shiki suddenly leaves the cover of the warehouse and goes out into the rain.

"So you're saying this: the more common sense you have, the more sense of sin you have. That's why there are no bad people in this world. But I have no such thing. Could you let such a person run unbounded?"

Now that she says so, that is indeed true. Before you can call Shiki good or bad, she has a small concept of common sense.

"I see. Then I guess it can't be helped. I'll have to bear all your sins then."

Those are my true feelings. They seem to have caught Shiki off guard, as she stands there dumbfounded. After being struck by the rain for a while, Shiki murmurs uncomfortably.

"... I finally remember... You say those kinds of jokes with a straight face."

To be honest, Shiki found it hard to deal with such things.

"..... *Sigh* I see. I do think I can at least carry one girl on me, you know."

I argue timidly, and Shiki laughs.

"I'll confess one more thing, I think I've borne another sin with this thing today. But I found out something in return. What my life is, and what I want. It's vague and fragile, but I will have to follow it for now. It turns out that what I'm following isn't as ugly as I thought it was. I'm a bit happy. A bit... A killing impulse that is slightly leaning towards your image..."

... I can only frown at her last sentence, but Shiki is beautiful as she smiles against the rain. The storm should go away by morning.

I keep staring at Shiki, surrounded by the summer rain. Come to think of it, this is the first true smile she's ever shown me since she recovered from the coma...

Remaining Sense of Pain Fin