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Illustrated by
BUNBUN



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Translation by Zoe Womack
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Ø1

It's Impossible for Normal Me

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

"Hey, Sousei, you're kinda..."

Sousei was washing his hands while Yukisada Hayashi was drying off one sink over.

They had gone to the bathroom with some other kids from their class during a break. After finishing their business, they ended up standing next to each other, washing their hands. It should have been the sort of normal, unremarkable thing that any regular high school student would do.

"...odd, aren't ya?" Yukisada finished with a chuckle.

Sousei cocked his head in confusion as he tried to figure out what Yukisada meant. "...Am I?"

Yukisada turned the faucet off with a mystified look on his face.

"Huh? Don't tell me you didn't realize."

"Uhhhh, well..." Sousei automatically gave a vague answer.

Self-awareness... I guess if I had to say, the answer'd be yes. But, man, this really came out of nowhere.

Sousei had been doing his best to act as normally as possible. At school especially.

"Okay, so when you say 'odd,' what do you actually mean?"

Yukisada gave an immediate answer to Sousei's question. "Your hands."

"...Say what?"

"You always take a superlong time. Washing your hands, I mean."

Sousei was in the middle of scrubbing between his fingers and lathering up.

"...Hmm. Do I? Is it really that long?"

"Yes, you take ages." Yukisada chuckled. "There aren't many guys who wash their hands so thoroughly. You wash them like a doctor. Or a surgeon about to go into the OR or something."

"Nah, a surgeon's gotta be..." Sousei muttered something along the lines of "an exaggeration" as he hastily finished up and took his handkerchief out.

Now that you mention it, everyone else doesn't spend much time washing. Or rather, they do a pretty sloppy job. At least, that's how it feels to me... But I guess doing it that way is more normal. Hmm. I should be more careful...

Yukisada chuckled to himself a bit. "You're also really diligent about the way you dry off."

"...Huh, really...?"

Sousei finished drying his hands to about 65 percent of what he'd normally be satisfied with and put his handkerchief away.

Argh. Not dry enough. This is gonna bother me...

But if normal high school students didn't dry their hands that much, then there wasn't much he could do.

I'll just have to put up with it...

Sousei let out a sigh.

Yukisada laughed again. This classmate who Sousei could probably call a friend never roared with laughter, but he did laugh quite often. And he was able to laugh in different ways.

```
"By the way, Sousei—"
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"Yeah?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"What?" Sousei responded without thinking.

"A girlfriend," Yukisada repeated. "Do you have one?"

"...Have?" To Sousei, those words sounded like a foreign language. "... Girlfriend?"

Of course, it was a standard word that was common in daily conversation. But did Yukisada mean a *girl friend* or a *girlfriend*? Was he asking Sousei if he was friends with any girls, or did he want to know if Sousei was dating a girl? Sousei was pretty sure that Yukisada was asking if he had a relationship. A lover.

Sousei and Yukisada had been in the same class since their first year of high school, but they'd hardly ever talked about this sort of thing before. In fact, it had never come up in conversation. Not even once. So why was Yukisada suddenly asking?

There was a girl called Asumi Shiramori in Class 2-2 with Sousei and Yukisada. Asumi was tall for a girl at five foot seven. She was slim and well proportioned, her body about seven or eight times the height of her head, which many considered to be the ideal build for a model. According to what Sousei had heard, either her grandfather or grandmother was a foreigner, which would explain why Asumi's skin, hair, and eyes were a lighter hue than most Japanese people.

Incidentally, Sousei was also five-seven, more or less. He didn't have any notable features. His eyes, nose, and mouth weren't especially big or small, and his jaw was neither especially square nor pointy. For normal high school student Sousei Takarai, who had average grades and mediocre looks, it felt like there was a big gap between him and Asumi Shiramori. A huge gap. They practically lived on different planets. Despite that, Sousei had taken an interest in Asumi. It wasn't just a passing fancy. It also wasn't because she had a peculiar appearance or because she was particularly good-looking.

It was her gaze that caught his attention. Asumi, who had been in the same class since the start of their second year of high school, always seemed to be glancing at Sousei.

...Is it just me? It could be a misunderstanding. Or just my imagination...
Maybe...

That was what he thought at first. However, all the signs seemed to indicate otherwise. It soon became clear that Asumi studied Sousei with unnaturally high frequency.

Could it be—?

With time, Sousei grew more and more confident in his hunch.

They do say you can't judge a book by its cover... Is it possible Shiramori... comes from a similar background...?

While he was at school, or more specifically, at least while he was at school, Sousei wanted to be a regular student like everyone else. Although he didn't have many friends, he did have people like Yukisada Hayashi in his life. He went to class every day. He sometimes enjoyed school events. Sousei considered these things priceless.

So it wasn't exactly accurate to say that he had taken an interest in Asumi. Sousei was *suspicious* of her. He was on guard.

And apparently, Asumi and Yukisada had ended up on the same train home recently.

"I was there by myself, and so was she. I had my earphones in, listening to music. Oh, I guess that doesn't really matter, huh?"

Correct. That didn't matter.

"Asumi said, 'Hayashi, you're close with Takarai, right?' and I told her that we're sort of friends."

Sort of friends...

Sousei's chest tightened slightly.

Sort of...? We're sort of friends...? Yeah, sure, makes sense...

Sousei only ever saw Yukisada at school. They had each other added on LINE, and they texted once or twice. But for Sousei, this was the closest he could get to anyone. More than that, like hanging out after school, was too much for him.

"And then," Yukisada continued smoothly, "Asumi asked me, 'Does Sousei have a girlfriend?'"

"Hmm..." Sousei blinked twice and then opened his eyes wide. "...Wait, what?"

"So I said, 'Now that you mention it, I'm not sure.' I thought about it, but then I realized I also had no idea."

"Ahhh..." Sousei felt like he was going to burst out laughing. It wasn't particularly funny or strange, but something about all this made him chuckle.

"Of course I don't have one. A girlfriend? Me? No, no, no... Of course I don't. There's no way. Can you even imagine? Crazy."

"Why's that?"

"Huh? Why? Pick a reason. This is *me* we're talking about. It's beyond impossible."

"Oh, come on, it isn't impossible, it's—heh." Yukisada broke into a grin. "You know, Sousei, you have a pretty funny way of talking about yourself. Not a lot of people act the way you do."

"Uhh...I guess I don't really try to act tough or cool. I suppose I'm in the minority there... Right, yeah..."

Sousei Takarai aimed to be a normal high school student like everyone else. Naturally, he tried to sound like the other boys in his class as much as possible.

...But it just doesn't come naturally to me. It always feels a bit off. Every time I try to talk like one of the guys, it's more embarrassing than anything else...

"Anyway, it's fine to say you don't have a girlfriend, yeah?" Yukisada asked, double-checking.

Sousei nodded.

"Right. And I've never had one before, either..."

He wanted a girlfriend. He'd had that desire before.

...It just doesn't seem possible. I haven't even had a crush on anyone before. I probably won't have one anytime soon, either... Maybe not for the rest of my

life. Yeah, looks like getting a girlfriend isn't going to happen ever!

Sometime later, Yukisada told Asumi Shiramori that Sousei Takarai didn't have a girlfriend, and Asumi asked Yukisada to give Sousei a message.

According to Yukisada, she wanted him to meet in the corridor between the buildings after school.

...Is it a duel? Does she want to duel me...?

The classic scene of a standoff between a swordsman and a gunman popped into Sousei's mind.

In the connecting corridor? At school...?

The location seemed strange. A showdown between a swordsman and gunman was strange as well. Also, where did the swordsman and gunman come from?

...Is it a trap?

†

Once school ended, Sousei headed toward the corridor.

It was empty.

Class had only just ended, so that wasn't surprising. When Sousei had rushed out of the classroom, Asumi was still sitting at her desk. Sousei decided to wait for her about halfway down the corridor.

Before long, students in sports clubs and other people started to come and go along the corridor. Only Asumi didn't show up.

...What is this?

He started to hear the energetic voices of boys and girls coming from the direction of the gym and field. Club activities were already in full swing, meaning Sousei had the corridor all to himself.

Have I been set up after all...? What kind of trap would this even be, though? And Shiramori still hasn't shown up. This must be a trap...

Sousei lowered his gaze. His face was on fire.

...So embarrassing. This is no good. Definitely no good. I don't know what exactly is no good, but I just know that it isn't. Maybe I'll just go home now. Yeah. I should get going. Time to head out...

Just as Sousei was about to run off, Asumi appeared at the opposite end of the corridor.

"Ah!" Sousei exclaimed without thinking.

Asumi was also looking at Sousei. For a moment, it looked like she was about to say something. However, she ended up simply walking up to him in silence.

Her legs, they're so long...

Sousei couldn't bear to keep looking directly at Asumi's face. Before he knew it, he was staring at her legs instead.

...Huh?

Sousei suddenly had a thought.

That's not quite right...

Asumi's legs weren't just long. They were beautiful. *Too* beautiful. Sousei felt drawn to that kind of beauty. It looked like she took good care of them, but purely for cosmetic reasons. Were her legs toned and trained? Could she run fast? Could she jump high? Could she mercilessly kick down her enemies? It seemed highly unlikely with legs like that. They were extraordinarily appealing legs in terms of aesthetics, not functionality.

Asumi stopped in front of Sousei.

"Sorry," she said in a really small voice. "There were just so many people. You got here too quickly, Takarai."

"Ah, so there were too many people..."

Sure enough, there were quite a few teachers and students going up and down the corridor until just before.

Is that why she was late? Because she was keeping an eye out and only showed herself once it was deserted...? Oh, I see...

Sousei tilted his head a little to the side.

...So it is a duel after all?

"You don't have a girlfriend, right, Takarai?" Asumi brought up information that she should have known already as she leaned against the parapet of the corridor.

"G-girlfriend..."

Sousei glanced at Asumi's face. Her full lips looked impossibly soft. And a little glossy. It wasn't from regular lip balm; she probably put something special on them.

"No, I—I do not have one at the moment."

"You're so stiff and formal." Asumi gave a slight smile and swept back her lightly colored hair.

Sousei grabbed at his shirt. There was a sweet aroma of perfume or something in the air. Was that the reason his chest felt tight?

My heart rate...

"So, hey," Asumi said, then lightly kicked the floor a few times with the heel of her right shoe. She was looking at the floor. "If you don't want to, you can say no."

"No?" Sousei felt lightheaded. "...Say no? T-to what...?"

Asumi glanced up at Sousei through her eyelashes.

"Would you..."

It was against school rules, but Asumi was wearing makeup. While it wasn't particularly heavy, most wouldn't consider it light, either. As far as Sousei could recall, she hadn't been wearing any in the classroom. That meant she must have gone out of her way to put it on after classes were over and before coming to the corridor. But even her makeup couldn't hide how much Asumi was blushing.

"...please go out with me, Takarai?"

For about seven or eight seconds, Sousei just stood there in stunned silence.

...Wait... Why does she sound so formal now?

Doubt welled up in him. It was extremely distressing. At some point, he had

started holding his breath. He'd suffocate if he kept this up. Eventually, Sousei had no choice. He breathed out and then in again. Sousei breathed out slowly and then gave his answer.

"Yes."



Sousei left the corridor to go get his bag before leaving school. He headed to his classroom.

...Was it all a dream?



"You don't use Insta?" Asumi had asked him. They added each other at her request. They'd also put their numbers into each other's phones. Sousei had a dim recollection of that happening.

Right. I remember that. So maybe it really did happen...

Sousei fished for his phone in his pocket.

If I check, I'll know for sure. But I don't think I actually want to check...

After hesitating for a bit, he ended up not taking his phone out. Sousei just grabbed his bag from where it was hanging from his desk. That was all he intended to do.

Sousei had taken it for granted that the classroom would be empty after school, but it turned out there was someone there. At the desk right in the very back of the room, by the window, there was a girl.

"Ah!" Sousei jumped back in shock. He bumped into the desks behind him, making a loud noise.

The girl by the window turned toward Sousei. She was sitting with her chin propped up on her hand. Her gaze was sharp and piercing. Unnecessarily piercing. Like a knife. They reminded Sousei of double-edged blades, like daggers meant only for killing.

...It's Hitsujimoto.

Sousei hurriedly straightened the desks and quickly slung his bag over his shoulder.

Unless he had cleaning duty, he usually left the classroom quicker than anyone else as soon as homeroom was over. That was normal for Sousei. So he didn't really know what the classroom was like after school. It was quiet when he got back. He hadn't heard any voices talking or anything, and nobody had been visible, so he'd decided that it was deserted.

...But for some reason, Hitsujimoto seems like the sort of person who would go home about as early as I do...

Everyone referred to Kuchina Hitsujimoto as *Miss Hitsujimoto*. Adding *Miss* before her surname was strange enough, but the nuance was especially

peculiar. It was more accurate to say that they called her *Misshitsujimoto*, as if that were her actual name. It carried a meaning beyond simple respect or familiarity.

At some point, the students in their class had started saying this about Kuchina: "Wow, look at her eyes. She's definitely killed someone before."

Kuchina had a large amount of white showing between her irises and her eyelids. To put it simply, this gave her an expression that a lot of people found unsettling. On top of that, the color of her irises was so dark that her eyes appeared terrifyingly pitch-black.

Kuchina was weird in general. She always wore black stockings. It made sense in winter, but she wore them in summer as well. And for some reason or other, she even wore gloves and was adamant about never taking them off. Could it be that she couldn't reveal her skin for some reason? No one knew why. She probably wouldn't tell Sousei even if he asked.

Kuchina didn't talk to anyone. The only time she spoke was when a teacher asked her to during class.

Everyone thought that Kuchina was creepy. There were people who had tried to approach her out of curiosity in the past, but all of them had failed miserably. And if they accidentally got in her way, all they got was a glare from those scary eyes. Her daggerlike gaze was so piercing. She was like a walking example of that old saying, "Let sleeping dogs lie."

But those eyes are intense...

Sousei backed away. He couldn't take his eyes off Kuchina. Because he was walking backward, it seemed like he'd crash into someone else's desk again. At that moment, Sousei turned his back to Kuchina.

...I wonder if Hitsujimoto is in a club or something. Probably not...

Before leaving the classroom, Sousei once again peered at Kuchina.

If it was anyone other than Hitsujimoto, it would probably be normal to ask if something was wrong. Ignoring her doesn't seem like the right move. You'd at least say something to her, yeah? Probably...

Sousei Takarai wanted to be a normal kid like everyone else. It was important for him to live the typical life of the average high school student. What kind of an existence was a normal high school student supposed to lead? He wasn't exactly well-versed in that topic. But he still tried his best.

Sousei found the courage to say, "Um..."

At that moment, Kuchina's shoulder quivered ever so slightly. It was unbelievable that he had gotten a reaction.

Sousei managed to squeeze out, "G-good-bye."

Right as he was about to leave the classroom, a single softly spoken word reached Sousei's ears.

"Good-bye."

"...Huh?" Sousei asked without thinking.

Kuchina was staring out the window, her chin propped up on her hand. Sousei waited for about five seconds, but Kuchina didn't move an inch.

...Was I hearing things? I don't think I was. I'm pretty sure that was Hitsujimoto's voice. But...

Sousei bowed slightly as he finally left the classroom. As he was went down the stairs, his phone suddenly buzzed.

N-no way. I-it has to be work, right? It has to be...

Sousei took a deep breath and took out his phone. On the screen was a notification letting him know he had a message.

"I-it's probably Yukisada..."

Sousei unlocked his phone and opened the app. He almost fell down the stairs. It wasn't Yukisada.

"It says it's from Asumi...?"

It was Asumi Shiramori, of course. It couldn't possibly be any other Asumi. He only had two entries on his contact list: Hayashi and Asumi. Sousei opened the chat screen with a shaky finger.

Can I call you now?

Sousei gripped the handrail of the stairs. Otherwise, he would have tumbled down them.

```
Sh-sh-sh-should I say something back...? B-b-b-but how should I reply...?
```

In the meantime, or rather, while Sousei still hadn't done anything, his phone buzzed again. This time, it wasn't a chat message. It was an incoming call.

```
"From Sh-Shi-Shiramori...?!"
```

Sousei answered it on reflex.

"Hello?" said the voice on the other end.

...Dammit... That really is Shiramori's voice, isn't it...?

Why was he treating it like a terrible emergency? Sousei wasn't sure who or what he was cursing when he had that thought. At any rate, he had already answered the call, so he should say something. He couldn't pick up and then just hang up without saying a word. Especially not as a normal high school student. Or really, as a regular human being.

```
"...He-he-hello...?"

"Takarai?"

"...Y-yeah?"

"I ended up calling you after all."

"...Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"...W-where? Um? Uhhhhhhhhhh...s-s-school..."

"You're still at school?"

"...Yeah."

"Hmmm..."

"......."
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"So, um," Asumi said finally.
  "Y-ves?"
  "Why do you sound so stiff?"
  "...Y-yeah?"
  "So, Takarai, can I call you by your first name?"
  "...Huh?"
  "Can I call you Sousei?"
  "...Uh... Weeeell... Th-that..."
  "You don't want me to?"
  "N-nah, th-th-th-that's...that's not..."
  "I'd like you to call me by my first name, too."
 "...By...y-y-your f-f-f-first...?"
  "I have a lot of nicknames, too, like Asumikku or Asumin or whatever. That's
what my friends call me."
  "...Ah—Aaaaaaaaaaaa—Asumikku..."
  "Maybe Asumi is better."
  "Aaaaaaaaa—Aaaaaaaaaa—Aaasumi...?"
  "That was a bit too long."
  "...S-s-s-s-sor—s-s-so-sorry..."
  "I think just calling me Asumi would be good."
  ""
  Before he knew it, Sousei was squatting down in the middle of the stairs. His
```

breathing was out of control. He put all his focus into calming down.

...So much time has passed already. I've just been silent this whole time...

He couldn't just leave her hanging like that. Sousei steeled himself.

"A-Asumi."

"...Whoa."

"What?"

"...My heart is beating so fast."

That—

Sousei was suddenly soaked in sweat.

That's my line...

Zero-Sum Game

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

"Are you ready, Sousei?" he heard from his earpiece.

Sousei's reply was short. "Yes, Sis."

He was on the roof of a high-rise building, wearing all black. His clothes weren't anything special. Neither were the sneakers he was wearing. He had bought everything from a local shopping mall. They weren't particularly expensive, but they weren't noticeably cheap, either. He had chosen items that were fairly durable and reasonably priced.

The pistol in his hand, however, wasn't sold there. And the chest rig he was wearing over his black clothing—which had lots of pouches for storing things like his pistol, extra rounds, and magazines—was also the sort of thing that wouldn't normally be found at a shopping mall. The mountain-climbing backpack he was wearing, though, had been bought from a sporting goods store.

"The target's car has entered the basement parking lot, Sousei."

Sousei moved to the edge of the roof without responding.

The building he was on was eighteen floors, and the one across the two-lane road was ten floors.

The target took the elevator from the underground parking lot up to the ninth floor of the building across the road.



Tonight's target only ever left his house once or twice a year. Their home was heavily guarded, and investigating its internal structure had been impossible. Did the target live alone? Even finding out how many security personnel there were hadn't been doable.

In the end, Sousei's sister had decided that their only chance would be on one of the rare occasions the target left the house.

...Not that I have any objections.

His sister had come up with a plan.

Sousei would jump from the building he was currently on and enter through the ninth floor of the opposite building. Then he'd neutralize the target along with his bodyguards.

His sister had also considered having him infiltrate the target building ahead of time. However, thorough safety checks had been conducted prior to the target's arrival. Even if Sousei hid, there was a possibility that he'd be found. The target was extremely cautious. The outing would undoubtedly be canceled if the security detail discovered any suspicious people.

Lying in wait for the target wouldn't work. Their only feasible option was a surprise attack.

```
Still, isn't there a better a better way to go about this...?

"Sousei?"

"Yes, Sis?"

"It's almost time."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Don't be a smart-ass."
```

His sister's tone was soft rather than accusatory, but that didn't necessarily mean that she wasn't angry. Sousei felt a choking sensation in his chest.

```
"...Sorry, Sis."

"It's all good, Sousei."
```

Did his sister really accept his apology? Sousei couldn't tell.

...I have no idea what my sister is thinking... Speaking of things I have no idea about, there's also Shiramori...

She had suddenly asked him to go out with her. That caught him completely off guard, and he had said yes without thinking.

...I still don't really get it. Does this mean I'm Shiramori's boyfriend? Wait. Does that mean Shiramori is my girlfriend? Whoa...

Sousei pressed a hand to his chest and wet his suddenly dry lips.

...This is weird. That's absurd. I mean...me and Shiramori— Oh, that's right, I'm supposed to call her Asumi. A-Asumi? No, no, no, no. It's impossible. I can't. It's inconceivable, I tell you! And why, out of everyone, would she pick me in the first place...? Wait...does that mean that Shiramori might...like...me? Whaaaaaaaaaa? No...that'd be weird. It would, right? Yeah, definitely weird...

"Sousei?"

"Yeah?"

"Were you spacing out just now?"

"...Nooooooo?"

"Really?" His sister let out a small sigh and then asked again in an extremely low voice, "Are you sure?"

Sousei couldn't answer. He'd probably incur his sister's wrath regardless of whether he said yes or no. The only option was to stay silent.

"Focus. Prepare for entry," his sister said.

"Roger."

Sousei looked at the ninth floor of the building opposite and then stepped back from the edge of the roof.

For a long jump, he'd need at least 130 feet for a running start. But this rooftop barely gave him 65.

"I'm ready."

His sister gave the order. "Get inside."

Sousei started running. It wasn't that he felt fear, exactly, but it wasn't enjoyable, either. If he had to describe it, he'd say it was unpleasant. Really unpleasant.

It doesn't matter how used to it I am; it never stops being unpleasant...

Sousei pushed off the edge of the roof and vaulted from the building.

Apparently, I have a girlfriend now...

The opposite building was rapidly approaching.

That's not really something I should be thinking about while I'm flying through the air...

He saw the tenth floor first.

Then came the ninth.

Sousei was spot-on, just like in the simulations based on his sister's calculations.

He used both of his arms to protect his head as he crashed into the ninth floor's thick windows. It was one hell of an impact. The sound was horrible. Sousei tumbled onto the shiny polished floor along with shards of glass, getting covered head to toe in blood. His body wasn't listening to what he was telling it to do.

"Are you in?"

"...Yes," Sousei said weakly.

He was already starting to pass out. It didn't seem like he'd be able to stand up, so he had no choice but to crawl forward. He had glass shards sticking out of him from head to toe, but he couldn't feel any pain at all.

...I'm...pretty much...at death's door...

The ninth and tenth floors of this building housed special facilities. The regular elevator only went up to the eighth floor, and then there was a private elevator that connected the ground floor to the ninth. Half of the ninth floor served as the entrance hall for these facilities, and another elevator or the stairs provided

access to the tenth floor.

Guests who walked past the lines of glass display cases containing splendid armor and helmets, expensive sculptures, and beautiful flower arrangements would eventually come across a certain hallway. To the left of the hallway was the entrance to the private elevator, and to the right were the stairs and elevator that led to the tenth floor.

According to his sister's predictions, the target should have taken the private elevator up to the ninth floor and would be passing through that hallway to head to the tenth floor any moment now.

Ahhh...

Sousei had failed to reach the hallway.

I quess it's not possible...

He could hear the sound of footsteps.

His vision wasn't simply blurry—it was almost pitch-black. He couldn't see a thing.

"Who the hell is this?!" someone shouted. It was probably the target's bodyguard.

An instant later, Sousei was shot by a handgun.

Security personnel often chose to carry semiautomatic handguns, which were also popular for self-defense, but their accuracy in actual combat conditions was relatively low, even when being used by a trained marksman. The bodyguard knew from a glance that Sousei was seriously wounded and barely breathing. He had approached and shot him from about ten feet away. Ultraclose range. There was no way he could've missed. He nailed Sousei right in the head.

The bodyguard didn't just fire once. He made sure to put three rounds in Sousei's head. It was pretty much instant death.

...Someone once said that death was like a sleep that you never wake up from...

Even after he started breathing again, Sousei remained motionless.

But that's not exactly right. It might just be me, but...I'd say it's more like suddenly winding up in a very small place and not being able to move. Ah, and I can somehow tell that I've died...

"It's all right now, Mr. Sakayanagi," the bodyguard said.

Sakayanagi was the name of the target. The bodyguard left Sousei and returned to his ward.

The length of the hallway was about fifty feet between the private elevator and the elevator that went up to the tenth floor. Sousei had entered just as Sakayanagi and his bodyguards had gotten off the elevator and walked about sixteen feet. There were four bodyguards wearing suits. One of them, Bodyguard A, had shot Sousei. Bodyguard B had been covering Bodyguard A. The other two, Bodyguards C and D, were focusing on guarding Sakayanagi.

The worst thing is...

Sousei snuck his right hand into a pocket of his chest rig. He gripped his pistol. It was a Ruger LC9. He used it all the time, since it was light and easy to handle.

...I don't have any perception of time while I'm dead. It seems like I come back to life right after I die, but it also kind of feels like I've been dead the whole time...

"What would you like to do, Mr. Sakayanagi?" Bodyguard A asked. "I'm not sure since he was acting so recklessly, but I suspect he's an assassin. Would you like to cancel?"

"You took care of him, right?" Sakayanagi retorted, sounding extremely displeased. "Canceling now means everything we've prepared will be wasted. More importantly, how did it get out that I was coming here?"

"Well..." Bodyguard A faltered.

Sakayanagi let out a contemptuous sigh.

"Determine the cause at once," he demanded. "...But yes, the plan is canceled. Let's head back."

"Understood."

Sousei saw Bodyguard A bow from the waist as he responded. Sousei crawled

along between the glass cases. Without a sound, he stood and readied his gun.

They were about fifteen feet away. Across from the bowing Bodyguard A was the target, Sakayanagi.

Kenshin Sakayanagi. It was said that he was sixty-four years old, but he only looked like he was in his fifties, at most. He looked like the sort of person who would play a dad in a TV drama. Sakayanagi had been involved in countless criminal acts for more than forty years, but he had never once been arrested. He wasn't connected to other major organized crime syndicates or overseas mafia, but over the course of his lifetime, he had built up a group called Rosa Rugosa that primarily conducted drug smuggling and human trafficking. Incidentally, Sakayanagi's older brother was an ex–police officer—a notable person who had risen to the rank of Superintendent General of the Police.

Sousei steadied his Ruger LC9 in both hands and pulled the trigger. The first round struck Sakayanagi around the right side of the bridge of his nose.

"Urgh," Sakayanagi groaned and stumbled.

"Ahhh?!"

While the bodyguards were still turning around and taking out their handguns, Sousei pulled the trigger a couple more times. His second shot hit Sakayanagi between the eyebrows, and the third hit dead center in the bridge of his nose.

Oh, I killed him.

Sousei could tell the instant he took someone's life. He got a feeling...like a distinct *thump* that reverberated in his core. The lives he took increased his own.

He was down one since he died once moments earlier, but now he was breaking even. *No, wait*— "Ahh..."

The bodyguards opened up without hesitation. They were good shots. Seven or eight rounds struck Sousei's head and chest. It was pretty much instant death.

...Seriously, what the hell is going on here?

Sousei came to on the floor, covered in blood. Evidently, he had died and fallen over.

It's nothing new, but...

His Ruger had dropped nearby. He grabbed it and was trying to get up when more gunshots rang out. Sakayanagi's bodyguards all seemed to be solid marksmen.

"Ugh..." It was pretty much instant death.

...I've been killed twice in a row. So that's minus two...

Sousei gripped his Ruger and fired while still on the ground. The bodyguards had come running up to his body, so Sousei was able to hit one of them without even aiming.

"Agh...!"

He didn't know if it was Bodyguard A, B, C, or D. Sousei got off four more shots while he was shot himself, taking down two of the bodyguards.

I'm back to just breaking even... Tsk.

But right after that, Sousei was shot in the head and died.

Sousei was in terrible pain when he came back to life. He was lying sprawled out, and one of the bodyguards had his shin pressed against Sousei's throat. Sousei also had a gun pointed at his forehead. He had only just been resurrected, and it already seemed like he was going to be killed again at any moment.

"What the hell are you?! Damn monster...!"

Gimme a break...

Sousei's Ruger LC9 wasn't within reach. The bodyguard must have kicked it away.

Sousei grabbed the bodyguard's pistol with an iron grip and twisted it upward just as the bodyguard was about to pull the trigger.

"Aaarghhh...!"

The bodyguard instantly pulled his index finger out of the trigger guard. If he

had pulled the trigger, he would have ended up shooting himself. Removing his finger from the trigger in that kind of situation was the correct instinct for anyone who had received proper training. But the bodyguard had also inadvertently removed his shin from Sousei's neck. That was a fatal mistake.

Sousei was now able to breathe. In one fell swoop, he stole the bodyguard's gun and fired. He shot the bodyguard three times, killing him. The last remaining bodyguard opened fire.

My temples—

That was Sousei's last thought before he took a hit and died.

...It's been a long time since I died this much...

When he was resurrected, the remaining bodyguard was about thirteen feet away from Sousei with his gun raised. He almost looked like he was hyperventilating, and he was shaking uncontrollably.

"Wha...? What the...? Y-you... The hell is going on? Fuck...!"

Luckily, Sousei had apparently died with his finger still in the gun's trigger guard. It seemed that the final remaining bodyguard had emptied his magazine into Sousei. The gun he was holding in both of his hands was likely out of ammunition.

"I understand you probably think I'm cheating or something, but—"

Sousei held the grip of the gun with his right hand and then added his left. He took aim and shot the last bodyguard.

"Uuuughh..."

The bodyguard took the bullet in his chest and then tried to turn around and run. Sousei couldn't allow him to escape. He hit him with a second and third bullet in quick succession.

"...Shi...iiiit... Arrgh..."

Sousei stood up once the bodyguard had collapsed onto the floor.

"It's not like I became this way because I wanted to."

Sousei walked up to the last bodyguard and shot him once more in the head.

He felt a thump and knew instantly that the bodyguard had died.

"I killed five people, but I also died five times. So I guess I broke even."

Still clutching his handgun in his right hand, Sousei touched both his ears with his left. His earpiece wasn't there.

"I better find it. If I lose it, Sis is really going to let me have it..." Sousei let out a sigh and started searching. "It's crazy, right? Someone like me having a girlfriend..."

Ø3

How Many More Seconds Until You Stop Breathing

My dreams have always been really bad...

Sousei Takarai was lying face up in bed, looking at the ceiling with his hand resting on his forehead.

I've never been able to sleep that well. But even then, to stay up all night long...

He could tell how bright it was outside, even with his blackout curtains. It was already morning. Sunrise had come and gone quite a while ago. Sousei gave up on getting any sleep and was about to get up when his phone buzzed by his pillow.

"Ah...!"

Sousei grabbed his phone. He had a message.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaa—Asumi..."

Morning

It was just one word. A message from Asumi Shiramori.

"...I—I thought s-s-some-something had happened..." Sousei jumped up. "Th-that's right! Ahh, I should probably reply to this, shouldn't I...?"

Sousei was doing sit-ups as his mind raced about what to do. Before he could figure it out, his phone got another message.

"Aahh!"

I had a dream

You were in it...

What kinda dream you think it was?

"H-huh?! A d-d-dream...? How should I know what kind of dr-dream she had...?"

His hands were shaking. Even though he had stopped doing sit-ups, he was instantly drenched in sweat.

"...Wh-wha-what should I do? Does she want an answer...? Should I answer? Wh-what kind of dream...? Does that mean it was a bad dream? No, that can't be r-righ— Whoa!"

Sousei almost sent his phone flying and quickly caught it in a panic. He had gotten another message from Asumi.

A good dream!

A sticker followed the short message. He didn't really know what it was of, but it looked like a smiling cartoon cat or something.

"...A g-good dream..." Sousei was breathing hard. He couldn't stop sweating at all. "I—I should...send something back..."

Good morning. I am glad it wasn't a bad dream.

"...Something like this? Maybe...?"

He sent his reply.

Straightaway, Sousei violently shook his head.

"No, that can't be right! I have a feeling that's wrong...!"

He immediately got a response from Asumi.

So formal!

"Aaaaahh!"

Sousei jumped out of bed and started charging at the wall.

"Nah... No, no, no! I shouldn't break the wall. Aaaaaaagh, but I messed up! This is bad, this is bad, this is really bad! Shiramori will definitely be mad at me for this...!"

But she sent him another sticker right after.

He didn't really get it, but it was a sticker of some kind of catlike thing holding its belly and rolling around laughing.

"What's this...?!" Sousei sank to his knees on the floor. He held his phone in the air and looked up at it. "She's not...mad...?! Right? She found it funny...?! How come?! That's good. Yeah, good enough for now. It's fine as long as she's not angry..."

He got another message while he was talking to himself.

I'm excited to see you at school

"...E-e-e-ex-ex-exci-excited..."

Sousei read the message from Asumi over and over again, almost out of breath.

"This is bad for my heart..."

†

Damn... This is the first time...

Sousei sighed for the umpteenth time while changing into his indoor shoes at the shoe lockers.

I've never been this nervous coming to school before...

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

Getting a girlfriend... It's not like I haven't imagined it before, but this is different somehow. Completely different. Or rather, I had no idea what it'd be like in the first place. There's no way I could have known...

Sousei peeked inside his classroom before he entered. Yukisada Hayashi was there. And Kuchina Hitsujimoto was in the back seat by the window, looking outside with her head propped up on her hand.

Hitsujimoto is kind of early. Maybe that's normal for her? I wonder... Come to

think of it, she does always seem to be in the classroom. I guess Shiramori isn't here yet...

Sousei drew in a breath and entered. A few people looked in his direction.

"Yooo!" Wakkuu greeted him with what looked like a salute. Wakkuu's real name was Kouichirou Wakuya, but everyone called him Wakkuu. He was the most cheerful person in the class and was full of energy.

Sousei tried his best to put a smile on his face.

"Morning, Wakkuu." That was the best that Sousei could manage.

...I want to try saying "Yo" too, but it's so embarrassing...

Wakkuu gave Sousei a thumbs-up and winked, even though Sousei wasn't very good at playing along. Wakkuu was like this with everyone.

I get nothing but good vibes from him...

When Sousei sat at his desk, Yukisada approached. Yukisada was a genuine, pleasant high school boy, but when he was bathed in the morning sun, his cheerful aura increased severalfold.

"Morning, Sousei," he said.

Sousei unconsciously squinted his eyes with how bright his friends' smiles were and how sleep-deprived he was.

"Oh, yeah... Morning, Yukisada."

"So?" Yukisada squatted and brought his eyes in line with Sousei's. "How'd it go?"

"...How'd what go?" Sousei asked.

Yukisada leaned in and dropped his voice. "Yesterday. Asumi asked you out, didn't she? What'd you say?"

"Ah, that..." Sousei looked down. He pressed his hands to his cheeks. His face was hot. "...Well, for now..."

"For now?"

"So...f-for now, that..."

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"Did you say no?"

"No...that's..."

"So you gave her the okay?"

"...I guess."
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"Ooooooo..." Yukisada grinned with satisfaction. "Gotcha. So you two are going out now. That's good."

"It's...good?" Sousei moved his hands up from his cheeks and held his head. "Good? Is it?"

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"Ah, I don't know. But it's not a bad thing, right?"

"I suppose..."
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"Asumi is cute and kind of seems like a fun, cheerful person. Sounds like a good thing to me."

Yukisada stood up and patted Sousei on the shoulder before walking off with a spring in his step. Someone started walking over to take his place by Sousei's desk.

Even Sousei had a few people he could talk with on occasion, but Yukisada was basically the only person who would bother coming to Sousei's desk just to chat. That was true right up until yesterday.

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"Shi—"
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Sousei's eyes bulged. He sat so far upright that he arched backward. Both of his hands pressed down on his thighs. The person who was approaching him was a girl. A girl with long legs and had a habit of walking a bit pigeon-toed. She was slowly walking this way with her gaze lowered and her hands clasped behind her. Her last step almost seemed more like a hop. When both of her feet landed, she leaned the top half of her body to the right and smiled coyly.

"Morning," she said.

"Ah..." Sousei blinked. If a blink so intense that it contorted his entire face could even be called a blink. He gave a stiff nod. "Goo..."

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...d morning.
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Of course, that's what Sousei wanted to say. However, he couldn't get his voice to come out properly. He started coughing instead.

"...ood...cough...ood...cough cough... G-g-good...morn...ing..."

"What are you even saying?!" Asumi Shiramori bent over laughing.

"...Ha. Aha-ha..." Sousei laughed as well.

Sousei's face was twitching. No, it wasn't just his face. Pretty much his whole body seemed like it would spasm at any moment.

With that, Asumi suddenly fell silent. All expression disappeared from her face, sending Sousei into a panic.

...Is she mad? Did I do something strange to make her mad...?

The expression "scared to death" popped up in his mind.

...Well, I have died before. And not just once or twice. I even died five times last night! It's weird that I'm suddenly feeling scared to death while I'm still alive...

He had no doubt that it was all due to Asumi being silent.

Should I apologize? Would that help...? But what should I apologize for? And how...?

Sousei was starting to seriously consider an apology for which he couldn't see a correct answer.

"We got to see each other, huh?" she said quietly. Asumi had been whispering, or rather, murmuring.

...We got to see each other, huh...?

Sousei's mind felt like the inside of an empty school gym. In there, Asumi's voice just kept echoing.

We got to see each other, huh?

We got to see each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh?

We got to see each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh? We got to see

each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh? We got to see each other, huh?

But this school gym was empty. So who was hearing the voice? Was it Sousei? Then Sousei had to be in the empty gym. And that would mean it wasn't empty anymore. They weren't even in the school gym in the first place. This was their classroom.

What is this feeling...?

"Ee-hee."

Asumi suddenly made a strange noise. She immediately pressed both hands to her mouth. "Ugh, I'm being so gross. Sorry, let me try again later!" Asumi said with a red face.

Sousei watched, stunned, as she turned on her heel and quickly rushed off.

What a cute creature...

†

Sousei Takarai wanted to become a normal high school student like everyone else. At the moment, he wasn't doing a very good job.

Sousei was getting a lot glances from his classmates and hearing whispers like "What's that all about?" "You're kidding," "Seriously?" "Hmm, how's that gonna go?" and "That can't be true." This was definitely not part of the normal high school life that he had envisioned for himself.

But it's not like I don't understand how they feel...

Asumi had greeted him personally, and it didn't particularly seem like she did it because she happened to be going that way. What in the world could that have been about? Could it be that the two of them had a special relationship? Was that possible? Their classmates were suspicious and puzzled.

It is me, after all...

Even during class, Sousei couldn't get Asumi out of his head and ended up glancing at her a few times. If he was being honest, it was at least ten—thirty-two times, to be precise.

Because of that, they made eye contact several times—six times, to be exact.

The first and second time, as soon as he thought *We made eye contact*, they both looked away.

The third time was longer. But it was still only about three seconds. Sousei wasn't able to maintain eye contact and turned away first.

The fourth time was right after that. Sousei was curious and looked back at Asumi. She was still looking at him. They looked at each other for about five seconds but couldn't stay like that. Their teacher had started talking about something, so they both faced the front again.

The fifth time, Asumi hid the bottom half of her face with her hands. Without really knowing why, Sousei also covered his mouth with his right hand. Asumi acted as if she was going to burst out laughing when he did that. She looked down and tried hard to suppress her laughter. Sousei watched her do that for about ten seconds or so.

The sixth time was especially memorable. After looking at each other for several seconds, Asumi started moving her mouth. She wasn't making any sound, though, of course, since they were in class. Sousei guessed that she was mouthing words. Asumi was trying to communicate something to him using the shape of her lips.

It seemed to just be a couple syllables. Asumi was repeating the same word over and over. Eventually, Sousei realized what it was.

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S
O
U
S
E
I
Maybe it's my name...?
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Sousei pointed to himself, and Asumi smiled and nodded.

Is Shiramori...human? A Homo sapiens? It's like she's a different species—honestly, it's like she's a cute creature from another dimension.

Even someone like Sousei found things like baby animals cute. They were round and fluffy, stimulating an instinctual desire to protect them. Undoubtedly, baby animals evolved to have a form that compels others to protect and care for them, making it more likely for them to be protected by parents or family members and increasing their chances of growing up and leaving offspring of their own.

But what about Shiramori...?

Did baby animals and Asumi have anything in common?

He could probably say that Asumi had some roundness, but that didn't seem quite right. Naturally, she also wasn't fluffy.

I dunno...

When class ended and their five-minute break started, Sousei became overwhelmed and left the classroom. He headed straight for the restroom, but he didn't actually need to go. He came back out just as fast as he went in.

But returning to the classroom would be unpleasant.

...I get the feeling...that it'd be unpleasant...

With no other choice, Sousei aimlessly wandered down the corridor. Before he knew it, he was walking so quickly that he was startling other students as he passed by them. He consciously slowed down, and by then the five-minute break had ended. He hastily returned to the classroom to find that their teacher had already arrived, making Sousei's entrance awkwardly noticeable. As he headed to his desk, Sousei couldn't get Asumi out of his mind. But what if he looked at her and they made eye contact?

I maight become unoble to move...

Sousei's brain was starting to lose its grasp on language. Where did his normal high school student life go? Where had it been in the first place? Sousei didn't know anymore. He didn't have the slightest idea.

Ø4

Demon Hunt

By the way, have you ever heard the rumor of the man with demon hands?

It was said that the man always wore a windbreaker jacket and pants when he went to work. The color of his windbreaker was usually black, often sporting white lines, while his shoes were black or navy-blue sneakers. The man appeared at the job location with his hood pulled down over his eyes, so he was sometimes called "the windbreaker man."

He was also wearing a black windbreaker that day.

There were few who noticed the man walking down the road at night. Most likely, none of them would even recall they walked past him.

The man stopped in front of a building. It was clear from a glance that the five-story building was covered in security cameras and heavily guarded. The front door facing the street was obviously an automatic door, but it was designed not to simply open for anyone who stood in front of it.

One minute passed, and then two, but the windbreaker man didn't move from in front of the non-opening automatic door. After about three minutes, the door finally opened, and a blond man wearing a tracksuit walked out, his hands rammed into his pockets.

"The hell d'you want?" the blond man demanded.

The blond tracksuit man was probably trying to get rid of the windbreaker man. Undoubtably, he was prepared to resort to violence if intimidation wasn't enough to drive away the unwelcome guest.

"Hey, I'm talking to you, asshole! Don't you know what this place—?"

But the first one to resort to violence was the windbreaker man. He threw a straight right punch that shattered the blond tracksuit man's jaw. Broken teeth and blood scattered everywhere, and the blond tracksuit man soared through the still-open automatic door.

The windbreaker man lost no time in crossing the threshold as well. The door closed a few seconds later.

The security cameras captured footage of the blond tracksuit man getting his ass kicked, so everyone inside was immediately put on high alert.

The building belonged to the Houjou Group, the subsidiary of a large, well-known crime syndicate. It was no coincidence that the head of the family, his lieutenant, and senior members who reported to them were all gathered at the office that night. The windbreaker man had carefully chosen to carry out his attack at this particular time on this particular day.

The man's name was Tousuke Mochizuke.

Job: killer.

For that reason, he was also known by the alias Crusher.

The first person to confront him in the entry hall was a feared gangster in his twenties who was known in the local area as Demon Bro. Demon Bro was an experienced fighter who was familiar with karate and boxing. He wasted no time on pointless yelling and instead closed in on Mochizuke with his quick footwork. Demon Bro's fighting style was to silently rain a series of blows on his opponent's face without warning, making the other person lose their will to fight within seconds.

"Hrrmmph, hrrmmph...!"

Demon Bro's jab and hook landed almost simultaneously. His boxing combinations were, in so many words, seriously kick-ass. That's why the younger punks in the area shook in fear and gossiped about him all the time. Even Mochizuke the Crusher couldn't avoid the hits. But there was no need for him to. He stopped Demon Bro's jab firmly with his right hand and met Demon Bro's hook with his left.

"Aarggghhh...?!"

More accurately, Mochizuke had crushed both of Demon Bro's fists in an instant.

Mochizuke stepped over Demon Bro, who had crumpled to the floor in pain, and the five gangsters who had crowded into the entrance hall shrank back.

The blond thug in a tracksuit may not have been anything to write home about, but Demon Bro was the best fighter out of all the younger members. Even if he didn't lose his temper, he was considered a real badass. A gangster should be able to take out a person or two without breaking a sweat when they're enraged. Otherwise, they wouldn't make a very good gangster. Being able to calmly beat someone to death went above and beyond.

Demon Bro was that sort of guy. Eight years ago, he had tortured then murdered someone from an unaffiliated street gang. One of the local junior members took the blame and was sent to a juvenile detention center. Out of all the gangsters, it was that junior member who gathered up the courage to step forward.

"Y-you asshole...! How dare...?!"

Once he got out of juvie, the junior member grew out his hair and entered the Houjou Group on Demon Bro's recommendation. The loyal and brave long-haired initiate was beloved by Demon Bro and the more senior gang members. Demon Bro's catchphrase was "Show me you're a man!" and the long-haired junior member often imitated this.

"Hyaaaah...!"

To show him what kind of man he was, the long-haired junior member lunged at Mochizuke. He put his entire body weight behind his dropkick. But it never made impact. Mochizuke had casually caught his right ankle.

"Hii-yaaahh...?"

It may have been because it was as fragile as a Popsicle melting under the blazing sun, but the ankle of the long-haired junior member was crushed down to the bone in the blink of an eye.

The remaining four gangsters made strange noises with their mouths, like "Eeaaahh," "Eeeeeerk," "Aaaah...eee," and "Nuhaaah," as they stood there on

the verge of fleeing. If they could have run away, they probably would have. Of course, Mochizuke the Crusher wouldn't let them.

Mochizuke crushed one gangster's shoulder, another's neck, and then a head, one after another. To Mochizuke, human bodies were no different from boiled eggs.

Some of the gangsters died, leaving mangled corpses, while others were left to writhe in pools of their own blood. It was over in an instant. The entry hall had transformed into hell on earth.

Mochizuke, covered head to toe in the blood of his victims, headed to the elevator. He pressed the button with his gore-stained hand.

He pressed it again. Nothing happened.

He took a detour to the emergency stairwell. The door was locked. But that didn't matter to the Crusher and his demon hands. He twisted the knob right off and flung it to the side. After opening the door, Mochizuke began climbing up the emergency stairwell.

For the members of the Houjou Group, this emergency stairwell became a battlefield.

However, the seven gangsters who had surged into the stairwell from the third floor all had their heads or necks crushed by Mochizuke. They were wiped out in a mere ten seconds or so.

From there, Mochizuke quickened his pace. Just as he reached the fifth floor at the top of the building, the door in front of him opened.

On the fifth floor of the Houjou Group's office, the leaders of the gang had been enjoying high-quality sushi, tempura, sukiyaki, and alcohol while holding an important discussion about internal conflict in their parent syndicate. Battle-hardened men who had spent more time in prison than out of it were also stationed on the fifth floor as bodyguards.

The chief of the bodyguards used the street name Broadaxe Masa. In his younger days, Masa slew the boss of an enemy organization with a broadaxe. Even after reaching fifty and starting to shave the thinning hair off his head, he was still an extremely ferocious man who sometimes flashed his axe while

walking around.

Naturally, Masa led from the front, bursting into the emergency stairwell with his axe in hand.

"Hyaaaaaah-!"

From Masa's point of view, he had opened the door and found Mochizuke right there. Masa instantly raised his axe the moment they bumped into each other with the intent of driving it into Mochizuki with an almost excessive amount of force and ferocity.

But Mochizuke's demon hands slapped Masa's axe away as if he were swatting at flies or mosquitoes. It meant nothing that Masa had been gripping the axe tightly in his right hand. Actually, because he'd been gripping it so tightly, Masa's whole arm was taken along with his axe.

"Oooooof...?!"

If Mochizuke hadn't grabbed hold of his bald head, Masa probably would have fallen down the stairs. He managed to avoid that fate. The trade-off was getting his head crushed by Mochizuke's demon hands instead, which was instant death.

When Mochizuke stepped from the emergency stairwell into the fifth-floor corridor, three gangster bodyguards were standing there gaping in shock. They had been eager to follow Masa and his broadaxe into battle but were completely rethinking their decision.

All three of them had fought through hell since their days as juvenile delinquents. Everyone who stuck out as looking like bad guys were either enemies or allies. These career villains were experts in crimes like extortion, theft, mugging, violence, scams, and smuggling, so more than fear, it was shock that gripped them.

"Even though it's a job, this is..."

Mochizuke trailed off. His voice was a little husky but forceful, and it carried well. His hobby was going to karaoke by himself. He also enjoyed showing off his voice at divey joints like snack bars.

"...so dull. Way too dull." As he spoke, he bent his right index and middle fingers toward himself.

The demon hands he used to easily destroy humans weren't particularly large or small. They were also quite normal in terms of thickness. If anything, the fingers might be slightly on the thick side.

"Fuck...!"

One of the gangsters pulled out a handgun that had been tucked into his belt. He had gotten quite a bit of practice shooting overseas, both as a hobby and for practical use, and had plenty of experience firing real guns. That explained why he drew so smoothly.

He flipped off the safety on his M1911A1, commonly called the Colt Government, held it firmly with both hands, and straightened out his arms. He held the pistol at eye level, aimed at Mochizuke by aligning the front sight with the notch in the rear sight. Then he pulled the trigger with his right index finger.

A gunshot rang out. The distance between the gangster and Mochizuke was a mere fifteen feet or so. The initial speed of the bullet was about 560 mph, or about 830 fps. It was definitely not the sort of thing that could be dodged. One could only pray that it would miss.

Did Mochizuke pray? Of course not. He had no need to. All he had to do was use his demon hands and simply grab the bullets, stopping them in midair. And that's exactly what happened.

"Whaaa...? Whaaaaaaaat...?!"

The gangster screamed in horror as he continued to pull the trigger. The M1911 usually had a seven-round capacity. It wasn't long before the magazine was empty. No more bullets came out.

Mochizuke opened both of his hands to show the gangster. Four dented bullets fell from his right hand and three fell from his left.

"Shit...!"

Another gangster lunged at Mochizuke. He had a dagger in his hand. Out of desperation, he had committed to charging straight in and driving the dagger

deep into Mochizuke's belly. It was a very decisive move. But Mochizuke easily crushed the dagger in his right hand and the gangster's head in his left.

"You guys are too easy."

In quick succession, Mochizuke smashed the heads of the gangster who shot at him as well as the other remaining gangsters.

"...This is frustrating."

The Crusher opened and closed his blood-soaked demon hands as he walked down the hallway. Whenever he came across a door, he opened it and peeked inside. When he opened the third door, he spotted sofas ringing a table. On the table was a tub of sushi, plates of tempura and other food, liquor bottles, and glasses. It was a magnificent parlor. The sideboard and other furniture were all high-end items, and the walls were decorated with paintings and calligraphy. There wasn't a soul to be seen.

But there was an iron door in the back.

Mochizuke sat on the sofa. He picked up a pair of unused wooden chopsticks and pulled them apart. He quickly wolfed down some sushi, savoring the salmon roe, medium-fatty tuna, and halibut.

"...Hmm. Not amazing."

He crushed the chopsticks and stood up. Next stop was the iron door.

"Houjou Group Chairman Iwatariiiiii—" He knocked on the iron door with his right hand—with his demon hand that could effortlessly crush a human skull and didn't flinch even when he used it to stop bullets. The door started caving inward with an awful sound every time he knocked.

"Lieutenant Mashirakawaaaa, Vice-Chairman Kunazawaaaa, Headquarters Manager Numahamaaaa. You're in there, aren't youuuu? Heeeey. Come on outtt..."

Mochizuke started knocking on the iron door with both hands.

"This building has some really good soundproofing, so the neighbors probably won't report anything, riiiiiiight? And you guys can't exactly call the police, either, can youuuuuuu? As if the police would come rescue the notorious

Houjou Group! But trying to barricade yourselves in is uselesssss! Useless! Useless! It's useless, I tell youuuu! Heeeeey! Ah..."

The iron door finally couldn't take any more and collapsed into the room behind it.

Mochizuke let out a sigh and stepped inside. The safe room was about a hundred square feet, and there were displays showing footage from the security cameras. He also spotted a vault and fridge in there. Four men were huddled in a corner, all with neatly styled hair and beards and wearing expensive designer suits by brands like Armani and Yves Saint Laurent. All four of them had pistols in their hands, but not one of them had their gun pointed at Mochizuke. The men were doing nothing but trembling.

"Wh-wh-what the hell do you want, you son of a—" the eldest gray-haired man said, white spittle gathering by the corner of his mouth.

Mochizuke removed the hood of his windbreaker, revealing that he had a neat side part. His face made him look like a department head or section manager at a serious, rigidly formal company more than anything.

"Six years ago, you guys conspired to have a man named Mitsuru Ategawa tortured and killed. You remember, don't you?"

"...Ategawa?"

The eldest man exchanged glances with the youngest of the four, a man who looked to be about fifty and seemed to know something about the victim.

"That normie who kept turnin' over one of our joints, doin' whatever he wanted even though he wasn't connected? We had to make an example out of him, so we killed him and disposed of him at that plant..."

"Ah, that brat! Ategawa... I think that was his name, now that you mention it..."

"As a matter of fact," Mochizuke said, "this was a request from the parents of that very same Mitsuru Ategawa."

Without a sound, Mochizuke closed in on the man in his fifties and crushed the man's head with his demon hands.

"Seems he was a terribly troublesome hooligan," Mochizuke continued, "but he was probably still his parents' beloved son and the apple of their eyes, don't you think? They've been trying all possible means to find out the truth behind his death and want to avenge him at any cost."

"...Nu-Numahamaaaa!" the elderly man screamed.

The other two finally pointed their guns at Mochizuke. They fired at basically the same time. Both of their bullets wound up in the demon hands like they had sucked up the projectiles. With the bullets still in his hands, Mochizuke crushed the two men's faces, one in each hand.

"I don't usually accept jobs that don't seem fun, but it was hard to decline since they offered me five hundred million yen. Mr. Mitsuru Ategawa's father is quite the wealthy man. Were you aware of that, Chairman Iwatari?"

"...F-fi-fiiive...five hundred million..." The gray-haired Chairman Iwatari slumped down.

Was Iwatari trying to escape at the last moment? He was kicking at the floor with both feet, but there was a wall behind him. He didn't even have space to back away.

"P-p-please. I-i-i-if it's money you want, I'll pay...!"

"Hmmm?"

"Fi-five hundred and fifty million! No, six hundred million! I'll pay you six hundred million! So please let me go! Don't kill me!"

"Hmmm, I see."

Mochizuke reached out his right hand and grabbed Chairman Iwatari's gray-haired head. Before crushing his head, Mochizuke pulled Chairman Iwatari's face close.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to make a fool out of me. A hitman who changes sides for money is second-rate at best."

"Te—" Chairman Iwatari started to say something. But before he could finish, those demon hands crushed his head.

Mochizuke flicked blood and gray matter from his fingers.

"I probably would have considered your offer for fifty billion yen. I might have hesitated for five billion, even."

Mochizuke laughed as he left the room.

"Kidding. Kidding. Just kidding..."

The door to the parlor was open, and there was a young man standing in the doorway. He was wearing a chest rig, but otherwise looked like any other young kid.

Well, other kids hanging out in the neighborhood probably wouldn't be holding a gun in their hands. It wasn't even a pistol. It was a submachine gun.

Mochizuke's eyes widened.

"Ooooh..."

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

Not once had he wished to have the kind of life where he'd be emptying his Ruger MP9 submachine gun into the demon-handed windbreaker man known as the Crusher.

"Oooh, oooh, oooh, oooh, oooh, oooh...!"

The Crusher, also known as Tousuke Mochizuke, used his bare hands to rapidly grab the 9mm Parabellum that were being fired at him at a rate of at least 550 rounds per minute. Sousei watched this play out in aggravation.

And after I went to all the trouble of bringing along an SMG since a regular handgun seemed like it'd be no match against the infamous Crusher...

In just under four seconds, Sousei had fired thirty-two rounds, emptying his magazine. He quickly replaced it with a spare magazine. When he started firing again, Mochizuke jumped on top of a table that was still filled with sushi, tempura, and whatever else.

"Mwa-ha-haaah...!"



Sousei suppressed his urge to fall back, steadied himself, and continued firing.

The demon hands. Sousei had also heard the stories. But hearing stories and actually seeing them in action were completely different. He already knew that both of Mochizuke's arms moved at high speeds. But how did they work? Sousei honestly had no idea. At any rate, it didn't matter how much he shot at Mochizuke's head, chest, or stomach. It seemed impossible to land a hit like this. Apparently those demon hands were catching the bullets somehow.

Of the second magazine's thirty-two rounds, he had fired the first few around Mochizuke's chest area and then angled the gun downward and shot the rest around his lower legs. Mochizuke had an average body, and his arms were also normal length. Sousei thought that firing outside of his reach might work.

You're telling me those arms can stretch...?!

Ultimately, all he managed to hit was the table and the sushi tub. None landed on Mochizuke.

Sousei tried to load a new magazine, but before he could, Mochizuke pounced. Sousei's vision was mostly obscured by Mochizuke's right hand. It grabbed on to his face like an eagle clutching its prey.

"Ahh—"

Sousei's skull and brain were both crushed, and he died instantly.

...Minus one, and so fast...

Even after he came back to life, Sousei stayed still and didn't open his eyes right away. He tried straining his ears. He needed to gather info. What was happening?

Sousei was lying on the floor. He didn't have anything in his hands. It seemed like he had dropped his MP9 when he was killed.

Where was Mochizuke? It was quiet. Sousei should still be in the parlor. Probably by the doorway, if his body was still where it fell when he had died. As long as Mochizuke hadn't dragged Sousei's dead body somewhere else. There was a possibility that Mochizuke might have done that.

Sousei opened his eyes. A man with a side part was peering down at him.

"....!"

Sousei tried take his handgun out of his chest rig. He'd brought along his Ruger LC9 in addition to his MP9.

But Mochizuke moved before Sousei could get it out. Mochizuke grabbed both of Sousei's arms with his hands. Against those demon hands, Sousei's arms were no different from potatoes that had been boiled for so long they were about to fall apart. Mochizuke crushed his upper arms effortlessly.

"Ah..." Sousei gulped.

"That really surprised me!" Mochizuke promptly put his right hand on Sousei's neck. "Wow! This is amazing! I've never seen this before! I killed you! You were dead, but then you came back! Amazing! What happens if I do it again?! Let's try it and see!"

"Gaaaaaagh..." Sousei hadn't uttered the sound. A voice-like sound just came out on its own. His throat, or rather his neck, had apparently been crushed. In other words, his head had been severed from his body. Although, *severed* implied that it was cleanly detached, which it was not.

It wasn't an instant death. He was conscious for about a second or so.

...This is the worst...

"Ooooh!"

Sousei heard Mochizuke's voice and knew that he had come back to life. The next moment, his head was probably crushed. He died instantly.

Consecutive deaths. It would be unthinkable under normal circumstances, but it wasn't as if Sousei hadn't experienced something similar before. Despite not even feeling like he'd come back to life yet, he desperately tried to jump up.

Just as he started moving, his head was sandwiched between Mochizuke's hands.

"Ha-haaaah...!" Mochizuke was cackling. As expected, Sousei died instantly again.

The next time, he'd at least try to grab something. He came back to life and was able to move his hands, but his head was pulverized by Mochizuke's demon

hands. He had the feeling that Mochizuke had been laughing that time, too, but Sousei wasn't sure. It was instant death.

"This is soooo—"

Sousei heard Mochizuke's shrill shouts of joy, and then his head was crushed. Another instant death.

"—amaaaazing!"

As soon as he came back to life, his left then right shoulders were crushed. Then his right thigh, followed by his left.

"Nnnngh... Aaah..."

"You're fun! You've got an amazing body! What in the world is going on with you, buddy...?!"

Mochizuke straddled him, strangling Sousei with both hands. Technically, he wasn't strangling him. It seemed that the strength of the demon hands could be adjusted. Sousei was simply having some difficulty breathing due to the pressure on his neck.

...Even if I could breathe...both my arms and my legs are already broken...

"Heeeey! Tell me something! You're in the same line of work, right?! That's gotta be it! You found out about my job and planned to attack me on-site?! Waha-hah! That's amazing! You're good, buddy! Even boring jobs I'm only doing for money aren't bad if there are bonuses like this! This is such a neat surprise! What's your name?! I really want to know your name! What kind of cheat power do you have? Or better yet, I really want to be your friend! I feel like I'd get along with someone like you! There might be a bit of an age gap, but I don't mind! Cheers to this wonderful meeting! Let's start off by becoming friends?!"

"...F-first...t-take...your...hands...off..."

"Oooh! Sorry, how rude of me!"

Mochizuke took his hands off Sousei's neck. But only for a second. He put them back straightaway.

"Mwa-ha-ha! No way, no way! I was just kidding! I can't be too careful, so if you pull any funny business, I won't hesitate to kill you! But I was being serious

when I said I want to talk! Sorry, but let's chat like this!"

...Shit. This isn't going to be easy... I guess I have no choice but to use it.

Sousei ground together the top and bottom second molars on the right side of his face with determination. Almost like he was screwing the top molar into the bottom one.

The thing buried inside his teeth wasn't a part of Sousei. It was a foreign substance. For some reason, it was still there whenever he came back to life. Even Sousei didn't know why, but he'd confirmed it himself. But if he used it, it'd be gone. It was decidedly single-use. That had also been proven.

Sousei detonated the small explosive buried in his bottom-right molar. His head blew off, and he died instantly.

...This job...!

When he came back to life, the parlor was thick with smoke and dust. The lights had gone out. The hallway was still bright, though. That was where Mochizuke had probably gone. Sousei could hear footsteps. He got up. His chest rig had been blown away, along with all the weapons he'd stowed in it. Not much remained of his clothes, either, especially on his upper body.

There was a katana that had fallen on the floor. It had been displayed on the sideboard before. Sousei picked up the katana and leaped into the hallway.

Mochizuke was staggering toward the emergency stairwell. He turned around, revealing that his hair was a mess, but his face was unharmed. He must have instantly shielded it with his demon hands. His guts were spilling out of his stomach, however.

"That's not an injury you can survive...!"

Sousei chased after Mochizuke. On the way, he took a handgun from the belt of a dead gangster who was missing his neck. Mochizuke tumbled into the emergency stairwell and closed the door behind him.

"You just don't know when to—!" Sousei yelled, opening the door.

Mochizuke hadn't gone down the stairs. He was waiting right there for Sousei.

"Ha-haaaah...!"

I was expecting that!

Sousei emptied the magazine into him. The historic Colt Government pistol. It had a seven-round capacity.

```
"Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh...!"
```

Mochizuke's demon hands caught every one of the seven bullets. He was full of glee even though his intestines were sticking out. It was lunacy.

Sousei unsheathed the katana. He threw away the sheath and closed the distance between him and Mochizuke, bringing the katana down in a sharp diagonal.

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"Hmmph...!"
```

Mochizuke crushed the katana in his right hand. Sousei continued to lunge toward Mochizuke regardless.

```
"Damn fool...!"
```

Mochizuke squashed Sousei's head with both hands. Sousei died instantly.

```
... I already factored that in...!
```

When he came back to life, Sousei made sure to entangle himself with Mochizuke, and they tumbled down the stairs.

```
"Oowwoowwoowwooowwww...?!"
```

Sousei frantically seized the howling Mochizuke's intestines.

```
"<G-god damn...!>"
```

...Was that English just now?

Just as Sousei wondered why, the demon hands pulverized his head.

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...This is such a horrible job.
```

Sousei came back to life. Both of his hands were still clutching Mochizuke's intestines. Or rather, his fingers were still tangled up in Mochizuke's intestines. They seemed like they'd be hard to unravel. Mochizuke was being crushed under Sousei on the stair landing. Sousei pulled on Mochizuke's intestines as hard as he could.

```
"Die already...!"
```

"Uuuuggggh... Arrrgh... Uuuugh...!"

Mochizuke was more dead than alive. But his demon hands still flailed around, chasing after Sousei.

"Ahh, crap...!" Sousei stopped yanking on Mochizuke's intestines and threw both of his hands into Mochizuke's body. He didn't know which organs were which, but it didn't matter as long as he turned everything into a gory pulp.

In that split second, Mochizuke's right hand tore off Sousei's jaw while his left hand crushed Sousei's right shoulder.

```
"Ughhhhh...!"
```

Sousei cried wordlessly while clawing around inside Mochizuke's body.

```
"Guhh... Nuuuh... Staaa..."
```

Not long after, Sousei felt it... That peculiar *thump* reverberated at his body's core, and Tousuke Mochizuke stopped moving. Even the Crusher's terrifying demon hands stopped twitching.

Sousei checked to make sure Mochizuke's heart had stopped beating, just in case. Then he finally stood up.

```
"...Uuhh... Uuuhh..."
```

He couldn't get any words out because his jaw had been completely torn off. A single flap of skin was all that kept his right arm attached to his crushed right shoulder. Then it, too, came off with a heavy thud.

Owwwww...

Sousei stared intently at Mochizuke's corpse.

The demon hands... Mochizuke made a pact with a demon and traded his soul for them... Or he forcibly stole the arms from a demon...and when Mochizuke dies, the demon will appear to reclaim them... There are a lot of different rumors about those hands...

But it didn't seem like anything unusual was going to happen after all.

Sousei felt like he was going to faint from the excruciating pain. He looked

around and spotted a broadaxe lying at the edge of the stair landing. It was one that had belonged to one of the gangsters Mochizuke had killed.

Sousei picked up the broadaxe with his left hand. He couldn't stand up properly anymore. He sat on the stairs and pressed the blade of the axe against his forehead once.

I've died nine times already...

He pulled the axe away from his forehead. With all the strength he had left, he swung the axe toward himself as he thrust his head toward the axe.

...and this makes ten.

Ø5

Please Tell Me What You're So Happy About

Sousei subtly shot a glance toward Asumi Shiramori's desk. Asumi wasn't looking in his direction. They were still in class and she couldn't be looking at Sousei at all hours of the day.

...Don't be disappointed, Sousei.

He was just about to shift his gaze to the blackboard when it happened.

Asumi glanced at him.

She looked at him once, then about two seconds later she looked at him again and smiled.

After that, she turned her eyes in the wrong direction. It was obviously on purpose. She was teasing him. It couldn't be anything else.

The next time she looked his way, it was no longer just a fleeting glance. She pouted her lips just a little and shook her head slightly while staring right at him.

Cuuu— Is she some kind of cute specimen of the primate family...?

Sousei clasped his hands on top of his desk, clenched his teeth, and exerted pressure around his eyes. It would be bad if he didn't go out of his way to exercise self-control like that. He felt like screaming. Like he might go on a rampage.

t

When he was in the classroom, Sousei felt uneasy unless Asumi was within

sight.

Asumi was always doing something during their breaks between classes. Sometimes she would go over to people, and other times people sought her out. They chatted, showed each other photos and videos on their phones, laughed... She was never still, not even for a moment.

Sousei's chest felt full and warm whenever Asumi seemed to be having fun. But then he would start to feel restless. Before long, he found it impossible to sit still any longer and somehow felt like it wouldn't be in his best interest to stay in the classroom.

What the hell is this feeling?

Sousei stood up and left the classroom.

I'll go to the bathroom... Ah, but I don't have to go right now...

Since he had nothing particular in mind, he decided to drink some water at the drinking fountain. He drank a single mouthful and turned off the tap, then sensed someone approaching. He could tell who it was before he checked with his eyes.

I felt...

Sousei noticed then.

In the classroom, when Shiramori was having fun chatting with everyone like usual, I felt a tinge of loneliness—or maybe jealousy. That's why I left the classroom...and part of me hoped she might follow. I wanted her to notice that I wasn't there and come looking for me. I was ever so slightly...expecting...her to...?

"Sooouseiii." Asumi tapped him on the shoulder.

"Wha...?!" Sousei caught his breath. He had sensed Asumi's approach. The tap on the shoulder was what had surprised him. "Shi— A— Shira— A—"

He had almost called her "Shiramori."

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"—A-Asumi..."
```

[&]quot;Oooo..."

```
"Whaaaaa-?"
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"You're still not used to it." Asumi smacked her cheeks with her hands. Her face was red. "Ah, but it makes me really happy!"

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"...O-oh...crab..."
```

"Crab?" Asumi tilted her head in confusion. She put up her index and middle fingers on both hands and moved them in a snipping motion.

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...Sh-she's miming a crab...
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His nervous slip of the tongue had resulted in Asumi acting adorable. This was hardly a bad outcome.

"N-not crab. I meant to say *glad*. I was going to either say *okay* or *I'm glad* and it came out as something totally different..."

"You were going to say okay?"

"...That's a bit weird, isn't it?" Sousei asked.

"Just a bit." Giggling, Asumi poked the right side of Sousei's chest with her right index finger. "Oh my god, Sousei, you're so funny!"

```
"...Ah, nah, not really..."
```

"And also, kinda..."

"Wh-what?"

"Cute."

Asumi looked down and fidgeted. She glanced up at him through her eyelashes. "...Does it bother you? Being called cute?"

"No," Sousei said, quickly shaking his head. "...I-it doesn't...bother me...you know?"

```
"Really? You're not just putting up with it?"
```

"Y-yeah. It's just...no one has ever called me that before..."

"Nobody's ever said that to you before?"

"N-nope."

"I see. So that means I was your first, huh?"

"...Yeah, guess so."

"Yay!" Asumi put her fist out. Sousei's eyes darted around in panic.

Wh-what? Wh-wh-what should I...?

Sousei panicked, trying to figure out the correct thing to do. He gently touched Asumi's fist with his own.



"We're celebrating a first," Asumi said with a smile.

...I...got it right...?

Sousei felt like slumping down on the floor.

"So, um..." Asumi immediately continued, bending forward a little and bringing her face closer to him.

Sousei almost bent backward. "...Y-yes?"

"This afternoon..."

"Afternoon?"

"...I wanna chat. After we have lunch."

"...Ahh. Well... Yes, I-I'd love to."

"In the corridor between the buildings." She put her right pinkie finger out.

Sousei linked his little finger with Asumi's, as if he had turned into a fully automatic promise-making machine.

Her fingers are so soft. And small...

Asumi was quite tall for a girl and was just a tiny bit shorter than Sousei. Her legs were clearly longer than his, but of course their physiques were different since they were different sexes. Sousei had much larger hands and feet. But even so, Asumi's slim fingers weren't bony at all. They were somewhat cold and slightly dewy.

†

Once the morning classes ended, Sousei took the energy bar and steamed chicken breast he'd bought at a convenience store on his way to school that morning and tried to hurry out of the classroom. When he got to the door, Wakkuu called out to stop him.

"Takarai, Takarai!"

Sousei ignored him, pretending not to have heard. He reconsidered once he got out into the corridor.

...It probably wouldn't be good to ignore him.

He waited in the corridor, and Wakkuu ran up to him.

"Yo, yo, yooo! Whoa, whoa! What's this? You're not eating in the classroom?"

"...Ah, yeah. Well, today I figured I'd do something different..."

"Hmm? Interesting." Wakkuu tagged along with him as Sousei walked off. "Can I ask you something?"

"...What?"

"Takarai..." Wakkuu cleared his throat and looked around. Then he put his arm on Sousei's shoulder and whispered in his ear, "Are you going out with Asumin?"

That's a good question...

Sousei kept his gaze fixed ahead and continued walking with Wakkuu's arm still around his shoulder.

...Can I tell people...? I have no idea. It doesn't seem like we're supposed to keep it a secret or anything. But...confidently saying it out loud...? Would that be okay...? Lying might be bad in its own way. And it doesn't feel like Shiramori wants to hide it...

After thinking it through for a while, Sousei eventually nodded. "...Yeah."

"You are? I thought so!" Wakkuu broke into a beaming smile. "I didn't want to just assume and make a big deal about nothing. Ah, but Asumin's lovely, huh? Maybe *lovely* isn't the right word. It's not that I wanted to go out with her myself or anything. What am I talking about? Anyway, I think it's nice. Yeah. That's it. Yep. Anyway, sorry."

"...Nah, no problem."

"That's all!" Wakkuu patted Sousei on the back and left with a salute-like gesture. "Yooo!"

"Yo." Sousei automatically imitated Wakkuu's salute.

"Ooo!" Wakkuu winked and gave a thumbs-up. He ran toward the classroom.

Sousei just stood there for a while.

...This is the first time I've been able to say "Yo."

†

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

Me, the guy who took down Mochizuke but still died ten times last night...

In the corridor bustling with students during lunch time, Sousei found himself side by side with his classmate, Asumi Shiramori, exchanging something resembling conversation.

But that's all it was: something resembling conversation.

Sousei barely uttered a word. All he could manage to squeeze in while Asumi talked a mile a minute were the occasional "Wow," "Uh-huh," "Hmm," "Ah," "Yeah," "I see," and nodding in response.

It seemed that Asumi never ran out of topics no matter how much she talked. Who did what, such-and-such person saying this or that, what repercussions that had, what happened in what YouTube video, what was happening on TikTok, and so on. Most of the things she brought up were things Sousei had never heard of. Was everyone able to talk about lots of different things this fast? Sousei was deeply impressed.

"Ah, sorry! I'm totally dominating the conversation."

"No, it's fine! You're all good."

"Oh wow, I'm a bit sweaty."

Asumi tugged on the neckline of her top and fanned her face with her hand. She had worked up a sweat, and the afternoon sunlight sparkled on the beads of moisture that dotted her skin.

...She...sweats? Ah, obviously.

"Hey, Sousei?"

"Yesss?!"

```
"What sort of places do you usually hit up after school or whatever?"
  "Ah, a-after school?"
  "Yeah, like when you hang out with friends or go shopping."
  "Ahh..." Sousei crossed his arms and cocked his head in thought.
 Hanging out with friends... That's not something I usually do. And shopping...
Well, I guess I don't not do that...
 After racking his brain, the only thing that came to mind was the name of the
nearest shopping mall.
  "The Aeon shopping mall, maybe...?" he ventured.
  "I also go there a lot. It feels like you can get pretty much anything there,
right?"
 "Yeah... Or I guess you could say that there's nothing missing from there."
  "There really isn't! You can even eat there."
  "Ah, yeah, there's the food court..."
  "I go there! I went there with Moena recently!"
  Moena was the nickname of Hina Shigee, another girl in their class. She was
often called Moena or Moechan.
  "You're really good friends with Shigee, aren't you, Shi—ah, Asumi?"
  "Ahhh! You were about to call me Shiramori, weren't you?"
  "...S-sorry."
  "Hmph!" Asumi puffed out her cheeks. Sousei almost fell over.
  ...She looks cute when she's sulking. It really wouldn't bother me if she was
always like this...
  "All right, now you have to say Asumi ten times."
  "What?!"
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"As punishment!"

"Ah, uhhh, okay..."

Sousei whispered "Asumi" exactly ten times. He couldn't look her in the eyes.

So embarrassing...

"Okay, let's take it from the top," Asumi said, pointing to herself. "Who's this?"

Without thinking, Sousei gave Asumi's face a long look.

"...Asumi," he answered.

"Ding, ding, ding!"

Asumi counted on her fingers while saying Sousei's name.

"Sousei, Sousei, Souse

"...Who's this?" Sousei pointed to himself, and she broke into a smile. It was as if some kind of tremendously joyous, extraordinary event had occurred.

"Sousei." Asumi just said his name. That was all.

...That's all. So why do I feel so incredibly happy?

At first, Sousei couldn't help being bothered by the eyes of students passing by. But he stopped caring about them before he even realized it.

I wonder why...

"By the way, Sousei."

"Huh?! Wh-what is it...?"

"Do you want to go to Aeon after school?"

"...Afte--?"

Sousei impulsively pressed his right fist against his chin.

I would like to, of course, but... After school, hmm... Going to Aeon after school. Going to Aeon with Shiramori? I have no clue what we'd do, but...even if we don't do anything in particular, as long as it's with Shiramori...

"Would...that be okay...?" Shiramori's voice tremored anxiously. Sousei's chest ached.

Last night, I died and I—	ten times and	l killed someone.	. Now, after s	school, Shiramori

Ø6

Sudden Death

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

If I didn't have my job, at least...

The target left the building where he worked before eight PM.

Sousei kept an eye on the area around the building diagonally across the road. The target, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a backpack, walked toward the train station.

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"Sis, the target has left his workplace. I'm also moving," he said.

"Roger," his sister answered through his earpiece.

If I didn't have my job...

Sousei let out a sigh.

Going to Aeon with Shiramori after school...

"Sousei?"

"Yeah?"

"Why did you sigh just now?"

"...I did? I sighed? Me? Sighed? Really?"

"You did. Definitely."
```

"Whaaa? Is that so? I sighed? Huh? I didn't notice..."

"Are you trying to suggest that I misheard?"

"Sorry. You're right, I did sigh. With all these back-to-back jobs, I guess I'm a bit tired..."

"Stay on your toes."

"Yes, Sis. Sorry."

Sousei apologized to his sister in a low voice as he tailed the target from across the road.

...It was really tough when I said no to her. Asumi was so disappointed. She ended up apologizing to me and said sorry for suggesting it out of the blue. How good-natured can a person be?! Is she a saint? Is she perfect both inside and out? Dammit. I'm the worst...

The target's name was Ikuo Ondou. He was thirty-seven, but with his hiking jacket and shoes, chinos, and a backpack that didn't look out of place in a city, he seemed even younger. He was five-six. Although he was short, he wasn't considered particularly short compared to other Japanese people. Apparently, he was a systems engineer and worked at a company that mainly handled systems development.

But if someone asked me what kind of work a systems engineer does, I wouldn't be able to answer...

Ondou was neither highly paid nor so lowly paid that he was living in poverty. According to Sousei's sister's investigation, Ondou dabbled in investing, but he was putting his money into investments in lieu of having savings. He didn't really engage in things like outdoor activities or barhopping, nor did he gamble on pachinko or horse racing. He was single and had never been married. There was no sign of him keeping company with anyone else. He lived in a high-rise apartment building with his parents, so he wasn't completely isolated.

Ondou entered Tamamachi Station. It was the subway station he always used to commute to and from work. Sousei followed Ondou from about thirty feet away.

"How's it going, Sousei?"

"He's entered the station. So it's going..."

"No different from usual?"

"For now...it's the same as usual."

"He's quite the unusual one, isn't he?"

Ondou used the stairs rather than the escalator. Sousei also chose the stairs. He went down them, pursuing his target from behind.

"...?"

Partway down, Sousei became bothered by something. But he was in the middle of tailing a target, so he didn't stop.

Ondou was going down the stairs in no particular hurry. Nothing unusual there.

What is that...?

Keeping Ondou within his field of vision, Sousei looked around the area.

That uniform...

The escalator was quite crowded. Within the line of people on the escalator was a schoolgirl wearing a uniform. Judging by the outfit, she seemed to be a student from the same school as Sousei. She was wearing a scarf. The schoolgirl was lower down from where Sousei was. If Sousei kept going down the stairs, he'd walk right past her.

Tamamachi is a business district, so for someone from my school to be here—that's a little strange.

Sousei wasn't exactly wearing a disguise, but he was wearing casual clothes and fake glasses.

I've seen a few high school students at this station. So I can't say for sure that there's no way, but...

The target, Ondou, would soon reach the bottom of the stairs.

I mean...I kind of feel like...I've seen...

That hairstyle. That figure. He had seen her before. He quickly glanced at the profile of the high school girl on the elevator as he passed by her. Sousei felt his heart rate shoot up. But he was in the middle of a mission, so he somehow

managed to keep his composure.

...Hitsujimoto.

Sousei arrived at the bottom of the stairs. He had the urge to turn around and check her face again. He struggled to suppress the urge.

"Sousei? Is something wrong?"

"...No, nothing's wrong. Why do you ask?"

"I just kind of get the feeling that you're not focusing."

"I'm doing my best..."

Ondou was about to go through the ticket gates. He took out his phone and held it up to the automatic scanner. Sousei also took out his phone and went through the gate after him.

Ondou was waiting on the platform for the train to come. It wasn't just Ondou. It seemed that Kuchina was also going to get on the next train.

It seems like Ondou—and Hitsujimoto—haven't noticed me.

The train finally came. Sousei entered the same car as Ondou, but from a different door. Kuchina entered through the same door as Ondou but quite a bit later.

...I'm getting distracted.

He couldn't get Kuchina out of his mind. She was standing around the end of the car they were on. With the same gloves she always wore. Stockings. There was no mistaking it. No matter how you looked at her, it was Kuchina.

Ondou stood by the train door, holding onto one of the hanging straps and looking at his phone. Sousei stood about fifteen feet away from him but didn't hold onto a strap. He pretended to look at his phone while he spied on Ondou and Kuchina.

"How's it going?" his sister asked again through his earpiece.

"...Nothing to report yet."

"Ondou was present at twenty-six suicide locations that we know of. There's no way that's a coincidence."

"I agree."

Ikuo Ondou was a special target. The request was also different from the ones they usually got; they couldn't simply eliminate him. As Sousei's sister had said, Ondou had witnessed a disturbingly large number of suicides. Security footage and quite a few witnesses were able to confirm that was the case.

But looking at it from another angle, that's all there was tying him to those incidents.

At least twenty-six people—men, women, the young, the elderly—had taken their lives by throwing themselves in front of moving vehicles or jumping from high places.

They hadn't confirmed anything beyond that.

However, none of the twenty-six people had left anything resembling a suicide note or will, and none of them had a clear motive, so all of their suicides were considered to be sudden and unexpected.

The police had also questioned Ondou as a witness a number of times. Including instances where his statement happened to be taken by the same police officer.

Could it be that these had actually been murders rather than suicides? Were those twenty-six people not suicide victims, but murder victims killed by Ondou?

One of their bereaved family members had started to harbor such suspicions after spending a great deal of time and money on doggedly investigating the circumstances.

There was not a single piece of evidence that proved Ondou had killed those people. However, as someone in Sousei's line of work would understand, it's not impossible to kill a person without leaving evidence. For some people, it could be quite simple. Hypothetically, even if Ondou was the culprit, he probably couldn't be tried in a court of law. But that didn't mean that he could be excused, and they couldn't let him go free.

Sousei's job was to figure out if Ondou was guilty and then make him pay for it if he was. If he had stolen the lives of twenty-six people—or even more—and

disguised their deaths as suicides, then Ondou would need to pay for it with his life at the very least.

...But I'm not good at this sort of thing. It's kind of annoying, to be honest...

The name of the next station was announced, and the train reduced its speed.

If I'm going to do it, I'd prefer to get it done without wasting any time. Not that I particularly want to kill him, though...

Ondou put his phone away. He was getting ready to get off the train. Sousei wasn't sure what Kuchina would do. She hadn't taken her phone out. She looked kind of spaced out and didn't seem to be focusing on anything in particular. She had an unfriendly expression.

I get the feeling that Ondou is the one responsible. It'd be better if I could just kill him quickly. But Sis says that I need to do this...

The train stopped, and Ondou got off. Sousei got off from a different exit.

Hitsujimoto is... Wait, I shouldn't be worrying about that no— Ondou was restlessly looking around the platform.

"Hey, Sis?" Sousei called out to his sister on the other end of his earpiece.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"The target got off the train, but he isn't leaving the platform."

"Don't take your eyes off him."

"Roger."

Sousei pretended to play with his phone while he continued observing Ondou. There were some vending machines between them. There were also passengers getting on and off the train. Ondou wasn't paying attention to Sousei. Passengers queued up for the next train.

Ondou moved toward the vending machines. Sousei looked away with feigned casualness.

...Is he coming this way?

It didn't seem like he was. Ondou stood in front of the vending machines. He was probably looking for a drink. In the end, he didn't buy anything. He moved

away from the machines. He walked toward the lines of people waiting for the train. A woman who looked to be about thirty glanced at him from where she was waiting at the back of one of the lines.

An acquaintance?

Maybe not. The woman soon faced forward again. But Ondou walked up to her.

Sousei tensed up.

By any chance...?

Ondou stopped right beside the woman. She turned to look at him again. She frowned, a suspicious look on her face. Ondou said something, but Sousei didn't know what. He couldn't hear what Ondou had said. It was a word or two, at any rate.

Ondou wandered off. The woman's gaze didn't even follow him. She looked like she was deep in thought about something.

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"Hey, Sis?"

"Yeah?"

"Ondou just spoke to a woman—"

"And then?"
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The train arrived at the platform. The woman was also looking toward the train. It looked like Ondou was planning to leave the platform, either via the stairs or the escalator. Sousei hesitated for a moment but then tried to follow Ondou while keeping an eye on the woman's movements.

"Sousei?"

"Just a momen—" Sousei almost unconsciously let out a scream, but he managed to gulp it back down at the last second.

The woman had suddenly started running. It all happened in a heartbeat. The woman ran past the lines of people and jumped off the platform.

Several people screamed. The train, which had been slowing down to stop, slammed on the brakes even harder. There was no way that it'd be able to stop

in time. The woman had already been run over.

"...That was an attack!" Sousei hurried to the stairs at a run.

The platform was in an uproar.

"What was that?"

"She jumped in front of the train. The lady that Ondou spoke to..."

Sousei headed to the stairs. Ondou had just reached the top.

The accident was being announced over the station's PA system. There was probably roughly the same number of people hastily leaving the scene of the accident as there were curious onlookers heading to the platform like moths to a flame. At any rate, the stairs were horribly crowded.

I should have taken the escalator...!

Sousei had a hard time getting up the stairs.

"What kind of *cheat* did the target use?" his sister asked.

"I don't know."

"But he did something, right?"

"Looks that way."

Right after he left the station, Sousei spotted Ondou from behind. He was waiting at a traffic light.

The apartment where Ondou lived with his parents was an impressive building not even a five-minute walk from the station.

"I think it was his handiwork. It happened right in front of me."

"All right." His sister came to a decision. "If you get the chance, I want you to take action."

"Understood, Sis."

The lights changed. Ondou started walking. Sousei followed him from about fifteen feet behind.

Before long, the apartment building that Ondou lived in came into view. The branches and leaves of the trees lining the street were quite dense and blocked

the light from the streetlights. It was dark.

They'd be at Ondou's building once they crossed the next street ahead of them.

A car drove past the street. There was no one around, but they were in the city. Naturally, Sousei wouldn't be able to use a gun. He wanted to avoid methods that would result in a lot of bloodshed, so he preferred to use his hands rather than a blade.

Strangulation. He'd strangle Ondou to death with his hands. He had used that method before.

But experience is the only thing I do have. All I can do is kill to increase my lives and then come back to life if I die. I don't have any other abilities or senses. So I can't use any special methods...

Sousei swiftly put on the combat gloves that he had ready. He soon closed the distance between Ondou and himself. But that made his footsteps so much louder. Ondou turned around.

"What do you want?" Ondou opened his eyes wide. He backed away while staring at Sousei through his glasses.

Sousei didn't waver. Now that he'd gotten this close, it didn't matter anymore if Ondou noticed him. All that was left was to do it.

It's just a job, same as usual...

He wouldn't do anything flashy, like brutally attack him as adrenaline rushed through his veins. Sousei silently grabbed his neck with both hands.

"...Ah!" Ondou was looking at Sousei's eyes.

Ondou said something in a voice that sounded kind of like a groan.

"Utsurokana wa ga yokitarazu yo no oto kieyu."

"Wha—" Both of Sousei's hands fell away from Ondou's neck.

Someone was breathing. It was him.

Sousei's eyes looked at Ondou's apartment, the road in front of it, the trees lining the street, the traffic lights far off into the distance, and the cars parked

on the side of the road.

What?! Oh no... This is bad! Oh no, I can't be doing this... That's right, I can't. Hurry, I have to go do that... Oh no, oh no.—
"Sousei?! Sousei...!" his sister called.

Sousei started running. He looked right and left, then behind him as he ran at full speed.

There...!

Sousei ran toward a light. He knew exactly what it was. A vehicle. It was a large cargo vehicle. A truck.

Sousei was on the sidewalk. The truck was driving down the road in his direction.

"Sousei...?! What are you doing?! Sousei...!" His sister continued calling his name.

While speeding along the sidewalk, Sousei calculated when to jump out onto the road. The truck's headlights were bright. They made it a little difficult to figure out the distance.

Now.

Sousei aimed at the truck roaring down the street and rushed at it diagonally. The sound was awful. Sousei collided with the truck and was sent flying. He died instantly.

...Seriously...?

Sousei was so dazed that he couldn't even gain consciousness straightaway once he had come back to life.

"...A-are...you okay?" someone asked him.

He couldn't see with the lights behind them.

This light... Is it a truck's...headlights...?

Sousei strained his eyes. He was lying on the road, and a man was fearfully approaching him in a half-crouching position.

...The truck driver...?

It seemed like this was the driver of the truck that had hit Sousei.

I...was hit by a truck... How come?

"H-hey..." The truck driver was shaking. He seemed terrified.

Sousei touched his arms and face. They were wet. It wasn't just water.

"Blood..."

His whole body was covered in blood.

Sousei had been run over by a truck. He had died and lost a life.

"Ah...!" Sousei jumped up.

"Aaagh!" The driver screamed and fell on his butt.

Yeah, that would definitely shock someone if they thought you were dead...

Sousei was about to help the driver up but then suddenly remembered that he looked like a snowman but made from blood.

"Ah, I shouldn't... I'm all right! Sorry for alarming you...!" Sousei bowed his head in apology and scurried away.

It isn't that far back to Ondou's apartment building, but...

If he went back there now, Ondou would probably already be inside. Sousei was generally uninjured but covered head to toe in blood. He'd have to completely avoid being noticed while he looked like this.

I'm not as concerned about Ondou as I am about whether I can get home without arousing any suspicion...

Sousei ran along the sidewalk, which was quite dark thanks to the trees lining the street. He was about to go down a side road when it happened. He saw the silhouette of a person on the sidewalk across the street. It almost gave him a heart attack.

"Miss Hi-"

Sousei dove into the side road in a panicked frenzy. He backtracked and peeked half his face back out.

...I was just seeing things...right?

He looked carefully at the sidewalk on the other side of the road, but there wasn't anyone walking there. There wasn't anyone standing there, either.

"...It looked like someone wearing a uniform. And a scarf..."

Sousei breathed in as deeply and slowly as he could. There wasn't anyone there after all.

Hitsujimoto... There's no way she could have been here.



A World I Know Nothing About

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

Sis lectured me so much yesterday...

Sousei was lying sprawled out on his bed with his phone clenched tightly in his hand. The drapes in his room were shut. But it was well past dawn.

I quess it's about time...

"Oh." Sousei caught his breath. As soon as he had thought it was about time, his phone vibrated. He promptly checked it. There was a message.

"It's from Shira— Ah, I mean, from A-Asumi..."

He opened up the chat screen.

Meow

There was that short message followed by a sticker of a cat character lying down.

"Pfft..." Sousei burst out unintentionally. It wasn't a laugh, exactly. It was an indescribable emotion that had become air and had escaped through his mouth.

In the meantime, Asumi had sent him more messages.

Morning You up?

Still sleeping?

Agh! Sorry

I'm annoying, huh...?

Straight after that, she sent him a sticker of a cat character kneeling and bowing with its head to the floor in apology. This sent Sousei into a coughing fit.

More than a cough, it was more like an indescribable emotion had risen up and taken the form of a cough. He sat up and replied to Asumi.

Good morning. You're not annoying. I just got up.

...Did I just get up?

Sousei felt a sting in his heart.

...I don't want to lie to Shira—to Asumi...but...

I'm gonna wash my face now You?

"I'll say 'Yeah, me too'... That's right. I should wash my face..."

Sousei was about to get down from his bed when he got another message from Asumi.

So we're doing it together, huh?

"...Yep, that's right..."

Sousei muttered before typing the message.

"Heh-heh-heh..." Then a creepy laugh slipped out.

He hesitated a bit before he made up his mind and typed out his reply.

Yeah, we're doing it together.

Right away, Asumi sent him a sticker of two cats leaning against each other.

When he saw it, Sousei unintentionally screamed.

"Together...!"

t

Sousei had no choice but to think about things that a normal high school

student wouldn't have to think about. That was unbearably painful to him at the moment.

I honestly don't care how Ondou is killing people or what he did to make me jump in front of a truck. I really couldn't care less about any of that. And maybe the stuff with Hitsujimoto, too...

Sousei stood paralyzed in front of the classroom.

Hitsujimoto...seems to be here, huh? I also unconsciously checked the shoe lockers. Her outside shoes were in there, so that means she's already here. Shira—no, that's not right—Asumi doesn't seem to be here yet... I really don't want to be worrying about Hitsujimoto. I don't care about her. But she's on my mind...

"Sousei?" Yukisada said, startling Sousei.

"...Yu-Yukisada. M-Morning..."

"Morning." Yukisada's expression relaxed. He glanced at the classroom and then looked back at Sousei. "Not going in?"

"G-going in? Ah-ha-ha..." Sousei laughed awkwardly. "Yeah, I'm going in. I was about to go in now. Yep, going in. I'm going in now..."

What am I mumbling about...?

He went in and, sure enough, Kuchina was there. She was sitting at the back by the window with her chin propped up on her hand. She seemed to be looking out the window.

I wonder if that was Hitsujimoto... It had to be, right...?



Sousei went to his desk.

...Ah, but I don't really know what I saw after I was hit by the truck. But it did seem to be Hitsujimoto— "Sousei?"

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"Errr- Wha-?!"
```

Sousei felt like he was going to jump out of his chair. Yukisada was standing in front of him. It seemed like he had put his stuff down at his own desk and then come to see Sousei.

"You're even stranger than usual this morning, Sousei."

"...Am I? Hmmm? I don't think so...or I don't think it's not true..."

"Which is it?" Yukisada asked with a chuckle. Yukisada squatted and brought his eyes in line with Sousei's. "So how's it going?"

"How? How's what going?"

"With Asumi. Are things going well?"

"Aah, that... Well..."

"Have you gone out places together?"

"...Gone out?"

"Like on a date?"

"D-d-d-date?"

"You haven't?"

"...A date...? What kind of...? Ah, one of those. What do people usually do on those? My experience with that sort of thing is, you know...nonexistent..."

"Hmmm..." Yukisada thought for a bit and then continued. "Like the movies? Or a theme park? Or the swimming pool?"

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"P-p-p-poooool...?"
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"I don't really know either, but maybe even just a walk in the park could be fun? As long as it's with someone you like."

"...S-someone you like..."

"Right?"

"Well..." Sousei lowered his eyes.

...Huh? Why can't I just agree straightaway? Saying that I like her wouldn't be incorrect. There's no doubt that I like her. Of course I do. It's Shira— It's Asumi, after all. She's so cute that she's like an angel. It's impossible not to like her. Why would she like someone like me to begin with—I mean, really, why? It's strange...isn't it? I haven't really thought about it that deeply, though. It's so strange that it doesn't feel real. Honestly, even now— "Is it embarrassing for you to say that sort of thing?" Yukisada chuckled.

Sousei nodded. "...Yes. Very."

"Takaraiii!" Wakkuu called out to him from a little way away.

"Ah, yeahhh?" Sousei asked.

Sousei looked at him and Wakkuu gave him a salute-like gesture. "Yooo!"

"...Yo." Sousei hesitantly returned the salute, and Wakkuu winked and gave a thumbs-up.

Asumi entered the classroom right after that. From the moment she stepped into the classroom, she was looking at Sousei. It was as if he was the only thing in her eyes.

I...like her.

Sousei also only had eyes for Asumi. Her entire face broke into a sparkling smile. As a matter of fact, to Sousei, it actually looked like it was sparkling more brightly than a jewel. Asumi opened her mouth to say something. From the way her mouth was moving, it looked like she was about to say *So*.

So from the beginning of Sousei...

But she changed her mind and lifted a hand up in a salute instead. "Yo."

That was unmistakably a "Yo." It was a trend Wakkuu had started in their class. Sousei had also finally managed to do it recently. He had done it just before, too.

It was that "Yo." Asumi's "Yo" was a different species from the others. Sousei

could feel it.

Asumin's "Yo" is from another dimension...

Sousei had unintentionally called Asumi "Asumin" instead of "Shiramori" in his mind.

The inside of the classroom was slightly abuzz.

"...Takaraiii!" Wakkuu called him in a low voice.

Sousei snapped back to reality and turned back to face Asumi.

He immediately saluted wholeheartedly. "Yooo...!"

†

"By the way, Sousei, have you ever been to Satanuki Shrine before?" Asumi asked Sousei. They were enjoying their lunch break in the corridor together again today.

"Satanuki Shrine? Is that the one that's pretty close to school...?"

"Yeah, that one."

Asumi told Sousei various things about it. Apparently, there was an old saying that if you tell someone about your feelings at Satanuki Shrine, you'll fall deeply in love with each other.

"I had seriously considered having you meet me at Satanuki Shrine so I could confess to you. But it would have been super embarrassing if you had known about that saying as well..."

According to Asumi, there were also several date spots within the city that couples shouldn't go to since they were said to trigger breakups.

The spots included the Second Municipal Pool, the exercise park in Tsukasachou, and Kinema-Za Hall, the movie theater in Kawaramachi.

"The exercise park is used for things like track meets and baseball games, so we should probably be careful about that one," Asumi said with a serious face. "I've never been to the Kinema-Za Hall movie theater before, but I'm pretty sure it's an old place. We'd have to avoid the Second Municipal Pool when we

go swimming."

"I see. Yeah, we should..." Sousei agreed. Then he immediately felt like he was going to burst into flames.

We're going to the p-p-p-p-p-pool...?! The t-two of us at the pool?! At the pool...?! N-no way— Sousei had to put quite a lot of effort into calming his thoughts.

...She didn't say that we're going anytime soon. She said, "When we go." Yeah. We might possibly go. There's a possibility of that. If that happens, then we'd avoid that pool—that's what she means. Because there are infinite possibilities... It's just a possibility, so...

"You wanna go somewhere together sometime?" Asumi asked without any hesitation.

"Yeah..." Sousei nodded on reflex. Then he was shocked at himself for doing so.

Whaaaaat?

"Yay!" Asumi jumped in the air, surprising Sousei even more.

Do people really jump when they're happy...?

"Where should we go?" Asumi suddenly huddled in close to Sousei. "Is this weekend okay?"

"This wee—uh, the weekend..."

"Saturday? Sunday?"

"Sat... Ummm...Sun, ahh..."

"Where do you wanna go?"

"Ah...yeah...ummm..."

Sousei almost bent backward. But there was no way he'd want to distance himself from Asumi. He suppressed the urge.

...She smells nice.

Sousei didn't know what the scent was coming from.

"Ah— Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." Asumi covered her face with her hands. "I'm soooo excited! Oh my god. What should I—? Wow. Just seriously, oh my god..."

†

I'm the one who doesn't know what to do.

Sousei was holed up in a toilet stall after school.

My stomach hurts...

He rubbed his belly. His pants weren't down. And, of course, neither was his underwear.

My stomach... I have work straightaway when I get home... But I have to go home... Home... Work... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, I don't wanna, don't wanna, don't wanna, don't wanna! Just thinking about it makes my stomach...

Sousei took his phone out of his pocket. He sighed.

Maybe...I could ask Sis for permission to go out this Sunday...

Sousei squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

No! Not ask for permission; I have to actually get it! I made a promise. We're supposed to meet at Kawaramachi on Sunday. Although, I guess there is a small possibility that I feel like I was pressured into it...

Sousei's eyes widened. He went on his phone and launched the app that allowed him to call his sister. Just then, his phone rang and vibrated.

"Ah..."

Sousei almost dropped his phone. He somehow managed to avoid dropping his phone and quickly answered it.

"He-hello ...?"

"Are you still at school?" Sometimes his sister could seem like she was in a bad mood but actually be in good one, and vice versa. At the moment, her tone sounded cranky.

"...Yes. Well, uh... My stomach hurts a little..."

```
"You mean you're not feeling well?"
  "Ah, no, it's not a big deal..."
 Sousei stood up from the toilet seat and left the stall.
  "I've left. By which I mean I'm about to leave now. I'm completely fine..."
  "Just be honest and say if you're not feeling well."
 ...Yet if I said that, she'd get angry and say that I'm not taking proper care of
myself...
  "I won't get angry at you, even if you're not being careful about taking proper
care of yourself."
  "Uhh..."
  "What?"
  "Nothing..."
 ...Sometimes I wonder if my sister can read my mind. It's scary sometimes...
  "By the way, I'm not reading your mind. I just know how you think since
you're my younger brother."
  "...Damn, seriously?"
  "'Damn, seriously'?"
  "I'm sorry. I'll be careful with my phrasing..."
 Sousei used his shoulder to hold his phone to his ear while he washed his
hands. He left the restroom.
 "There's a job, right? I'll come home right away."
  "If you know, then there's nothing for me to say."
  "In that case, I'll talk to you later."
  "It doesn't make sense, though. If you knew, then why did you make me
prompt you?
 His sister hung up the phone before Sousei could give an excuse.
  "...She's so sarcastic."
```

By murmuring the best insults he could muster under his breath, Sousei somehow managed to calm himself down. After he left the restroom, he headed to the classroom to get his bag. The school was quiet after hours, and the corridors were pretty much empty.

But no doubt she's still here...

Sousei's prediction was correct. When he entered the classroom, there was a single student sitting in the back seat by the window.

Could it be that Hitsujimoto...stays in the classroom by herself...perhaps?

As usual, Kuchina sat facing the window, her chin propped up on her hand.

Sousei intentionally tried to make his footsteps louder as he went to take his bag from where it was hanging on his desk, but she didn't react.

"Miss Hitsujimoto." Sousei called her name. Finally, Kuchina moved.

Her body only stirred slightly, but it was a reaction. She had probably heard Sousei's voice.

"You took the subway the other day, right? From Tamamachi Station," Sousei continued.

Kuchina didn't move even an inch.

...Is she...ignoring me?

Sousei temporarily put the bag he was holding on top of his desk.

But actually...what's the point in my asking her about this...?

Kuchina took her chin off her hand and softly exhaled. For a moment, Sousei thought she'd look in his direction, but she didn't. Kuchina stood up and picked up her bag. If she had just hurried out of the classroom, Sousei may have given up. But she shot him a glare.

The look in her eyes was like she was looking down on someone she despised from the bottom of her heart, glaring with all the contempt she could muster, trying to deny their very existence. Sousei wasn't just frightened; he was hurt.

...Is there nothing you don't look at with that gaze? It's like you're not human or something...

"Why?" Kuchina's voice was difficult to hear. Her voice was pretty low for a girl in the first place. Perhaps she didn't know how to vocalize properly for others to hear. It was as if her breath struggled to form words and wasn't like a human voice at all.

"Why would you ask me about that?" she asked.

"...Ah." Sousei was unconsciously hiding his right hand behind his back. His left hand was feeling around his thigh. If he had been hiding some kind of weapon somewhere on him, he probably would've been grasping it right about now.

Tousuke Mochizuke the Crusher, who had demon hands, had killed Sousei about ten times. Even Mochizuke hadn't made Sousei feel this intimidated.

"...Well...I thought...I saw you. Just by coincidence..."

"If you saw me..." She didn't blink. Just like a snake. "Doesn't that mean I was there?"

"...I guess so. Yeah..."

"Good-bye." Kuchina dropped her head and walked away. She went to leave the classroom.

"G-good-bye," Sousei said in a very faint voice.

Kuchina stopped and turned around. It was the last thing Sousei had expected.

Hu-uh...?

Sousei was taken by surprise and became disoriented. Kuchina wasn't glaring at him. Her gaze wasn't pleasant, but she looked a little dazed and about as disoriented as Sousei. Sousei unintentionally ended up making eye contact with her.

What...do we do now? It looks like she's also confused about what to do...

Finally, Kuchina blinked. Not just once, but twice in a row.

Then she nodded. Sousei also nodded on reflex. Kuchina turned on her heel and left the classroom at a half run.

"... Whaaaaaat was that all about ...?" Sousei let out an enormous sigh.

He didn't want to end up following her out, even by accident, so he deliberately just stayed there motionless for a while. When he left the school, Kuchina was walking ahead of him.

Most of us do go the same way up until the station...

Sousei walked to the nearest station, Tsukasachou Station, with feigned ignorance. He went through the ticket gate and down to the platform. When he got there, Kuchina was standing and waiting for the train a little farther down.

The same train—and in the same direction...

The train came, and Sousei got on. When he changed train lines at Shizukamachi Station, he unconsciously looked around for Kuchina.

...Hitsujimoto is here as well.

They were in different cars, but Kuchina was on the same train.

It can't be...

Sousei took the train five stops from Shizukamachi and got off at Sharinchou Station.

It certainly was.

Sousei left the station and was waiting at the first set of traffic lights just outside. He looked back toward the station out of curiosity, just as Kuchina was coming out the exit.

I wonder if she'll...come this way...

Kuchina walked in the opposite direction. Sousei wasn't certain whether she had noticed him since she didn't look in his direction. The traffic light turned green, but Sousei just looked at it.

"...Miss Hitsujimoto lives near me." He let out a breath and then crossed the road at the crosswalk.

"We've been going to the same school since we started high school, and I had no idea..."

<u>Ø8</u>

Deadline

The target, Ikuo Ondou, still hadn't come out of the building where he worked. Just in case, Sousei concealed himself in an alleyway from which he could just barely see the main entrance of the building in question.

He checked the time on his phone.

9:03 PM...

Ondou had used some kind of method—probably a *cheat*—to try to kill Sousei. Or rather, he *had* killed Sousei by making him collide with a truck, and then Sousei had come back to life. But there was no dead body in that neighborhood. There's no way that Ondou wasn't aware of that fact. The boy who had been run over by the truck had gotten up and left the area. Ondou might have even figured out that a creepy incident had occurred, like something from a ghost story.

"How are things going, Sousei?" his sister asked through his earpiece.

"Nothing yet."

"I see. He's late, huh?"

Sousei kept a close eye on the building's main entrance. Ondou just wasn't showing up.

"Sis?"

"What's up?

"Um... Well, it's about this weekend."

"What about the weekend?"

"Well, how should I put this...? I have plans."

"What kind of plans?"

"Well, uh...sh-shopping. I have to...go shopping. There's something I really need to buy."

"What are you talking about? You can just buy it online, can't you?"

"Ah, but for some things, it's hard to pick unless you see it in person..."

"Is it something that's more important than work?"

"...No, it's not."

"Well then, you can't do it."

"...I understand." Sousei felt like sighing, but he frantically stifled his sigh.

If I talk back now, it'd just be like adding fuel to a fire. If I try once more later... it'll be the same, won't it? Yeah, it'd probably end up the same. But no, there's still time until Sunday. There could be some chance...maybe? I wonder... If I can get this job finished— That's it! That's it. That's what I'll do. I should finish off Ondou by Sunday. That's the only way...

Sousei racked his brain while keeping his gaze fixed intently on the building's main entrance.

Ondou said something strange to me: Utsurokana wa ga yokitarazu yo no oto kieyu. I'm guessing that it'd be split up into three lines, like: Utsurokana

Wa ga yokitarazu

Yo no oto kieyu.

It did something weird to me, at any rate. Do those words hold some kind of power themselves? The number of syllables in each line would be five-seven-seven. Not five-seven-five. So it isn't the correct number of syllables to be a haiku or anything like that. Perhaps it's a haiku with extra syllables. Nothing will necessarily happen if I say it out loud to myself. So does that mean it has no effect unless Ondou says it? Whomever Ondou says that phrase to kills themselves—is that what his *cheat* is?

Sousei quickly checked his phone. It was 9:15 PM.

...Ondou tried to make me kill myself. But I didn't die. Ondou knows that. He also knows that he's being targeted. And who's targeting him—and that I'm still alive. Well, even if there's no evidence of that, he should be suspecting that I might not be dead. If that's the case, then he'd naturally be on guard, but he's going to work as usual, and is doing overtime...

Someone came out of the building's main entrance.

Black-rimmed glasses. Hiking jacket. Chinos. And a backpack.

"Sis, he's come out."

"How's he acting?"

"Same as usual."

Ondou headed to Tamamachi Station. He wasn't even restlessly looking around. Sousei started tailing him.

Ondou had seen his face before, so Sousei wasn't wearing his fake glasses this time, and he was wearing a colored wig to make his hair seem lighter. Sousei kept glancing at the elevator as he went down the stairs.

Hitsujimoto...isn't here, I quess.

Kuchina wasn't on the platform, either. It seemed that Ondou hadn't noticed Sousei. There was also no sign that he was paying attention to his surroundings. He was calmly waiting for the train.

"...What a brazen guy."

"I've done some research," his sister said.

"What about?"

"Ondou has always lived with his parents. His address, schools, and workplace are all clear. So we can roughly estimate the range of his movements."

"...By any chance, has there been a peculiarly large number of suicides among the people around him?"

"Yes. There was a statistically significant deviation. A more than adequate deviation. And it increases noticeably from around the time he turned fourteen."

"Fourteen. So around the second or third year of junior high—"

"By my estimate, he has killed two hundred people or more in the last twenty years or so."

"...Two hundred?"

"That's more than the number of lives you have at the moment, isn't it, Sousei?" His sister laughed a little. "However, no matter how many people he's killed up until now, your target only has one life. There's no point in you being scared, correct?"

"Yes, Sis," Sousei answered mechanically. He wasn't sure whether his sister was satisfied, but she sniffed lightly.

The train came. Ondou got on, followed by Sousei. Ondou was holding onto one of the hanging straps and looking at his phone. He seemed like he normally did.

The train stopped at Shizukamachi Station, and about half of the passengers got off. Shizukamachi was a transfer station, so a lot of people were getting on and off. Among the people who got on was a schoolgirl Sousei recognized. He almost let out a strange sound. The girl passed close by Ondou and stopped around the end of the train. She didn't hold on to a strap. She wasn't looking at anything in particular. She also hadn't taken her phone out. Sousei had never once seen her take those gloves off. She was wearing the same tights as usual. And she was wearing a scarf again today.

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...Hitsujimoto.
"Sousei?" his sister asked.
"...Yes?"
"Has something unusual happened?"
"No?"
"Really?"
"What would I possibly gain from lying to you, Sis...?"
"I wonder."
```

The train started off again.

"I want to ask you the same question," his sister said. "Is there anything you would gain from lying to me?"

"...Nothing, of course."

Sousei looked alternatingly at Ondou and Kuchina out of the corner of his eye.

But why—why am I not telling Sis about Hitsujimoto...?

His eyes stopped on Kuchina's school uniform.

...Because she's a classmate, maybe? I wanted to be normal as a high school student, at least...

The train slowed down, preparing to stop. The apartment where Ondou lived with his parents was still six stops away. And yet, Ondou was getting into motion before the train stopped.

"Sis, it seems the target is going to get off."

"Isn't it too early for his stop?"

"Yes, that's right. But..."

The train stopped at Tsutsumichou Station. Ondou ended up getting off the train, just as Sousei had thought. Kuchina also got off, but from a different door.

...Her doing that definitely means that she's following Ondou, doesn't it...?

Sousei waited a little and got off just before the doors closed.

He couldn't see Kuchina anywhere. Ondou was there, going up the stairs. Sousei followed him while looking around for Kuchina.

There were a lot of people getting on and off trains at this station, too. Tsutsumichou had shopping facilities as well as offices. There were also large apartment buildings there. It was crowded inside the station, so tailing people was easy. Sousei wondered what had happened to Kuchina. She had gotten off the train, so she should be around somewhere, but Sousei couldn't spot her.

The target is a higher priority than Hitsujimoto. That's obvious, but...

After he left the station, Ondou walked toward an area crowded with large

buildings. He entered one of them with no hesitation.

"...Sis?"

"What's happening with the target?"

"It looks like he's not going home."

Sousei stepped inside the building. Ondou was saying something to the receptionist at the front desk. It wasn't particularly bright, but it was a large lobby. There were some sofas. And large columns. Plenty of places to hide here.

"He's entered a hotel. The Grand City Hotel in front of Tsutsumichou Station. My guess is he's getting a room for the night."

"He changed his movements," his sister responded.

"He looked confident, but he's actually being quite cautious, isn't he?"

Ondou took a key from the receptionist and headed to the elevator.

"...I think I know which floor he's staying on, but you can't take the elevator up to the guest floors without a key card, right? Maybe I could take the stairs up..."

"You're surely not planning to do something?"

I want this to be finished by Sunday.

Sousei swallowed hard.

"...Would it be unreasonable? It wouldn't be impossible to find his room, right? Wouldn't you be able to manage it somehow, Sis?"

"It's a highly visible location, and there are security cameras everywhere. If we're doing this in a place like a hotel, we'd need to prepare very carefully to avoid having it traced back to us."

"...That's true."

"Stop messing around. I shouldn't have to spell it out. This isn't amateur hour."

"I'm sorry..."

Ondou had already gotten into the elevator. It stopped on the twelfth floor.

Ondou had gotten on alone, so that meant he was staying in a room on the twelfth floor.

"...I guess I can't do it," Sousei muttered. Sensing his sister's anger through his earpiece, he quickly added, "I just thought I'd mention it. Sorry..."

Ø9

Even If I Let It Slip Out

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

"...Craaaaaaaaaaaaaaap...!"

Sousei was doing bending and stretching exercises in his room while gripping his phone in his hand. He was doing squats. You could say that this was a habit of his. He regularly kept on top of completing the training he needed to do for work, of course. But he also moved his body at home whenever he had a spare moment. Doing so was deeply ingrained in him.

"It makes me sick! I'm not! Normal! The way! I am! But I! Wanted to! Be normal! Craaaaaaaaap...!"

His phone showed that the time was 7:58 AM.

"What do I do?!"

It was Sunday.

"What should I do?!"

It soon became 7:59 AM.

"Our meeting time is nine forty-five AM, in front of the Kawaramachi train station. But now that I think of it, why is it a quarter to the hour?! It's such a weird time, but anyway, Shira—I mean Asumi—shouldn't have left the house yet! There's no way she'd leave an hour and forty-five minutes early! It's unthinkable! No matter how early she's going to leave the house, it's still about an hour too early, right...?!"

It was eight AM.

Sousei put his phone on the floor.

"...Oh my god!"

He immediately started doing push-ups.

"This is bad! This is really bad! I'm running out of time! If I keep dragging my feet like this, Shi—Asumi—will ending up leaving her house to meet me! Crap! Why?! Why did I procrastinate until now...?! Even though I knew! Right! That's right! I knew! I always have work on days I don't have school! It's always been this way! And besides, I'm in the middle of an assignment right now! There's no way I can take a day off! I knew that already! Shit, shit, shit...!"

His phone started ringing.

"...Huuuuh..."

Sousei stopped doing push-ups. He picked up his phone and sat on his knees on the floor.

"...Fuuuuuu—! It's gotta be Sis! But I can't just ignore it...!"

Sousei frantically calmed his breathing down, cleared his throat, then answered the phone.

"Hello, Sis. It's Sousei. I know. It's work, isn't it? Work. It's a really lucky day today, and a perfect day for work. I've prepared everything and am about to leave the house."

"...I see. If you're aware, then it's all good."

"Yes, everything's fine. I'm hanging up now. Bye."

As soon as he hung up, Sousei hit his phone to his forehead and screamed.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggh!! Work can eat shit...!"

Sousei completely undressed as he left the room and had a shower. It was just for a moment to rinse the sweat off.

He put his clothes on and dried his hair with a hair dryer in the living room while he wolfed down an energy bar, apple, and some milk.

When he looked at his phone, it was ten past eight. The next second, it was eleven past eight.

"Shiramori—Asumi—might already be starting to get ready to go out. She might be in the middle of getting ready. She's probably in the middle of getting ready. It's my fault for putting it off until now. Why was I procrastinating? I'm an idiot! I'm trash! Scum! I'm human trash, the scummiest of all scum! I can't delay any longer, can I...?!"

Sousei opened the chat screen.

His fingers moved by themselves.

I'm so sorry.

It turns out I can't go today because an emergency came up.

I can't apologize enough.

I'm truly sorry.

"...Wh—?! Did I just type this...?! This...was typed by me? Huh? I don't get it... Ehhhhhh? Did I...lose consciousness? But I mean...is this...okay...? Like this? This message... But anyway, I have to...send something soon!"

Sousei sent the message. Straightaway, he got a call from Asumi.

"You gotta be kidding...?!" Sousei squirmed. "...Buuut I can't exactly just...not answer it... Ah!"

Sousei tapped the button to answer the call, and Asumi immediately started talking really quickly without pause.

"Sousei?! Are you all right?! You're not hurt, are you?! Are you okay?! Huh?! Are you at the hospital now or something?! Sousei?!"

"...Ah, no, that is, well... I-I'm okay. Well, I mean, I'm not in the hospital or anything..."

"You're all right?!"

"W-well, yeah...I am. You could say that I'm doing all right...I guess."

"...That's such a relief." Asumi let out a huge sigh. "I was so shocked and

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worried. Sorry for calling you like that."
  "N-no, it's fine. Th-the one who should apologize...is me..."
  "But you said there was an emergency."
  "Huh?"
  "You said there was an emergency... What happened? Ah, is it all right for me
to ask?"
  "Ask..." Without realizing it, Sousei started doing squats. "...Oh, yeah... O-o-of
course. A-actually, my...un...cle?"
  "Your uncle?"
  "Yeah...my uncle."
  "Did something happen with your uncle?"
  "...D-di-di..."
  "He died?"
  "...He di...ed?"
  "Huh. When?"
  "Y-yesterday? No, well, basically today... Just about today..."
  "So he only just died?"
  "...Yeah."
 "So when you say 'uncle,' do you mean your dad's brother or something?"
  "...Yeah. Because he's my uncle. He's not just some man or anything..."
  "My uncle always takes such good care of me."
  "...Is—is that so?"
  "He's taken me to various places since I was little. And he gets me presents
every year on my birthday, even now."
  "...That—"
  "If my uncle died, I—" Asumi sounded like she was going to cry.
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"...Sorry. I shouldn't talk about myself at a time like this."
  "Th-that's okay..."
  "So you'd be going to the wake and funeral and things like that?"
  "...That's right. So I have to ... go ... to those now ... "
  "I see. Well, it can't be helped, then. That's all you can do."
  "...I'm really sorry."
  "It's not something you have to apologize for."
  "...I know, but...s-sorry..."
  "Have a nice day... Oh, it's weird to say that, isn't it?"
  "...I-I'll be going now.
  "See you later, then."
  "...Yeah."
 "See you at school."
 "...Yeah."
 "It's hard to hang up, isn't it? Sorry, I'll hang up," Shiramori said, ending the
call.
 Sousei was immediately nearly in tears.
 "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaghhhhhhhhh...!" Half crying, Sousei sped up his squats.
"I've! I've! I've! I've, I've, I've! I've done! I've done something really
baaaaaaaaaaad...!"
 He did squats until he ran out of breath, completely drenching himself in
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sweat.

"I'll have to have another shower! Crap! Craaaaaap...!"

He was heading to the bathroom when his phone rang. It was his sister. Sousei answered it. He had no choice.

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"...Hello?"
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[&]quot;You're not still at home, are you?"

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"I'm already leaviiiing."
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Sousei held his phone high above his head. He wanted to slam it on the floor. He wanted to smash it. He wanted to destroy his phone.

"Shi—! Shiiiiiii—! This doesn't make any sense! I'm taking my frustration out on the wrong thing! There's no point in taking it out on an object! I shouldn't wreck my phone. There's no point to it! Is there...?!"

Sousei gritted his teeth. He placed his phone down gently on the table.

[&]quot;Why are you talking like that?"

[&]quot;Sorry. I'm leaving now."

[&]quot;Be careful." His sister hung up.

[&]quot;Damn my sister..."

10

Bad Accident

I know.

Sousei was watching the entrance to the Grand City Hotel in front of Tsutsumichou Station. The roads in that area were lined with both trees and guardrails. There were telephone poles, as well as a lot of signboards that had been placed on the sidewalk. There were also guardrails and supports that people could kind of sit on. As long as he didn't stand there completely motionless, the people passing by wouldn't get suspicious of him. He could do surveillance all he wanted.

There's no point in resenting Sis. It's not like everything is her fault. No, that's not it. Even I know that much...

Ikuo Ondou came out of the hotel a little after half past one in the afternoon.

"Hey, Sis," Sousei said.

"Yeah?"

"He came out."

"Roger. Follow him."

"Understood."

Sousei started following Ondou. It was a weekend afternoon, and they were by a station, so there were a lot of people walking around. Ondou was empty-handed. He didn't have his backpack today, so he probably only had things like his wallet and phone on him. Where was he going?

...He's going to Starbucks?

Ondou went into the café. He was buying coffee or something but wasn't drinking it there. He got it to go. He left shortly after. Sousei's target was strolling around the city in the early afternoon with a coffee in his hand.

I want to murder that guy...

Sousei was grinding his teeth without realizing it.

I don't usually feel like this. But my targets are usually assholes or murderers, so they're not the sort of people I'd sympathize with. I guess I think it's a good thing for them to die, or maybe that it's better for the world and people in general if they die. But if I get too emotionally invested, that can end badly...

He turned his head left and right and gently raised and lowered his shoulders.

"Sis. The target bought a coffee and is taking a walk."

"He might be searching for his next victim."

"What if he—"

"Tries to kill someone?"

"Yes. Should we prevent that?"

"That's not our job."

"Roger."

Ondou went into a park. It wasn't a children's park with play equipment, but rather a multipurpose park with a pond and fountain.

This isn't for justice. And of course it's not a personal grudge. This is a job.

Sousei also entered the park, acting like someone who had just dropped by aimlessly. Ondou sat on one of the many benches that were in the space around the fountain. Perhaps he was basking in the sun while drinking his coffee. He wasn't looking at his phone.

Surely, he hasn't really come here to drink coffee and get some sunlight—Sousei caught his breath. Sitting on a different bench to Ondou, there was a girl Sousei recognized. Or rather, one that he knew. Naturally, she wasn't wearing her uniform since it was Sunday. She was wearing dark clothing and a scarf. She had barely any skin exposed. She was wearing gloves, and her scarf covered her

mouth, so only part of her face was showing.

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"Sousei?" his sister said harshly.

"It's nothing."

"Really?"

"Really."
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Sousei didn't go into the area around the fountain, but instead pretended to be playing with his phone next to a bush nearby.

...Hitsujimoto. Coming all this way... Isn't that strange? There's no way it can all be a coincidence. She has to be doing surveillance on Ondou. But what for...?

He had probably only taken his eyes off Ondou for a few seconds. His gaze had been on Kuchina rather than Ondou. During those few seconds, Ondou had gotten up and moved away from the bench. He had left his coffee behind, but he was not on the bench anymore.

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"Hey, Sis?"

"What's up?"
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Sousei couldn't pull the wool over her eyes this time. He breathed in and out again.

"The target is coming this way," he said.

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"...What was that?"
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Ondou was walking in his direction. He probably should have said "coming straight to me" rather than "coming this way."

"You were spotted? You've screwed up, haven't you, Sousei?"

"What should I do?"

"In this kind of situation, wait and see what he does first."

"...I might get killed again, though."

"We'll worry about that when it happens. You're not a kid anymore. Don't make me clean up after your messes. Figure it out."

Sousei didn't answer. Ondou had already come close to him. He stopped right

in front of Sousei. Behind his black-rimmed glasses, Ondou's pupils were staring fixedly at Sousei like glass beads. Was he surprised? Was he smiling? Did he find this amusing?

"How odd." Ondou leaned his head to the right and nodded. "This is actually quite peculiar."

"Utsurokana waga yo kitarazu yo no oto kie yu." Sousei tried saying the short poem-like phrase that Ondou had said to him.

As expected, nothing happened. Ondou didn't particularly react, either.

...He's going to strike.

Sousei braced himself. If he at least managed to mentally prepare himself, he'd be able to avoid being thrown into confusion.

"You're quite peculiar yourself, but"—Ondou shrugged as if wondering if that were the case. Or perhaps to brag that it was the case—"I can see them."

"What?" Sousei asked.

"That—tsk, tsk"—Ondou clicked his tongue—"is a secret."

Ondou beckoned Sousei to come closer. Sousei could refuse. However, it seemed that Ondou was indicating that Sousei should come closer if he wanted to know his secret. Sousei took a step forward. Ondou leaned in as well.

I took the bait.

Sousei's thoughts about screwing up vanished as soon as Ondou whispered, "Murakumo wo hiiro ni somuru homura no te."

"...Haaah..."

Sousei could hear himself breathing in and out. The target. Ondou. Ikuo Ondou didn't matter.

There were more important things. One by one, Sousei looked at the area around the fountain, the paved road surface, bushes, outdoor light fixtures, clusters of trees, and grass.

Oh no. This is bad, isn't it? Oh no. This isn't good. This is bad. Really bad.

Sousei broke into a run. He left the park and saw the road. There were no cars

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passing by.
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"What the hell...! At a time like this...?!"

"Sousei?! What's the situation?!"

Sousei ran. A tall building entered his vision. What kind of building was it? Sousei didn't know, but it didn't matter. It was plenty tall enough. That was the most important thing.

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"This is it!"

"What's it, Sousei?!"

"This is...!"
```

The building's fire escape was on the outside of the building. They were external stairs. Sousei ran up them. He looked down every now and then, checking the height.

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"Not quite! Not yet!"

"Sousei...!"

"A little farther...!"
```

Sousei arrived at the top of the fire escape. There was an iron fence. It could be opened and closed. But it was locked. Sousei clawed his way over the iron fence without any difficulty. He jumped onto the roof and soon made his way over to the edge. He looked down from there. It would all be for nothing if this building had a fall prevention fence or something. There didn't seem to be anything like that from the looks of it.

Ondou was on the road below him. He was looking up at Sousei. It looked like he was laughing.

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"...All right, then!"
```

Sousei prepared to jump from the roof. He should land headfirst rather than feetfirst. That was essential in high diving. There was no hesitation.

If he hadn't abruptly lost the strength in his body and collapsed, he would have been jumping. Instead of jumping, he had sunk to his knees on the roof.

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"...Huh?"
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"Sousei? Did you die again?"
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"No..." Sousei looked over the edge of the rooftop. Ondou had collapsed on the road below. "Wha...?"

What had happened? There was someone near Ondou. Or it might be more accurate to say that someone *had* been near him. That person was likely next to Ondou just a moment before. Now she was walking away.

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"Hitsujimoto."
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"...Sousei? What did you say? 'Hitsujimoto'...? What's that?"

Passersby were starting to gather around Ondou. One of them was trying to assist him. Screaming voices rang out. Several men and women were yelling things like "Ambulance!" and "Police!" Kuchina was no longer in the vicinity. She might still have been in the general area, but Sousei couldn't see her.

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"Sis." Sousei pulled his face back from the ledge. "...He seems to be dead."
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"What?"
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"I haven't confirmed it, but probably."

"Did you do it, Sousei?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

Sousei left the rooftop. He climbed over the iron fence and opened the door instead of going down the fire escape. It opened into a hallway lined with doors. There was an elevator at the other end. It seemed this building was a rental apartment building.

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"So whose work was this?"
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Sousei walked briskly to the end of hallway and pushed the button for the elevator.

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"I'll report the details—"
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The elevator door finally opened and Sousei got in.

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"—later."
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"All right. For now, withdraw as soon as possible."

"Understood."

Sousei left the building and got on the subway.

...She's not here, is she?

He tried to look for Kuchina but couldn't spot her.

He got off the train at Sharinchou Station and watched the other people getting off from the platform.

As he expected, Kuchina wasn't there.

Just to make sure, Sousei waited for the next train to come as well.

It turned out that she didn't get off that one, either.

What am I doing...?

Sousei went into the station restroom and holed himself up in one of the stalls.

...Hitsujimoto is an assassin, too. That has to be it. She was also targeting Ondou. She was my business rival in a way. My target was poached... Was it a poaching? That might not be quite accurate... But I was played for a fool, in any case. Like a decoy, or a stepping stone...

Sousei left the stall and washed his hands. He noticed that he was washing his hands meticulously out of habit. It reminded him of when Yukisada Hayashi pointed out that he washed his hands like a doctor.

Ondou was only cautious about me. Hitsujimoto wasn't even on his radar. What was Ondou's cheat...? How did Hitsujimoto take him out? In broad daylight and in that kind of location...?

Even when he left the restroom, Sousei's mind was still filled with thoughts of Kuchina.

To think that Hitsujimoto from class is in the same line of work... An assassin like me...

Kuchina had been wearing black clothes. It wasn't rare to see people wearing dark clothes. Sousei kept an eye on the ticket gates as he roamed around inside

the station. Kuchina didn't appear at all.

"Sousei?"

The blood rushed to Sousei's head as soon as he heard his sister's voice.

"Yes. I'm nearly home," he answered rapidly. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he removed his earpiece and shoved it in his pocket.

Sousei left the station. The first traffic light he got to was red. It irritated him.

I get annoyed too easily—

"Sousei!"

"—Ah!" Sousei hurriedly spun around in complete shock.

Asumi was running up to him, waving. She was wearing a skirt that was much shorter than her school uniform skirt and some slightly high-heeled boots. Perhaps those were making her already long legs appear even longer. Asumi had her hair braided. She never had her hair like that at school, so she looked like a different person. She was wearing a lot of makeup and red lipstick, but it was unmistakably her. This was none other than Asumi Shiramori.

But...but why? Huh? What's she doing here? What the...? Eh? Huh? Why, why, why, why, why? Huuuuh? H-h-how come...?

"Sousei," Asumi said, a little out of breath. She had run to catch up with him. She was smiling, but her smile disappeared in a flash.

"Ah..." Asumi covered her mouth with her hands. She looked down. "Sorry."

...What for? Why is she apologizing? Wh-why...?

Sousei stood there stunned.

"...Are you on your way home from the funeral now?" Asumi asked, looking up at him questioningly.

A sound escaped Sousei's mouth, kind of like an "Ah" or a "Huh," but not quite fully formed.

...Ah, that's right. The funeral and wake. For my uncle. That's what it was. Or, actually, that's the excuse I went with— "Y-yeah." Sousei nodded, then realized that his eyes were open really wide.

His eyes were strained unnaturally wide. He forcibly lowered his eyelids, trying to get them as close as possible to normal.

"...I see." Asumi looked away. For just a moment, her mouth twitched into a pout. "Well, you're not wearing your uniform or clothes for a funeral, so I was kind of confused."

"...I ch...anged clothes...yeah. Lots of stuff happened, so..."

"Hmmm..." Asumi glanced at Sousei, looked away, touched her face, and fidgeted. She seemed a bit restless.

Or rather...she's suspicious.

Sousei tried to swallow. The inside of his mouth was so dry that it was utterly impossible.

...But...but why? Why is she here? What for? I told her ahead of time that I couldn't go on our date anymore. She understood. And this wasn't even our meeting place to begin with. And it's not the right time. So why? What is happening...?

Sousei backed away. Asumi looked startled in that moment.

The light turned green.

"S-s-sorry, uuh, umm, errr, the luck... It's bad luck, so..." Sousei said wildly. Before he realized it, he had bolted off. He bounded across the crosswalk in one breath and continued running without looking back.

11

I Don't Need Sadness Anymore

Turns out...

Sousei was busy doing squats in his room.

...I never heard from Asumi after that...

The drapes in his room were shut tight. It was already bright outside. It was Monday morning.

I just... I thought that she'd say something... I had mentally prepared myself—I guess I had been expecting it, even. I wouldn't know how to answer if she questioned or accused me, and that'd be scary, but...it would have been much better than her not talking to me at all...

Sousei was naked from the waist up, and there was a puddle forming beneath him. It was all his own sweat. He had already been doing squats for several hours now. His swollen thighs, calves, and butt and the lake of sweat were proof of that.

...It doesn't matter what it is, I just want her to say something. Really, anything would be fine. I just want her to contact me. Because...well, I can't contact her first, you know? Right. There's no way I could do that. I can't. It's impossible. It's definitely impossible. But since it's morning and I still haven't heard from her, that means...

Sousei stopped squatting and violently shook his head, spraying buckets of sweat around.

"...Ah, it's no use! It's over, isn't it? I—I don't know what's over or how, but anyway, it's definitely over...!"

Sousei couldn't stand anymore and sat down where he was. He ended up sitting in his pool of sweat. It felt gross.

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"...Shit... Shiiit... Shiiiiiiiiiit..."
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He crawled out of the room, got a bucket and rag, and started cleaning the floor.

"Wh-what do I do...? What should I do...? I can't face Shiramori... Seeing her would be too hard... I don't want to go to school... Aaaaaaah, why...?? School was... School was the one place I wanted to be normal. At least while I'm going to high school... Have a peaceful, uneventful school life as a normal high school student... That's why I...I worked so hard... I was trying to be so careful..."

When he finished cleaning the floor, Sousei put all his laundry in the washing machine. While that was on, he took a shower and then had a breakfast consisting of things like energy bars, fruit, and milk fortified with protein. He got dressed.

Sousei lived by himself in a house in Sharinchou. His older sister hardly ever came by. The owner of the house was their father. He owned a lot of other properties besides this one. Sousei checked his phone.

"Still no messages, huh...?"

How many times had he opened his texts between leaving the house and getting to school? He had lost count. He ran into Yukisada Hayashi at the shoe lockers.

"Morning, Sousei," he said with a refreshing smile.

Sousei felt awkward and cast his eyes down. "...Morning."

"Huh? You don't seem so good."

"R-really? I don't...?"

"Are you not feeling well?" Yukisada suddenly got closer and tried to look at Sousei's face.

"...I-I'm all right." Sousei unconsciously took stepped back and looked away. "I might be a bit...sleep-deprived? That's about all that comes to mind..."

"I see. You should take it easy today."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Yukisada smiled and then left.

...Ah, he's going by himself...? But we're in the same class. We're not going there together...?

For a while, Sousei couldn't move away from the shoe lockers. He also couldn't just stand there, so he meaninglessly kept putting his indoor and outdoor shoes in the locker and taking them out again.

...I wonder if I ticked off Yukisada... Or maybe he decided to leave me alone because I was acting strange, or something like that... Either way, I should apologize to him later... Probably. But there's someone else I need to apologize to even more...

With a start, Sousei hurriedly put on his indoor shoes and rushed to his classroom.

Shiramori gets to school later than me. If I lose my head and dawdle, we'll accidentally end up bumping into each other. That would be awkward...I think? If I have to apologize, the shoe lockers would probably be better than in the classroom—but how do I apologize...?

When he entered the classroom, Wakkuu greeted him with a salute and a "Yooo!"

Sousei would have liked to have said "Yo" back if he could. He had done it before. He should have been able to say it back, but it was too hard for him today.

"...Morning," he said quietly, then quickly walked to his seat.

When he got to his desk, he shot a glance at Kuchina. She was the same as usual, sitting at the back by the window, resting her chin on her hand, and looking out the window.

...I never thought there would be other killers at this school besides me...

Their debriefing the previous night had gone on for quite a long time.

"All right, Sousei?" his sister had asked.

Sousei had put in his earpiece and was sitting in the traditional Japanese way, on his knees, just as his sister had commanded. Sousei had been alone in the room. Even so, whenever he got tired and slouched or let his legs out from under him, his sister somehow immediately caught on and scolded him.

"Ikuo Ondou had been using some method to drive a large number of people to commit suicide—in other words, it's certain he killed them. Immediately after he whispered strange words to you, you also jumped in front of a moving truck, correct? That wasn't your intent. But you unmistakably did it yourself voluntarily. Ondou was a man who could kill people in that way. According to my estimation, he had two hundred victims or more. Our target was a serial killer of a level that is rarely seen—"

Normally, Sousei would have had to kill Ondou and complete the job. However, Ondou had used his *cheat* to make Sousei nearly kill himself not once, but twice.

"Moreover, you were beaten to the target by a business rival."

"...Yes."

"Furthermore, you were only rescued from jumping to your death thanks to her. That's absurd."

"...I'm sorry."

"You should be ashamed, Sousei. Idiot. And on top of that, this rival attends the same high school as you—and is your classmate?"

Sousei hadn't said a single thing to his sister about Asumi since she was unrelated to work, but he had no choice but to confess everything about Kuchina. It was an issue Sousei couldn't just ignore. It was unavoidable.

"Hey, Sousei, we're two people in one. Isn't that right?"

When his sister got too mad, she circled back around and used a gentler tone.

"Who are Soul Harvester, Life Reaper, and Samael the Angel of Death from the Church of Assassins? That's right, those titles all refer to us, Sousei. Samael never loses sight of his prey. Our success rate for completing requests is ninetynine percent. It would have been a perfect one hundred percent if you hadn't messed up, but there's no use grieving over what's already done. Isn't that right?"

Sousei had no interest in the ridiculous aliases, success rates, or the organization they belonged to.

I'm honestly not interested in this job itself. It's not like I'm doing it because I want to. Isn't that obvious? I'm not a freak. I had no choice... I didn't have the luxury to think about what's good or bad or anything... The cause of all of this is our father—

"Hey, Sousei," his sister said almost sweetly. "We'll have to closely investigate that girl, Kuchina Hitsujimoto. You agree, don't you?"

"...Yes, Sis."

"We need to. That girl stole our target from us. Samael's prey was snatched away. And not by someone from our organization. That much is clear. It was a job contracted to the organization, after all. The client placed the request with multiple agencies. That's the most likely explanation. Well, that happens sometimes. Our company's Samael was outdone, and that girl—Kuchina Hitsujimoto—eliminated the target. Know your enemy, know yourself, and you need not fear a hundred battles. Okay? First, we need to know our enemy, Sousei..."

...Investigate Hitsujimoto.

Sousei put his head on his desk. He sighed with his nose and forehead pressed against it.

Well... Yeah, I am curious about Hitsujimoto. That's true. But I guess I'm not super eager about it. Or I have more important things to worry about. Or it isn't the right time. No. No matter how you look at it, it's not the time to focus on Hitsujimoto...

Someone had come into the classroom in the meantime.

"Gooood morning!" It was Asumi's voice.

"Yo." Wakkuu immediately threw out his regular greeting.

"Yo," Asumi repeated without hesitation.

...She seems well, doesn't she?

At least, the impression he got from her voice was no different from usual. Asumi exchanged greetings with several more people after that. She hadn't gotten to her desk yet. She seemed to be chatting with her friends. Occasionally they laughed as well.

...She seems to be enjoying herself like usual, huh?

Sousei lifted his body up a little and spied on Asumi out of the corner of his eye. She was so lively, chatting and giggling merrily with her close friend Hina Shigee—better known as Moena—as well as Wakkuu and several other people.

... I guess it's not the same as usual...

Sousei pressed his nose and forehead back against his desk.

She's completely ignoring me. That's different for sure... It's my fault, isn't it? Yeah, it has to be. It's natural that I'm being ignored. All of it, every little thing, is my fault...

Wakkuu and some other classmates were concerned and came to talk to him in the short time before class started. Sousei said it was nothing every time, but even he didn't find himself very convincing.

"Are you really okay?" Yukisada approached Sousei after first period.

"Aah, yeah..."

Sousei felt like he was on the verge of failing to hold in his tears anymore. He wanted to open up about everything.

...But I can't do that, of course. That'd be bad. My heart is so weak...

"I'm fine, I'm fine. No, really. I'm kind of sleepy. Yeah. I'm just completely sleep-deprived..." Sousei pretended to stifle a yawn, and Yukisada seemed to buy it.

"How about sleeping during class if you're having a rough time?"

"Ah, I can't do that. I'm not good at napping for some reason. No matter how sleepy I am, I can't seem to fall asleep, I guess. Perhaps I'm not good at sleeping

in front of other people..."

"I can sleep with my eyes open."

"Huh? That's amazing!"

"So I can sleep in class without getting busted, just as long as the teacher doesn't call on me."

The conversation with Yukisada gave Sousei some comfort and peace of mind.

Maybe I'll try to doze off. Taking a nap would make things easier, even if it's just for a short time. I kind of feel like I might be able to at the moment...

That had just been his imagination. Once class started, Sousei got hung up on Asumi again, and dozing off was out of the question.

...But it's better not to look. I can't look. I won't. I won't look...

After resisting for as long as possible, Sousei couldn't stand it anymore and nervously directed his gaze toward her. During that fifty-minute class, he looked at her more than a dozen times. Seventeen times, to be exact. But Asumi never met his gaze, not even once. Not even for a second.

...Waaah, she hates me!

Around the time that their morning classes ended, Sousei's spirit was basically a pile of ash.

I probably had this coming after what I did. Being seriously hated like this, waaah!

Sousei grabbed the energy bar and chicken that he had brought for lunch. He got up from his desk. He no longer had the courage to spy on what Asumi was doing. He quickly left the classroom and headed toward the corridor between the buildings. Once the students who had just finished PE had left, Sousei was the only one in the corridor. He couldn't bring himself to eat the chicken and he only managed to eat half the energy bar.

"...I can't go on like this..."

Sousei made up his mind and took his phone out.

He hesitated quite a bit, but he opened his texts and sent Asumi a message

with shaking fingers.

Could we talk?

I'm on the corridor between the buildings.

After sending the message, he noticed that he had written "on the corridor" instead of "in the corridor."

"Aaaaahh! When she sees this, she's going to think I'm messing around..."

After a few seconds, he saw the "read" notification. Sousei gripped his phone tightly and waited for a reply. He waited in the corridor for Asumi's reply until just before the lunch break ended. But a reply never came.

"...I've been left on read..."

12

Attempted Confession

The destructive power of being left on read was staggering. This was the first time in his life that it had happened to Sousei. The way he conceptualized it changed drastically after experiencing it for the first time.

He used to think:

Being left on read means that they've read your message. Isn't that better than being ignored?

Sousei had thought lightly of it before he'd gotten a taste of it for himself. Now his thoughts changed to: Being left on read... It's unbelievably rough... Beyond imagination, even... This is an absolute sense of despair... Being left on read is a weapon that can kill people... I still have a lot of lives left, but...even though the number of lives I have isn't decreasing, it feels like I'm dying every second...

The afternoon classes were hell. In this hell, Sousei turned into a stone statue of Jizo, the guardian deity of children. Sousei just sat like a Jizo statue at his desk in the classroom. No, wait, Jizo statues were never sitting. They're always standing. Sousei was a Sousei-shaped statue sitting in a chair.

After all the day's classes were over, he had a thought. The one thing he wouldn't do was commit the folly of remaining in the classroom, unable to move.

That—just that—would be in bad taste. I don't want to make Yukisada or Wakkuu or anyone worry. It would be bad if they showed me concern right now. I might end up crying. Really, that would be...

So Sousei quickly left the classroom, going straight to the restroom and shutting himself in a stall.

...I'm always going to the restroom after school. I must look like I have serious stomach problems. My stomach doesn't hurt, but my chest does. It's seriously unbelievable how much my chest hurts. Has something happened to my heart for real...?

He sat on the toilet and soon found himself tightly clenching his phone.

Am I...expecting it? For Shiramori to reply? Even now, after all this time... Am I an idiot? I...must be an idiot. The day I'm no longer left on read will probably never come. I don't know, but she probably won't reply. She probably won't. She won't, will she? Of course not. I guess she won't...

Sousei shook his head from side to side.

He shook it to the right.

She'll send me a reply.

He shook it to the left.

She won't.

He repeated this single-mindedly.

She will. She won't. She will. She won't. She will. She won't. She will. She won't. She will. She won't—Before he knew it, a lot of time had passed.

"Seriously, what am I doing?"

Sousei left the toilet stall. He washed his hands with his phone sandwiched between his chin and collarbone. His phone could go off at any moment. He might get a reply from Asumi.

"...I'm not getting one." Sousei left the restroom and headed back to his classroom.

Pretty much the only people left at school were students working diligently on their club activities.

Wait, no—

Sure enough, when he entered the classroom, Kuchina was there. She was

sitting at the back by the window, resting her chin on her hand, and looking outside. Sousei walked to his desk.

Sis ordered me to investigate Hitsujimoto, so...is this...work...?

He reached to take his bag.

It's not a work request. No matter how much I investigate Hitsujimoto, even if I killed her, for example, I wouldn't be compensated for it. I don't even know how much we've saved up from working in the first place. Sis is the one in charge of that side of things...

Sousei pulled out his chair and sat down.

If I go home now, Sis will question me on if I've had any results or anything. I'd probably make something up to report to her, she'd get mad at me, and I'd apologize. I'll pretend to reflect and tell her that I'll do my job properly from now on— Ah, just thinking about it is painful...

"Takarai."

When Sousei heard the voice, he thought he was just hearing things. He directed his gaze in Kuchina's direction just in case. As always, she was leaning on her hand and was looking out the window. At the very least, she wasn't looking in Sousei's direction.

... I guess I was hearing things after all.

He was just about to be convinced when he heard the low voice again.

"I thought you were going out with Shiramori."

"Huh...?" Sousei was left speechless.

Kuchina glanced at Sousei, her head still propped up on her hand. Her gaze was like being cut with a razor.

"But you two haven't spoken a single time today."

"Huh? Wha—? Uhhh..." Sousei folded his hands under his desk.

I certainly haven't spoken to Shiramori at all today, but—

His face twitched. Both of his legs started shaking nervously.

Why does Hitsujimoto...? It seems like people in our class know about my relationship with Shiramori, so it's not strange that she knows...right? I mean, Hitsujimoto doesn't have a single friend. That's for sure. Yet she always remains at school alone— Although, she's not alone right now. There's the two of us...

"Have a fight or something..."

After a short pause, Sousei started wondering...

...Did she just ask me a question? It didn't sound like a question, but Hitsujimoto generally doesn't use much intonation when she speaks... Right, she probably did ask me a question.

"Kee—" Sousei had a coughing fit. "...K-k-keep out of it... It's none of your business..."

For a while, Kuchina stared out the window. The silence continued for about fifteen seconds.

"True," she said quietly, giving two slight nods. "It has nothing to do with me."

...Right?

Sousei didn't calm down at all.

It's none of her business. No matter how you look at it... But Hitsujimoto is acting like she's hurt or something. I don't want her to act like I've hurt her or something...

Eventually Sousei couldn't bear it anymore and stood up. He picked up his bag and was about to leave the classroom. His feet stopped right in front of the door.

...Given how little we've said to each other, I don't think it really calls for greetings. But it doesn't feel right to just leave silently. I don't mind, even if it makes her feel weird. It might be okay not to, but...

After much internal debate, Sousei did an about-face.

"Good-bye," he said.

Kuchina immediately looked in Sousei's direction. Her mouth was slightly agape. Her gaze wasn't sharp. They made eye contact and Kuchina lowered her

gaze.

"Ah—good...bye," she said.

Sousei almost laughed unconsciously. He suppressed it and left the classroom.

...Hitsujimoto was flustered. She's more normal than I expected. I guess her menacing look isn't her natural expression or anything. Could it be that she's just continuously glaring at everyone? That's what it seems like... But why would she do that? She doesn't have good eyesight, and it helps her see better? Could that be the reason?

As he swapped his indoor shoes for his outdoor ones, he was hit with a headache.

I haven't found out anything about Hitsujimoto. Before I investigate her directly, I should probably check her background a bit more. I could look up her address, and I should know things like the junior high school she went to. I guess I'll do that. Sis will nag me if I don't do anything...

Sousei planned out his investigation on his way to the station.

Well...

He couldn't really figure out an outline for his plan since he wasn't in the mood for it.

I guess I'll just wing it. Sis will probably get angry at me, though. I'll just have to deal with that when it comes...

While he was on the station platform waiting for his train, his phone rang from inside his pocket. For a moment, Sousei was startled.

...Ah, I guess it's Sis? It's probably Sis... I'm not going to get a reply. I've pretty much given up...

Sousei sighed and took his phone out of his pocket.

"Ahhh...!" he accidentally yelled.

The people waiting for the train all looked at Sousei simultaneously.

"S-sorry..." Sousei apologized as he left the line of people waiting for the train. There was an empty bench on the platform. He sat down and checked his

phone again.

"...Sh-Shiramori—Asumi—sent me a reply..."

His heart was pounding wildly. He opened the chat screen and checked the message.

Sorry for ignoring you Can we talk?

"...Wha—? ...Does this...?" Sousei reread the message from Asumi several times. His palpitations didn't subside. If anything, they intensified.

"I—I can...talk, I'll say." Sousei moved his fingers in desperation, replying to Asumi's message.

It was marked "read" straightaway. He got a response.

Where are you?

"Uh, uhhhh... I'll say, 'I'm at the station'... Ah, I got a reply already."

Tsukasachou? In the station?

"...I'll put 'I'm on the platform.""

Wait there 5 minutes

Kay?

"...Five minutes? Of course, I'll say that's okay... Huh? F-five minutes? Does that mean...she's nearby? I guess? Huh...? She's c-coming? Miss Shir— Ah, Asumi? She's coming here? Whaaaaaa...?"

Sousei sat kneeling on the bench.

"W-wait, this isn't right. This is completely wrong..."

He got off his knees and sat with his legs crossed instead.

"...This isn't right, either. I should sit normally... Wait, no. Is that right? Would it be better to stand? Which is better? Oh no. I'm muttering out loud to myself a lot. I'm such a weirdo. I'm frightening people around me..."

While he was trying to figure it out, five minutes passed. Right on schedule, Asumi appeared on the platform.

Sousei practically leaped off the bench. He started to raise his hand but stopped midway. Asumi approached at a run. She should know that he was there. But her eyes were downcast. She wasn't looking at his face.

"I might have been more than five minutes." That was the first thing she said. She didn't look up. Her eyes were pointed toward Sousei's feet.

"You were exactly five minutes," Sousei replied in a shaky voice.

I have to apologize. First I need to apologize. I have to apologize. Apologize to her. Apolo—wait. What did I have to apologize for again? I have to apologize, but... That's a given, but...

Asumi directed her gaze to the bench that Sousei had just been sitting on. "Want to sit?"

"Ah... Y-yes, I would be delighted to..." Sousei unconsciously spoke politely, and Asumi let out a little laugh. That was enough to lift his spirits.

...But wait, that doesn't mean that she's forgiven me yet... Sousei told himself as he sat on the bench. Asumi sat down as well. It was a fairly long bench that could seat about four or five people. Asumi sat at least a foot and a half away from him.

...Will she...forgive me? But she came all the way here to talk to me— "Sooo..."

Just as Sousei was about to broach the topic, Asumi opened her mouth.

"...I have something I want to ask you," she said.

"...Ahh."

"Hmm?"

"Ah, never mind... G-go ahead."

"Oh, okay." Asumi looked down. She tapped the heel of her shoe against the ground a few times. Then she took a deep breath. "You lied to me, didn't you, Sousei?"

"Uhhh..." Sousei squeezed his eyes shut.

I...did lie. But I can't tell her the truth. There's no way I could tell her. But that's not a good excuse. It's not that I wanted to lie, but even so, a lie is a lie...

He couldn't open his eyes. He wasn't in the mood to see anything if he could help it.

"...I lied. I'm sorry."

"I knew it," Asumi said. She fell into silence.

A train came. Passengers got on and off. Before long, the train departed. Sousei nervously opened his eyes and glanced at Asumi's face. She was looking down, but she wasn't crying. Her lips were slightly apart. Her shoulders were hanging low, and it looked like she was disappointed and exhausted.

"...Shiramori?" Sousei said, making Asumi puff her cheeks out. It was clear that she was doing that deliberately.

"Don't call me that."

"...I'm... I'm sorry."

"I hate lies."

"That...makes sense."

"I really hate it. I hate being lied to," she said. She looked both like she was smiling and about to start crying any second. "I live with my mom. It's just the two of us at home."

"...I see."

"My mom and dad got divorced when I was in the sixth grade of elementary school. I wonder what my dad's up to now. I have no idea. I never hear from him."

"...Have you tried contacting him?"

"Well, I've tried tracking down some acquaintances of his, but that's about it."

"...Do you want to see him? Your dad?"

"It's complicated." Asumi tilted her head and let out a little laugh. "I don't know. He's kind of—well, quite—a frivolous person. He never got mad at me or my mom. He even took us out various places."

"He...was...a good dad, huh?"

"I did like my dad." Asumi bent forward and her hugged her shoulders. "But he was a pathological liar. He told so many small lies. Like saying he'd come home at a certain time but then not coming home at that time. Or promising we'd do something the next day and then casually breaking that promise. It's awful, but he was using several different names for various things—"

Asumi's father had a number of fake names, like Takashi, Hiroshi, Masashi... and that wasn't all. For each fake name, he had also created fake identities by changing details like his age and occupation. And he had built different relationships. Takashi had been borrowing money from his friends. Hiroshi had had his own partner and mistress. Masashi had had a lot of gambling buddies at the horse racing track and pachinko parlors. Naturally, leading so many different lives couldn't last forever. When Takashi's lies started to unravel, Hiroshi's lies were exposed as well. The chain reaction led to Masashi's lies also falling apart.

"My dad is unbelievable, don't you think? His debt wasn't too high, so that could be worked out somehow. I knew he was a liar, but I couldn't imagine the extent of his lies. It's terrible, isn't it?"

Sousei couldn't agree or disagree with her, so he just listened silently.

"Apparently my mom thought something was off and was suspicious of him," Asumi continued, still hunched over. "But I had no idea. I was completely fooled. Of course I was. Every last thing came as a shock to me, but the worst part—"

"Yeah?" Sousei finally managed to give a response.

"The worst..." Asumi repeated, then exhaled deeply. "...The worst was when he left. He said that he'd come back. He even pinkie-promised me. He just left and never came back. My dad was a liar right to the end. He lied to me and then disappeared."

...What a terrible father.

It felt like all the blood in Sousei's body had gone cold.

I'm a terrible person...

Another train arrived. Passengers got off. Kuchina was in the line of people

waiting to get on. And she was looking in their direction. She noticed Sousei's gaze and turned back to face forward. The line started to move. She soon got on the train.

"I'm sure you must have had some kind of reason," Asumi said, her voice half drowned out by the sound of the bell signaling that the train was about to depart.

The train that Kuchina was on started moving. Once the train left, the platform became oddly quiet.

"If it was the sort of thing that you could talk about normally, you would've. You lied to me because it's something you can't talk to me about, right?"

Asumi seemed to be trying to persuade herself. She had probably tried to persuade herself like that every time her father had lied to her.

"I-if I tell you..." Sousei couldn't stop shaking, and he was ridiculously sweaty. "I-if I t-t-told you... If I t-told you..."

Asumi sat back up and looked at Sousei. Her white skin had probably never been showered in the blood of others. Her eyes didn't reflect the corpse of someone who was shot in the forehead and wouldn't move again.

What would happen?

If he revealed his secret to Asumi, what would happen? If she knew that Sousei Takarai was, in fact, a killer? That he killed people for money. That he was an assassin. But that didn't mean that he'd kill just anyone. The only people he killed were murderers or people who would make others kill without even batting an eye.

So I'm—to regular people, I'm not dangerous... So you don't have to be scared of me. At the very least, I wouldn't kill you, so it's all right— Should I tell her that?

What had Sousei been doing on Sunday? Obviously, his uncle hadn't died.

I had also gone to kill someone that day. I failed, though, because my kill had been stolen out from under my nose. Whose handiwork do you think that was...?

To tell the truth, the business rival was a classmate.

It's Hitsujimoto. Kuchina Hitsujimoto. That weird classmate who doesn't talk to anyone has the same job as me. If I told her all this, would she believe me? I've killed a lot of people. If I told her that, I think she'd definitely be upset. I've killed so many people. I started this job when I was eleven, so...that means I've just been killing people regularly since before Shiramori's...Asumi's father left home.

If he just opened up and told her everything, what would happen?

"I-if I told you..." Sousei put his hands on his lap. He had stopped shaking. He would probably also stop sweating soon. "It'd cause a lot of trouble for you, Asumi. So I couldn't tell you. I'm sorry."

"...I see," Asumi said in a weak voice. "Okay. But in that case, I'd have liked for you to be honest and tell me 'I can't tell you the reason, but I can't go' rather than lying."

"Yeah. I should have done that."

Sousei's pulse was back to normal, and he wasn't tensing up any part of his body. He had calmed down.

So in other words, this is...a breakup. Even though we say we're dating, we haven't really done anything that would really qualify as dating. But even so, Shiramori hasn't left our relationship up in the air. She created this opportunity for us to talk in person and settle things properly. She's such a good person—"When we ran into each other at Sharinchou station," Asumi said with a little chuckle, "you were probably surprised, huh?"

"Yeah. I was really surprised."

"Sorry for startling you like that," Asumi said, still smiling. It wasn't super obvious, but she had some slight dimples when she smiled.

...I wonder why she's smiling so much.

Sousei was somewhat taken aback.

This is a breakup...right? I mean, it seems like we're almost done with our talk...

"I thought that if I went there—" Asumi bent forward again and pressed her

hands to her knees. "That maybe...even for just a moment, I might be able to see your face. That's what I was thinking. I'm kind of crazy, huh?"

"No..." Sousei shook his head. He shook it really hard many times. "Y-y-y-you're not crazy. At least, I don't think you are..."

"And I actually did get to see you, didn't I?" Asumi smiled sweetly, with some teeth showing. She might have been teasing Sousei, or she might have just been covering up her embarrassment.

...Huhh?

Sousei wanted to hold his head in his hands.

What is this all about? Huh? This doesn't seem like how it should be after a breakup... Could it be that I'm wrong? I was mistaken...?

"So next time," Asumi said.

Sousei blinked. "...N-next time?"

"Next time, don't blow me off, 'kay?"

"Okay," Sousei answered immediately, but he was confused. His heart was beating rapidly, and his chest ached.

Why? Next? Next time? Huh...? What does that mean...? That...means...there will be a...next time? Could it be that this wasn't a breakup? We aren't breaking up...? We're still going out...?

13

This Is Fine

I'll investigate.

Sousei Takarai devised a plan.

I should investigate, right? About Kuchina Hitsujimoto. I'll thoroughly investigate her. She's just a high school student, after all. It's not like she's a hitman who doesn't reveal their hideout or a target who doesn't leave their fortress-like mansion. If I want to investigate, I can do so as much as I please. There are plenty of things I can look into. I'll take plenty of time and investigate thoroughly...

Sousei got off the train at Sharinchou Station. He hadn't gone home.

Kuchina's address became clear from just a little research. Judging from the address, her house should be at least a twenty-minute walk from the station, at the edge of the Sharinchou area.

While he was walking slowly—or leisurely, actually—he got a message from Asumi. As he sent a message back, Sousei made his way to Kuchina's house, glancing at the shops and buildings in the surrounding area on the way. He wasn't in a hurry. Occasionally he stopped walking and reread messages from Asumi with a grin. He also replied to her messages, happy whenever he got a "read" receipt and taking detours while he waited for a response.

I have to investigate thoroughly without rushing or making a lot of noise. After all, she's the business rival who stole prey from me—from Samael the Angel of Death of the Church of Assassins. It's almost certain that Hitsujimoto was tailing Ondou and was also there when he collapsed. But that's it. I didn't see the

crucial moment. Ondou's official cause of death was cardiac arrest. In other words, the exact cause is unclear, but he died because his heart stopped. The method is completely unknown. As of right now, I can't even say with any certainty that Hitsujimoto did it...

As he kept walking, stopping, and walking again, he got another message from Asumi.

By the way, Sousei Do you like chocolate?

"...Chocolate? Well, I don't hate it. I don't eat it much. Come to think of it, when was the last time I had some...?"

Sousei jumped as if the phone in his hand had released an electric current.

"Huuh? She's asking about chocolate...? Could it be...? N-no, V-V-V-V-Valentine's Day isn't for a while, right...? Right... B-but we're going out... It seems we haven't broken up, so does that mean I'm going to receive chocolate from her?"

Sousei went back the way he came from. He walked for a bit, turned back in the opposite direction, then walked again. He stopped.

I don't usually eat it, but I quite like it.

"...Something like this...I guess? I'll send a subtle reply. Like this...?"

Sousei sent the message, and it was marked "read" straightaway. He got a response soon after.

I like chocolate too Wanna go have chocolate cake together?

"...Yesss." Sousei unconsciously talked aloud as he replied.

"Eh-heh-heh," he laughed. He typed a reply straightaway.

Yes, I'd love to!

Is the explanation mark...too much? But I want to express my feelings. Nah, I'll just send— Sousei took the plunge and sent the message, then stood stiffly upright, waiting. He got a reply.

Yaaayyy

The reply was followed by a happy sticker of several cats dancing.

"...Cake, huh?" Sousei dabbed his eyes to stop himself from crying. "I've never really eaten cake itself before, and now we're going to go eat some together...? For real...?"

People passing by were glancing at Sousei. He cleared his throat and started walking.

I'm supposed to be investigating. Judging from the address, I should be nearby. It should be around here somewhere, I think. Yeeeeah...

A convenience store and some two-story apartment buildings stood along the street. There were both old and newer buildings and a public bathhouse. That was an interesting sight. He checked the addresses displayed on the buildings as he walked and spotted a narrow lane that seemed right.

Looks like I go down this way... Hitsujimoto left first, so she should be home by now... Although, I guess she could be on a job right now, if she's really in the same line of work as me...

Sousei went down the narrow lane. The pavement was in bad condition. On the right-hand side were two ancient-looking apartment buildings in a row. After that was the building that matched Kuchina's address.

The building had probably been built at least fifty years ago. It was a small two-story building. The walls were cracked and the paint on the roof was considerably faded.

...Does anyone live in this house?

Japanese houses usually had nameplates with the surname of the family that lived there, but this house didn't have one of those. All the windows had the drapes closed. There wasn't any mail or newspapers or anything in the mailbox, either.

Sousei walked past it once and then turned the corner.

That's the address, though... Is it a decoy? I guess that's possible if she's also an assassin...

He wasted time until it got dark, messaging Asumi and doing other things to

pass the time. He walked past Kuchina's house again.

There weren't any lights on, and there was still no sign of anyone being there.

There should be three people living here: Hitsujimoto and her parents...

Sousei decided to continue surveillance. Loitering around there too much would have raised suspicion, though, so he visited the convenience store, drugstore, and fast-food restaurants. At night, he could also avoid being seen by hiding in narrow alleys. He sent Asumi a message to say good night from the alley.

He checked many times, but no lights came on in Kuchina's house, even in the middle of the night.

No one lives here. This is probably an abandoned house.

Sousei stopped his surveillance on Kuchina's house a little after two AM and started off home.

Hitsujimoto doesn't live in that house. It could be a base for meeting contacts or something, maybe. Even her family might be camouflage. I'm supposed to be living with my dad and sister myself...

When he was nearly home, a call came from his sister. Sousei put his earpiece in and answered it.

"How's it going? Are you making progress?" his sister asked.

"Yes, Sis."

"Any leads?"

"The address the school has on record should be the same as the one registered with city hall, but it doesn't seem like anyone's living there."

"What about the person herself?"

"She might be working."

"You're not tracking her?"

"Not yet. I'm considering tightening the net. How are things going on your end, Sis?"

"I've been digging up a few names that might be relevant. She's unlikely to be a freelancer. It could be the agency or association..."

"Tell me if you find out anything."

"Same to you."

"Yes, Sis. Is there anything else?"

"No."

"I see. In that case, I'd like to go to bed now. Good night." Sousei hung up the phone.

His sister didn't say anything else after that. She didn't seem mad.

"...All right, then."

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Sousei was in the middle of a dream when his phone buzzed by his pillow, waking him up. He had been having a terrible nightmare, so he was actually quite thankful to be woken up.

"Hmmm..."

He picked up his phone. It was a message from Asumi. He read it, still in bed.

Morning

You up?

Sousei couldn't stop the muscles in his face from relaxing. He lay face down, hugging his pillow as he replied.

I just woke up. Morning!

Waking up like this is rather nice.

He hadn't had much sleep, but he felt refreshed. He got ready for school as he messaged Asumi.

He left the house early and quickly went to look at the Hitsujimoto residence before getting on the subway. It was the same as before. As he had expected, there was nobody there. Hitsujimoto is always in the classroom when I get there. I guess she doesn't only stay at school till late, but she gets there early as well. Maybe I'll try getting to school early next time...

As he was thinking about that and waiting on the station platform for the train, he got a message.

I never know when to stop messaging...

I just want to keep going "...Yeah, true," Sousei unintentionally agreed out loud.

The people lining up for the train around him glanced at Sousei, as if they were wondering what was up with him.

Embaaaaaarrassing, but I'm surprisingly okay with it. Well, I am messaging my girlfriend right now. Not that I'm bragging about it.

"Heh-heh..." He let out a cocky laugh.

I'm aware that it's insane I'm this excited, though. Naturally...

Sousei boarded the train and grabbed on to one of the hanging straps. The morning train was basically at capacity, with people packed in like sardines.

But what's wrong with being excited? Of course I'd be excited. I mean, I thought it was all over. For some reason, she confessed to me and we ended up going out. Then it was like we went from everything going swimmingly to suddenly falling off a cliff. But I mean, why me, of all people—?

Sousei almost sent Asumi a message several times.

I wonder what Asumi liked about me that made her want to ask me out. I want to ask her...but I shouldn't ask her that sort of thing out of the blue. It'd be all right if it came up naturally in conversation, though...

The train stopped at Tsukasachou Station. Sousei got off the train with other students from his school. Before he went through the ticket gate, he got a peculiar feeling.

...What?

He understood right away. Someone had quickly hidden behind a pillar on the

other side of the ticket gates. Sousei didn't clearly see who it was, but he had a hunch.

He passed through the ticket gate, pretending not to have noticed anything.

This doesn't count as lying, does it...? It's not like I saw her clearly. It's just a guess— Asumi jumped out in front of Sousei just as he was about to pass by the pillar.

"Boo!"

"Whoa!" Sousei leaned backward. He hadn't been able to predict when Asumi would jump out. It was possible she could have jumped out behind him after he had completely passed by, so he actually was surprised.

"A great success!" Asumi looked at Sousei's reaction and laughed.

He could have sworn she sparkled when she laughed. To Sousei, it felt like the brightness level around them had been turned up several notches.

"Huuuh, huuh— Wh-whyyy...?" Sousei didn't need to put on a performance. He was genuinely stunned and confused.

Why? Why is she shining so much? She's so bright. What kind of phenomenon is this? Is there something wrong with my eyes? What is this...?

"I left home a little early to ambush you."

"Huuuh, wh-wh-why...?"

"You say 'why?' a lot, don't you, Sousei?"

"Nah, but..."

"I thought it might be fun if we could talk and stuff between here and school." Asumi's cheeks blushed slightly, and she poked Sousei's shoulder with her index finger. "Geez, don't make me say it!"

"...S-sorry, I apologize." Sousei lowered his head, making Asumi laugh again.

"What's that all about? You're so funny!"

"Huh? Really? Am I...?"

"You're always funny, Sousei."

"I think I'm quite normal, though. Being normal is best, after all..."

"Hmmm." Asumi crossed her arms and tilted her head in contemplation. "Normal? ...I probably wouldn't call you that. That's just my opinion, though. You're a bit different. In a good way, of course."

"In a good way..."

"Wouldn't it be weird if everyone was the same?"

"Yeah, I guess so. For sure, I think that'd be the case."

"You're different in a good way, Sousei."

"I'm different..." Sousei nodded slightly a few times.

If it's in a good way, I guess that's okay...?

"Let's go." Asumi grabbed Sousei's arm and pulled him along.

The two of them walked like that for a while. Around the front of the station exit, Asumi suddenly let go of his arm.

"Ah, I was holding on to you for so long. Sorr—"

"N-nah! It's no problem..."

Actually, it's more like "Thank you," I guess.

Sousei was on the verge of letting out his true feelings.

"But we should keep some distance. We're on our way to school, after all," Asumi said, seemingly to herself. "Some people might enjoy flirting at school, but I'm not really into that kind of thing."

"Ah, I see..."

"I'm okay with it outside of school, though."

"...You are?"



"How about you, Sousei?" Asumi suddenly brought her face closer to his.

Sousei almost looked away, but he somehow managed to just move his eyes downward and to the left.

"...Yeah, I think that's fine. As long as it's not at school. Yeah..."

14

Miss Cat

...Kuchina Hitsujimoto.

There was something he had come to understand. And there was something he still didn't understand.

On her official documents, Kuchina is written in kanji, but she only ever writes it phonetically at school, so none of our classmates know what her name means. The first kanji character in Kuchina means decay, which isn't the most auspicious. Her father, Katsuhiko Hitsujimoto, and her mother, Yoshimi, are not her biological parents. Hitsujimoto was adopted...

Sousei had observed the Hitsujimoto residence since that morning, but it was deserted, as he had expected. Kuchina didn't leave from that house, either.

It was still too early to go to school, but Sousei headed there anyway. When he arrived, the entrance was still locked. Students who had morning practice for their clubs were allowed to enter the school through the staff entrance, but Sousei waited for the main entrance to be unlocked. Of course, there was no one in the classroom first thing in the morning. Sousei sat at his desk.

Hitsujimoto had lived in another prefecture up until the end of junior high. She took an out-of-prefecture exam to get into this high school, and she moved around a lot before that. Her parents move around a lot for work... Something like that could be a plausible explanation, but her adoptive mother, Yoshimi, is unemployed. I assume she's a housewife. And her adopted father, Katsuhiko, is self-employed. He's not in management or anything, and his employment history is spotty. If nothing else, it's clear that they're not the kind of family that moves around due to work transfers— Sousei got a message from Asumi. He

read the message and smiled with his eyes. Right after he sent a reply, a female student entered the classroom.

"Hmm..." Kuchina Hitsujimoto looked at Sousei with wide eyes.

"Good morning, Miss Hitsujimoto," Sousei greeted her, but Kuchina walked away without saying a word.

Once she sat in her seat by the window at the back of the class, she quietly said, "Morning."

Sousei got another message from Asumi. Or he thought he did, but it turned out to be a sticker. Sousei sent her one back.

...Hitsujimoto has moved from place to place, and even now her house is just a cover. She was also following Ikuo Ondou and was at the scene of his death. At the very least, she's not living an honest life. I don't know whether she was the one who killed him, but there's a high chance she's in the same line of work as me— As always, she was looking out the window with her head propped up on her hand.

She gets to school earlier than anyone else, and just stays in the classroom by herself, not doing anything. She doesn't talk to anyone. I've never seen her with a phone in her hand, either. It seems like she doesn't have any friends. And it's unclear whether her adopted parents are alive and well— Sousei felt something like a chill and almost shivered.

...No matter how or from what angle I look at her, she's not normal. She's strange. Everyone thinks she's weird and refuses to get involved with her. I was like that, too. She's just an incredibly strange classmate— Sousei Takarai wanted to become a normal high school student like everyone else. He wanted to lead a normal life. Of course, there was that. But there was one more reason. If he pretended to be a normal high school student, he wouldn't seem suspicious.

Her methods are different from mine, but...no matter how much of a weirdo she is, no one would suspect that she's involved in killing people...that she kills people with those hands...

The next thing he knew, Kuchina was looking in his direction. Her chin was still

propped up on her hand. It wasn't her usual terrifyingly sharp gaze that seemed to pierce or kill. It was more of a half-open, slightly sleepy-looking expression.

"It's going well." Kuchina's low voice was hoarse, unclear, and quite faint. "With Shiramori..."

Sousei caught his breath.

...Her intonation didn't go up at the end. Was that a question just now? Is she asking me a question...?

Kuchina was staring intently at him.

She's looking at me. She's looking at me a lot. Is she waiting for an answer? Ummmm, what was the question? Are things going well, with Shiramori...with Asumi? Something like that? Or that exactly, I guess. Why is Hitsujimoto asking me something like that...?

"I—I guess..." Sousei nodded, pulling his chin in. "It's going okay."

"That's good." Kuchina went back to facing the window.

...Is that sarcasm...I wonder?

Sousei dropped his eyes to his desk. He pressed his hands to his thighs and fell into thought.

But the way she said it didn't...seem sarcastic, I guess? She also asked me whether we had a fight before. Is she...concerned about us...? Why? It shouldn't have anything to do with her, right? Whether we're fighting or things are going well between us, it has nothing to do with Hitsujimoto...

Some classmates came into the classroom while he was thinking.

Sometimes Sousei greeted his classmates first. Other times, his classmates would say hi first, and then Sousei returned the greeting.

Wakkuu saluted Sousei as soon as he saw him. "Yooo!"

Sousei still couldn't let go of his embarrassment, but he put all his effort into imitating Wakkuu.

"Yo," Sousei replied.

"Oh!" Wakkuu winked and gave a thumbs-up. "That was a good 'Yo'! Thanks,

I'll take it!"

"Y-you're welcome...?"

"That's where you're supposed to say 'Science up,' Takarai! It's gotta be!"

"...Is that a thing?"

"I just came up with it. I wanna be an inventor, you know."

"You do ...?"

"I wouldn't know!"

"Nah, it seems like you really don't..." Sousei attempted some modest banter with him. Some other students laughed along with Wakkuu.

From there, Sousei and Wakkuu seemed to get a kind of comedy act going between them, which everyone seemed to really enjoy. Sousei casually glanced at Kuchina. She was looking out the window, as he had expected. But her back was trembling slightly.

Is she...laughing...?

When he looked again, it both looked like she was trembling and maybe not. He couldn't tell either way.

I guess I imagined it...

†

Their morning classes over, Sousei sat in the classroom eating his energy bar and chicken when Wakkuu suddenly came at him with a question. It was a game called Sudden Improv that was popular in their class recently.

"A long, long time ago, in a place far, far away, there was—who?!"

"Errr..." Sousei's mind was blank.

I can't think too long. I don't want to spoil the mood...

That thought was the only thing that made Sousei spit something out: "A f-fish stick."

"That's unreal!" Without missing a beat, Wakkuu acted as the straight man in

their impromptu comedy duo.

The timing must have been good because it was reasonably well received. Asumi and her friend Moena clapped and burst into laughter.

Kuchina was looking out the window with her chin propped up on her hand. Come to think of it, Sousei had never seen Kuchina eating lunch. But she was usually in the classroom. Always gazing out at the outside scenery alone like that.

Yukisada Hayashi came up to Sousei, carrying some rice balls from the convenience store.

"A fish stick, ha-ha-ha!" Yukisada chuckled.

"I was under pressure," Sousei said as an excuse.

Yukisada sat at the desk next to him. "But it was pretty funny, honestly!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Yeah, I do. A normal answer to that question would be a person, right? Something like a fish stick wouldn't come up normally." Yukisada started unwrapping his rice balls.

"Today you have salmon and...simmered seaweed paste?" Sousei asked while biting into his chicken. "You have rice balls every day, huh? But always with different fillings."

"Well, rice is my favorite food. You have energy bars and chicken locked in as your lunch, right, Sousei?"

"Ah...well, I need the protein and stuff. Nutritionally..."

"You're talking like a body builder, he-he," Yukisada snickered.

Wakkuu hit the laughing Yukisada with a question. "Hayashi, what is something scary a hitman says in their sleep?"

"Let's make the next one the last," Yukisada answered instantly.

The classroom fell quiet.

"I thought that one up before," he added.

Wakkuu and some others burst into laughter, exclaiming things like "Scary!" "Wow," and "That's creepy."

"Was my delivery okay?" Yukisada asked.

Sousei nodded, but his smile was forced.

I've thought the same thing many times myself, just not in my sleep...

Sousei finished off his energy bar and chicken and left the classroom. He went to the restrooms on the way to the corridor between the school buildings.

During the break between classes, he had made plans via text. Asumi soon came running after him.

"A fish stick!" she exclaimed.

"S-stop! It's embarrassing..."

"But it was funny! Just think about it: A long, long time ago, in a place far, far away...there was a single fish stick just sitting there. Isn't it amazing picturing it?" Asumi laughed. "Okay, I guess it's not amazing. But it was funny."

"Perhaps. What would you have said, Asumi?"

"Me? Hmmm... A long, long time ago, in a place far, far away...there was a turtle and a frog. Something like that?"

"A turtle? And frog ...?"

"I like both of those. The animals I like are turtles, frogs, and—"

"Cats?"

"Yeah. I like cats the most. Meow!" Asumi meowed like a cat suddenly. But it wasn't a very accurate impression.

...She's too cute.

Sousei felt dizzy but managed to withstand it.

"Sometimes I track cats, though," Asumi said with a strangely serious expression. "There are a few stray cats around where I live. I've known some of them since they were kittens, so they're pretty friendly toward me and don't really run away."

"So, you're...observing their behavior?"

"I guess? I've followed them around for about five hours before. That was a long time ago, though."

"You're kind of like a detective, huh?"

"A cat detective. Meoooow." Asumi did her terrible cat meow impression again, and Sousei felt like swooning.

...That's way too lethal. Never mind a detective; she could probably even be a hitman— "But I can't say something like that..." He accidentally said the last bit out loud.

"What can't you say?" Asumi asked.

Sousei panicked.

"Ahhh, nothing, I was just thinking that your cat impression was really cute."

"It was cute?" Asumi fluttered her eyelashes at him. Her cheeks instantly turned red. "...I'm so embarrassed! Umm...I'll just say that I don't usually go around doing cat impressions or anything..."

"Is that so? Ah, that's too bad..."

"Why's that?"

"Huh? Because it's...really cute, so..."

"Mmmeeooooww."

Asumi lightly swatted Sousei's shoulder with her face bright red. She wasn't hitting him hard, of course. It didn't hurt or tickle at all, at any rate. Sousei was shocked at this kind of powerlessness.

So fragile...but she is a girl. She's extraordinarily tall and slim, and exceptionally cute, but she's a quite a normal girl—and to think that she's going out with me...

"Ah, I'm seriously so embarrassed," she said, fanning her face with her hands.

She glanced at Sousei.

"By the way, Sousei, does your family happen to be quite strict?"

"Strict..."

His sister's face popped up in the back of his mind.

...Well, I guess I could say it's strict, even though my sister is the only one who's strict with me. I only have my sister left, so saying my house is strict wouldn't exactly be a lie...

"Hm... It's strict, yeah. Relatively strict. Pretty strict, I guess. Maybe even super strict..."

"Is that why you can't really go out much and stuff?"

"...There's that, yeah. It's just kind of...family reasons, I suppose. I mean, it's difficult to talk about this sort of thing."

"It is, isn't it?" Asumi nodded with a slightly sad look on her face. "I understand. It's not like we don't have the same kind of thing at my house."

Sousei's chest tightened.

...I wonder if this is okay. Is it really okay to let Asumi look so sad? I'm— Not good. There's definitely no way it was okay.

"Bu-but—" Just as he was about to speak, his sister's face flickered in his mind again. He felt like he could hear her voice. And it was the weirdly kind voice she used when she was furious. But Sousei shook his head and dismissed the thoughts of his sister. "Let's go out. This weekend, even. O-of course, only if you're free...Asumi. If you'd like to, that is..."

Asumi was listening with a serious expression. Sousei was already starting to regret it. He was caught lying when he canceled at the last minute before. How could he suggest such a thing when that storm hadn't blown over yet?

"Are you being serious when you say that?" Asumi wasn't smiling. Sousei felt like recoiling, but he didn't avert his gaze.

"Yeah. S-seriously... I'm saying it seriously."

"In that case—"

Asumi looked down. She clasped her hands together behind her hips. She crossed her long legs and tapped the heel of her shoe against the floor a few

times.

Sousei held his breath and waited for her response. He had died many times up till then. This was more intense than any kind of danger he'd ever been in.

Asumi lifted her head. She puffed out her cheeks slightly and pursed her lips. Sousei didn't know what kind of intent that face indicated.

"All right," she replied simply. She smiled.

Sousei unconsciously looked up and clenched his fists. "...Woo!"

15

An Eye for an Eye, a Crime for a Crime

Sousei worked diligently on his investigation in the lead-up to the weekend. Although he wasn't pouring his heart and soul into it, he was still approaching it with a decent amount of seriousness. His research deepened his understanding of Kuchina.

Hitsujimoto gets to school earlier than anyone else and leaves school in the evening. She gets off at Sharinchou Station sometimes, but there's also another station that she goes to. In any case, she's not going back to that house. The stations that Hitsujimoto has taken the train to more than once are Sharinchou, and one other station: Motomachi...

On Friday evening, Sousei walked all around Motomachi. Kuchina had gotten off the train at Motomachi Station in the evening. Sousei knew that. Because he had tailed her.

The west side of Motomachi was a high-end residential area on a hill called Yamanote. There was also the Motomachi Daijingu Shrine, Motomachi Park, Motomachi Baseball Stadium, and the Motomachi Zoo in that area.

The east side was lined with both new and old buildings, such as relatively expensive apartment buildings, trendy restaurants, and stores.

Kuchina walked through the shopping district and headed toward Yamanote, the high-end residential area uptown. After that, she entered Motomachi Park. That much Sousei knew for certain.

Motomachi Park was quite large and was adjacent to the Daijingu Shrine and baseball stadium. Sousei lost sight of her in the park.

Did Hitsujimoto notice me and give me the slip? Or did I just mess up? Is she here working right now, or does she have a house in Motomachi she goes home to? At any rate, there's something about Motomachi—

Sousei ended up continuing his search in Motomachi until it was nearly time for the first train of the morning.

I did my best...didn't I? I did everything I could. Even though I didn't learn anything in particular. I did everything in my power...

Sousei sat on a bench on the Motomachi Station platform and waited for the train.

Next week. Yeah. I'll try again next week. On the weekend. Finding Hitsujimoto is difficult. And it's impossible to tail her when we don't have school. There's no way to take further action, I mean. I worked really hard on my investigation until early Saturday morning, so Sis can't complain, right? She hasn't said anything yet.

"Sousei," his sister called to him through the earpiece he had in. "Are you still in Motomachi?"

"...I was just wondering if I could stop for today and go home."

"I see. Okay, good work," she said kindly.

Sousei's back straightened automatically.

What's happening? Is it okay to take that at face value? Or is she frustrated because there's been no progress? That's the feeling I'm getting...

"I said I'm thinking of going home..." he tried repeating.

"You don't have to say it twice. Go home and rest."

"Do we have any new jobs...or anything?"

"We haven't gotten any. You know the reason, don't you?"

"...Yes."

As he listened to an announcement declaring that the next train was coming, Sousei looked at the stairs down to the platform. A girl wearing black clothes and a scarf was coming down the stairs. Sousei gasped.

"Sousei?" his sister asked. "Is something wrong?"

"...No. Nothing's wrong. Uh, so, I'm going to go home and rest now."

Whether or not his sister was suspicious, she didn't say anything back.

The girl in the black clothes stood farther down the platform from where Sousei was sitting on a bench. She shot him a glance.

...Sis thinks that we should get new jobs after we wipe the slate clean. After we've dealt with the competitor who stole our prey...

The girl wearing black wasn't facing Sousei's direction anymore. But she had definitely looked at him once.

Hitsujimoto... Are you coming back from a job on the first train of the day? Or are you going out on a job now...?

The train arrived.

Sousei stood up from the bench. He hesitated, then got on the same car as Kuchina.

The station wasn't in a bustling area, and it was the first train on a Saturday morning, so the train car was empty. Kuchina was sitting toward the end of the train, and Sousei sat down diagonally from her.

"Hey, Sis?" Sousei tried calling quietly.

"Yeah? Aren't you going home to sleep?"

"...Yes, I'm going to sleep. Good night." Sousei took out his earpiece and put it in his pocket.

What was Kuchina looking at? At the very least, her gaze wasn't pointed in Sousei's direction.

But we're riding in the same train car—

He couldn't stop thinking about Kuchina, but he decided not to look at her anymore.

Today, I'll go home, take a nap, and then go on my date. I'll put Hitsujimoto out of my mind. I don't really care that she poached my target in the first place. Of course, Ondou had to die. He was a man who had to be killed, but it didn't

really matter who killed him. If Hitsujimoto had a hand in it, then that's that. It's just that, well, she's another assassin in the same class as me...

The train passed several stations. Some people got on. Other people got off. Sousei inadvertently looked in Kuchina's direction. She wasn't there.

"Hm..." He hastily looked around for her. She wasn't sitting diagonally from him anymore. She was sitting on the same side of the train as him.

She...moved? When did she— No, wait. What does it matter? It's not worth worrying about, is it? It's irrelevant...

Sousei risked closing his eyes. They passed a station. Closing his eyes made him sleepy. That was natural since he had pulled an all-nighter. He couldn't allow himself to fall asleep. He opened his eyes and quickly looked to the side. Kuchina was sitting closer to him on the seat. And that wasn't all.

"Sousei Takarai." Kuchina said his name in her usual low voice. Kuchina's face, which was covered to halfway up her nose by her scarf, was facing forward rather than toward Sousei.

"...Wh-wha-what...?" He reacted without thinking.

"Have you had fun running around snooping on me?" she asked, still facing forward.

Sousei was shaking and couldn't answer straightaway.

...I was noticed. Hitsujimoto threw me off. If I feign ignorance— Ah, it's no use. It's strange for us to bump into each other on the first train of the morning to begin with. There's no way it could be a coincidence...

"M-Miss Hitsujimoto, you—"

"I what?"

"Ah, nothing..." Sousei covered his mouth with his hand.

...What was I about to ask her? It's better not to say anything that gets straight to the point. Sis only told me to investigate, nothing else. If I research more than I should, then it could come back to bite us later...

So Sousei fell silent. Kuchina also kept her mouth closed.

The next station was Sharinchou. The train stopped, and Sousei stood up. Kuchina stood up at pretty much the same time.

"...What the hell?" Sousei blurted out.

Kuchina looked at him with wide eyes. The bottom half of her face was covered by her scarf, so he wasn't certain, but to Sousei, it looked like she had burst out laughing. Kuchina immediately faced forward again and then half ran off the train. Sousei got off after her. They went through the ticket gate and exited the station, keeping about a dozen feet between them. That's where their paths should have split. But Kuchina stopped, so Sousei had to come to an abrupt stop as well. She turned only her head to face him.



"Good night, Takarai," she said.

"Huh...?"

Kuchina walked off, leaving Sousei behind as he lost his voice. Sousei just stood there dumbfounded until he couldn't see her anymore.

†

...I don't understand.

Sousei took a shower and then attempted to take a nap. The curtains in his room were shut tight. He made sure to set his alarm and got into bed. But he couldn't fall asleep.

...I don't get it at all. Hitsujimoto's behavior. What was she trying to do? What was she doing in Motomachi? Was it work after all? She was coming home on the first train...?

But it could be possible that Kuchina didn't live in that house. She might have another house in Sharinchou. Perhaps he should have followed her. But even if he had followed her, she would undoubtedly have given him the slip.

Hitsujimoto's appearance is relatively normal. I mean, she has quite a delicate build, and the way she moves is supremely normal. She could just be pretending to be an average girl, but— No, no, no... She's not normal. She's someone who goes to incredible lengths to avoid exposing any skin. She wears gloves and stockings even in the summer. Are they stockings? Maybe they're tights. It's quite strange...

Perhaps there was some kind of special reason why she couldn't expose her skin.

...Hitsujimoto always sits out during PE classes. She was given permission to earn credit through observation due to exceptional circumstances, apparently. It's probably due to an illness or something, but they're protecting her privacy. Despite being a school, security is surprisingly strict. It's annoyingly hard to look into...

Sousei finally gave up. He sat up and picked his phone up from by his pillow. It

was 8:45 in the morning. His alarm was set for 8:50. He turned it off and sighed.

"...I've just been thinking about Hitsujimoto this whole time. What's up with that? I feel kind of guilty about it since I'm about to go on a date with Asumi. Even though I don't have any feelings for her at all. Obviously..."

Sousei sighed another three times or so, then got out of bed. He took a quick shower. He didn't have much facial hair, but he shaved just in case. And he brushed his teeth.

He didn't have an appetite, but nutrition was important, so he had an energy bar, an apple, and some milk. As he was getting ready, he got a notification from Asumi. It was a sticker of a cat saying hi.

"I wonder if she's half in doubt about whether I'm going to cancel at the last minute again. That's totally understandable. But it's okay..."

Sousei sent Asumi a message saying that he was about to leave the house.

Asumi immediately sent an "OK" sticker back.

"What did I work so hard for last night—or should I say, 'until this morning'? That was all for today. Sis shouldn't contact me until tonight."

Sousei left the house in high spirits.

The time they had agreed on was ten o'clock. They were meeting in front of Kawara Kozou in Kawaramachi. Kawara Kozou was the town's mascot and a standing statue of him had been erected in the square in front of the station. It was one of the most prominent places to meet in the city.

He was so light on his feet that he felt like he might start skipping if he let his mind drift. Until he got on the subway, that is. As soon as he grabbed the hanging strap in the train, he became restless.

...I wonder if my outfit is okay.

While he was working, Sousei always had to dress to blend in with the place. He owned a lot of clothes since they often got damaged. Today he had chosen a white shirt, casual beige pants, white sneakers, a navy-colored jacket, and a leather shoulder bag.

I don't think it's...uncool, but I wonder if it's typical. Perhaps I should have

done more with my hair. Apply some hair product or something...

While he was changing trains at Shizukamachi Station, he started wanting to turn back.

No, I can't do that! Standing her up would be unthinkable...

He couldn't help feeling anxious about it, but he somehow managed to change trains and get off at Kawaramachi Station. From the subway station, he went up the station building attached to the JR train line. There were a lot of people since it was the weekend. The square in front of the station was also crowded, particularly with young people in their teens and twenties. In front of Kawara Kozou were flocks of men and women who were clearly waiting for people. It was still ten minutes before their meeting time, but Asumi was among them.

"Aah-ooh..." Sousei let out a mysterious sound and stumbled. Asumi hadn't noticed him because she was looking at her phone.

Sh-she looks incredible in a long skirt... I mean, even in her long skirt, her long legs are emphasized rather than hidden... Her jacket is also long... So are her sleeves. And—

Sousei hid in the shadow of a pillar in the station building to try to calm his racing heart, mind, and breath.

—she has her hair in a ponytail. That looks great. She's such a stylish person. Am I going to be all right? Would she be fine walking with someone like me...?

In the meantime, five minutes had passed.

...Confident. Be confident. Do I have confidence? I don't, but I don't want to keep her waiting anymore...!

Sousei summoned up courage and headed to the space in front of Kawara Kozou. Asumi had just put her phone in her bag. She lifted her head and looked in Sousei's direction. She smiled like a flower coming into bloom. She lifted both her hands high and jumped up.

"Sousei...!" She waved.

...Is this real life?

Sousei had his doubts as he broke into a run. There was no need for him to run. He knew that, but he still couldn't help it.

+

They watched a movie at the Kawaramachi movie theater complex. It was a romantic love story based on a science fiction novel that had also been made into a movie in the past. It was what Asumi wanted to watch, and Sousei didn't have any objections.

...I didn't really absorb any of the story, though. I couldn't help being more fixated on things like...Asumi's facial expressions as she was watching the movie next to me. But I think I got the gist of the plot...

After the movie ended, it was time for them to have lunch. Sousei hadn't put any thought into what they should go eat.

"Wh-what...should we have for lunch?" he asked. But was it all right for him to leave it up to his date to decide? Sousei desperately racked his brain for wisdom he didn't have. "...P-pasta or something? I don't know... O-o-omurice? Something like that? I wonder...?"

"Well, I for one," Asumi said without hesitation, "like soba noodles."

"...Sssssss-sobaaa? Ah, soba... Huh, soba?"

"I guess soba is kind of basic and plain. But I've liked it for such a long time. Do you hate soba?"

"No, it's fine. I don't dislike it. There's no way I could dislike it. Uhhh, so if we go with soba—"

Sousei used his phone to look for soba restaurants in the area. His eyes landed on a restaurant called Kazukihana, which was reasonably priced but had good reviews and kind of a relaxed atmosphere.

"I wonder if this place is okay?" he asked, showing his phone to Asumi. She leaned in closer.

She had a scent like something he had never smelled before. It made his head spin.

This floral? Florence? Fragrance? It's wonderful...

The soba restaurant they had in mind was about a seven-minute walk from the movie theater. It was a little crowded, but not as bad as they had been anticipating. They were shown to their seats after waiting only ten minutes or so.

They were sitting at the counter rather than across from each other at a table. Sousei sat next to Asumi. If he was facing her directly today in particular, he might not be able to chat with her very well. So, for Sousei, it was actually a relief.

"What should we get?"

"Yeah, what should we go for ...?"

Since they only had one booklet-style menu, they naturally ended up leaning together to look at it together. It lifted Sousei's mood and made him more impulsive than usual. Otherwise, he would have had no idea what to order.

"I think I'll go with this," Sousei said. "Soba noodles with tempura. Looks like it's the recommendation."

"I was thinking of that, too. But I'm also interested in the soba noodles with duck meat and Welsh onions. But the simple drained soba with dipping sauce would be good, too. I also like tanuki soba with crumbled tempura batter. Hmmm, what should I go with?"

After being indecisive for a while, Asumi ended up deciding on soba with mountain vegetables and grated mushrooms.

"I like soba, by the way. I already said that, didn't I? That's why we came to this restaurant, huh? What kind of food do you like, Sousei?"

"Huh, me? I like...umm..."

"You always seem to be eating snacks or something every day."

"Aaah, yeah, they're energy bars. I don't eat them because I particularly like them or anything, though..."

"You eat them with nutrition in mind?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. Yeah. Food, huh? Food. Hmmmm... I'm not a particularly picky eater or anything..."

She'd probably find it incredibly weird if I told her that I was basically only thinking about calories and nutrition. That's the truth, though. I don't really get flavor profiles or any of that stuff. When was the last time I had soba? Maybe in junior high for a school lunch? Did we have soba in our school lunches...?

"Fr...uit, I guess? If I had to choose food that I like..."

"I like fruit, too. So what kind of fruit do you like?"

"I usually eat things like apples. I have apples basically every day..."

"Every day? You must really like them!"

"Ah, yeah, I guess so. They're also nutritionally balanced..."

Their food arrived. Asumi took a picture of her soba with her phone, so Sousei also took a picture of his. He was strangely moved.

That's right. This is the first time in my life I've taken a picture of food. I only ever take pictures of things related to work, like my targets, locations, and the corpses of targets after I've taken them out...

Asumi ate a mouthful of her soba with mountain vegetables and grated mushrooms. Her eyes widened. "...Yummm."

Sousei also tried his soba with tempura. The flavor and texture of the soba noodles, the umami flavor seeping from the shrimp tempura, and the flavor and saltiness of the broth all blended together well, making it surprisingly delicious.

"...Th-this is...extremely delicious, in my humble opinion..."

"Why'd you say it like that?!" Asumi laughed. But it didn't feel mocking at all. "You're just like a person having soba with tempura for the first time."

"...Actually, this might be the first time for me. I don't know, though. I don't have any memories of it..."

"Seriously?"

"Well... Ummm. How do I put this? I'm not really the kind of person who eats out much."

"The soba with tempura you're eating with me is your first?"

"Yeah...I guess it is. There are still quite a few things that I haven't tried yet, to be honest."

"So if we go to eat at more places together, everything will be a first for you?"

"There's a high chance of that, I guess. As embarrassing that is to admit..."

Sousei tried the shrimp tempura. He might have had shrimp tempura before, but it was probably his first time trying it soaked in warm soba broth.

"...Y-yum. This is good. Is soba with tempura usually this tasty...?"

"There's lots of delicious things." Asumi lightly bumped her shoulder into Sousei's and giggled. "Now I have something to look forward to. I want to get you to eat lots of delicious things."

"Th-that's..." Sousei's muscles relaxed so much that he felt like his face might collapse, leaving him feeling disoriented.

...Am I happy? ...Yeah. I am. Extremely happy. Is this what they call happiness...?

Sousei's brain was numb with euphoria that surpassed happiness.

"We should eat," Asumi urged him.

If she hadn't prompted him, Sousei might have just remained in a state of bliss. Just as he thought *That's right, I should eat* and was about to dig into his soba with tempura, Sousei's phone started ringing. It was inside his bag, hanging on the back of his chair.

"Huh?" Asumi looked around restlessly. "It's not my phone. Is it yours?"

"Y-yeah..." Sousei took his phone out of his bag.

Why didn't I put it on silent? I'm sure it's Sis... It's Sis. It's still early afternoon. It's too early. I said I was sleeping. That's it. I'm still sleeping...

He put his phone on silent as he told himself that. The ringing instantly stopped, and his phone started vibrating instead.

He had put it on silent, but the vibration was still on. Sousei's settings for silent mode turned the ringing volume off, but not the vibration.

"Someone's calling you?" Asumi glanced at his phone. "You don't have to answer it?"

He decisively changed it to "do not disturb" mode so both the ringing and the vibration would be off. He put his phone back in his bag.

"Yeah, it's fine," Sousei answered.

Sousei ate his soba with tempura. For some reason, it didn't have much flavor anymore.

I guess it's because it's gotten a little cold...

For about five minutes after that, Sousei talked with Asumi as they ate, but he couldn't focus at all.

There was a high chance that his sister was continuously calling him. She wasn't the type of person to give up if he didn't answer.

"I'm terribly sorry, everyone," one of the staff members suddenly called out loudly, "but is there a customer here called Mr. Takarai? If so, please inform us. We have a message for you. Is there a Mr. Sousei Takarai here?"

"...Unbelievable." Sousei stood up automatically.

Asumi was frowning inquiringly.

"S-sorry. I'll j-j-j-just be a min-minute."

Sousei hurriedly left his seat. He immediately returned and grabbed his bag. He talked to the staff member, who led him to the kitchen and handed him the phone receiver.

"...Hello?"

"Sousei." It was his sister's voice. She let out a throaty laugh. This meant that she was absolutely furious. "Loafing around in the middle of the day on a Saturday, Sousei? Having a meal? That's right, at a soba restaurant. You're not alone, are you? You're with a friend? My, my, you're not with a girl, are you? So you've reached that age where you chase after women, huh, Sousei?"

Sousei couldn't utter a single word in response. His heart shrank to the size of a golf ball and was raging wildly in his chest. His whole body felt cold and yet somehow also hot at the same time.

"So you have those desires, too, huh? Working all night long, hardly getting any sleep, and what? Did you go see a movie, Sousei? A movie with a girl? How was it? Did you have fun?"

His sister was cheerful. That's how she sounded. Of course, her true feelings were quite the opposite. His sister's blood was boiling.

"And then you went to a soba restaurant. How nice, Sousei. But does your little girlfriend know everything, I wonder?"

"...Knnnoooww...? What...?" Sousei finally managed to say in a gasping, broken, terribly hoarse voice.

"Does your girlfriend know that you're a killer? Have you told her how many people you've killed up until now? I wonder if she knows she went to see a movie and is now eating soba with a killer?"

"...Shut up."

"Whaaat's that, Sousei? What did you say?"

"Shut up!" Sousei yelled against his better judgment.

All the staff in the kitchen looked at him in unison. Everyone was startled.

"S-sorry," he apologized to the kitchen staff, bowing his head. "...I'm hanging up for now, Sis. I'll call you back."

Sousei replaced the receiver without waiting for his sister's response. He bowed in apology to the staff once more and then quickly left the kitchen. He took his phone out of his bag and, gripping it tightly, went to where Asumi was sitting.

"S-something urgent has come up. Would it be okay if I go outside to make a phone call?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"I won't be long."

As Sousei left the restaurant, he got another call from his sister.

"...Yes, hello. Sorry about before."

"It's all right." His sister laughed calmly. But in reality, she must have been seething with rage. "So? Did you come clean to your girlfriend?"

"...There's no way I could tell her." Sousei leaned on a guardrail in front of the soba restaurant. "If I told her those things—"

"False friendships easily shatter, don't they? Or should I say, even a hundredyear love can grow cold? By the way, Sousei, do you like that girl? Now, what was her name again? Asumi Shiramori, from your class?"

"...How do you know that? And why do you know my whereabouts?"

"Oh, come on, it's fine. What's the big deal?"

"It's not good. I've turned off the GPS and everything on my phone. You're the one who told me to do that since we never know what might happen."

"Good boy, Sousei. You listen properly to what I say."

"...Have you planted something? Are you monitoring me without permission?"

"You and I are one, Sousei. Don't make me spell it out." She laughed cheerfully, making Sousei angry.

"This isn't a job I do because I like it. Are you suggesting that I do it because I want to? It's not a joke. I'll quit my job."

"And? Do what?"

"...Do what? I'd just...live normally. As a normal high school student..."

"And do you also aspire to study diligently for college entrance exams and go to college? What about after that?"

"G-get a job...earn a salary, and just...live. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? There are lots of people who do that."

"But, Sousei," his sister said in a voice that sounded like she was telling off a child, "you're different than them. You know that, don't you? I'm not going to tell you not to go on dates with girls your age. I'm not a monster. I'm letting you attend school, aren't I? But there are limits, Sousei."

"...Limits."

"That's right, Sousei. Be content in occasionally breathing the same air as regular people. It's fine if you want to casually hang out with Asumi Shiramori. But don't get too carried away. That wouldn't be in your best interests."

"In my best interests...? You're one to talk. You don't think about me at all."

"You think that? Really?"

Someone came out of the soba restaurant. It was Asumi.

"...Sousei?" Asumi walked quickly toward Sousei. "Do you think you might take much longer? Because the restaurant is still crowded..."

Sousei covered the mic on his phone. "S-sorry, I just need a little—"

"Unlike the young girl there, I know about all the crimes you've committed." His sister kept talking regardless. "I know it all. Everything, inside and out. I'm the only one who can bear those sins with you. The only one who shares them with you. We are one. How could I not be thinking of you? I'm your other self, and you're my other self."

"...Stop it," Sousei begged his sister in a low voice.

"Uuh...umm, Sousei?" Asumi looked worried. "If it's something important, you don't have to worry about me—"

"No! It's not important!" Sousei shook his head. "No, it's not important. It's not—"

"Yes, it is, Sousei," his sister told him. "Isn't there something even more important you should be doing?"

"Stop... Please stop. I'm begging you..."

"You need to stop goofing off and go investigate Kuchina Hitsujimoto some more."

"M-Miss Hitsujimoto is—" Sousei hastily clammed up.

Asumi was frowning suspiciously.

"Hey, Sousei," his sister said, "you're not trying to get a normal kid involved, are you? I don't think that's such a good idea. It wouldn't be in anyone's best interests. That's why I'm cautioning you. Because you know what would happen

if someone knew too much...right?" She snickered.

Sousei averted his eyes from Asumi. He couldn't stand the look in her eyes, as if she was suspicious about something.

"Umm, I—" Asumi let out a single sigh. "...It seems like you have something you need to do, so I'll go home now. I'll pay for our food. Take your time on the phone. See you."

Sousei should have been able to call out to stop her, but he just watched as Asumi went back into the soba restaurant.

"Hey, Sousei," his sister said, "I think about you more than you think I do. I'm also concerned about that girl Shiramori. If anything, perhaps you haven't thought—"

Asumi soon came back out of the soba restaurant. She practically ran off without making eye contact with him.

"Sousei, do you think that innocent girl should be deeply involved with you?" his sister asked. "With a murderer tainted with sin? A murderer who is one in body and soul with me? Well? Wouldn't you feel sorry for her...?"

16

Even Though You Ask Me Why

Sousei sent Asumi a message to apologize. It ended up being a really long message. After a short time, it was marked as "read."

He got a reply on Sunday night. The text was blunt. It was just one sentence: Got it.

At the arrival time of the first train on Monday morning, he waited in ambush around the exit of Sharinchou Station. Although he hadn't been confident, Kuchina appeared from the entrance in her black clothes and scarf.

"Morning," Sousei said.

Kuchina stopped and looked a little surprised. She quickly scanned Sousei's whole body before staring directly into his eyes.

"You don't look well," she said.

"...Huh?"

"Sleep deprivation."

"Huh..."

Sousei hadn't expected Kuchina to say something like that to him. He was caught completely off guard and stood there in a daze as she walked off. Sousei chased after her.

...What the hell?

Kuchina kept walking at a normal pace without turning around.

I can't read her. What did she mean? I don't get it. It's a mystery. Shiramori's

—Asumi's—"Got it" from earlier was also a mystery. What does it mean? Does it mean she forgives me? There's no way. There's no way she's not mad. What kind of face should I make when I see her...?

It seemed Kuchina was heading to the Hitsujimoto residence in Sharinchou. Or rather, they had arrived in front of the Hitsujimoto residence. She took a key out of her pocket and unlocked the door. Then she faced Sousei.

"If you were a stalker, I'd report you," she said.

"Report me...to the police?"

"Is there someone else I could report you to?" Kuchina let out a sigh and then softened her mouth very slightly but unmistakably. Her eyes also squinted slightly.

While Sousei stood there stunned, Kuchina entered the house, closed the door, and locked it from inside.

She smiled. Hitsujimoto smiled...

†

Sousei got to school at the same time he usually did. He managed to return Wakkuu's "Yo." Kuchina was already sitting in the back seat by the window, her chin propped up on her hand, looking outside.

When Sousei arrived at his desk, Yukisada Hayashi approached him. Asumi came into the classroom as Sousei was chatting with Yukisada.

"Morning," Asumi waved at her classmates with a big smile. She also returned Wakkuu's "Yo."

"M-morning." Sousei felt like Asumi had looked his way, so he greeted her mostly on reflex.

"Morning." Asumi smiled and returned his greeting. Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes weren't. Sousei could feel it. But even so, she hadn't ignored him.

...What does that mean?

Their gazes didn't meet at all during class. Asumi seemed full of energy,

however, chatting and laughing with her close friend Moena as well as with other classmates.

When Sousei was with Yukisada in the restrooms between classes, he ended up accidentally blurting out, "Girls are so mysterious, aren't they...?"

"Huh?" Yukisada chuckled. "What's wrong, Sousei? Did something happen between you and Asumi again?"

"...Ah, no. There isn't...not...anything in particular as well, though."

"I really don't understand what you're trying to say, but maybe you should open up more?"

"Open up...?"

"I don't know, but you seem kind of..." Yukisada chuckled and gently patted Sousei on the back. "There are things like compatibility, but I can't really say."

"...Compatibility."

"It's not that I think you and Asumi aren't compatible. But, well, how you two feel is more important than what I think."

†

Is Yukisada kind of strangely deep...? Occasionally he says things that seem meaningful or insightful...

Sousei walked around the school building once school was over.

I'd been wondering if there was any way I could be alone with Asumi that didn't feel unnatural... I saw her twice, but it never happened. And now it seems like she's already gone home...

The toilets at the end of the school building, the stairs by the row of special-purpose classrooms, the stairs leading up to the locked rooftop, the space under the stairs, the corridor between the school buildings... Sousei wasted time in those kinds of areas during times when there wouldn't be many people around. A message might come from Asumi. But that faint hope was gradually fading away.

...Ah, I'd rather just do my job properly already. When I'm focused on work, everything else stops mattering. And I feel a sense of accomplishment when I take out a target. Although, I do wonder if I should be feeling a sense of accomplishment for killing someone, even if they were a bad person...

Sousei returned to the classroom. As he had expected, Kuchina was sitting at the back by the window, with the classroom, illuminated by the setting sun, all to herself. However, she didn't have her chin propped up on her hand like she usually did. She had both of her elbows on the desk and was gently holding them with her gloved hands. Sousei was about to take his bag from where it was hanging from his desk, but he stopped.

"Miss Hitsujimoto, why are you always wearing gloves?"

She didn't answer. Sousei approached her desk and put his hand on the desk in front of her. Kuchina turned her face toward Sousei. She was clearly looking up at him, but she was also not looking at anyone. It seemed like she was pleading something, but also rejecting everything. Sousei felt like he was going to be sucked into her eyes. Yet it also felt like he was being pushed away.

"Do you want to know?" Kuchina asked in her low, flat voice.

"I do," Sousei said. He nodded.

I do... I want to know. But why? Because Sis ordered me to? Because I have to thoroughly investigate about Hitsujimoto? Just that...?

Kuchina stared at Sousei for a short time. Finally, she spoke.

"Okay."

She picked up her bag and stood up. It seemed that she planned to leave the classroom. Sousei also took his bag and followed her. Kuchina walked with almost completely silent footsteps. There were no high school girls who walked like that unless they were trained ballerinas.

That's just like…an assassin. Like me.

Sousei tried to silence his own footsteps. For a normal person, if someone who should be behind you seemed to suddenly disappear, you'd turn around. Kuchina wasn't like that. She kept walking quietly.

Hitsujimoto might want to settle things. She's inviting me to a deserted place...so she can finish me off.

Sousei prepared himself for the worst.

It's work. If I think of this as work, then it's nothing. I've been doing this since I was eleven. It was bound to turn out like this at some point anyway. Sis had intended it, and it's beyond awkward having a classmate in the same profession as me. It wouldn't be difficult to make someone like Hitsujimoto disappear. I'll end her, and my life will go back to how it was. A regular high school life like before—

Kuchina stopped in front of the shoe lockers. Sousei held his breath. There were two female students standing by the lockers. It seemed that they were waiting for someone. They were both classmates. Or more specifically, they were Asumi and her friend Moena.

"Huh...?"

Moena was much shorter than Asumi and loved to eat. She gave the impression that she was always cheerfully laughing. Everyone called her Moechan or just Moena and was fond of her. But now her face was distorted with hatred.

Asumi's expression was a familiar one: the face of a person on the verge of death after not having had the slightest idea that they were going to be killed. That's the face that Asumi was making now.

Kuchina looked at Asumi and Moena and then glanced at Sousei from the corner of her eye. She took a short breath and looked down.

"This—" Kuchina might have been trying to offer an excuse, but Sousei was the one who needed to explain, not Kuchina.

"N-no, it's not—!" he started to say.

"Let's go." Asumi grabbed Moena's arm and turned her back on Sousei.

"You're the worst, Takarai!" Moena shouted at him as Asumi dragged her away.

"No, it—it's not..." Sousei's voice trailed off.

†

Kuchina got on the subway at Tsukasachou Station. She changed trains at Shizukamachi Station and got off at Motomachi Station.

It was kind of surprising that she'd get on the subway.

Sousei was relatively calm. Or rather, his heart was so cold and seemed so numb that he felt nothing.

Taking the subway will definitely leave evidence, like security camera footage, proving that the two of us had been together. But if she plans to get rid of me, it seems better to avoid this kind of thing—

By the time they reached Motomachi Park, the sun had set, and it was kind of dark. Kuchina walked down a path in the park which was sparsely lit in places by the occasional lamppost.

Sousei thought about putting his earpiece in and contacting his sister. However, that seemed really troublesome.

I'll report to her afterward. Hitsujimoto probably plans to get rid of me, but that's not how this'll end. Once I'm done, I'll ask Sis about how to deal with the aftermath.

It wasn't the time of year when people would be out enjoying the cherry blossoms or autumnal leaves, so the only people around would be those cutting through the park as a shortcut. Kuchina walked deeper and deeper into the park, where those people wouldn't go past them.

"Is it okay?" Kuchina asked out of the blue.

"What?"

Kuchina shrugged slightly. "With Asumi. You had a misunderstanding, didn't you?"

"That has nothing to do with you."

"...Yeah, I guess not." Kuchina turned back to face Sousei. Her bag hit the

ground at the same time. That wasn't all. Her gloves. She had taken her gloves off. Both of them. She must have taken them off at some point. Sousei had carelessly not noticed.

There was a streetlight far away. This small path was a walking route in a park. There was no one around. There was probably nobody except Sousei and Kuchina within a 165-foot radius.

"It has nothing to do with me," she said.

It was fairly dark, so it was difficult to tell what kind of expression Kuchina had on her face. Sousei could only see the whites of her eyes clearly.

"It was you who killed Ikuo Ondou, wasn't it, Miss Hitsujimoto?" Sousei asked, keenly aware of her murderous intent.

"Well..." was all she said.

"You don't have to play innocent this late in the game. He was my prey."

"Weren't you the prey?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"That man could see people's death poems. If he recited theirs to them, that person would die."

"...So that was Ondou's cheat?"

Sousei felt satisfied. *I see*, he foolishly thought. At that moment, Kuchina charged at him.

She's going to hit me...?!

Kuchina swung her right arm and threw a punch. It would be a hook if they were boxing. A right hook. That's what Sousei saw it as. His first instinct was to block it rather than dodge. He tried to block her right hand with his left arm. It wasn't her fist. Her hand wasn't clenched; it was flat. Her fingers didn't really touch so much as just graze him just below his left wrist.

"Ah-"

When Sousei came to, he was on the ground in a heap. His eyes were halfopen. It was dark and he couldn't see well. He couldn't hear anything in particular.

...Huh? I died? Did I die? Yeah...I died. This feeling definitely means that I died. How? Why? I don't know. This is the first time I've died this way. But I've died. I was killed. Did something happen to me? She slapped me with her hand. That was all. I died just from that...? Is that a cheat...?

Was Kuchina still around? She wasn't in his field of vision. But there was someone nearby. Sousei could feel it. Kuchina definitely hadn't left yet. She was next to him. Sousei instantly jumped up.



"...You came back to life...!" It was Kuchina's voice.

She was there after all. She was a step and a half, or at most two steps, away from him. Should he flee or attack? Sousei hesitated in his judgment. He was unconsciously bracing himself. Kuchina stepped forward smoothly.

For now, I'll flee—

Sousei tried to jump back. But by then, his right wrist had already been grabbed. Her hand was really cold.

When he came to, he was on the ground. Again. It was the same as last time. No, actually, it wasn't exactly the same. This time, Sousei's eyes were closed. He had closed his eyes before he died.

...I was attacked. Just by being touched by Hitsujimoto... Her gloves. That's right, she removed her gloves. Her hands were bare. Is that why? I see. So that's why—

Kuchina was there. He couldn't see her, but she had to be. But where was she? That was the question. Standing away from him and waiting to see what would happen. There was a good chance that was the case. That's what Sousei assumed.

I'll run as soon as I get up. Basically, it's fine as long as she doesn't touch me—

Sousei tried to get up. Something touched his right shoulder sooner than he realized that his assumption had been wrong.

Sousei was still collapsed with his eyes closed.

—I died? For a third time? No way. What is this? What is this way of dying? It's just like having a switch turned off. It seems more...simple, maybe? Compared to the feeling I usually get when I die. But that's so much creepier. Is this really the third time? Or have I died more times than that? Have I actually died so many times...that the next time I die, it'll be over—?

He couldn't move. Sousei held his breath desperately. Was Kuchina here or not?

...Did I actually die? I might have used up all my lives and am now in the afterlife. It's pitch-black, there's no one here, and there aren't any places...like

this forever, for eternity, just stillness— This might be a real death...

"Why?" Kuchina asked in a low voice.

Judging from how he was hearing her voice, she wasn't up close. She was maybe a dozen or so feet away. Relief washed over Sousei.

That means...I'm not dead! I still have some lives left. I'm alive...

He sensed Kuchina backing away.

"... Why won't you die?" Kuchina demanded before she took off running.

Once he clearly heard the sound of her footsteps fading away, Sousei got up. Kuchina had already vanished into the darkness.

17

The Truth and a Sprinkling of Lies

Would you mind if we talked in the corridor between the buildings after school today?

That was the message he got first thing in the morning. He looked it over, still lying in bed.

"...Why'd she say it like that?" he muttered without thinking. "Why is Shiramori being so polite...?"

Sousei worried about how to reply for about twenty minutes. During that time, his body moved by itself, taking a shower, eating breakfast, and getting ready for the day.

"Well, obviously, I have to say okay..."

†

School was the same as usual. Kuchina was sitting in the back seat by the window, her chin propped up on her gloved hand. She was looking outside. Wakkuu came and said "Yo" to Sousei. Yukisada Hayashi was pleasant from the morning. Asumi said "Morning" to Sousei when they made eye contact, but she and her friend Moena were trying not to let him into their field of vision. That being said, Sousei wasn't especially close with Moena, so that wasn't particularly different from usual. For the most part, it was about the same as always. Or rather, it felt a bit eerie.

...Was going out with Shiramori just my misunderstanding? Besides that, everything really is normal. But the messages from her are definitely real, so I guess this isn't normal...

Sousei didn't know how many times he opened the messaging app chat screen on his phone and rechecked the message before the end of school. He scrolled back up through their chat history. Seeing all their pleasant interactions made him feel like he'd faint from the agony. Even though it was unbearably painful, he couldn't help rereading them.

I managed to get through until the end of school...

Around the time school ended, Sousei felt utterly exhausted. When he reached the corridor, memories of Asumi flashed through his mind like a kaleidoscope.

This is where it started, and this is where it ends, huh...?

Sousei leaned heavily against the parapet and absentmindedly watched the sports club students go by.

But it also feels like nothing really started. We basically just went to see a movie. And even then, we really did just watch the movie. Someday...I might remember that once, even for a moment, even someone like me was able to have a girlfriend...

Eventually the corridor started to empty, and Sousei got nervous. But Asumi didn't keep him waiting. She got there relatively quickly.

"Sorry, did you wait long?" Asumi didn't try to look at Sousei in the eyes. But her face definitely wasn't grim. Rather, it was soft.

"Ah, no, not at all..." Sousei held on to some hope for a moment.

Perhaps this isn't a breakup talk, but a discussion to make up? Come to think of it, we haven't gone out long enough to break up or even say that we were going out—

Asumi stood next to Sousei. Apparently, she wanted to talk without making eye contact.

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"I like your face. It's my type," she said.
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[&]quot;...Huh? Face? Mine...?"

[&]quot;Yeah, your face."

"B-but. I— Well, speaking for myself...I'm not really that good-looking at all, I guess I'd say?"

"Moena always tells me I have bad taste," Asumi said, smiling slightly. "But I tell her to leave it alone. Moena is really superficial and only interested in good-looking guys. She likes cool idols and stuff, but I'm not really into those kinds of guys. Or can't seem to get into them, I guess."

"...I see."

"So at first it was your appearance. I thought it was good. When someone's on your mind, you end up looking at them a lot. And from there, I started thinking that I liked how you spoke and your voice and stuff. I dunno. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was kind of peaceful."

"Peaceful—I've never been called that by anyone before."

"Maybe I should say calm? Or that you seem nice?"

"...I have no idea. I don't really know myself..."

"Like you're not frivolous and seem like you wouldn't lie. You seem sincere, I guess?"

"Sincere..." Sousei was staring at the floor.

...Even though I'm a lump of lies. Just like Shiramori's father... No, I'm worse than that. There aren't many people who lie as much as I do. Even me being here looking like a normal high school student is strange. It's only because I'm a liar that I can stand here...

Asumi was silent for a moment and then opened her mouth again.

"Moena asked me if maybe I had been 'tilting at windmills."

Sousei didn't respond, and Asumi went on.

"There's a phrase like that, apparently," she continued. "I hadn't heard it before, but it means that you're fighting an imaginary enemy. Strange, huh? I probably had been doing that. I just jumped to the conclusion that you were that kind of person without even asking."

Well, I am a liar— Sousei wanted to tell her.

It's not that Shiramori isn't a good judge of character. I'm...like a swindler, covered in lies, body and soul... I'm a big, hopeless liar. You can't help it if you get deceived. It's not Shiramori's fault. It's a hundred percent entirely my fault. But—

He couldn't say that.

—I have to lie. If I don't keep telling lies, I...can't be here anymore. Saying hi to my friends, talking about silly things and laughing. I won't be able to do any of that.

Lies were mandatory. They were a prerequisite for Sousei.

...If I don't lie, the only thing I'd have left...is work. Killing people. I'd only be able to think about work...

"How about you, Sousei?"

Asumi's question caught Sousei off guard.

"...Ah? ...Huh? Wh...what?"

"Did you like me?" Asumi was looking at him. Her mouth was smiling, but the look in her eyes was serious. "Or did you not feel much about me either way? I asked you to go out with me, so you just went with it?"

"Th-that's not..."

"What did you like about me? What kind of things?"

"Shiramori, y-you are"—Sousei tried to correct himself and call her "Asumi" instead, but he couldn't. He couldn't call her "Asumi" anymore. He lowered his gaze—"cute."

"Got it." She sniffed.

When he looked at her, Asumi was gazing up at the ceiling. She must have been feeling extremely let down, disappointed, and hurt, but Sousei couldn't comfort her. It would be like an assailant injuring an innocent person with a knife and then trying to tend to their wounds. It'd be more than just despicable; it wouldn't make sense and would likely cause the victim nothing but fear. At that point, it'd even be bizarre. He couldn't frighten her after he'd already hurt her.

Asumi turned back to face Sousei and bowed her head. "Thank you for the short time we had together."

Sousei barely managed to shake his head.

When Asumi lifted her head, she looked somewhat refreshed.

"Ah, can I ask you one more thing, Sousei—?" She frowned in distress and bit her lip once. Then she corrected herself. "Takarai? Do you like Miss Hitsujimoto?"

"No," Sousei denied firmly and immediately. "No, I don't."

"Really?" Asumi laughed. It seemed like a teasing laugh. "Because you're a liar, aren't you?"

Sousei almost forced a laugh on impulse. But he wasn't in a mood to laugh, so his face contorted into an odd half-crying, half-laughing grimace.

"Sorry I'm such a liar," he said in a faint voice.

Asumi, who was already walking away, didn't stop. She probably didn't hear him.

†

Sousei returned to the classroom. Kuchina was there. She was the only one there, sitting at the back by the window, her chin propped up on her hand, looking outside. There's no way she hadn't noticed him. But she didn't move an inch. Sousei went to his desk. He started reaching for his bag but stopped. He didn't feel like sitting down, either. He sat lightly on the edge of his desk.

"I was dumped by Shiramori," he said, his voice ringing hollowly around the classroom that was empty except for the two of them.

As expected, Kuchina did not move a muscle.

"For that"—only her low voice disturbed the air. It was faint and hoarse—"you have my condolences."

Sousei laughed. He couldn't help it. It felt like if he didn't laugh, his heart would break from the pain. When he finally lost his ability to laugh, Sousei

glanced out the window, breathing hard. The evening sun had turned the sky red, and dark shadows were falling on the town.

"Was it love?" Kuchina said abruptly. She said it in such a flat, monotonous way that Sousei misunderstood what she meant for a moment.

...No, that's not right. She's asking me if I loved Shiramori, isn't she? Hitsujimoto isn't trying to figure out if she liked me herself or anything like that. That's obviously impossible—

Sousei let out a breath. "...Shiramori asked me that as well. I couldn't really answer."

"She was hurt."

"You know about that? How come—" Sousei felt like raising his voice but managed to suppress it somehow. "You don't have to tell me. I already know. I'm the worst."

"You regret it?"

"If you're going to ask me questions, could you speak in full sentences? And you should look at me when you're speaking." Sousei was irritated. His emotions were boiling up.

Kuchina took her hand off her chin and faced him. Sousei suddenly remembered something. It was right after they had become second-year students.

Kuchina had been trying to leave the classroom. Coincidentally, Wakkuu had been clowning around with friends around there and had almost bumped into her.

"-Don't touch me!"

Kuchina had furiously hollered at Wakkuu.

"Ah, sorry," Wakkuu had apologized, but Kuchina glared at him even more.

When Kuchina left the classroom, Wakkuu exaggerated looking afraid before turning that into laughter. That had happened.

After that, everyone thought Hitsujimoto was a really scary person and that

it'd be better to stay away from her. Let sleeping dogs lie and whatnot...

Kuchina wasn't glaring at Sousei right now. She was just looking at him. Her gaze was so direct that he almost shrank away unintentionally.

It's not that she just glares at everyone. She doesn't like being touched. I died just from coming in contact with her. She can take someone's life simply by touching them, so she doesn't want to be touched by anyone—or she can't let herself be touched by anyone…?

"Miss Hitsujimoto"—Sousei pulled his chair out and sat down before continuing—"do you like school?"

"Why?" Kuchina kept her eyes on Sousei.

"You're always here, aren't you? You arrive before anyone else, and you always stay in the classroom."

"So?"

"You're usually looking at the scenery outside, but you're actually listening to what everyone else is saying, aren't you? You even knew about me and Shiramori."

"What are you trying to say?"

"What am I trying to say?" Sousei pressed his hands on his thighs. "I wonder..." He sighed and looked around the classroom.

"I like school, Miss Hitsujimoto. I particularly like people like Wakkuu who seem to be having fun. Every single day, I wonder what's so fascinating about it. It's like how people say that there's an age when even the most minor things seem funny. Even the little things in life could be important. Even minor changes can be huge events. There are boring days, too, of course. And there are people who subtly bring up topics when their friends are feeling down, right? That's exactly what Wakkuu does. Shiramori is also that kind of person. I wonder why they're so considerate of others. I couldn't possibly be like them."

"I couldn't, either."

"Right? If you touched them for the briefest of moments, they'd all die." Sousei felt his throat tighten up as he said it.

Kuchina dropped her gaze to her desk and clasped her right hand tightly with her gloved left hand.

Sousei continued. "...It might not be true for everyone, but they all seem happy. These days are the height of happiness, but they probably don't notice that. They're probably so happy that they don't need to notice. When I see people like that...it's like I feel fulfilled, I guess. It makes me feel like there might even be meaning in what I'm doing."

Sousei shook his head. He didn't want to talk about that. He shouldn't talk about that. But he couldn't stop.

"There are some unimaginable assholes in the world, aren't there? You should be well aware of that, Miss Hitsujimoto. Like people who take pleasure in trampling over others to get what they want. Or people who thoughtlessly kill others as if they're just moving chess pieces. In my case, I don't just kill whoever. I only ever take jobs that get rid of those kinds of assholes. There are people like that, aren't there? People who need to be killed. It's better for the world and everyone else in it when they die. If we let those kinds of people be free, it's possible that the students at this school might become their victims. When I do my job, those scumbugs disappear. Every time I do my job, the number of assholes in the world decreases. Even though it's not really the kind of job that I can be praised for, it does have meaning. I'm not a good person. I might be a bad person, but people like me are a necessary evil."

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"That's a very—"
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"—difficult thing you're thinking about." Kuchina's eyes softened ever so slightly. She might even have been smiling.

"Would you mind coming with me now?" she asked in a proper, full sentence. "There are some people I'd like you to meet. My parents."

[&]quot;Hm?"

18

We're Looking at the Same Stars

Sousei left school with Kuchina and got on the subway at Tsukasachou Station. It was quite crowded on the train. She moved to the corner of the car and didn't grab the hanging strap. Sousei stood next to her.

A considerable number of people got on at the next station, and passengers started jostling each other. Kuchina was acting casually, but Sousei could feel her really tensing up. She was constantly vigilant in making sure no one touched her.

"Miss Hitsujimoto." Sousei indicated with his eyes that Kuchina should move closer to the wall. She looked a bit dubious but moved so that her back was to the wall.

Sousei was jostled by other passengers and nearly bumped into her, but he kept his left hand grasping the hanging strap and placed his right against the wall, somehow managing to keep himself up without touching her.

Becoming a human wall was so much easier than being a killer.

Kuchina lowered her gaze. "Thanks," she said in a whisper.

If Sousei wasn't mistaken, her ears were a little red.

"...Isn't it all right as long as your hands are covered?" he asked. Kuchina didn't answer.

†

They changed trains at Shizukamachi Station. Sousei wondered if they were

heading to Sharinchou, but he was wrong. Kuchina got on the subway heading in the opposite direction. They got off at Motomachi Station.

Before they exited the station, his phone rang. It was a call from his sister. He sent her a message saying that he couldn't answer at the moment and would contact her later. Then he turned his phone off. Sousei didn't know how things would turn out, but it was finally going to be settled. He just had that feeling. One way or another, he didn't want anyone, even his sister, to get in the way. This was something that Sousei had to finish with his own hands. Or maybe Kuchina would finish it with her own hands.

Kuchina walked through the shopping district and headed toward the highend residential area uptown.

Sousei spotted the first star of the evening. A veil of darkness was already falling on the world.

Kuchina stopped in front of a house. It was surrounded by a white concrete fence and had lush trees in the garden. It was a large, grand house, but it wasn't new. The fence and outer walls of the house were covered in ivy. Kuchina took something that looked like a remote control out of her bag. She used it and the iron gate opened automatically.

"Please, come in."

Sousei did as he was told and stepped onto the cobblestone pavement of the premises. Kuchina followed him in and then closed the gate with the remote control. The front door to her house had an electronic lock requiring both fingerprint authentication and a PIN.

They went inside, and Kuchina took her shoes off before turning the light on. The entrance was spacious but empty.

"This way." Kuchina walked down a marble hallway. Sousei took off his shoes and followed her.

At the end of the hallway was the living room, which was also spacious but mostly empty. It only had a dining table and one chair. There were no TVs, cabinets, or sofas to be found. The drapes were closed.

Adjacent to the living room was the kitchen, which was equipped with a

refrigerator and microwave. There was something strange on the kitchen counter. It was an antique phone. A vintage black rotary-dial phone. It was Sousei's first time seeing one in person.

"You can sit down if you like," Kuchina said. She walked toward the kitchen.

Sousei put his hand on the back of a chair but didn't sit down.

"This is your house, Miss Hitsujimoto?"

There was no answer.

Kuchina opened the fridge and took out a plastic bottle. It looked like mineral water. She took two cups off a built-in shelf and poured water into them.

While she was doing that, a *brrrrrring-brrrrrrring...*sound started ringing out. It was like the sound of bells being rung continuously.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrring...

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrring...

The sound didn't stop. It just kept ringing.

It was probably the sound of a phone. Yeah. This was definitely the sound of a rotary-dial telephone.

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrring...

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrring...

Brrrrring-brrrrrring-brrrrrring...

"You're not going to answer it?" Sousei asked.

Kuchina shook her head slowly. It was probably a call that she should have answered. The fact that she stopped pouring water midway and stood still until the ringing stopped was evidence of that. In some ways, it wasn't dissimilar to what Sousei did when he tried to ignore calls from his sister. Even if he intended to ignore it, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Kuchina brought the two water-filled cups over and placed one of them on the table. She brought the other one to her mouth and took a sip. Perhaps she was trying to make a show of tasting it for poison. "I have a dream sometimes," Kuchina said quietly.

Sousei picked up his cup. He was thirsty and drank about half of the cold water in one gulp.

"What kind of dream?" he asked her.

"One with lots of people. People I know and people I don't. In my dream, those people are my friends or family—"

She didn't know if it was at home or school, but she was surrounded by parents, siblings and friends in a warm, cheerful place. In her dream, they ate food, talked, and laughed.

It was a dream.

That sort of situation was impossible, so she was sure it had to be a dream. Besides, she saw that same dream many times. So it couldn't be anything besides a dream. She understood that.

Since it was a dream, she wanted to keep talking with her family and friends more. Just a little longer would do. She wanted to be there.

"But then I make a mistake. I accidentally touch someone. The tip of my finger just slightly grazes someone... It doesn't even feel like I touch them..."

Her friends and family fell with a thud. They were already dead.

The people around her saw and screamed.

"No." She instantly tried to defend herself. "It wasn't on purpose. I didn't mean to do it."

But nobody believed her claims. They refused to listen at all. They didn't have time for that because they were all scrambling to escape as fast as they could. There were people getting shoved and falling to the ground. On reflex, she went over to try to help them back up. As soon as she touched them, they'd die, too. Again. The sound of people screaming rang out. More died. She had killed again.

"No... No. Stop. It's not like that. I just—"

She was surrounded by corpses before she realized. Piles of corpses all

around. They were all her friends and family. Besides her, there was only one person left standing.

"...The last person is different each time I have the dream. In the dream I had yesterday, it was you, Takarai—"

"Please stay away!" the last person shouted. "Don't come near me. Please don't kill me. I don't want to die!"

"No, that's not what I want to do," she repeated as she approached the last person. "But...you're the last one. It's just me and you left. That's probably my reasoning. Everyone else died because of me. I killed them. I think leaving only you on this earth would actually be crueler. So I have to kill you as well—"

"The last person was me." Sousei placed his cup on the table. It seemed there hadn't been any poison in it. "But if you killed me as well, you'd be all alone, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah." Kuchina placed her cup on the table. "That would be better. If it was only me— If there was no one in the world except me, then there'd be nothing to worry about."

"Even if you were by yourself forever?"

"It's just a dream, after all."

"Oh, right. We were talking about a dream."

"But my dream last night was different from usual."

"How so?"

"You didn't die. I killed you so many times. But no matter how many times I touched you, you wouldn't die. And then I woke up. In the end, I wasn't able to kill you."

Kuchina was looking at him. She was hardly even blinking.

"So that's why you brought me here?"

"I told you, didn't I?" Kuchina walked away. "There are some people I'd like you to meet."

Sousei had carelessly not noticed until now. There were stairs in the corner of

the living room. They didn't go up. They were stairs going down. This house must have had a basement. Kuchina went down the stairs, and Sousei followed her.

At the end of the stairs stood an extremely sturdy-looking metal door that looked like it could belong to a bank vault. Naturally, it was locked. It had an electronic lock. Kuchina unlocked it using fingerprint authentication and a PIN code. She spun something that looked like a ship's steering wheel, and the door opened surprisingly smoothly. The area on the other side of the door was instantly lit with pale blue light. It was probably set up to do that.

"...Phew, it's cold—" Sousei flinched unintentionally.

Cold air was gushing out of the pale blue basement room like white smoke. They were blasted with it. Kuchina continued into the basement room despite it.

"...We're going in?" Sousei hesitantly followed her in.

It was unnaturally cold inside. It was an abnormal coldness. It might have been worse than the outdoors in the dead of winter, with an even lower temperature.

The basement was probably about 175 square feet or so. The pale blue light on the ceiling wasn't very bright. But the interior of the room was still visible enough. There was a sofa. A cabinet. A table. Chairs. There was even a TV. This was a room. A normal room, if you could call it that. It had more of a lived-in look than the living room on the ground floor. It was an approximately 175-square-foot living room that had been frozen.

It wasn't just a room. There were even inhabitants. There were a middle-aged man and woman sitting on a sofa which looked like it could seat three or four people. Kuchina stood in front of them.

"Mom, Dad, I'm home," she said.

If someone had their eyes closed and heard her say that, they probably wouldn't have known it was Kuchina's voice. Sousei couldn't believe his eyes or ears. Kuchina was beaming with innocent, childlike joy.

"...By any chance, would those people happen to be...your biological parents,

Miss Hitsujimoto?"

When he spoke, the chill reached Sousei's throat. He felt like he was about to have a coughing fit. Kuchina faced him.

Her face had completely changed to an icy, emotionless expression as she continued.

"...don't know my birth parents. Apparently, my mother died when she gave birth to me."

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"...Huh, so—"
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"Katsuhiko and Yoshimi Hitsujimoto. These people raised me. They're my mom and dad. My parents. My family."

"But..." Sousei strained his eyes and looked at Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto.

They looked like they were around their fifties. They didn't have any distinctive characteristics. Their appearances would be difficult to recall. Neither of them looked anything like Kuchina. They were dressed as if they were relaxing at home on a Sunday afternoon.

Weren't they cold? Perhaps they should be dressed more warmly. No, that wouldn't be necessary. The two of them were obviously not breathing. Their hearts probably weren't beating, either. They were dead. Suffice to say, they weren't Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto anymore. They had been Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto when they were alive. Now they were being preserved via freezing. They were two corpses.

"I've been like this since I was born." Kuchina sat on the edge of the sofa that her parents were sitting—had been sat—on. "Of course, I don't remember that, but my earliest memory is of being in a cage. Not metaphorically. An actual cage. A big cage. I had a few caretakers. They gave me food and drinks while being careful not to touch me with even a finger. I was taught how to read and write. I was ordered to do this and that, and I did. And then I killed people when I was told. I was praised when I followed orders. But I wasn't happy."

Several people had looked after her. Or rather, had taken her away and raised

her. She had been overly special right from birth. Several people had plotted to use her. So they had tried to tame her.

"It was decided that I would go to school. But it would be unnatural if I didn't have a house. If I didn't have a family. Two people who had been my caretakers took on the roles of being my mother and father."

That had been the people sitting next to her now: Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto.

She looked at them.

"I was pitiful, I guess. My mom and dad were kind. I tried to steer clear of other people as much as possible while I was outside, but there were people waiting for me when I got home. They were just like a real family."

Sousei tried to say something. But no words came to him. He brought his hand to his mouth. His fingers were shaking. So were his lips. Maybe it was because of the low temperature.

"My mom always used to put her hand on my shoulder and smile. My mischievous dad sometimes came up behind me and tapped me on the back to try to startle me. Even though that was incredibly dangerous. I killed people when they touched my bare skin. It didn't matter if they were wearing clothes. They could have died instantly if they even slightly touched my exposed skin. They were both cautious, but they weren't overly afraid of me. But I"—Kuchina sounded like she was about to cry—"was scared. If I made just the slightest mistake, I might kill my mom and dad. I could lose them. I was always scared. I couldn't handle it anymore. I wanted to quit my job."

"That wasn't..." It was extremely difficult for Sousei to get his voice out. It was way too cold in this basement room. "Miss Hitsujimoto, it wasn't you...was it? The one who made them...your mom and dad...die?"

"This isn't a job that I do because I like it." She stood up. "I've been forced to do it. I had no choice but to do it. Same as now. My mom and dad suffered this fate because I said I wanted to quit my job."

"... They were killed? By the o-organization that k-keeps y-you...?"

"Do you know what 'suspended animation' is?"

"...Huh? Like in science fiction...and stuff. That ...?"

"I was told that they weren't dead. That they were just frozen and had fallen asleep. If I kept doing my job properly as I had been up till now, they would wake up one day."

"B...but...th-that..."

"You think I'm a fool, right?" Her eyes softened and the corners of her mouth lifted upward, smiling. "But I believe it. I want to believe it."

Though a little too late, Sousei noticed something was wrong. His extremities, like his fingers, toes, and tongue, were numb and quivering. It wasn't because of the cold. He felt dizzy. His head hurt. It hurt really badly. He couldn't stand anymore. Sousei sank to his knees. He was having trouble breathing and felt nauseous.

"...Ahhh—it was poison...?"

It was the water. The water he drank upstairs. He had drunk about half a cup or so of the mineral water. Kuchina had put it to her mouth first. Had she just been pretending to drink? Sousei had been careless. It was odorless and tasteless. He had thought it was pure mineral water.

"Neurotoxin. Similar to tetrodotoxin, the poison from puffer fish, it doesn't have any taste or smell." Kuchina walked toward the door. "But it's also different in that it dissolves well in water. I've used it a few times on people who refuse to come near me."

Sousei couldn't say anything anymore. His consciousness was paralyzed, he was finding it hard to breathe, and his blood pressure was dropping. Soon his whole body would probably become paralyzed, he'd lose consciousness, and then he'd die.

Even if he died, Sousei would come back to life as long as he had some lives left. In this freezer-like underground room. Actually, no, that wasn't the right wording. It was a freezer. Once he came back to life, he'd have nothing to do but wait to freeze to death in this frozen storage chamber. He'd freeze to death, come back to life, then freeze to death again. That would continue until he used up all his lives.

"Good-bye, Takarai. This is all I could come up with," Kuchina said. It seemed like she had to force the words out.

Before she finished talking, Sousei took out an ice pick—shaped weapon that he had concealed in his jacket sleeve. He plunged it into the gaps of his lower ribs at a forty-five-degree angle and thrust it up into his liver. Straightaway, he pulled it out and thrust it between two of his upper ribs and into his heart with determination. Then he buried the weapon deep into the back of his neck, piercing his brain. Sousei died instantly.

The three-point method. He had practiced it a lot. As long as his limbs could move, he could carry it out instantaneously the moment he decided he was going to do it. It was pretty much a guaranteed suicide method.

When he came back to life, Sousei was in a crouching position on the floor. In his right hand, he was still loosely holding his concealed weapon, covered in his own blood. He jumped up and dashed for the door of the basement room.

"Ah...!" Kuchina had been about to leave the basement room at that very moment.

First of all, she had removed her gloves as expected. Even if Sousei attacked her with his concealed weapon, Kuchina wouldn't back away. Instead, she came at him with both of her eyes wide-open. Sousei shuddered at the gleam in her eyes. It was as if her determination to kill had turned into a raging fire and was gushing out. This wasn't mere hostility. She was incredibly fixated. On living. She didn't want to kill. She wanted to live. Unlike Sousei, she only had one life. If she died just once, her life would end. It wasn't just her life. She would lose everything.

That didn't necessarily mean that Sousei didn't falter. He also didn't go easy on her. He couldn't. He didn't have that luxury. He thrust the weapon in his hand toward her forehead. If a razor-sharp murder weapon was coming right at someone, they wouldn't be able to stay calm. If they were a normal person. Of course, Kuchina wasn't normal.

She reached her bare hand out toward Sousei's right hand, without any fear of the weapon he was holding. Even that simple gesture could kill Sousei. Sousei anticipated it and quickly retracted his hand. Kuchina looked bewildered, but

only for a moment. Sousei only had that one second of hesitation. It didn't have to be his right hand. It could be anywhere. If she touched him, she would win.

"Kill me—!" he yelled as he hurled himself at her.

"Huh...?!"

Sousei wondered where on his body she had touched him and with which hand. It was like casually turning off a switch, that abrupt—

When he came back to life, he was still grappling with Kuchina. Just as he had planned.

The deaths caused by the *cheat* Kuchina was born with were more instant than any other deaths that Sousei had experienced up until then. They were plain and lacked depth. Most deaths allowed him to realize that he was dying, but not these. These were a loss of consciousness that refused to be embellished with words. That came with a mysterious sense of horror, but even if Sousei died, he was resurrected instantly.

"Argh...!" Kuchina might have tried to shove Sousei away while he was dead.

She had probably tried to leave Sousei's dead body in the middle of the basement room and close the door behind her. But before she could do that, he had come back to life.

He seemed about to drop his weapon, so he regripped it in reverse. They struggled with each other and left the basement room, bumping into the open door on the way.

"Why...?!" Kuchina pressed her left hand against the back of Sousei's neck.

Her touch was cold like ice. *I've done it now*, Sousei thought. The death like having a switch being turned off—his consciousness that he was supposed to lose instantly, for some reason, was still crystal clear.

"Wha..." Kuchina's mouth opened wide. Sousei was also surprised.

Kuchina had touched him with her bare hands. He should have died. But he hadn't. He hadn't died. Sousei had no idea what was going on. But he knew what he should do. He used the weapon he was holding with a reverse grip and tried to aim it below Kuchina's left ear. If he stabbed her there, it would reach

her brain without her hard skull getting in the way. He'd used this method of killing several times before. It wasn't that difficult. In this kind of situation, it would actually be almost surprisingly easy. The tip of the weapon was only a couple of inches—in fact, less than half an inch—away from Kuchina's skin.

That's where his hand came to a complete stop. Even though he could kill her. And Kuchina Hitsujimoto had tried to kill him. And in a really cruel way at that. If she had gotten her way, would Sousei have been able to escape from the basement room before he ran out of lives? If he hadn't, he would have frozen to death repeatedly and ended up as a frozen corpse, just like Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto.

He'd kill her. He should kill her. Was there any reason not to? As he questioned himself internally, he'd been hugging Kuchina.

He suddenly realized what he was doing. He'd been about to kill her with his concealed weapon. But he'd been clinging to her body. His left arm was pressed against her back to stop her from getting away. Their current situation could probably be called an embrace.

"Ah, s-sorry," he apologized. What should he do after apologizing? Sousei didn't know himself.

What had Kuchina said? Sousei couldn't quite make it out.

Kuchina tore herself away from Sousei and ran up the stairs. Sousei decided to go up the stairs, too.

The door to the basement room was still open. He briefly wondered if it was okay to leave it open. He went up the stairs three at time, still worried about the wide-open door.

Kuchina wasn't on the ground floor. Sousei ran down the marble hallway toward the entrance. There was a loud bang. Perhaps it was the sound of Kuchina slamming the front door. Sousei put his shoes on and went outside. The iron gate wasn't open. It seemed Kuchina had climbed over without opening it. Sousei cleared his ears but couldn't hear any footsteps. There was a dog barking somewhere far away. He could also hear cars. But that was all.

Sousei went back inside the house. He went back down the stairs and into the basement room, where his bag was lying on the floor. He picked up his completely cold bag and started to leave.

Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto were sitting on the sofa the same as before. If you overlooked that they were frozen, they just looked like a happy couple relaxing and watching TV together.

"I nearly became like you..." he said.

The image of Kuchina sitting next to her parents appeared in the back of his mind. That was definitely not the first time she had done that. She possibly came to this cold room sometimes, perhaps even frequently, to spend time with her parents. But no matter how much she talked or smiled at them, she never got a response. But she probably still told them about what had happened that day. She might even have talked to them about Sousei.

"...Thanks for having me."

Sousei left the basement room, closing the metal door behind him. He didn't move from that spot for a little while. Kuchina Hitsujimoto's face came to mind. Those piercing, burning eyes, and that fragile smile that looked like it was going to break. It reminded him of Kuchina sitting alone in the classroom, looking out the window with her chin propped up on her hand. That low voice, as if it had been forced out, was probably a reflection of how she lived. Sousei took out his phone and called his sister.

"...Sousei?" his sister asked suspiciously.

Sousei got straight to the point.

"I want you to leave the handling of Kuchina Hitsujimoto to me."

"What's this about all of a sudden? You haven't contacted me for—"

"Please," Sousei repeated himself, his phone gripped tightly in his hand. "Please, Sis. I'm begging you."

For some reason, Sousei was convinced that his sister would give in. And she did.

19

We're Friends, but We're Not Friends

He had a dream.

Just like Kuchina Hitsujimoto, Sousei Takarai also often had dreams. It wasn't exactly the same from beginning to end every time. But it was pretty much the same.

He'd had that dream more times than he could count over many years. So he instantly recognized it even while he was asleep.

His dream was of that darkness.

Sousei was curled up and holding his breath in that dark place. It was as if his eyes were shut tight. He couldn't see anything. His breathing sounded unusually loud to him. He felt like he could even hear his heart beating. It wasn't completely dark everywhere. If he looked around, he could find places where faint, thin beams of light were shining in from above.

But it was no good...

Everyone was drawn in toward the light. It wasn't just Sousei in this darkness. There were forty-nine people, including him.

They each had a sword made from stone and were playing hide-and-seek in the dark. No. This wasn't hide-and-seek.

If someone finds me—

"Sou."

Sousei caught his breath when someone called out to him. It was a quiet voice.

Should he run? That wouldn't be any good. It would actually be better not to move. Besides, Sousei knew who that voice belonged to.

"Sou, it's me. It's Ukihiko."

Sousei didn't answer, and Ukihiko laughed in the darkness.

"You're so cautious, aren't you, Sou? You can't trust me?"

...That's not true.

"It's okay. You don't have to answer. I think you'll be all right, but you should be careful."

I'll be all right...?

Ukihiko left. Sousei couldn't see anything, but he knew Ukihiko left. Sousei was alone again. He was all alone in the darkness.

Ukihiko might be all right... He's the one I was closest with... I wonder why I didn't tell him where I was...

Sousei's father had a lot of children. They didn't know if they all shared the same blood. But his father had a lot of children, at any rate. Some had even been raised in the same house. Some hadn't. His father had shut those fortynine into this dark place that was like a cave or tunnel or stone labyrinth. All forty-nine of them were the same age.

... Father gathered the forty-nine for this reason...

"I found you!" someone yelled in the dark. It sounded like Taira. Sousei's brother from a different mother. His body was strangely large, and he was scarily comfortable with killing living things. He was a horrifying man. He was often called "Tyrant" as a pun on his name.

Sousei almost screamed. But he couldn't. He shouldn't say anything. Tyrant's voice was far away. The person he found wasn't Sousei. It was someone else.

"They went that way," Tyrant said.

He was with someone.

"Got it," the other person replied. That voice belonged to Kenzou, another half brother.

Kenzou's physique wasn't much different from Sousei's, but he was a savage guy who was partial to blades. Kenzou had torn Sousei's nails off with a knife once, then laughed hysterically as he watched Sousei cry.

"Aagh!" someone else cried out in a horrifying voice. "Stop! Ah, it hurts! Help!"

Sousei covered his ears. He didn't know who it was, but they had been captured by Tyrant and Kenzou. Those two seemed to stab the person repeatedly with their stone swords, silencing their victim.

"All right, that makes thirteen people so far," Tyrant declared with satisfaction.

"I wonder how many people are left," Kenzou said with a foolish laugh.

Even though they'd just killed someone. Someone the same age as them. A child. Their sibling.

"Well, so far the two of us are killing off everyone else, according to plan," Tyrant said.

"The real contest will start later."

"Only one person can remain. Will it be me or you? No hard feelings, Kenzou."

What a horrible dream, Sousei thought every time he had it.

Because this was something that had actually happened to him. Every time he had this dream, he had to survive in this darkness. It wasn't that he wanted to survive or didn't want to die. It was simply that he didn't want to be killed. He didn't want to be killed, but he also couldn't stand this. He wanted things to be easier. What could he do to make things easier? Was being killed by someone the only way? No. Just like he thought before, he didn't want to be killed. In the end, all he could do was sit still in the darkness. Because he didn't want to die, but he didn't want to kill anyone, either. Whenever he felt someone's presence, he crawled away. Never going near the light. He had had enough of this. He wished he could just die already.

"Sou."

How long had he been in that darkness? Sousei should have been starving by

now. But he could no longer tell whether he was hungry. He was parched, though. So parched that his throat hurt. What were you supposed to call it when it hurt this much? It didn't matter.

...Oh... But that voice is...Ukihiko?

"Sou. It's me. Come. Come here. It's over. Finally. I've finished it."

It was a weak, fragmented voice. But Sousei could still hear it clearly.

"Ukihiko..."

His body didn't listen to what he told it to do. He crawled forward in the darkness. At the other end was a faint light. It seemed someone was sitting there. Ukihiko. It was Ukihiko.

"Sou..."

Ukihiko was covered in blood. He was injured. Badly. He only had one arm. His right arm. Had his left arm gone off somewhere? Both his ears had been cut off, and his left eye had been scooped out.

"It's all right..." Ukihiko laughed.

"Taira...Tyrant...and Kenzou...they've all been taken care of. I managed it somehow. It's okay... I can still see. Because I still have one of my eyes..."

"Ukihiko...Ukihiko..."

"...Sou, do you have a sword? Mine broke... I don't have it anymore..."

"I—I have one, but..."

"I have a...favor to ask...Sou..."

"What? Oh, I get it..."

Sousei and Ukihiko had been close. It had been difficult to think of his father's other children as brothers and sisters, or as family. That had been really difficult. But Sousei and Ukihiko had never stolen anything from each other or deceived each other in any way. They had never been violent toward each other. Ukihiko had been killed by that horrifying Tyrant and Kenzou. But he couldn't lay his hands on Sousei. Ukihiko probably meant he couldn't bring himself to kill Sousei.

"I understand, Ukihiko. Yeah. I got it. I'll do it. I'll do it myself. No one else is left, right? It's just us. I was...just running and hiding the whole time. I didn't do anything... Couldn't do anything. If only person can be left alive...then, of course, it'll be you, Ukihiko. Okay. It's all right. I will...I'll get rid of myself."

"...That's not it, Sou."

"Huh?"

"Would you please...kill me? With your sword... Do it for me... It's all right... I... It hurts so badly... I'm in...so much pain. Hurry... I just want to be free. I'm begging you, Sou. Please... It's all I want now... We're...friends, aren't we?"

Even though he and Sousei shared the same father, Ukihiko did not appeal to him by mentioning they were family or brothers in his dying words. He said that they were friends.

"Sou...!"

That's how Sousei was released from that darkness. He always thought that the dream ran long.

Sousei later met his father and two older sisters. His eldest sisters knew what was about to begin. Of course, Sousei also knew. Because this was something that had actually happened, after all.

His father clutched Sousei's face. Their father was a hitman called Venenoza—the Poison King. This man had been administered every single kind of poison since he was an infant. His body itself was extremely toxic.

Sousei was eaten away by his father's poison. His very body rotted away. He was in agony. He took his final breath. His father observed it with a smile and great interest. That was how Sousei died.

And then he came back to life.

"You did well." His father nodded. "You being the last one alive is unexpected, but the ritual was a success."

Die! Sousei thought. What was a success? Die! You should die. Do me a favor and die. Just die already. Die! The only one who should die is you, Father.

"We'll kill him. You're fine with that, aren't you, Sousei?"

Sousei knew that his older sister would come to him with this suggestion one day. This was a dream, after all.

"Yeah." Sousei nodded. Just as he had done many times before. He nodded this time, too. "It's fine, Touka. But I doubt Rio would disobey father."

"I know. Take care of Riona."

"I don't hate Rio. She's a kind person—"

"But there's no other choice."

His older sister Touka was tall with long, straight black hair that she was proud of.

It was said that Sousei, Tyrant, Kenzou, and their older sisters Touka and Rio definitely had Venenoza's blood in their veins. They weren't sure about the other children. Their lives lived on in Sousei after the ritual that had taken place in that darkness. As did the lives of those who had died at Venenoza's command after the ritual had ended.

"That man should die. You think so, too, don't you, Sousei?"

Even so, it was a long dream. It was a never-ending nightmare.

Big sister Riona. Riona Takarai was a sacred *katashiro* who Venenoza had fathered with a renowned priestess. Anyone who wounded her would instantly receive the same wound. If you killed her, you'd die as well.

"Do you intend to kill Father no matter what?" Rio always spoke quietly. Her body was weak, and she liked books. That day, her thin body was propped up on cushions that were stacked on her bed. She was reading an old book. Lace drapes were drawn across the window. She placed her book face down on her knees, which looked like they were about to break.

"It's bad luck for family to kill each other," she said.

"I've already decided."

This was something that had been decided a long time ago. It was destined to come to this. It was something that had actually happened and had been executed by Sousei. This was a dream that Sousei had had countless times before. Sousei loomed over Rio and sat astride her.

Rio had a babyish face. No matter how much older she actually was, they looked about the same age.

"I guess there's no changing your mind, then," Rio said, closing her eyes.

Sousei had planned to strangle her. No matter how many times this happened, he simply couldn't do it. He pressed a cushion against Rio's face. Her body stiffened. She didn't put up any real fight. Sousei felt the same pain that his sister Rio felt as she became unable to breathe. As Rio suffocated and breathed her last breath, Sousei also lost consciousness.

"...I guess tonight's dream ends there."

He woke up. He was horribly sweaty. Just like usual. He took his phone from beside his pillow. It wasn't even five in the morning yet. He pretended not to be bothered by it, but every now and again he felt like he was being watched, even though he should have been the only one in the house. Sousei sat up and glanced around the corners of his room. Of course, there was no one there. But it felt like there was something cold and vaguely dark lurking there.

"Are you here, Rio?" he called out, and the presence quickly vanished. Sousei let out a sigh and got out of bed.

†

At school, as Sousei was going up the stairs to head to his classroom, Wakkuu came running down.

"Ah, Takarai! Hey, Takarai!"

"...Morning, Wakkuu. Huh? What's up...?"

"So, Takarai..." Wakkuu put his arm over his shoulder. "I overheard something, but is it true? Did you and Asumin break up?"

"Oh... Well, yeah."

"Wow, so it is true. I see. Well, I did hear it from her."

"...Really?"

"Ah, well, this might be one-sided info, but anyway, Asumin said it was

because of soba noodles."

"Soba noodles?"

"You went together to eat her favorite food, soba, but you didn't finish it all. And she just can't tolerate you not having the same taste in food. Something like that."

"...Shiramori said that?"

"It kind of seems like she's trying to trick us or give us a joke reason or something. Asumin isn't being serious with that, is she?"

It was no wonder that Wakkuu was suspicious. The actual reason was, to put it simply, that Sousei was a liar. Asumi had misjudged him, and Sousei was a dishonest person.

"What she said is true," Sousei lied nonchalantly. Just like a liar would.

"Seriously?" Wakkuu laughed. "You're so funny, Asumin. I feel sorry for you, though, Takarai. Ah, sorry, my bad. I shouldn't laugh, huh?"

"Don't worry. It's all right."

"Ah, well, such is life, right? But soba noodles, huh? Dunno about that. Huh. But don't let it get to you too much, 'kay? Maybe that's asking too much. You'd probably be feeling down, huh? Yeah, I guess you would..."

"Thanks for worrying about me, though."

"Nah, nah. No worries. It doesn't affect me at all. I haven't taken any damage. Oh, but I guess that's obvious, huh?"

Wakkuu rubbed Sousei's back a few times. Sousei decided to go to the restroom on his way to class. He didn't feel any need to actually use the toilet, though. He washed his hands well.

...Shiramori hates liars, but she'd still tell that kind of lie so that I wouldn't be the bad quy...

"Oh, Sousei." Yukisada Hayashi strolled into the restroom. "Morning. Aren't you washing your hands too much?"

"...Considering I'm not a surgeon?" Sousei replied, making Yukisada chuckle.

Yukisada put his head to one side. "Wait, why did I come in here?"

"What's that all about?" Sousei laughed a little.

As Sousei headed back to the classroom with Yukisada, Asumi was talking with Moena and some other people about something in the hallway. Sousei felt weak in the knees for a second.

"Ahh." Asumi noticed Sousei and gave a little wave. "Morning, Sousei," she said.

"...Goo...d...morning..."

"Why'd you say it like that?" Asumi asked with a smile.

Moena's face was doubtful. But she still said good morning to Sousei and Yukisada.

"By the way, Sousei." Asumi stopped him as he was about to enter the classroom. "You can still call me by my first name. You don't have to go back to calling me by my family name. Going back to how it was before actually feels worse."

"...Yes, of course. I mean, I'm fine with that."

"Sousei, you can also call me Asumin or whatever if you like."

"A...Asumin."

Moena glanced at Sousei and then cut in with "Everyone calls her that..."

"...Yeah." Sousei felt like he had a lump in his throat. He was almost in tears. He felt a touch of anxiety before he set foot in the classroom. He worried that she might not be there, but he was worrying about nothing. Kuchina was sitting at the very back of the room by the window. As always, she was looking out the window with her chin propped up on her hand.

†

When class finished, Sousei wasted time around school. When he went back to the classroom, there was no one else there.

"...You've got to be kidding." Sousei momentarily stood there in a daze.

If Kuchina hadn't entered the classroom from the back door, he might have just kept standing there forever. She walked in without looking at Sousei and sat down at her desk.

Well...that's a bit mean, but it's not like she can just sit there forever...

When Sousei cleared his throat, Kuchina rested her head on her hand and looked outside.

Is she ignoring me...?

Sousei scratched the back of his head. He hesitated but then walked up to Kuchina. She didn't even move when he pulled out the chair at the desk in front of her. Sousei sat down facing her.

"Were you okay last night?" he asked.

There was finally some semblance of a response. But even so, it was just Kuchina stirring slightly.

"You said you have dreams, didn't you? I have them, too. I had one just this morning."

After about half a minute, Kuchina spoke without looking at him. "What kind of dream was it?" Her voice went up a little at the end of her question.

Sousei glanced out the window. The setting sun was slightly bright and warm.

"Forty-nine children get locked in a pitch-black place and have to kill each other. In the end, only one person is left alive. That person can take all those dead children's lives and make them their own. That's not all. If they kill someone after that, they steal that person's life, too."

"Is that dream"—Kuchina softly let out a breath—"about you?"

"Yep." Sousei nodded. "I was that one who survived. The forty-eight others were siblings from other mothers, including someone who called me their friend."

"Did you kill them?"

"I only killed one person. I killed my dear friend with my own hands. That was my first time killing anyone."

"Did you want to survive?"

"Hm, I don't know. My friend asked me to do it. He asked me to kill him. But I guess I didn't want to die after all."

Sousei had hidden in that darkness until there were only two of them left. Ukihiko had told Sousei that he thought Sousei would be all right, but he should be careful. Why did Ukihiko think he'd be all right? Ukihiko had probably known. He'd known Sousei was more determined to live than anyone else and didn't know when to give up.

"How many people have you killed up till now?"

"At the moment, I have one hundred and thirteen lives inside me."

"You've killed a lot, haven't you?"

"Yeah. I killed my birth father as well. It was my father who locked us in that darkness and made us kill each other. And I also killed my half sister. Rio got in the way of me killing my father."

"I don't have the right to blame you."

"Right? We're similar."

"No." Kuchina faced Sousei. She took her chin off her hand and placed her gloved hand on the desk. She furrowed her brow, perhaps trying to glare at Sousei. But instead, it looked like she was about to cry. "We're not the same. You and I are different."

"That's right," Sousei replied. He tried to smile at her, but it ended up being half-hearted. "You wouldn't kill your parents. I'm far worse."

"That's also not—" Kuchina tried to say something but didn't seem able to put it into words.

Sousei didn't have the confidence to express his feelings well, either. He had never spoken with anyone like this before. He had never opened up to anyone about his past before. He hadn't even told his sister about that dream. Perhaps it was the same for Kuchina. It might have been to kill him, but she had brought Sousei to meet her frozen parents. People who were important to her. She had told Sousei about her own terrifying nightmares that tormented her. Sousei

knew firsthand the power she'd been born with. And now Sousei's secret was in her hands, too. How he had survived in that darkness and the horrifying way he'd absorbed more lives.

"Miss Hitsujimoto." Sousei sat up straight and placed both hands on his lap. Kuchina seemed a little surprised when he did that. Her eyes flickered. "Would you be friends with me?"

Kuchina's eyes opened wide. Then she blinked twice.

"...Huh?"

"I think we could become friends. At the very least, we wouldn't have to lie to each other. We don't have to hide who we really are."

"Our..." Kuchina's chin quivered slightly. "...true nature as assassins?"

"That's not right." Sousei placed a hand on Kuchina's desk. She shrank back, and her chair made a noise.

"We're assassins, but we're also humans. We get hurt. There are times we're sad. You don't have to pretend not to feel anything. You don't have to hide that from friends."

"Cut it out!" Kuchina stood up. Sousei had anticipated that she might do that and stood up straightaway. He reached out with his right hand, grabbing her right wrist. He pulled her toward himself before she could shake him off. He hugged her with both arms.

"....." She seemed to be taken aback.

"If I don't do this, you'll run away, Miss Hitsujimoto."

Soon after, she took her gloves off. She was going to try to touch him. That wasn't necessary. There was no need for her to kill Sousei. Sousei gently pressed his own right hand to her cheek. The switch was instantly turned off.

"Takarai...?!"

Sousei died, lost a life, and then came back to life.

Apparently, Kuchina had immediately held Sousei after his instant death. His hand was slack, but it was still somewhat touching her neck and chin.

"Wow," Sousei unconsciously muttered.

"...Huh?"

Kuchina should have noticed as well. The same thing had happened after she had tried to leave him in the basement room. They had struggled and he'd been killed once. She had tried to kill him again after he came back to life. But he didn't die for some reason. He lightly pressed his right hand to her left cheek. It was really soft. It seemed like her skin would break if he used too much force. It was scary.

"Hmmm..." She closed her eyes and exhaled.

His fingers had grazed her earlobe, so perhaps it had tickled.

"Sorry," he apologized. He temporarily removed his hand from her cheek, then brought his hand in contact with her skin again. "See, Miss Hitsujimoto—"

His chest and back felt tingly. He had goose bumps. Sousei couldn't even put a name to the emotion he was experiencing. Was this an emotion? He wasn't sure.

Kuchina opened her eyes. Her whole face was flushed. Her lips parted slightly. Her breaths were short and shallow. Sousei noticed something he hadn't before. Kuchina had a mole below her lip, on the right-hand side. A very small, barely noticeable mole.

"If I die and then come back to life while you're still touching me..." Sousei took a breath. He had a lump in his throat. It was painful, but it was fine like this. It was fine like this. "...then I don't die. Strange, isn't it? That something like that would happen. It's like a miracle."

Kuchina didn't say anything. She was just shaking. But she didn't tear herself from Sousei's arm, even though she should have been able to. Surely, she was always alone in this vast world, no matter where she went.

The compassionate existence of Mr. and Mrs. Hitsujimoto had probably provided emotional support to Kuchina. However, they had also become her weakness because of that. And even they couldn't have understood the real reason for her loneliness. They could feel sympathy for her and look after her, but that was all. They couldn't cuddle with her even if they wanted to. It was





"You don't have to be scared with me."

No one else could do this. Only Sousei Takarai could cuddle with her like this.

"If you kill me by accident, it's fine. It's all right even if you want to kill me out of anger. I'm used to dying."

"I know." She sniffed her nose slightly. It might have been a laugh. "I've already killed you so many times."

Sousei wanted to hug her more tightly. But would that be appropriate as friends? Was it even acceptable to hug a friend like this to begin with? Were they even friends in the first place? Had Kuchina accepted his request to be friends? Either way, Sousei never knew when to give up. He wouldn't back down easily even if she rejected him...

Ahhh...

Sousei clenched his teeth. If he hadn't, he would have let out a strange sound. Kuchina tilted her head slightly, as if she was nuzzling her cheek against Sousei's palm. Perhaps that wasn't her intent. But her body wasn't tense. It was as if she was entrusting herself to Sousei.

I might be killed by her many times from now on.

It wasn't that he was hugging her. He was taking care of her as a friend. That was all. He wanted her to feel at ease. He wanted her to relax. She lowered her eyes, which were hidden by long, voluminous eyelashes. Her dark eyes were wet, as if they were blurring.

I'll have to kill a lot more, so it won't matter how many times I die—

112 LIVES LEFT. CONTINUE?

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Ao Juumonji. Perhaps there are some commendable people among you who know about me. Anyway, it's been a while since I've written a novel for MF Bunko J. I looked it up, and the last book I wrote for them was Volume 3 of *The Struggle of Class 1-10* in 2013. That was quite a while ago, so it's somehow been nine years.

My editor changed a few times during that period. The editorial team at MF Bunko J are incredibly dependable, or should I say loyal, and have diligently stuck with me as an author. The reason I wasn't really making any significant progress wasn't because of my editors over the years, but because of myself. I've been juggling various small tasks here and there, and there was also the lingering thought of whether someone like me should even be writing for MF Bunko J—a publisher that steadfastly upholds the tradition of publishing light novels, which were once primarily aimed at middle and high school students and now carry a sort of old yet new dignity. Well, the point is that I was dragging my feet.

The fact that I was able to finish writing *Love Is Dark* this time was largely thanks to my current editor, Suzuki, who was quite persistent. We brainstormed together several times, and each time I threw in the towel, and even when our communication faltered for a bit, he always came back with a "How about now?" For some reason, Suzuki never gave up. What's the deal with that? I'm honestly not sure.

Rather than someone like me who has written over a hundred novels, maybe it's better to encourage writers with a fresher perspective to write what fits the "now" and urge them to keep writing. I've mentioned that to Suzuki, but he still insists that I write. It's not often that others demand so much from you. Even when you've worked tirelessly day and night with someone, it's not uncommon

for them to leave with a smile and a "Let's do this again soon!" only to become uncontactable afterward. I'm not good with the usual social niceties, and I simply can't say things I don't mean. But I've gotten somewhat used to being told what to do and accepting it as just how things are. Suzuki is different. When he says he'll do something, it seems he truly means it. I want to somehow meet his enthusiasm and write the most enjoyable light novels I can without compromise. I'd be happy if I'm able to do that.

Furthermore, the fact that I could work again with BUNBUN, who I collaborated with on my debut work, *Maria of the Roses*, is also thanks to Suzuki. I didn't personally ask BUNBUN to do the illustration. Suzuki took the initiative and commissioned BUNBUN on his own. Thankfully, BUNBUN accepted. I hope we can continue to work together in the future, since this is a precious opportunity, and there's more I want to write.

Ao Juumonji

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