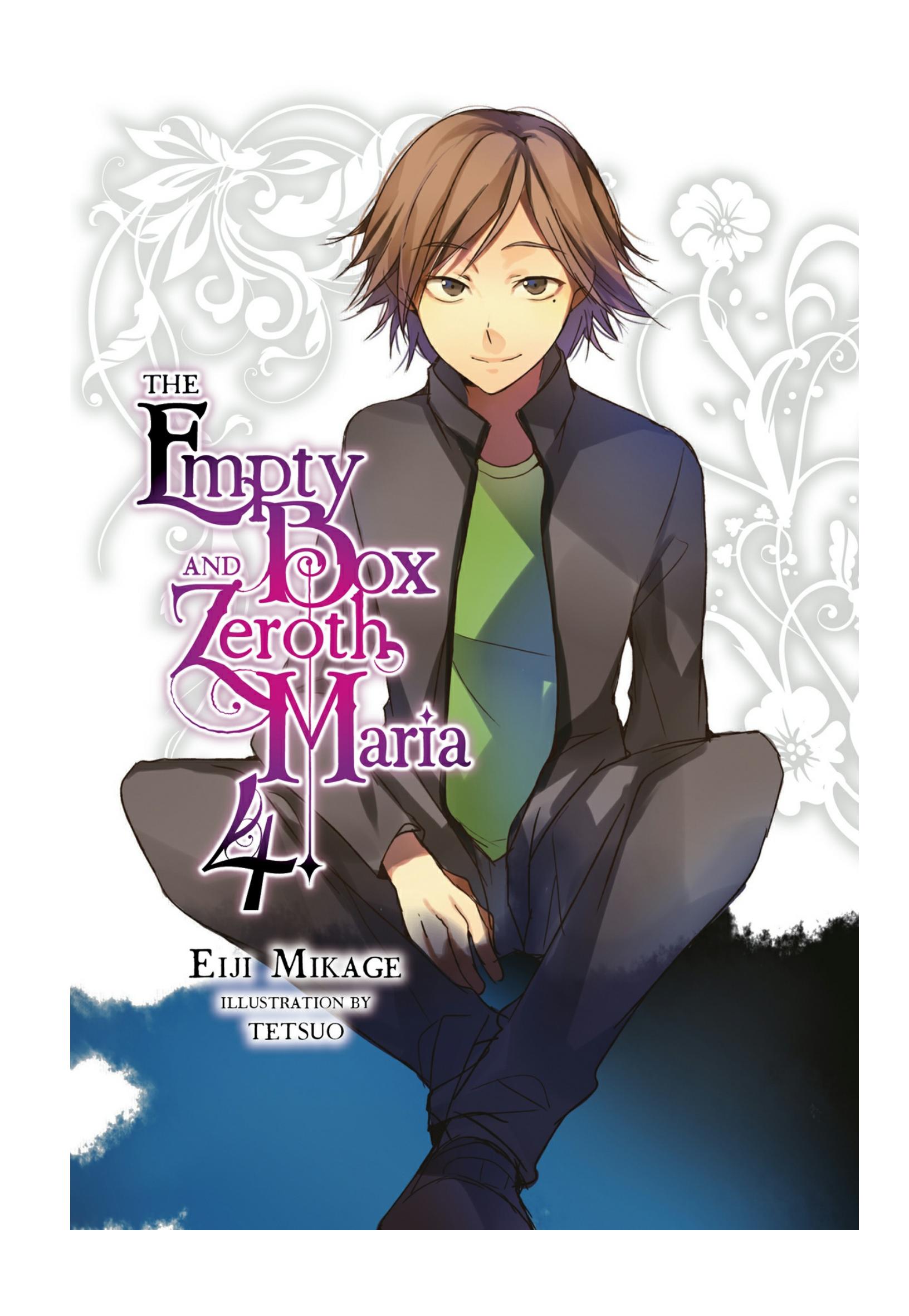


THE Empty Box AND Zeroth Maria

4

Eiji Mikage

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



THE

Empty Box AND Zeroth Maria

4

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY
TETSUO



Iroha Shindo

The young president of the student council. She has excellent grades and is the ace of the track-and-field club. During the finale of *Kingdom Royale*, she makes full use of her gifts, imposing a government upon the group with herself at the top.

Koudai Kamiuchi

A young man who conceals many talents beneath the facade of a lighthearted class clown. His easygoing exterior and well-hidden interior allow him to make some unexpected moves during the endgame of *Kingdom Royale*.

Daiya Oomine

A cunning cynic with silver hair and earrings. He has no qualms about killing and deceiving if it serves his purpose. He appears to cooperate with Kazuki's opposition to Iroha's tactics in the final round of *Kingdom Royale*.

There are no prerequisites to become the king.

If you want to, just do it. If you think you can, go for it. You know it's pointless, though, right?

None of you has the guts to take responsibility for the lives of others.

Each and every one of you is just trying your hardest to stay alive. You aren't prepared to take charge; you don't even understand how. You're immature. Weak. Selfish. Gah, you're all hopeless!

Hmph, what did I expect anyway?

If there's no other option, then I'll just have to be the king myself.

—Iroha Shindo



I know better than anyone how powerless I am.

Even though I worked until my fingers bled—and that's not just a figure of speech—I never even came close to becoming who I wanted to be; in fact, all I did was take myself further away from my ideals.

I'm so weak, I can't even protect myself. I have no choice but to look for protection from others.

That's why I have to deceive everyone.

Even if my soul is crushed in the process, I'm not allowed to feel sorry for myself. I'm toxic, after all, and I deserve your hatred.

That's why I don't believe you.

I can't believe you would still want to keep me safe after I lied to you.

It's a bit frustrating.

If I'd known you had such kindness within you, I would've trusted you with everything from the very beginning.

—Yuri Yanagi

Yuri Yanagi
A shy, quiet, and rather skittish girl with a brilliant mind on par with Frodo's. She's focused on keeping her head down now that her true nature was revealed during an initial round of *Kingdom Royale*.



I don't need it.

I don't need anything
that warms me inside.

I plunged myself to
the bottom of the ocean
so that I could be a Box.
I numbed myself to the
cold. Feeling warmth now
only highlights the chill of
where I am.

That's why anyone who does
that to me is my enemy.

—Hey, Kazuki.

I guess you've been my enemy
all along.

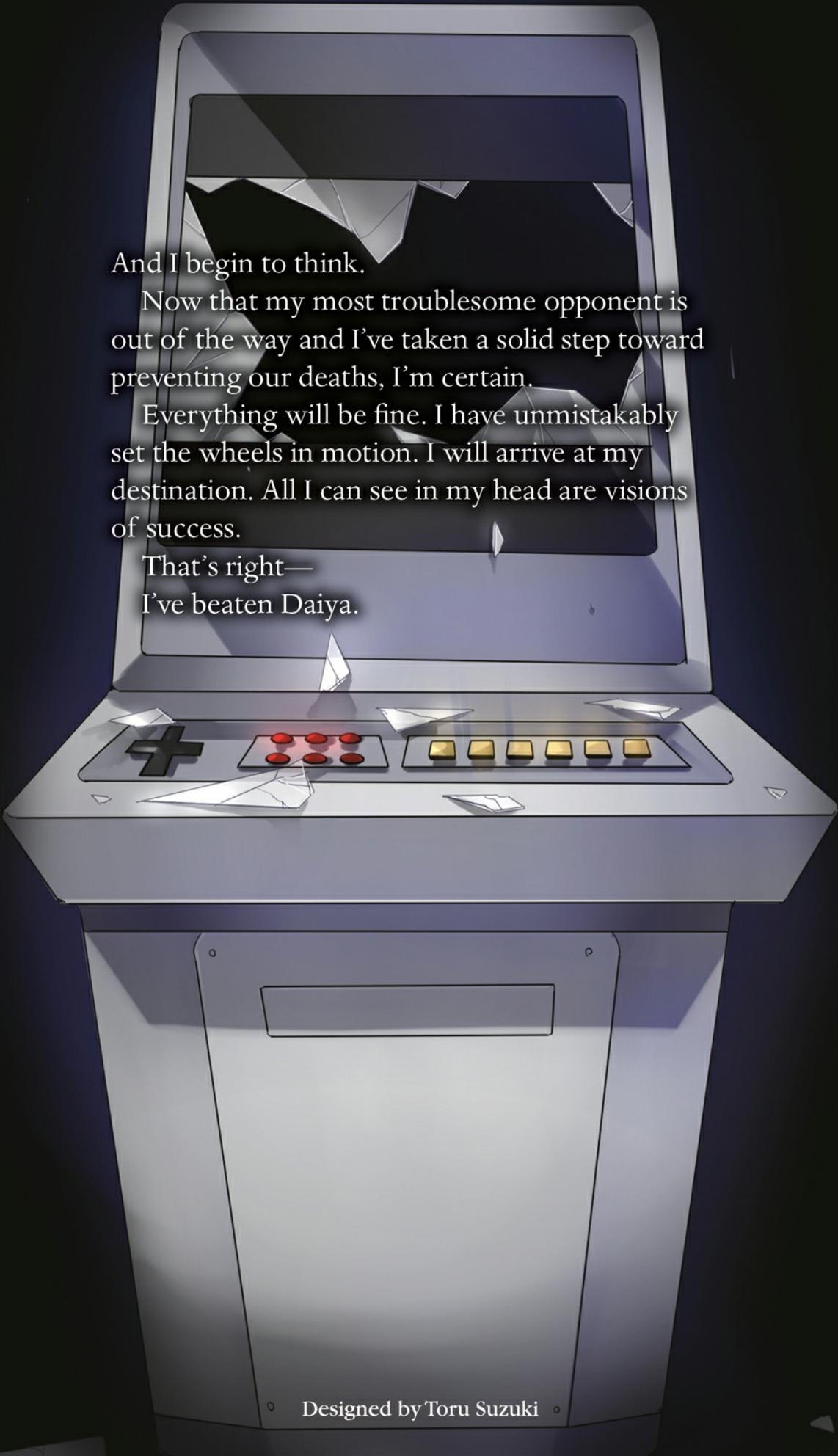
—Maria Otonashi

Maria Otonashi

A beautiful and heroic young woman
on the hunt for O, the grantor of
Boxes. Though she is gifted in the
martial arts and possesses a keen
mind, her excessively noble nature
has led her to forbid herself from
harming others. She begins to
behave strangely toward Kazuki near
the end of *Kingdom Royale*.

Kazuki Hoshino

An extremely ordinary young man
with a decidedly unusual obsession
with maintaining a normal life.
He has become a favorite object
of study for O. During the closing
stages of *Kingdom Royale*, he takes
action to find a way to beat the
game, but...

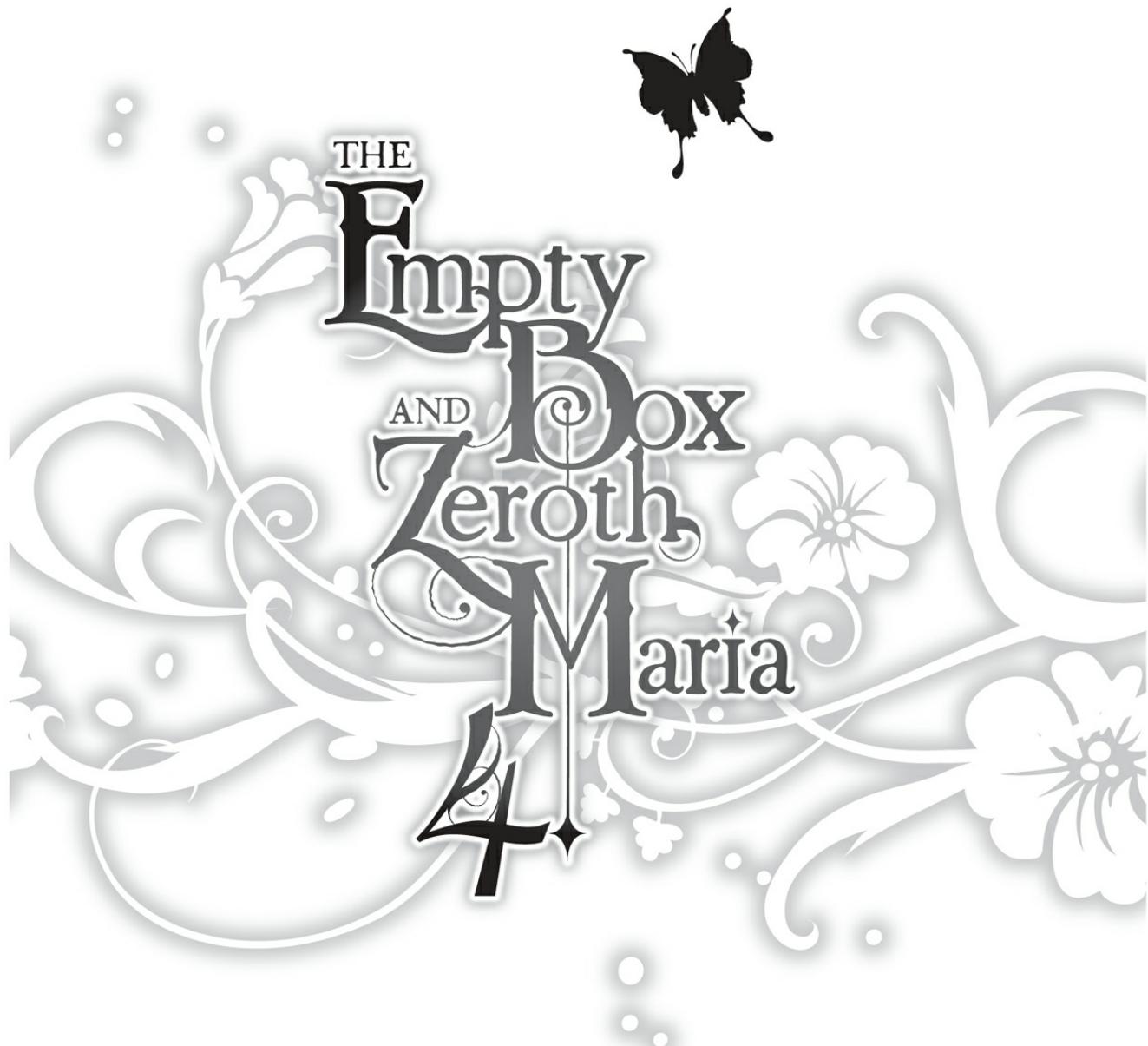


And I begin to think.

Now that my most troublesome opponent is out of the way and I've taken a solid step toward preventing our deaths, I'm certain.

Everything will be fine. I have unmistakably set the wheels in motion. I will arrive at my destination. All I can see in my head are visions of success.

That's right—
I've beaten Daiya.



EIJI MIKAGE
ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



New York

Copyright

The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria, Vol. 4

Eiji Mikage

Translation by Luke Baker

Cover art by Tetsuo

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UTSURO NO HAKO TO ZERO NO MARIA Vol. 4

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“HeY_hey_hey. How’s_iT_haNGing? It’s_yoUR_lOvable_oLd_friEND_Noitan_t hE_masCOt_of_Kingdom_Royale.”

“Huh? You_WAnt_to_knOW_whAT_thIs_wonDERful_Noitan_feLLow_IS_after ? WeLL_I_thOught_I_would_eXplain_the_rULEs_of_Kingdom_Royale_to_yoU_birdbRAins. EvEN_thOUGH_some_PEople_Might_thINK_the_Word_‘simPLEto n’_cAME_from_YoU_PLLebs_ol’_Noitan_HEre_has_A_bIG_heART. I’m_a_mascOT_after_aLL.

“Now_theN_let’S_get_starTED.

“Put_sIMPlY_Kingdom_Royale_is_a_gaME_of_mURDer_and_trICKERY.

“The_sIX_pLAYers_are_each_giVEN_a_class_and_TRY_to_wIN_the_gaME. I’ll_shOW_you_the_Classes_and_vicTORY_cONDitions_noW.”

★ **The King**

Victory Conditions: The deaths of the Prince and Revolutionary

★ **The Prince**

Victory Conditions: The deaths of the King, Double, and Revolutionary

★ **The Double**

Victory Conditions: The deaths of the Prince and Revolutionary

★ **The Sorcerer**

Victory Conditions: Survive until the end

★ **The Knight**

Victory Conditions: The deaths of the King and Prince

★ **The Revolutionary**

Victory Conditions: The deaths of the King, Prince, and Double

“The_gAME_ends_whEN_everYONE’s_vICTory_conditions_ARE_fulfiLLed. To_put_iT_another_wAY_the_gAME_doesN’T_end_eVEN_IF_just_yOU_achiEVE_w HAAt_you_nEEd_to_win. FoR_exAMPlE_even_IF_the_Prince_and_Revolutionary

_die_while_you_are_the_King_the_game_wILL_not_end_as_loNG_as_the_Knight_wHO_is_tryING_to_tAke_your_life_IS_stiLL_out_thERE.”

“That_meANS_the_gAME_won’T_sTART_uNTil_someONE_kiLLs_sOMEone_else.

“Huh?_How do you kill each other?_You have knives_so why not just off each other with those?”

“What?_You could never do that?_Are you freaking stupid?_Just kill yourself, then; after all, you humans are such wonderful animals who just kill each other whenever you want something, and it doesn’t even have to be food.”

“Ethics? Oh, you mean your poorly defined, context-dependent ‘standards’? That’s what’s keeping you from killing people? It sucks, but I guess there is that. Don’t you worry, though. *Kingdom Royale* has been designed so even chickens like you can murder one another. It’s a nice little system that lets you end a life with the press of a button.”

“.....”

“Huh? Am_I_mAd? AnYWAy_I’lL_expLAIN_the_abILLties_of_eaCH_cLAss_inCLUDInG_thE_ones_that_IET_YoU_KIII_wITH_the_TOUch_oF_A_bUTTon.”

Abilities of the King

- Murder

The King selects someone he wants to have killed and can then ask the Sorcerer or the Knight to carry out the act. The King may opt not to choose anyone, too.

- Switch Places

The King may trade places with the Double for one day only and avoid being the target of Assassinate. If the King is targeted during the day while he is switching places, the Double will die instead of the King.

Abilities of the Prince

- Heir to the Throne

The Prince will be able to use Murder if the King and the Double die.

- Anti-magic

The Prince may not be killed by Magic.

Abilities of the Double

- Succession

If the King dies, or if Switch Places is used, the Double will have the ability to use Murder.

Abilities of the Sorcerer

- Magic

The Sorcerer may decide whether to actually kill characters selected for Murder. Characters he does kill become charred corpses.

Abilities of the Knight

- Death by Sword

The Knight may decide whether to actually kill characters selected for Murder. This ability may only be used if the Sorcerer is dead. Characters he does kill will die by decapitation.

Abilities of the Revolutionary

- Assassinate

The Revolutionary can Assassinate a character he specifies. He may also not choose anyone. The characters he kills will leave a strangled corpse.

“GenerALLy_the_sTRonger_tHE_abiliTIEs_of_a_cLASS_the_greATER_the_risk.
So_yOU_caN’T_acTUALlY_say_onE_class_hAS_an_adVANTage_over_tHE_oTHERs.”

“NoW_I’ll_fILL_you_in_oN_the_surprisingLY_imPORTant_sCHEdule_for_the_gAME.”

Before 12 <A>

PM

- Break time, stand by in your quarters.

12 PM – 2

PM

- Assemble in the common area.

2 PM – 6 PM

<C>

- Spend thirty minutes in the room of a character of your choosing (Private Meeting).
- The King may choose characters to Murder.
- The Sorcerer may perform Magic (or the Knight may perform Death by Sword).

(Characters targeted by Magic or Death by Sword will die at 5:55 PM.)

6 PM – 8 PM

<D>

- Assemble in the common area.

8 PM – 10

<E>

PM

- Meal in your own quarters.

(If you don't have any rations at this point, you will be mummified and die.)

- The Revolutionary may perform Assassinate.

(Characters targeted by Assassinate will die immediately after being selected.)

10 PM

<F>

- Break time, sleep.

“LoOK_at_this_tO_cHECK_wHen_tO_do_tHINgs.

“Oh_yEAH. There’S_one_mORE_tHIng_I_nEEd_to_teLL_you.

“Kingdom_Royale_iS_acTUALlY_a_gAMe_you_plAY_one_aT_a_time. WhEN_i
t’S_yOur_turn_aLL_the_otHER_pLAYers_are_NPCs_so_eVEN_if_yoU_kiLL_tHe
m_the_reAL_ones_wOn’t_diE. AWESoMe_rIGHt? YoU_cAN_bUmp_peOPLE_oFF

_worry-free_aNd_jUst_hAVE_fuN_pLAYing_the_gaME.

“Huh? Just_beCAuse_they'RE_NPCs_doESN't_mEAn_you_cAN_plaY_iT?

“If slow-minded trash like *you* kicked the bucket, your pathetic life wouldn't even warrant a blurb on Yahoo News, so where the hell do you get off talking like that? Just give into the moment and follow your desires. I have trouble telling you apart from a domesticated pig anyway; might as well act like one.

“.....

“Just_kIDDing. ☆ DiD_I_sTArtLe_yOU? Noitan_hERE_is_yOUr_maSCOT_so_oF_course_I_dON't_tHINK_aNYthing_liKE_thAt. ☆

“AnyWAy_hAVe_a_bLAST_Wlth_Kingdom_Royale!”

I'm in the midst of sights I can remember only in dreams.

"I'll be honest—things are not developing as I had hoped."

Though I should be familiar with whoever it is in front of me, I still can't quite discern the features of their face.

"Ironically enough, it's Daiya Oomine, your would-be enemy, who is responsible for this development. No...perhaps it would be more accurate to say he did this *because he is your enemy*."

But even as he (she?) says this, their smile reveals not a hint of worry. It's just as unnerving as ever.

"The reason is that you and I share a similar goal."

Goal?

Something about the word genuinely bothers me. I mean, nothing I've seen has suggested this person has any sort of ultimate objective. I've always thought they simply enjoyed toying with us.

I can't believe our goals could be similar. In fact, they should be diametrically opposed. *I mean, you've been trying to wreck my normal life this whole time, despite my best attempts to preserve it, right?*

"If that were so, do you think I would have helped you in destroying the Box when you were being possessed?"

Wasn't that only because you wanted to keep observing me?

"Heh-heh... That is merely a hobby, not a goal. Well, perhaps it could be said that having a hobby *is* the goal."

I don't understand.

"So you say, but are you really any different? You only declare your vague intent to keep your life normal. Does that sound like a clear-cut goal to you?"

My instinctive response is to hold my tongue.

"It's difficult to understand, and that is what makes such a goal hard to sustain. I'm impressed that Daiya chose to go after it for this very reason. But I don't believe even this will be enough to change your true nature."

I'm irritated by their constant equivocation, but I ask for their reasoning.

"If you were such a simple person, I never would have discovered you." The smile remains in place as they continue, "It seems Daiya said you are one who crushes the wishes of others. I believe that is correct in every sense. I have to say, his accuracy on that point is very intriguing. Still, it's a view from only one angle. I can't say it suffices as an answer. You grind the wishes of others into nothing—"

As they finish the sentence, their expression turns smug.

"—or perhaps you grant the wishes of someone else."

A pungent stench hangs in the air, reminiscent of paint thinner.

It's a harmful odor, the kind that causes hallucinations, even breaks a person. But it also invites a dependence on it.

Like a sauna made just for me, this black space is pleasant, though I still wouldn't call it comfortable.

You can spend your life here with hardly a care in the world.

My time is slipping away before my eyes. It's all so easy to see and understand, like the balance of a bankbook slowly dropping down toward zero.

Ahhh... This feels great.

Spending is pleasurable, after all. People addicted to shopping get relief and peace of mind not from buying things, but from the act of using money. They know they're putting themselves in a more difficult position later on, but they can't escape the pleasure.

This Box is the same.

It's a paradox, but I find pleasure and peace in endangering my life—in frittering it away.

Does that sound foolish?

I'm sure it does. But I don't care. No matter how you go through life, you're still bound to end up thrown in some old folks' home with a nurse wiping the shit off your ass and quietly cursing you the whole time. If that's all that awaits you, better to seek pleasure rather than subject yourself to the torture of working hard to achieve something. Right?

With these equally pointless thoughts in my head, I reflect on the inhuman being that gave me this Box.

“Do you have a wish?”

I noticed something off about them right away. I can't remember if they were a boy or girl. I guess that doesn't really matter. But this strangeness was more than enough to spark my curiosity amid my boredom.

I'm pretty sure my answer was something like “I can't come up with a wish,

but I find this world unbelievably boring.” An unreadable smile appeared on their face, and then they offered me the Box.

I could tell right away that it could truly grant wishes.

I briefly wondered whether I actually wanted it, and I wasn’t sure. But, hey, if they were giving it away, might as well take it. I ended up accepting it, like it was a pack of tissues advertising some prep school.

While they explained on and on about all this confusing stuff, I just thought about whatever, like how maybe I should preorder a copy of that new game I saw when I was flipping through this week’s *Famitsu*, since it did look pretty interesting.

Then I imagined a game that could be even more interesting.

And I was like, *Hey, works for me.*

That’s how the “Game of Indolence” was born, for the sole purpose of playing *Kingdom Royale* to take the place of that unreleased video game.

Well, well, well, back to the matter at hand.

“*I will beat you, Daiya.*”

So Kazuki Hoshino declares.

I can’t hide my amusement.

“*Not a chance in hell.*”

I’m absolutely certain of it: Kazuki Hoshino will never be able to achieve his goal.



► Day 1 <A> Kazuki Hoshino's Room

—*Crunch.*

I'm being crushed. The transparent hands drive into my body and smash my insides. Turning them to mincemeat, squashing and mashing me down into a form that can be forced into the game. My body spins drunkenly, as if I've been tossed into a washing machine with a load of laundry.

While I fight down the physical revulsion, the color begins draining away from me until I'm just like the transparent hands. I feel very light, like there's nothing left of me at all; I don't remember when I closed my eyes, but slowly, I open them.

I see a bare concrete ceiling with an exposed light bulb.

My pulse accelerates. I'm back in that cell-like room again.

...No, that isn't quite right. This is actually my first time here, in the true sense. I can't afford even a single slipup in the struggle ahead.

I think back on the promise we made during our conversation moments ago.

“If no one kills anyone else for eight days, you can survive.”

“And—if you reach that ending, I'll destroy the Game of Indolence. This is your idea of fair, right?”

My objective is to destroy the Box, save Maria, and return us to the real world.

In the Rejecting Classroom and the Week in the Mud, we were able to resolve things by finding the owners and persuading them to turn over their Boxes. Things won't go that way this time, though. Daiya, the owner of the Game of Indolence, isn't one to be persuaded.

That's why instead of getting through to him, I have no choice but to beat him at his own game.

What I need to do is guide everyone away from killing one another and reach an ending where no one dies.

I take in my surroundings. Everything is exactly as I remember it. In the small room, there is an exposed toilet and a sink. A twenty-inch monitor. A table with a hemp sack on top of it.

The contents of the sack are the same. A ballpoint pen, a notebook, a blue wristwatch, seven sets of solid rations, a portable device, and a knife.

But—

“NiCE_to_mEET_you.”

—a disgusting green bear, Noitan, greets me.

Nice to meet you, huh?

It doesn't feel right, but this is actually the appropriate greeting. I feel like I've met Noitan several times before, but this is actually our first real encounter. The ones who met Noitan before were my NPCs, copies of me. My experiences there were nothing more than a part of their Replays.

“Heh_hEH_heh. NiCE_to_meET_you_Kazuki. NoW_tHEN_leT'S_get_dOwn_to_busiNESS. The_pLAYer_neeDS_to_seLECt_hiS_Class.”

“...? I can pick my Class?”

“YeAH. *Kingdom_Royale_is_deSIGNed_so thaT the_pLAYer_has_aN_advaNTAGE_over_the_NPCs. ThE_mENTal_beneFIT_of_knowING_that_tHE_oTHER_charaCTERS_are_NPCs_is_pART_of_this. So_aRE_the_Replays_tHAT_aLLow_the_pLAYer_to_sEE_the_NPC_daTA.*”

“And choosing a Class is another one...”

“ExACTly.”

The image of Noitan vanishes, and the Classes appear on the screen.

KING

PRINCE

DOUBLE

SORCERER

KNIGHT

REVOLUTIONARY

“...Huh?”

I notice that, for some reason, the buttons for the King, the Sorcerer, and the Revolutionary are grayed out.

“You_CAn’t_choose_Classes_THat_aRE_graYed_out. Once_anotHER_Player_has_choSEN_it_it_BEcomes_unaVAILABLE,” Noitan explains, as if answering my silent question.

So these Classes were already picked. Daiya had chosen the Revolutionary, Yuri had chosen the King, and as for the Sorcerer... I didn’t have time to find out who that was, but I’m sure it was Iroha.

“But why have this rule?”

“BeCAUse_if_wE_don’T_theN_the_earLIER_pLAYERs_wiLL_be_aT_tOo_much_of_a_disADVAntAGe_sINCe_thEY_can’t_leaRN_as_much_fROm_Replays. InSTEAD_we_eVEN_the_sCORE_by_gIVING_theM_moRE_fREEdom_in_choOSINg_theIR_Class.”

Fair enough. That still doesn’t really do much to help out the very first player, though...

At any rate, that means my choices come down to the Prince, the Double, or the Knight...and as you might expect from the leftovers, none of them seem especially suited for manipulating how things go down.

“Oh.”

I notice something.

These three Classes are my only choices. Conversely, this also means the three most dangerous Classes for others to have—the King, the Sorcerer, and the Revolutionary—are guaranteed to be assigned to someone else.

I recall the second round, when Yuri was the player. I was the Revolutionary

then. That didn't stop the game from ending in tragedy...but what would have happened if, say, Koudai Kamiuchi had been the Revolutionary? I'm sure the outcome would've been even more horrible than it was. I probably wouldn't have been able to help anyone, not even Maria.

If Daiya or Koudai Kamiuchi end up as the Revolutionary this time—

“—Ugh.”

A shiver runs through me. If that happens, I can't foresee a peaceful, uneventful resolution.

...No, I can't lose heart. I have to find a way to lead us to the <E> time block on day eight with everyone alive.

“HuRRy_up_aND_cHOOse.”

At Noitan's urging, I return my attention to the monitor.

Of the Prince, the Double, and the Knight, which Class will be best suited to keeping everyone alive? The key is going to be keeping the Revolutionary in check. Which would mean—I reach out toward the button.

“Is_tHAT_what_yOU_wanT?” Noitan says, even though he was rushing me just a second ago.

“...Yeah.”

A Class with similar victory conditions to the Revolutionary lets me talk them into becoming an ally. A Class that also has the ability to act as a deterrent. That would be—I press the button for KNIGHT.

The screen changes straightaway as Noitan appears once again.

“Okay. AS_of_thIs_momENt_yOU_are_the_Knight. In_kEEping_with_thE_sTO Ry_yOU_must_suPPress_your_lUST_for_reVENge_aGAInst_the_otHER_players _beTRAy_them_aNd_lop_oFF_their_heAds.”

“...What the hell does he mean, ‘lust for revenge’?” I mutter.

The green bear's mouth gapes open so wide, it rips.

“You hate their guts_don't you_All those bastards who tricked you and butchered you_C'mon_they were prepared to off you for their own

survival_Heh-heh-heh.”

Noitan’s awkward way of speaking becomes far smoother when he says mean things. I remember that now. This nasty green bear is quite fluent when it comes to trash-talking.

“...You’re way off. I don’t hate them at all.”

“Cut the hypocritical crap, scumbag. Do you deal with attempted murder by just giggling and letting it happen like some kinda perverted masochist? I know you’re wondering why you have to get offed when it’s the others who should be doing the dying. You have to be. That’s why the others actually took your dumb ass out.”

“I would never think anything like—”

But the words catch in my throat.

Of course, I don’t hate the others. I’m not trying to get revenge, either. I don’t have the slightest inclination toward that in my head.

That said—Yuri did still kill “me,” even if it was just a copy.

I won’t be able to accomplish what I’ve set out to do unless I’m willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. That’s why I’m prepared to gamble with my life to save the others. To shield them, I may have to act as a lightning rod for whatever may occur.

—All for the sake of the ones who killed me over and over.

But can I actually do it without hesitating, without any misgivings? When I ask myself that...I find I’m really not too certain I can. Will this hang-up hinder me in completing my plan?

I shake my head.

I’ve got to stop this. There’s no point in filling my head with such thoughts.

All I need to do is create an environment where everyone can trust one another without falling prey to suspicion. If I can pull that off, no one will have a reason to murder anyone.

“—No.”

I'm not sure that's right... I've got it wrong.

That *isn't enough*.

It's not incorrect that we're going to need a relationship of mutual trust. But we need way more than that. Trust alone would still allow the impulsive Koudai Kamiuchi to act freely; Yuri with her fear of death would still plot behind my back; Iroha would still heed her bullheaded instincts and tear through anything in the way of whatever she thinks is right; and Daiya would never play ball to begin with.

So what should I do?

"That's what I'm saying. All ya gotta do is follow your nature and cut 'em all down without remorse, you closet butcher."

"Shut up!"

"You really think you can just hold hands like that? You know damn well you've got murderers in there with you. It's no use fighting it. Your only option is to rule the others like they're your servants."

"...Shut your mouth. Servants? Come on! There's no way I could lord it over—"

...Wait, am I sure about that? Is that my only option?

It doesn't mean there's no way out of this aside from killing one another. It means I'll never get any sort of resolution if I simply act on faith with the others and let them go ungoverned.

That's right. What it comes down to is that in order to win, I—

—I have to have control over everyone else.

".....Ha-ha."

What the hell? Is the only way to break the game to seize control of everyone else and rule them like a despot, as the name *Kingdom Royale* suggests?

Can I win the game if I become a king?

Am I that type of person? It doesn't sound realistic. I could never pull it off.

But at the same time, I also understand.

There is no other means of creating a situation in which no one starts murdering one another.

If that's how it is—

"Within Kingdom Royale, I'm just a powerless girl.

"—But I still want to protect you, even if it means throwing away my life."

—then I have to do it. In this Box, Maria is just a helpless princess; if I want to protect her, I have to do it.

"HeY_It's_abOUT_tlme_to_meeT_aLL_thOse_other_pEOple_who_muRDERed_you."

With that, Noitan disappears, and the door opens.

Beyond it is an expanse of darkness like raw desire. The sea of malice that I must confront.

I clench my fists.

Fine... I get it.

"I—"

I will become the king.

► Day 1 The Common Area

All six of us are here, in the white room that looks like it's from a newly built hospital.

It seems Daiya took care of Iroha's knifepoint threats as he had in the second game, because no one put a blade to my throat.

Thanks to that, things didn't spiral too far out of control, and events followed a similar course to the second game. Unsurprisingly, we end up introducing ourselves at Koudai Kamiuchi's suggestion again.

I mull over how to gain control of everyone as I listen to their introductions.

"I'm Iroha Shindo. My hobby is—"

Iroha is the student council president. Her watch is orange. She's tremendously gifted. According to her, her superhuman talents are supported by exceptional powers of focus. She behaves impulsively and almost never lies. Maybe it's part of being at the top, but Iroha can be a bit oblivious to the intricacies of how the mind works, her own included. Once she's prepared for the worst, she's capable of completely shutting off her emotions and even committing murder.

Iroha does like Yuri, but the feeling also appears to be the result of rationalizing the negative emotions of a complicated romantic situation to make them easier to process.

In short, her relationship with Yuri has the potential to blow up.

If I can gain Iroha's trust, I can't imagine she'll betray me. She has the ability to take charge, so she would be a valuable person to have on my side.

"I-I'm Yuri Yanagi."

Yuri is the top of Year 3, Class 1. Her watch is beige. Unlike Iroha, she's shy, sensitive to others' emotions, and even capable of manipulating how others see her. Yuri also has a ruthless streak, and she's willing to use any goodwill she gains this way if it will help her survive. Sometimes she fakes the emotions she shows, making her hard to read.

But in general, she's easily frightened and has a good heart. She would never commit a crime if she wasn't cornered.

There is a part of Yuri that doesn't think of Iroha as simply a good friend.

In short, her relationship with Iroha has the potential to blow up.

Winning her trust is not as important as making her feel safe by demonstrating the advantages of working with us.

"Koudai Kamiuchi here. Pleased to meet ya."

Koudai Kamiuchi is a first-year student. His watch is green. He's a dangerous person with no compunctions about murder, and he even seems to be enjoying all of this. The deciding factor for his actions is how much fun he expects to have, and he doesn't appear to have much regard for his own life, all of which

makes him difficult to predict. For some reason, Kamiuchi is also no stranger to violence. If it comes down to a fight, Maria or even Daiya doesn't stand a chance against him one-on-one.

Kamiuchi has a thing for Yuri, but that doesn't mean he actually cares for her.

There's no point in gaining his trust, and I will never trust him, either. Kamiuchi is the one person in this who is unmistakably my enemy. If I want to beat him, my only option will most likely be to trap him so that he can't kill anyone.

"I'm Daiya Oomine."

His watch is black.

Daiya is the owner of this Box, the Game of Indolence, but his stance in *Kingdom Royale* is unclear.

I can't possibly come up with a way to beat him.

"I'm Maria Otonashi, first-year student."

Her watch is red. The princess.

"—Phew, ack!"

My knees buckle beneath me. I was thinking so hard, I didn't notice Maria's introduction had ended, and I unconsciously sighed in relief.

"...What're you doing, Kazuki? Playing the space cadet for sympathy points?"

Maria gives me a reproachful look, and Yuri giggles at us.

All the same—analyzing the others as if I'm strategizing to beat the game doesn't feel very praiseworthy, though I really don't have a choice... But the actual problem is that everyone here aside from me is an NPC...

I don't think that matters, though. Even if they don't have any memory of the three games before this, and even if their survival here has no effect on their real versions, these NPCs are no different from the actual people.

"It's your turn," Maria says suddenly.

"Huh? For what?"

“Don’t play dumb. I’m saying it’s your turn to introduce yourself.”

“Oh yeah.”

I start to open my mouth—then hesitate.

...Right. I can’t introduce myself and leave it at that. If I act like I’m just as clueless as everyone else here now, that initial secrecy might give them doubts later on.

That said, it’s dangerous to come out and reveal everything I know at this point. If say the wrong thing, I could end up making them wary of me.

“...Why are you being so quiet, Kazuki?”

“Uh, it’s just—”

But the easiest opportunity to speak about the Game of Indolence without arousing suspicion is before Noitan explains the rules. I have to bring a few things to light.

The important thing is choosing what information to reveal.

I steel my nerves and start talking.

“I’m Kazuki Hoshino, second-year student. Daiya is my classmate, and I met Maria during some stuff that happened before she came to our school. And—”

I swallow once, then continue:

“—*I’m the Knight.*”

I can almost see the question marks in everyone’s expressions.

“...Hoshino. By ‘knight,’ do you mean a knight starting with a *k*?” Iroha asks.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, you startled me. For a second, I thought you were saying you were ‘the night,’ as opposed to ‘the day.’ Anyway, is ‘knight’ a metaphor for something? Or maybe it’s—”

She gets cut off midsentence.

“HeY_hEy_hey. SeEMs_like_soMEONe_is_gIVing_hiMSELf_away_here_sO_I_miGHT_as_wELL_tELI_you_about_Kingdom_Royale.”

"AnYWaY_I_wish_you_all_GOOD_luck. DoN'T_let_the_game_ENd_with_SOme_bORInG_outCOme_where_YoU_are_all_muMMIfied."

Once he finishes explaining the rules of *Kingdom Royale*, Noitan disappears.

"So how about you explain yourself, Hoshino?" Iroha asks. She was giving me frequent suspicious glances while Noitan was talking. "How is it that only you knew about *Kingdom Royale* at that point? And why are you the only one who knows your Class? None of us are supposed to know it right now."

Yep, this is what comes of revealing my Class. As of this moment, I'm now a villain who somehow possesses information none of the others have access to.

I'm the villain whom Iroha tries to uncover each game, even threatening us with her knife.

"...But..." Yuri's the one to respond to Iroha's question, not me. "He can't be telling us his Class to get the advantage, right? Clearly, keeping quiet and fooling the rest of us would've been better for winning the game..."

"I mean, I guess that's true, but what's your point?"

"What I'm saying is that I wonder if Hoshino purposely put himself at a disadvantage to keep the game from going according to plan for the one who created it."

Excellent. She understands why I went to the trouble of revealing myself as the Knight.

"...So he put himself at a disadvantage... Okay. I guess I can see that." Iroha's stern expression softens slightly as if in understanding. "So the problem now is, why did he do it?" she says, fixing me with a sharp gaze.

I answer with a calm nod.

"There's something I need you to believe."

The other way to win the game.

"If no one kills anyone else for eight days, you can survive."

Daiya had told me this.

"There's a way out of *Kingdom Royale* without fulfilling your victory

conditions.”

Everyone waits with bated breath.

“We won’t all end up mummified. That outcome doesn’t exist. Basically, if we can all make it to the *<E>* time block of day eight alive, then the game is forced to end.”

This is my goal, and I’m sure everyone prefers this strategy as well.

I mean, it’s not like everyone wants to kill one another in *Kingdom Royale*. If they wanted to survive, or to save everyone else, they had no choice but to murder. The only reason Yuri and Iroha took others’ lives when they were players was because they decided it was the only solution.

Presenting them with another option will prevent that first murder. That’s why I have to make sure I tell them that, at least.

“Now that you mention it...Noitan did say something to that effect, didn’t he? That he didn’t want us to go and do something boring like getting mummified. If you think about it from another angle...maybe that’s what he was getting at,” Yuri says quietly. If she’s searching for a reason to believe me, she’s taking my revelation the way I hoped.

Obviously, it’s easy to accept information that suits your purposes. All I need to do is keep revealing facts bit by bit like this, and then eventually, I can tell them about the Box and Daiya being the owner.

Yeah, this is going well.

If everyone works toward the same goal, we can’t possibly have any murders.

That is—

“Gotta say, I’m not convinced.”

—as long as there aren’t any naysayers.

Among us is Koudai Kamiuchi, who needs us to kill one another so he can enjoy the game of *Kingdom Royale*.

“Do you have something to add?”

At Iroha’s question, Koudai Kamiuchi smiles lightly and replies while

scratching his head.

"Well, I think it's obvious my man Hoshino here is involved with *Kingdom Royale* somehow. But is that enough of a reason to just buy whatever solution he throws at us?"

I look at Yuri's eyes, and I can see the unease in her expression deepening.

"For all we know, this whole 'solution' of his could be a big fat lie. Hoshino could just be saying this because that's what he wants us to believe, right?"

"That's...not true."

"Easy for you to say. Got any proof?"

I fall silent. How do I explain? How much do I need to say to get him to believe me? I can't possibly tell if he will, even if I reveal everything.

"Why can't you explain yourself? If you're really trying to lead us with good intentions, you shouldn't have anything to hide, don't you think?"

When I fail to offer up a counterargument, he presses further.

"So you've got nothing... I see. Well, as it turns out, I've found a good theory."

"...Huh?"

"*You're a spy.* If we assume Hoshino is actually a plant trying to mess with our heads even more, then everything falls into place nicely."

The word is a powerful one. It recasts everything that came out of my mouth and instills distrust.

I can see the growing wariness in Yuri's eyes.

Iroha furrows her brows.

With no knowledge of the past games, neither girl has a reason to trust one of us over the other.

".....Ngh."

This is bad. I'll never become the king like this, much less convince them to believe me. On the contrary, they'll probably come to see me as an enemy.

My head droops under all the cold stares. I can't think of a single word that

could get me out of this mess.

Is this it?

Is this how it ends?

Is there really no way for me to beat the Game of Indolence?

Koudai Kamiuchi's lips twitch up; he's assured of his victory—

“That's enough, Kamiuchi.”

—but his malicious grin vanishes at the sound of her voice.

Maria.

Just the way she speaks up at all sets my mind at ease. I smile.

That's right; she always saves me. Everything will be okay. I'll be fine now—

“—Oh.”

...No. What am I feeling relieved about?

Relying on her like this has always led to the worst-possible outcomes. I should have learned that more than well enough by now from the previous games.

But...even though I know this, even though I have to help Maria instead of letting her help me, here I am falling back on her again.

“Quit trying to set up Kazuki.”

Koudai Kamiuchi's eyes widen, and he spreads his arms. “Hey now, don't go getting the wrong idea. If anything, Hoshino's the one trying to set us up.”

“If so, then why are you inviting confusion?”

“...What do you mean?”

“You don't understand? That proves you don't have a reliable character.”

“Whoa, whoa... Why is that?”

“I'll tell you why. If you looked at this like a normal person, you would want to go along with Kazuki's plan whether you believed it or not. And even if you were to raise doubts about his idea, you'd most likely pick a different way of

confronting him about it.”

“You sure? If Hoshino is fishy, I should call him out, right?”

“Not like that. What Kazuki is suggesting will prevent any mutual bloodshed. Even if you don’t know his intentions, his plan repudiates a certain kind of situation that you should want to avoid as well. And yet, here you are strongly denying what he says. *You’re vehemently contradicting someone who has a plan to prevent us from killing one another.*”

Koudai Kamiuchi shuts his mouth.

“You do understand the danger of such an act, don’t you? In one sense, it could set us on the path to murder. Even if you are trying to warn the rest of us, you should be taking more care... Unless you’re actually trying to get us all to play the game.”

Koudai Kamiuchi is quiet for a moment, then begins to defend himself with a rueful grin.

“...Well, I can’t deny I overdid it a bit. All the same, why doesn’t Hoshino have anything to say for himself?”

“Even you must be able to tell that where we are isn’t exactly normal, right?” she abruptly retorts.

Koudai Kamiuchi presses his lips together in a frown. “Yeah, I guess so... Your point?”

“We’re actually in a hyperspace dimension created by aliens from Sirius so they can observe the ecology of earthlings.”

“.....Uh, what?”

This must be exactly the reaction she expected. Maria smirks. “Do you believe me?”

“...No, of course I don’t.”

“Then what do you believe is the reason we’ve been drawn into this space?”

Koudai Kamiuchi scowls at Maria’s question.

“I don’t care if it’s a lie or a tall tale or whatever. Give us an acceptable

explanation for why this place exists.”

After thinking a moment, he replies, “...Nah, I can’t.”

“So if Kazuki does know the truth, and it turns out to be something as outlandish as my little story about aliens from Sirius, do you really think he would share it right here and now? Do you think he could say it if he knew that it would unquestionably put him at a disadvantage?”

“.....”

Having weathered the verbal beatdown, Koudai Kamiuchi steals a quick glance at me.

His mouth has that same little smirk as always. But in his eyes—

“.....Urk.”

—there’s a gleam of madness he can’t quite conceal.

It was only visible for a second, so it’s possible I’m the only one who noticed it. A seemingly carefree grin rises on Koudai Kamiuchi’s face, and he flings his arms wide dramatically.

“Fine, fine, I lose. Sorry, I got too caught up in trying to get to the bottom of my suspicions and didn’t think about the rest of you enough,” he says, and I can tell his expression puts Yuri and Iroha at ease a bit.

But I know the truth. That smile is dangerous. It’s an artful disguise for his insanity. I was deceived and failed in the past because of it.

But for now, I’ve been spared from the worst-case scenario where everyone turns against me.

Still—

“There’s nothing to worry about, Kazuki. I’ll protect you.”

My hands clench.

No. It won’t work like this.

If Koudai Kamiuchi can overcome me so easily, if I’m this weak, then this Box is absolutely going to overwhelm me.

And Maria will lose her life to the Game of Indolence.

► Day 1 <C> Kazuki Hoshino's Room

YOUR CLASS IS THE KNIGHT.

That obvious message is displayed on the monitor.

Everyone else must have seen this screen, too, by this point. All I can do is pray they somehow got Classes that'll work out well for me.

"Hey, dumbass, don't go blabbing about secrets. What're you going to do if the game is completely boring, you hypocrite? I want a refund."

Noitan keeps needling me after he appears, but of course I don't have a reply for him.

"Pick who you want for a Private Meeting, scum."

Noitan and his bloodshot eyes disappear, replaced by portraits of the six players.

A Private Meeting, huh? There's really only one person I would pick. My hand reaches almost reflexively for Maria's picture—but then stops.

Is this really the right choice?

Choosing Maria isn't a mistake. I'm absolutely going to need her help if I want to save her.

But...I reached for her *reflexively*. Before even really thinking.

Is that because I decided in an instant that my choice was correct?

...Of course it wasn't. Even after that mess just a bit ago, I'm still unconsciously relying on Maria.

That's why I need to pick someone else, regardless of whether it's the right or wrong choice.

I need to sever my reliance on Maria.

"I'll fight this battle on my own."

I'll choose the opponent I'm going to defeat first.

My arm is still hovering, and I reach out again. I'm going after—

“Oh_hO. An_unEXpecTED_choiCE.”

—Iroha Shindo.

I will be the king.

The first step to that end will be taking control of Iroha.

Iroha Shindo	→	Yuri Yanagi	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Yuri Yanagi	→	Iroha Shindo	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Daiya Oomine	→	Kazuki Hoshino	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Kazuki Hoshino	→	Iroha Shindo	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Koudai Kamiuchi	→	Daiya Oomine	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Maria Otonashi	→	Daiya Oomine	3:40 PM – 4:10 PM

► Day 1 <C> Private Meeting with Daiya Oomine – Kazuki Hoshino's Room

Though I'm completely focused on my Private Meeting with Iroha, my conference with Daiya comes first. This means he chose me more quickly than I chose Iroha.

It's a bit of a letdown, since all I want to do is talk to Iroha, but I quickly regain my composure.

This is one person I can't afford to slip up with.

Daiya enters my room immediately when the time arrives. His intense stare is fixed on me even before he sits down on the table.

“...Are you really Kazuki Hoshino?”

“Huh?”

That's a strange question.

Even though the others are the copies, the ones who aren't real, Daiya doesn't realize this.

Wait, if he's asking me this, he must be unaware that he is the owner of the

Game of Indolence. Daiya's NPC is competing under the same conditions as the rest of the NPCs.

...Wait a second. That means—

“.....Daiya, what do you think of this Box?”

“You've got a lot of nerve ignoring my question and asking one of your own... But fine, I'll give you an answer.”

Daiya spits out his response in obvious displeasure:

“*It's a worthless piece of garbage.*”

I knew it.

“It accomplishes nothing, just makes people play a killing game. It has no reason to exist.”

This Daiya thinks the same way as the Daiya in the second game.

What he's saying is almost exactly the same as what he said back then. It makes complete sense now that I think about it. Daiya's NPCs don't retain memories. If they don't have any additional information, naturally they're going to do the same things.

And I'm certain the Daiya in the second game—

“Who the hell would play a disgusting game like this?”

—wanted to put a stop to *Kingdom Royale*.

In other words, the Daiya NPC here with me now shares that goal. You could even say he's my ally.

No, Daiya isn't the only one on my side. None of the other NPCs, aside from Koudai Kamiuchi, should be actively wanting to kill anyone else. The ones who actually did so in order to survive were the players who believed they had no other options and knew that all the others were NPCs.

...I might have a chance of winning this after all.

“Daiya, there's something I want you to hear me out on, okay?”

“What is it?”

“You’re dangerous.”

“...What the hell? I know I must seem like a dangerous person to others. I’m sure I could kill someone if it came down to it, after all... Is that it? Why say something like that now? You hoping to give me a lecture for my perilous ways?”

“...No. I wasn’t saying you’re a threat. I meant it in the sense that you’re the one at greatest risk—basically, the one with the highest chance of being murdered.”

“What kind of crap is—?” Daiya suddenly cuts himself off. “No, maybe it isn’t crap... Whether I’m first in line or not, I can understand how my personality would make me an easy target. Others might decide I’m a threat because of it.”

“That’s not all,” I say, and Daiya regards me silently. “It’s also because you’re the owner.”

“What? Cut the crap. I know I’m an owner, but there’s no way in hell I’m the owner of this Box.”

Right—Daiya criticized this Box for being unproductive during the second game, too. That coming from a guy who used a Box just because he was bored...

Maybe all that stuff about trying to break the tedium was just a lie? Could he actually have had an ulterior motive he didn’t want me to know about? And maybe not even the Daiya NPCs can see through the real Daiya’s intentions?

...I don’t know, but it’s best to set all those complications aside for now.

“...Regardless of whether it’s true or not, Maria thinks you’re the one behind *Kingdom Royale*. If that idea spreads, I think there’s a good chance everyone will get the wrong idea and decide that if they crush your Box—if they kill you—that will solve everything.”

That’s the actual reason why Daiya was killed so fast during the second game.

“...Well, it does sound plausible. I have to say, I never thought someone would warn me off getting killed instead of killing someone else.”

Daiya fixes me with a sharp look as he speaks.

“There’s definitely something off about you. An idea like that would never

come from Kazuki Hoshino even on his best day. Even if you did come up with it, you'd never be able to voice it with as much confidence as you did now. What's up with you? It's almost like *you've seen this before*—” He pauses. “...I see now... I fell for it. That must be why I thought your attitude toward Shindo and the others was off. This...isn't the first time you've played *Kingdom Royale*, is it?”

Daiya never fails to impress.

One could easily come up with several other likely scenarios, but his ability to arrive directly at the truth with so little to go on is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

“...That look on your face tells me I’m right. But I don’t really care about the truth. It’s enough for me to know what you’re trying to make me do by getting that answer out of me. So, c’mon, spit it out.”

Daiya’s tone is authoritarian.

“Just as long as you’re prepared to be used.”

I choke back my words at that.

I had intended to use this Private Meeting to figure out how Daiya would act. Put another way, this meant I had not yet decided what to actually do with him.

However, I’ve learned that I share the same goal as the Daiya NPC.

Could this be the best chance I’ll get for us to work together?

I mean, I can’t really imagine any other situation where he would listen to me this earnestly. If I can convince him of what I’m saying, I may be able to keep him from being such an easy target. Even more importantly, I’d have his intelligence as a resource. That would be a huge step toward the finish line.

There are risks, of course. If Daiya really felt like it, he could easily use me just as he said he would. The thought doesn’t stem from weakheartedness; it’s just a fact based on my experiences during the first game.

Still—

“I know all about how the Game of Indolence works.”

No, this is no time to keep quiet about things. I think...it was bound to turn out this way from the moment I revealed myself as the Knight.

"There's a lot I want to talk about, but for now, I'll start by telling you how things went during the three other rounds I've played of *Kingdom Royale*. In the first game—"

And so I begin my explanation.

Daiya listens, barely offering any comment at all.

Unable to finish my story in the remaining time, the Private Meeting comes to an end with a promise to tell him the rest during the next one.

► Day 1 <C> Private Meeting with Iroha Shindo – Iroha Shindo's Room

I have no idea how my interaction with Daiya will play out. But for now, I have to mentally switch gears.

My next Private Meeting is with the first person I need to beat—to control. Iroha Shindo. I already know what I need to say to pull it off.

There's a reason I want to get Iroha under control as soon as possible: She's the one with the greatest ability to change the nature of a situation.

That's why I need to make my move before she does something to hurt my cause.

Judging by what I saw earlier, she shouldn't be totally closed to what I have to say.

I'm in good shape here.

Telling myself that, I head to Iroha's room.

"....."

So what's up with this? Iroha is standing there imposingly like she's waiting for an enemy, arms crossed and blank-faced.

"Can I ask you something? Why did you pick me for your Private Meeting?"

She wasn't wary like this in the common area, I don't think.

Despite my uneasiness, I answer, "Because you're the first person I wanted to win over, Iroha."

It's not a lie.

"...Iroha?" Iroha narrows her eyes suspiciously.

"Um, is something wrong?"

"...It's just that most other students call me President when they meet me for the first time. Meaning I'm not used to people calling me by my first name out of the blue. Apparently, it's not easy to get cozy with me."

Now that I think about it, I called her President, too, until she told me not to...

"But enough about that... Why do you want me on your side first? ...Actually, you don't need to explain. I'm guessing you've worked out that I'm trying to manipulate how things play out here?"

".....Wha—?"

I'm caught off guard by how quickly her mind works.

"You don't want me to go off and do something that puts you in a difficult situation. That's why you're in a rush to have me join your cause."

"Yeah, but..."

What's going on here? It's like she predicted what I was about to say to her.

"This is just how I see things, but let's say I did simply nod my head and go along with what someone said, and things panned out in the end. All the same, even if luck did end up on our side, I couldn't respect that type of person. Leaving your fate in the hands of another is the same as shutting off your brain. Don't you agree, Hoshino?"

".....Um—"

"It's just not in my nature. I'm not into following orders, dancing in the palm of someone's hand... So where were we? Oh yeah, *you were trying to gain control over me and then call me your ally.*"

Of course.

Of course she's already got me pegged.

"So, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, Hoshino, but I won't do anything under your leadership. I'm going to use my own head so we can act together."

"...'We'?"

Iroha doesn't answer the obvious question of who this "we" is referring to. There's only one person who would've already joined forces with Iroha at this point.

Yuri Yanagi.

The one who once tried to murder Iroha with Magic.

...This is most definitely not a good turn of events.

"I'll be honest with you. I generally wanted to believe what you said in the common area."

"...Huh?"

"But Yuri pointed something out during our Private Meeting just now. She said it seems like you know more about us than we do about you. Well...Yuri and I are fairly well-known, so you may have heard a few rumors about us, but it feels like your knowledge is much more in-depth than that."

"That's—"

Iroha doesn't give me a chance to speak, though. "I don't mind if you know about us. I understand you're in a special position here, given how you knew you were the Knight. The problem is that you tried to hide it. *You didn't immediately make it clear that you're in possession of information that gives you an advantage in the game.*"

"Th—that's not what I... You've got it wrong. I didn't say anything because I can't just talk about that stuff right off the bat!"

"Yeah, that may be true. But there's no guarantee of that. We have no way of telling if you're the one who set this game up, are on board with it, or are a dissenter. We want to believe it's the last of those three, but if we're wrong, we pay with our lives. You can see why it's too dangerous for us to just vaguely follow what you say, right?"

That's why she won't follow me.

Ah, dammit... It's a natural conclusion.

"Relax. We won't completely stonewall your ideas. We'll hear you out. But we're going to judge the truth of what you say for ourselves. Our lives are on the line, so of course we can't blindly place our trust in the words of someone else. That's why we can't be your allies. Sorry."

It's a sound rationale to me, and it's probably the most correct choice for Iroha and Yuri. It also still conceivably leaves me in a position to do something.

But only conceivably—*since I'm powerless now.*

We're already at a dead end here.

".....Iroha."

"What? You're still going to try to justify yourself? Go ahead. I'll listen, of course."

"....."

Truthfully, I don't have any problem with laying everything out for Iroha like I'm doing with Daiya. She's capable of calm, rational judgments, so she'd most likely take my story relatively well. At the very least, she would probably lend me a hand in my goal of ending the game without any deaths.

But—

"...I've changed my mind."

—things aren't going to work out that way now.

"I see."

I mean, Iroha is going to tell Yuri everything, and once Yuri's opinions get added to the mix, the situation will inevitably change.

The reason is that unlike Iroha, who can take a detached perspective even in regards to herself, Yuri will refuse to believe any uncomfortable truths. For example, I can't imagine her accepting the idea that she's currently an NPC, or that the real her now bears the weight of murder on her conscience.

What will Yuri do when she hears me saying things she doesn't want to hear?

She'll reject it. She'll view me as an enemy.

And then she'll draw in Iroha and set out to win *Kingdom Royale*.

In other words—*run headlong toward murder*.

That's why I'm at an impasse here.

“__”

We still have time in our meeting.

But I can't find anything else to say.

► Day 1 <D> The Common Area

My powerlessness soon rears its head in the absolute worst way possible.

“We may need to split into groups.”

After waiting for all of us to take our seats, Iroha offers her opinion.

I'm not sure what she's up to immediately. After all, Iroha and Yuri are already teamed up. Why would she need to go and announce that to everyone?

But I understand once I look up at her smile.

This is her way of keeping me in check.

Both me and “the person who knows all about *Kingdom Royale*” who Iroha believes exists.

I was helpless during the last time block, and now Iroha has identified me as an enemy.

“Maybe I need to explain. First, let's confirm our purpose. Obviously, that's to get out of this without killing one another. Do we all agree?”

No one objects.

“Next, we have one proposal for how to accomplish this, courtesy of Hoshino: We'll automatically be freed if all of us survive. That's a very appealing idea. But isn't it too dangerous to accept his assertions wholesale and do as he wishes without even knowing who he really is?”

After checking to make sure we're all listening closely, she continues:

"Still, if you think about it, we aren't really going to find another better solution. Heck, we can't even tell if it's a lie or not. If it's true, there won't be any murders. After all, if there's a chance that this oh-so-attractive solution could be for real, then there's no reason for anyone to actively pursue victory by killing."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

Koudai Kamiuchi voices his agreement. It makes me want to yell *That's not the case with you!* but I fight down the urge.

"What it boils down to is that we're automatically going to proceed toward Hoshino's goal. Whether we trust him completely or not, we're going to arrive at that eighth day without taking any action."

"Maybe. However, there's a chance we may get out of this, and it's a much better option than killing one another as part of the game, isn't it?" Maria remarks.

Iroha nods, then replies:

"That's true for me, but for someone else, not so much."

"Who?"

Iroha answers without the slightest change in her expression. "The instigator of the game."

The one she's acknowledged as an enemy.

Iroha isn't mistaken about who she's chosen as her foe. But it's impossible to defeat him, since his non-NPC self isn't here.

This is the flaw in Iroha's plan of attack.

"It isn't really clear what exactly their intentions are, but I'm sure whoever set this game up wants to see things get ugly between us. Even if I'm wrong about that, they're undoubtedly hoping for some sort of drama. I mean, there's no other reason for such a pointless game, right?"

No one voices any dissenting opinions. Even without any hard evidence, her

general argument sounds plausible enough to everyone.

And then there's the fact that I know she's correct on all counts. This Box Daiya created to relieve his boredom definitely doesn't want an uneventful time.

But it bears repeating that our foe isn't here.

"That's why there has to be someone—someone collaborating with the instigator—who will try to change things so that people die," Iroha says, blatantly staring at my face.

Now that she's veered away from the truth, she's picked the wrong person to fight.

"...Are you suggesting that's what Kazuki is trying to do?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm getting at is that someone among us may still try to change the course of things. If they do, it puts us all in danger. That's why we need to split into groups."

"There'll be my side and the instigator's side."

I see. So Iroha's mistake isn't just that she thinks there's an "instigator."

"Yeah. That sounds okay, doesn't it?"

"I...think that may be our only option."

If there isn't an instigator, then nothing can set off the game. Believing that is their first mistake.

It's not hard to understand why they do. Even the NPC me didn't anticipate someone like Koudai Kamiuchi who would welcome a killing game with open arms. I failed to see that Yuri had the initiative to take a person's life. I never would have learned either of these things if I hadn't experienced the second game.

Iroha has no memory of the previous games; she wouldn't realize them, either.

All the same, with no way of knowing any of this, Iroha presses on with her explanation.

“What we need to be afraid of right now are traps set by the mastermind. But we can turn them back on our enemy if we don’t go along with what the instigator wants. Rather, what we need to do is discern their intentions and use those plans against them to reach the end without any murders.”

Scowling, Maria asks, “That’s why we’re splitting into groups?”

“Yeah. I think if we each act on our own, the instigator might catch someone in their trap. Especially since the stakes are so high for us. It could drive us to let our suspicions get the better of us, and the weaker-willed to get blood on their hands. That’s the worst scenario I can imagine.

“But what happens if we are all of the same mind? What if we have an absolutely infallible purpose? Any traps set by the troublemakers would be trivial. And that’s why I say we need to make a group with a unified purpose. The ones who might try to deceive us wouldn’t be a part of it, of course.”

“Hmph.” Daiya snorts derisively at Iroha’s explanation. “I see your logic, but how do you go about forming such a group? How do you tell who’s on the instigator’s side to begin with?”

“There is no way of telling, obviously,” Iroha says matter-of-factly.

“What the hell? Then—”

“That’s why—we *need to take away their freedom.*”

Iroha lays it out before Daiya can finish.

“...I don’t get it. Are you saying you’ll threaten to kill anyone who doesn’t follow your orders?”

“The opposite.”

Daiya furrows his eyebrows. “The opposite?”

“Yeah, the opposite. I won’t control the ones who don’t listen to me; *I’ll take away the freedom of those who agree with me.*”

At that, everyone’s eyes go wide, not just Daiya’s.

“Once you belong to my group, I won’t tolerate any objections. I’ll make everyone swear absolute obedience to me. *And if you do try to resist, I’ll kill*

you.”

“K-kill us...?”

The words quietly escape my lips, and Iroha Shindo gives me a hard look before she elaborates.

“As for how, I’ll have everyone who agrees hand over their rations to me. If that scarebear is right, we’ll turn into mummies and die if we don’t eat our rations during the *<E>* time block, right? So if anyone displays even the slightest hint of opposition toward me, I’ll take everyone’s rations and flush them down the toilet. If you all obey, I’ll give you a day’s worth of rations during the *<D>* time block. In essence, I’ll be doing what the Revolutionary does with Assassinate, except by overseeing our rations.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Daiya interrupts Iroha’s explanation. “Why do you think anyone would want to join your group if they know all that?” he asks.

A frosty smile appears on Iroha’s face. “The people who join my group are totally obedient to me. This, of course, means they’re helpless. *They can’t even try to set this murder game in motion.* I’ll be able to determine that those who do join the group are victims caught in the game. Or I could just judge them to be losers who got tired of fighting me. *On the other hand, those who don’t join will be deemed enemies who plan to fight me.*”

Iroha pauses for a moment and lets out a breath.

Then, smiling slightly, she lays down her cards.

“If you’re going to prove you aren’t my enemy, bow and scrape before me.”

The violence of her words renders everyone speechless—even Daiya.

Here’s what Iroha is saying: Membership isn’t a free choice—it’s mandatory. She’ll eliminate anyone who doesn’t join.

Looking at us as we all sit in silence, Iroha continues without batting an eye:

“I figured it out. A way to beat this game. Someone with righteous intent has to assume control over everyone. Yeah, now that I’m saying it aloud, you could call it becoming a temporary ‘king.’”

Become the king.

That's the same conclusion I reached.

"I know it sounds like I'm asking too much. And it's not out of the question for me to make a bad call that leads to someone's death. I'm willing to acknowledge the possibility. But surely you can understand that this is exponentially better than us all running willy-nilly and falling prey to our fears, right?"

"And is there some necessity that it be you who does this?" Daiya points out.

"No," she readily admits. "However, I can't think of anyone better to fill the role."

Her tone is full of confidence. Daiya scratches his head and presses on.

"That's not the only problem. From where we sit, it's hard to deny the possibility that *you* might actually be one of the troublemakers. If we're going to follow you, we would need you to show us what makes you trustworthy."

"I see. I'm not an instigator, so it slipped my mind... But just saying that isn't going to help you trust me. Guess I have no other choice. I'll just have to demonstrate it to you."

Saying this, she pulls up her shirt.

"This is the resolve of the king."

There's a knife underneath.

"Wh-what are you—?"

Ignoring my exclamation, she pulls the knife out of her skirt and stabs it down into the table. Yuri stiffens at the loud *bang*.

"Take a good look, all of you. This is true resolve."

Iroha rips off her scarf and ties it around the little finger of her left hand so tight, I can see it swell with blood.

What is she—?

My mind can't keep up with her actions. But that doesn't matter as she grips the knife protruding from the table with her right hand.

Her gaze is straightforward, almost too sharp. The corners of her mouth

twitch upward; her breathing is ragged. Her forehead is dotted with sweat.

“I-Iroha?”

The intensity in her eyes is enough to drive Yuri back when she tries to approach. Then...

“Ah—aaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” she yells.

And her little finger—

—is severed.

“Ah—aahh—”

Yuri stands pale and speechless, but Iroha keeps laughing.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing—?!”

It happened too suddenly for Maria to react earlier, but she runs up to Iroha, tearing off a strip of her own shirt to begin staunching the flow of blood. Iroha doesn't try to stop Maria, but she also pays no attention to her as her breath comes in rough gasps, her mouth still twisted.

She then levels a gaze at me, full of conviction bordering on insanity.

It's enough to strike terror into anyone.

“So how about it? Do you think anyone trying to play this stupid game would be prepared to do that? Are you sure I could cut off my finger on sheer resolve if I were some lackey?”

“N...nghhh...”

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?! Not a chance in hell! I will *never* play this game, and I’m too strong to let it beat me... I’m the one to lead you! Do you understand that?!”

It's overwhelming.

Seeing her in such a state, I'm well aware I have no choice but to follow her.

That's right.

This is Iroha Shindo.

This is Iroha Shindo's resolve to become the king.

"Entrust them to me! Trust me with your lives, your souls, just for the duration of the game! I will bear all of them. I will bear the responsibility for everything until it crushes me!"

She throws her finger, as if to declare she has severed all attachment to it.

"Follow me, you ignorant peons! And those of you who would stand against me, be prepared! You think anyone's gonna let you idiots get your way?! I will take control of this place. That's right; I—"

She spits the words like acid.

"I will become the king."

This intensity.

It almost makes me lose my nerve. Only one person can become the king. It's impossible to have two at the same time. Meaning I'm bound for a showdown with an undeniably superhuman girl.

The very idea is crazy. I can't possibly win.

The overriding fear sparks a sudden thought.

...Would it be better to let her be the king?

Who the king is doesn't really matter. As long as someone can keep things under control and none of us ultimately kill another, my goal of protecting Maria will be achieved. If so, then couldn't I afford to just leave everything in her hands?

"__"

I know. That will never work.

After all, she can't fight her true enemy. She is an NPC, and her real self has already finished her battle.

I look around me.

Yuri stands terrified, and a hollow look is appearing in her eyes.

Koudai Kamiuchi observes impassively, but he can't quite hide the glee in his.

But Iroha Shindo doesn't notice any of this. She stands so far ahead of the pack that she fails to see the subtleties at work in others. If she becomes our ruler, she'll be betrayed and murdered just like the King in the backstory of *Kingdom Royale*.

That's why I have to be the one.

I can't rely on Iroha. I can't rely on Maria, either. There's no depending on anyone for me in the fourth game of *Kingdom Royale*.

After all, I'm actually alone in here.

I'm the only one truly fighting with Daiya in this space.

I look at the finger Iroha threw.

Iroha, I understand your resolve.

I also recognize that you're an incredible person.

However, even so—you're still not up to the job.

You can't become the king. You're an emperor with no clothes; you think you can become king when you're nothing more than an NPC in a supporting role. Step aside.

The only one who ever had any right to become the king—is me.

► Day 1 <F> Kazuki Hoshino's Room

After that, Yuri and Koudai Kamiuchi decided to join the Group. The former was no surprise, but it caught me off guard how easily the latter agreed. Well, I doubt he gave it much thought at all.

Maria and Daiya are still deferring their decision. This is partly because swearing total obedience to someone isn't a decision to be made lightly, and also because Iroha says she's willing to wait until the third day—specifically the <D> time block of the third day—when all of us will be in one place.

Even if she wasn't waiting, I have my suspicions that from her perspective, we're already on the side of the instigators.

Not just Iroha, either. I'm pretty sure Yuri's also on guard against us, though she may not show it. We've already been deemed hostile. The Group views us as enemies, and there's no reason for us to believe we can trust anything they say.

Still, though this may be obvious, I must take action. I have to do away with Iroha's arrogant notion that she can rule us.

To begin with, there's no way creating a group system will put an end to the game. It won't do anything to keep Koudai Kamiuchi's savage nature in check, and I can't imagine Iroha will be able to control Yuri's actions. The two of them may have joined the Group, but they aren't actually submitting to it. Without access to information from the previous games, Iroha has no way of knowing this.

This is why I have to destroy this whole system.

I don't think going after Iroha will work, though, now that she's gone all-in. She's made it her mission to become the king.

I've learned all too well how impossible it is to sway her once she's locked on to her goal, both from amputation and the events of the third game.

That's why I need to aim my attack at someone else.

“.....If that's the case, then...”

My target almost sets itself.

Yuri Yanagi.

She won't be an easy opponent to deal with, herself. But she's my only means of destroying the Group.

Yeah, that's it. Tomorrow I need to go after Yuri.

Now that I've reached this conclusion, I lie down on the bed.

I'm not in a very favorable position here. I've been way too weak. I need to pull myself together and navigate this situation skillfully. But for now— —the first day is over, and no one has died.

► Day 2 The Common Area

“Okay, hand them over.”

At Iroha’s prompt, Yuri and Koudai Kamiuchi put their rations, knives, and, for some reason, their wristwatches on the table.

Iroha nods and gathers everything up, then puts the beige and green watches around the wrist of her four-fingered left hand. I piece together that this is her way of representing that she has control over them.

...Still, as painful as it looks, Iroha’s expression never changes, almost like she never had a little finger to begin with... I’m sure it still hurts.

“Oh, by the way, it’s no use talking to them, okay? I control what they say, too.”

Thinking back on it, I realize neither of them has so much as opened their mouths for anything beyond basic hellos.

It occurs to me that this means the two of them must have revealed their Classes to her, too.

“Anyway, my group has nothing new to say to you all, so if you have any issues, you can bring them to me.”

Maria glances at me, but she keeps her mouth shut. She knows that this is the work of a Box and that if we can convey this fact properly, we’ll be that much closer to solving this mess.

But she can’t say anything.

Now that Iroha has formed her Group, what’s going to determine how this plays out isn’t the truth of our claims so much as whether she chooses to believe them. If she doesn’t, our chances of recovery afterward aren’t great.

At the very least, it’s safe to assume Maria won’t make a move until she knows why I already knew about the Game of Indolence.

That explains why Iroha, who is acting calm enough to make you forget she cut off her finger, is inevitably the only one doing the talking. She speaks to us cheerfully and casually, trying to get to know us by asking about our hobbies

and what we like to do on our days off from school. But we all know that each word could spark misunderstanding and ruin everything for us. We're like courtroom prosecutors and defendants at a matchmaking party together.

During our entire guarded conversation with Iroha, I'm keeping an eye on Yuri.

She spends pretty much the entire exchange with her head lowered.

If she were to act—

I recall the second game. Unlike Iroha, who does everything out in the open, Yuri works behind the scenes. By the time her actions—her machinations—come to light, it's too late to do anything about them.

Will Yuri actually make a move? She's calculating, for better or worse, so it's unlikely she'll try anything risky if she's decided Iroha's plan is her best chance for survival...

Suddenly, Yuri feels my gaze and raises her head.

Though she seems a bit flustered at the attention, she flashes me a weak, almost wry smile that all but admits to being in a spot of trouble. Just as a small animal has a certain kind of charm, I can't help finding that helpless smile really cute.

Cute?

Is that what she wants me to think?

We're on opposite sides, but is she actually trying to win me over instead of keeping her distance?

“.....”

I'm overthinking it. She can't be that aware of her expressions. I know that.

I know it...but I've already noticed.

Will Yuri make a move or not?

What a carefree way to think. We're already way past that stage.

In the second game—when Yuri was admittedly the player, but still—she had already taken action by this point. She always acts quickly. That's why, even

now—she's long since set things in motion.

Yuri Yanagi's plans are already underway.

► Day 2 <C> Private Meeting with Yuri Yanagi – Yuri Yanagi's Room

Iroha Shindo	→	Maria Otonashi	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Yuri Yanagi	→	Iroha Shindo	3:40 PM – 4:10 PM
Daiya Oomine	→	Koudai Kamiuchi	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Kazuki Hoshino	→	Yuri Yanagi	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Koudai Kamiuchi	→	Iroha Shindo	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Maria Otonashi	→	Kazuki Hoshino	3:40 PM – 4:10 PM

I need to have my Private Meeting with Yuri immediately.

That's why I'm unable to keep my promise to choose Daiya. All I can say is that I don't really have any other choice.

I enter Yuri's room.

Recognizing that it's me, Yuri gets up from her bed and bows her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Hoshino. I'm not allowed to speak with you even during Private Meetings. So even if you want to talk to me, I don't think I'll be able to reciprocate..."

Interesting behavior.

Yuri should be on guard against me, absolutely positive I'm on the side of the instigator. There's no doubt of that.

But that isn't how she acts toward me; instead, she seems to be trying to show that she's merely following Iroha and doesn't really hate me.

So she can have a way to get me on her side if she really needs it.

...Sly as she may be, I have to break her down.

"...Iroha isn't here now. Are you still going to do as she tells you?"

"Um...I have to show Iroha the data from my device."

Of course Iroha wouldn't have overlooked that. I had kinda figured that might be the case, though. That's why I could come up with a countermeasure.

"I'm going to ask you flat out: Are you okay with the way things are now, Yuri?"

"U-um... So, um...I can't answer those kinds of questions."

"Do you really think everything will work out if you go along with Iroha's plan?"

"U-um—"

Troubled, Yuri's gaze comes to rest upon the table.

She notices what I've written on the notebook I set there.

"She won't know if we write it."

Messages on paper aren't saved on our devices. I realized this when Koudai Kamiuchi passed me his note during the second game.

She must understand the implications of what I wrote. Yuri looks at me, her eyes wide.

I hold out the pen to her. I'm sure it'll take her a moment to decide what to do. She's frozen, staring at me, hands clasped together in front of her chest.

"...I understand. You can't say anything. Okay, then I won't, either. Aw man, guess that's it, then. This Private Meeting was a complete waste of time..."

As I misrepresent my true intentions to throw Iroha off the trail, my hand is moving.

"What do you really want to do? Are you still going to obey Iroha?"

After writing this, I hold the pen out to Yuri again.

But she shakes her head vigorously as if to say *I can't*.

"No matter what?" I write, but Yuri still shakes her head.

...Well, yeah, guess that's no surprise. She's wary of me; she has no reason to go along easily with my ideas.

I'm going to need to coerce her a bit. Nudge her along and shake her up.

I scribble down the words I need.

“You didn’t even like him—”

Yuri’s eyes go round at this sudden, nonsensical sentence; then she looks at me. But I’m not done yet. I’m going to shock her, rattle her until she has no choice but to write a reply.

I scribble down the rest.

“—but you still went out with the boy Iroha liked, didn’t you?”

“—!!”

The effect is astounding.

Yuri’s shoulders tremble, and her face goes so white, I feel sorry for her.

Keeping my face impassive, I offer her the pen again. Looking back and forth between the pen and me several times, she finally seems to accept that I won’t take no for an answer and takes it in her hand, on the verge of tears.

She still tries to play dumb, writing in a shaky hand *“I don’t know what you mean.”* But when I don’t react, she quickly tears off the page and balls it up.

She moves her hand across the paper, tears streaming down her face.

“How do you know that?”

“You can’t possibly know.”

“Not even Iroha has figured it out.”

Afterward, she hands the notebook and pen back to me. She wipes away her tears and gazes up at me through her lashes.

.....Do you really think that look is going to work on me?

“You told me yourself.”

It would be more accurate to say I heard it from Iroha, but that would be too hard to explain in writing.

Yuri shakes her head fearfully.

“I don’t know what you mean. I haven’t told you that. What are you talking about?”

Her responses up to this point are as I imagined they would be. My aim all along was to get her to ask me “*Why?*”

That’s why I can finally write:

“This isn’t the first time I’ve played Kingdom Royale.”

I guess it’s not enough for her to understand, because Yuri merely peers at me uneasily. She’s smart, though, so I know if I explain this way, she’ll catch on quickly enough.

“I’ve played this game several times with the same people. This is the fourth time.”

Yuri’s eyes bulge. I can see the realization creeping into her gaze, and she begins to shake in fear.

“That’s how I know so much about you.”

She shakes her head violently, refusing to accept the idea. She motions for me to give her the pen.

“You’re lying! I would never tell anyone about my ex-boyfriend.”

“Maybe not under normal circumstances. But are you certain you wouldn’t in an extreme situation like this?”

“—!!”

“I’ve observed you over the course of three games. I’d say I understand you fairly well.”

“That’s how I know.”

Why did Iroha adopt such a hard-edged attitude during our Private Meeting yesterday?

I found the answer when I looked at the name of the person she met with before me.

“You talked Iroha into making the groups, didn’t you?”

“Wha—?”

Yuri speaks up without thinking but quickly claps her left hand over her

mouth. Without removing her hand, she frantically scribbles in the notebook.

“What are you saying? That I’m the one responsible for making this happen? All of it? I could never do that!”

“The Yuri I know could.”

She didn’t know everything, of course. There’s no way she could have predicted Iroha would lop off her little finger.

All the same, knowing Iroha’s personality as well as she does, Yuri would surely have known at least one thing.

“You would’ve known Iroha would try to gain control over everyone, at least.”

Yuri lowers head and closes her mouth.

“The Yuri I know would use what she needs to survive.

“Use Iroha.”

That would be her only option to keep herself alive.

Yuri could never become the king like Iroha could. With her personality, it would be impossible for her to take charge and unify everyone under a single purpose.

However, she would be able to control whoever did become the king.

That’s why Yuri tried to set Iroha up in that role. That would position her to indirectly steer the course of future events and thus guarantee her own safety.

Yuri remains silent, her head lowered.

She stays motionless for a moment. But her panicked breathing has become calm.

“.....”

Yuri slowly moves her arm and quietly begins writing in the notebook.

“I’ll accept that your beliefs are correct.”

She continues at an even pace, her handwriting rounded and girlish, yet also neat and clear.

“I’ll accept that you have actually been through this game three times, and

that you know me very well.”

She quietly tears off the page and continues on a fresh one.

“So what?”

She raises her head.

“—Urk.”

A chill runs through me.

Her eyes have that same vacant look I saw before.

“Would you be satisfied if I cried and apologized and promised to do whatever you wanted? If that’s what it takes, I’m more than willing to do anything I have to.”

And then tears actually begin to well up. Her face contorted in pain, she writes:

“It’s really very easy for me to do.”

“__”

Agh, this is awful. I’ve already failed.

“Listen, that’s not what I—”

Yuri isn’t paying attention to my writing anymore, though. She goes quiet, puts a meaningless smile on her face, and lies down on the bed.

“Ugh...”

I had hoped to make Yuri submit—well, maybe make her understand our predicament and win her over without having to do all that. I would then have used her to gain a foothold in overcoming Iroha.

But my approach was clearly mistaken.

She obviously didn’t believe me when I told her the truth straight-out. Maybe I shouldn’t have used this approach, though. Why did I ever choose to go after someone as fearful as she is with what almost amounts to an attack?

“You hate their guts don’t you All those bastards who tricked you and butchered you C’mon they were prepared to off you for their own

survival_Heh-heh-heh."

Noitan's words run through my mind.

Could he have been right all along? Did I choose to attack her because I subconsciously want to see them as opponents to defeat rather than people to save?

If so...then maybe I've unknowingly fallen into the trap of this awful Game of Indolence myself.

► Day 2 <C> Private Meeting with Maria Otonashi – Kazuki Hoshino's Room

Maria arrives in my room with her arms crossed unhappily.

"...Finally, now I can have a real conversation with you. Dammit... What were you thinking? You should've come and talked to me first of all. Why didn't—?"

Maria stops short and scowls.

"Why the long face?"

I guess it's obvious.

Overwhelmed by the shock of my failure, I've been sitting hunched over on the bed.

"Haaah... This is so depressing. What exactly happened? Did Yanagi turn you down or something?"

"Turn me down? ...Something like that, I guess."

She was clearly joking, but Maria seems momentarily taken aback by my response. Then she releases a long, exasperated sigh.

"Well, you certainly move quick... This will do nothing to dispel your reputation for getting girls without even trying. I suppose you thought you had a chance, since Yanagi doesn't display a lot of self-confidence. What a devastating miscalculation. A girl who seems as popular as she is must have tons of suitors. I mean, you're into dressing up in women's clothing; she's way

out of your league."

...Hey, you're the one who forced me to dress up, you know.

I can't even muster the energy to quip back at her, though, so I just sit, gaze lowered, mouth closed.

"...And how do you fall for a girl you just met yesterday? Mogi is one thing, but..."

"Wha...?"

At her soft muttering, I look up. Maria scratches her nose and scowls, then plops down on the bed next to me. She silently punches my shoulder.

"Kazuki. Buy me a strawberry tart."

And now she's trying to mooch off me.

"....."

"What's with that look? I'm willing to go out with a guy who just got dumped. They always go on about how 'She was kinda "eh" anyway, when you think about it' or 'She wasn't even that cute, really,' but if you want to vent, I'll still hear you out. A strawberry tart is a small price to pay for putting up with the sorry state of your psyche, isn't it?"

"...No, that's—"

"I don't know about Yanagi, but I'm saying I'll be here with you," Maria says with a calm, collected expression.

She states it so bluntly, as if it's nothing, so the kind words catch me off guard. But the thoughtfulness behind them soon brings a smile to my face.

She's right. This is no time to be depressed. I most certainly failed. But it still shouldn't be too late. If so, all I can do is make sure not to mess up next time.

So I can protect Maria.

"I'm sorry, Maria. And, uh, it's not like I got rejected after a romantic confession."

".....I know. There's no way you'd be brave enough to do that. I was just joking around to try to cheer you up."

I notice you weren't sure what to say for a moment, though...

"So what happened with Yanagi?"

"I botched my attempt to persuade her."

Maria frowns with bewilderment. "You were trying to persuade Yanagi? Not Shindo?"

I nod. In response, Maria puts her hand to her chin in thought.

"Why? Are you saying you have some information that made you decide that was the best course of action? ...Oh, right. I was originally planning to interrogate you on what exactly you know."

"Uh, I see..."

"Tell me."

Maria's expression says she trusts me to rely on her and tell her every last detail, without a doubt.

She's not wrong. We spent a lifetime together, so she can read me like a book.

Still—

"...Sorry, but I can't."

Who I am right now has experienced several tragedies that Maria knows nothing of thanks to the Game of Indolence.

The person I am now knows in the depths of his heart that he must protect Maria.

".....What...are you saying? You can't tell me? Why?"

"I just think I can't keep relying on you all the time."

"...Quit talking nonsense. Whether you rely on me isn't the issue here. Isn't it better for two to work together and solve this than just one?!"

I know she's right. With my wits alone, I might end up making the same mistakes as before. Even I don't think I can count on my own abilities.

However, what's going to happen if I tell Maria everything just because of

that? If I tell her the truth—that she's an NPC—she may come to believe she's a replacement, that it doesn't matter if she dies, which I'm sure will lower her regard for her physical well-being even further.

I could never allow that to happen to her. I have to get everyone through this alive.

Someone like Maria, who would sacrifice herself for the sake of others, *will do things that hold me back from achieving my mission.*

That's why I can't tell her everything.

The best thing would be for her to not do anything at all.

“—”

Maria begins to speak with a pained expression, perhaps wondering about my silence.

“...Has my help wounded your pride? Do you think I look down on you? I apologize if I've done anything to make you think that.”

“That's not the case at all.”

“Then...!” She probably didn't mean for that to come out so loud. Averting her eyes awkwardly, Maria continues in a more subdued tone, “...Then...rely on me.”

“.....Maria.”

...My past self might have found strength in those words.

But it's different now. In fact, it's almost the opposite.

I know, after all.

I know Maria is aware she's being selfish.

That's why I'm sure her next words—

“I'm going to help you.”

—are a scream of pain.

However, even though I realize this, it doesn't change what must be done.

“...Maria, can I ask you to not say anything about the Boxes for the time

being? I think it would be dangerous to talk to Iroha about them.”

“...You’re not going to tell me what’s going on?”

“.....No,” I reply.

Maria lowers her gaze and crosses her arms.

“...I see. You have your own ideas, so I guess I have to leave it at that.”

Her words suggest she’s fought down her own emotions in an attempt to see my logic.

But she still can’t suppress all her feelings, and they show on her face.

Maria observes me closely, maintaining a neutral expression. I notice the sadness in her eyes; our relationship isn’t so feeble that I wouldn’t.

Then she says:

“You...are Kazuki, aren’t you?”

Maria can read my mind and heart so well, it’s as if she can see my thoughts; even when I was embroiled in the Week in the Mud, she claimed she could tell who was the real me just by the way I used the muscles in my face.

“.....Huh?”

That’s why I can’t believe it—can’t imagine she doesn’t know me—and I just sit there dumbfounded.

Maria averts her gaze.

She mutters weakly, still looking away:

“...It’s nothing. Forget it.”

► Day 2 <F> Kazuki Hoshino’s Room

There wasn’t much change in Maria’s attitude after that.

I’m sure what she said to me earlier must’ve been a slip of the tongue. It has to be, since she didn’t tell Iroha and the others about the Box.

No one rocks the boat, so the situation has come to a standstill.

I don't doubt today will be the last day without any developments, though.

On the third day, Iroha is going to want to hear our decision about joining the Group.

But at any rate, it's over.

I collapse onto the bed.

A second day has passed without any deaths.

► Day 3 <C> Private Meeting with Daiya Oomine – Kazuki Hoshino's Room

Iroha Shindo	→	Daiya Oomine	3:40 PM – 4:10 PM
Yuri Yanagi	→	Iroha Shindo	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Daiya Oomine	→	Kazuki Hoshino	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Kazuki Hoshino	→	Yuri Yanagi	3:40 PM – 4:10 PM
Koudai Kamiuchi	→	Iroha Shindo	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Maria Otonashi	→	Daiya Oomine	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM

“.....Did I really say that? That I would crush the Box myself if we made it to the <E> block of the eighth day?”

“Yeah.”

After my affirmation, Daiya goes quiet in thought.

I'm finally able to finish telling Daiya everything about the Game of Indolence during our Private Meeting. I had planned to keep quiet about this Daiya being an NPC, but he realized right away that I was holding something back. I had no choice but to tell him.

Daiya didn't seem too bothered, though. What really seemed to fascinate him was his apparent ownership of the Game of Indolence.

“.....Hey, Kazu. What did I say when I sent you into this game?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Quit beating around the bush and answer the question, No-Clue Kazu.”

What's with the rhyming dis?

“...Let’s see, when I said I would beat you, you said, ‘Not a chance in hell.’ I’m pretty sure that’s how our last exchange went.”

“Probably because you beating me is about as likely as the earth suddenly spinning ten times faster.”

Man, this guy is really turning up the rudeness.

“That means the ‘real me’ must believe it’s impossible to get through *Kingdom Royale* without anyone dying.”

“.....Most likely.”

Daiya scowls and folds his arms, as if something still doesn’t sit right with him. He still seems to be on the fence as to whether I’m telling the truth, so I timidly ask: “...Do you believe me?”

Daiya looks up and replies without losing his stern expression.

“If you are without a doubt Kazuki Hoshino, then I don’t think I have any choice but to believe your story. The Kazuki Hoshino I know can’t just whip up a tale like that. He also has a hard time lying.”

...So does that mean he believes me?

“...But if you are Kazuki Hoshino...then you’ve changed.”

I never expected him to say that.

“Changed? Me?”

“Yeah. You still reject other people’s wishes the same way, but I get the feeling your reason for it is a little different now. I told you before, right? It seems like you’re floating in suspension. It doesn’t feel that way anymore.”

“And...why is that?”

“Hell if I know. People’s minds have changed in this Box, though, haven’t they?”

“In this Box...?”

The first thing I think of when he says this is Nana Yanagi.

I had ignored her and tried to forget her, but my first love had held me completely in her spell all this time.

It's not like I'm free of it now, either. I'm going to try to forget her again for my own salvation.

However, I've definitely awakened to the fact that I can't run from it. I've managed to realize that, at least.

Could a tiny change like that have affected how I appear to others?

"To me, it seems like you've found a purpose...or an ambition, I should say. If so, then it's possible you might not be able to fully use a Box any lon—"

Daiya stops short in the middle of what he's saying.

"...What's wrong, Daiya?"

But he doesn't seem to hear me. He just stands there rigid with his eyes open wide.

".....Use a Box...? I see it now... That must be it..."

"Daiya...?"

He doesn't respond, though, instead putting his hand to his chin as if something has seized his mind. I give up on getting a reply and just wait until Daiya stops muttering and begins to smile.

"Heh...heh-heh..."

I have no idea why he's chortling to himself.

"Kazu, I have to thank you."

"Huh?"

"You're an easy read. That's how I know what the 'real me' was thinking."

Daiya's grin grows bolder.

The expression leaves me undeniably nervous.

...What's going on here? Is Daiya planning something?

The NPC Daiya and I should share the same goal. I thought I got him to believe we can win if we make it eight days with no one dying.

So why?

I get the feeling Daiya isn't on my side anymore.

▶ Day 3 <C> Private Meeting with Yuri Yanagi – Yuri Yanagi's Room

The player is on their own.

They possess information that puts them alone at an advantage, and they can't share it with the NPCs. In the end, the information is only good as ammo for deceiving the others.

So maybe it's a matter of course that the player ends up fighting a solo battle.

You kill the NPCs to survive, suppressing your guilt the entire way. That's how this game was meant to be played.

All the same, I've been trying to break this cycle. If I don't, I can't imagine being able to save Maria, and this Box will also probably break my will.

Still—is what I'm attempting even possible?

In the system of *Kingdom Royale*, no one can make an ally of anyone else.

Gloomily, I enter Yuri Yanagi's room. She won't even make eye contact with me. Though I know it's pointless, I write a message to her in the notebook.

“.....”

Yuri Yanagi tears off the paper, crumples it up, and tosses it away without even reading it.

It seems she's through with me.

I bite my lip.

How can I gain control over her without communicating in words?

Should I do something that shows I still want to help her so that she'll listen to me? ...That'd never work. Even I'm beginning to doubt my own sincerity, so there's no way I'd get through to her at this point.

“__”

I clench my fists and lower my head. Yuri notices my dejection, but that's not enough to make her look at me.

Am I already out of moves to make?

Have I already failed?

Iroha is going to demand I join her Group during the upcoming <D> time block. If things go as she plans, I'll have no hope of becoming the king.

I suddenly notice the notebook sitting on the table. I'm pretty sure it's Yuri's, and there's something written in it: "*Iroha is the Revolutionary.*"

I immediately understand the implication.

This is what Yuri is trying to tell me:

—If I do anything funny, I'll be killed.

That's most likely true. Iroha can say she's going to take charge of everything here because she has no fear of dying—because she's the Revolutionary, in other words. Plus, I'd hazard a guess that Yuri is the King or the Sorcerer. Once she knew the identity of these Classes, Iroha decided she had no worry of being murdered in *Kingdom Royale*.

If she's capable of cutting off her own finger, she can also most likely decide to take my life if necessary.

I review my current situation. I've gone and made an enemy of pretty much everyone. Yuri, Iroha, and Koudai Kamiuchi are all hostile to me, and as always, I have no idea what Daiya's thinking. I can't even rely on Maria, who should be my one ally in all of this.

Under these circumstances, anything I try is going to backfire.

Have I lost all hope of becoming the king by now?

“.....Damn.”

I keep telling myself to not give up, but I can't think of a way to reverse my situation. It's irredeemable.

Eventually, I just fall to my knees on the spot.

I can't do this anymore. I'll let Iroha be the king. I don't think things will turn out well for her, but it'll probably still go better than if I took the wheel. I'll just count on the whims of Koudai Kamiuchi and Daiya, leave my fate to the heavens, and follow along with Iroha's plan.

Like some rock lying on the ground, I'll just be here and do nothing.

I...have lost.

I lift my head so I can ask Yuri's forgiveness.

That's when I see them. I see Yuri's eyes as she looks down on me blankly.

—I see her empty eyes.

“—Oh.”

And that's how it suddenly dawns on me.

“You hate their guts_don't you_All those bastards who tricked you and butchered you_C'mon_they were prepared to off you for their own survival_Heh-heh-heh.”

I suddenly know how to answer.

No. I don't hate them. But... I'll do whatever it takes to crush them and make them submit.

When I made Yuri suffer yesterday, I thought I was okay with defeating her because the Box had broken me.

That was wrong, though.

I understand now, clearly and without any doubts. I don't need to be pointlessly kind to everyone, including the person before me. They're all just NPCs.

I need to save everyone back in the real world.

“Please kill me.”

That's what the real Yuri said to me during the second game. The Game of Indolence had made her so desperate, she felt she had to say that to me.

But was the Game of Indolence the only reason she suffered so much?

No. She had brought something in with her from the real world that caused her pain. I know that now, because I learned it within the confines of this horrible, pointless Box.

Nothing can change what has already come to pass. There's no salvation for Yuri now that she has killed Iroha and the others.

But perhaps I can analyze, dissect, and remove what she brought in with her from the real world.

If I do that, won't it free her from a little of her suffering?

That's why I will win.

I couldn't care less about crushing her as an NPC.

That's my proof that I'm firmly grounded in reality, in normality. It's my proof that this stupid Game of Indolence hasn't defeated me.

This means—

“Heh-heh.”

—I haven't lost at all.

I stand up.

In this game, the player is definitely on their own. I don't care if I'm alone or whatever, though.

No matter how hopeless the situation, I'm the only one who can destroy the Game of Indolence. No one can save all the others except for me.

If that's the case...*I'll do it.*

I'll start by forcing Yuri to submit to me, and then I'll save everyone.

“...What are you smiling about?”

Yuri is still looking at me with those hollow eyes.

Thank you. Those eyes helped me realize it—the source of Yuri's suffering lies in her familiarity with suppressing her true feelings. I'm now sure I want to do something about it, too.

Still smiling, I deliberately and violently tear off the sheet of paper with “*Iroha*

is the Revolutionary" written on it and rip it up loudly before her eyes.

The hollowness changes to surprise.

Yeah, that's the ticket. This is good.

I won't ever let your eyes turn empty again.

"Yuri Yanagi."

The blunt manner of address makes Yuri look at me, her eyes wide.

"You will become nourishment for the real Yuri," I tell her.

I can predict how the Yuri I know so well will react.

".....Oh."

Yep, the coward has gone white. You won't be able to ignore me now, will you?

"To that end, I'm going to destroy the Group Iroha made. The first thing I'm going to do now is implement a plan to make you leave it."

Yuri is speechless for a few long seconds, but then she tries to protest.

"Wh-what are you—? There's no reason I would leave. As if I even could."

"I said I'm going to make you leave it."

"If you say that...I-Iroha will kill you, you know...? She might really do it... No, she actually will, okay?"

Yuri is too flustered to worry about Iroha hearing this conversation.

"I know."

"Then—then why are you saying it?! It's like committing suicide!"

"Because I'm going to take down Iroha, too, of course. She won't kill me if I do that," I say.

Yuri's eyes go round.

She shakes her head violently.

"That's... That's not possible. Don't you understand how well I know this...?"

Yeah—

There it is.

I've finally found the pus within her, the source of her suffering.

"So if I defeat Iroha....."

The reason why her eyes turn empty. It's—

"If I defeat Iroha, will you be able to overcome your jealousy of her?"

—her feelings of inferiority toward Iroha.

It's a sentiment I understand very easily as a companion of Daiya's and Maria's. I'm constantly surrounded by reminders that I will never be their equal, and the fear of mistakenly assuming my existence is worthless compared with theirs.

This is even worse for Yuri, who unlike me takes second place. Just knowing she could feasibly catch up must be frustrating.

She's so close but never seems to cross the gap between her and Iroha Shindo.

How painful it must be to be reminded of it.

"Someone as stupid as I am should have just stayed quiet... I'm sorry for any confusion."

She called herself stupid during the first game. Though she seems incredible and brilliant enough from my point of view, she never has any confidence in herself.

Because in her heart, she compares herself with someone she can never measure up against.

"—Oh."

I'm sure she must be aware of this herself.

Yuri seems so shaken I almost pity her, and she stands there trembling.

"You wanted to beat Iroha no matter what, didn't you?" I say, and her shoulders jump. "You wanted to beat Iroha. You wanted to best her for so long. That's why you wanted to beat her in this game, too. You thought that if you could get her to act according to your plan, maybe you could call it a form of

victory, so you decided to make it happen.”

When Yuri was the player, I’m sure the reason she deceived Iroha and went out of her way to wound her with the revelation about her ex-boyfriend was that she wanted to experience the feeling of beating her rival.

“Wh-why are you talking like you know—?”

The panic on her face as she denies this is easy to read, and it has no hint of her usual shrewd acting.

“But while things did go as you had intended, in the end, you still didn’t feel like you’d won.”

“—!!”

“You were overwhelmed, after all. When Iroha was willing to cut off her own finger, the jaw-dropping nature of that act—the difference between her resolve and yours—reminded you that your miserable little plan could never compete with hers.”

“.....Stop it.”

“Once you knew how incredible she was, all you could think of was relying on her to get through this alive, yet another reminder of how far she rises above you and your cowardice.”

“Stop.”

“You woke up to the reality that you never had a chance against her in the first place, no matter what you tried. After all, you learned that victory wouldn’t be enough to dispel your inferiority complex; it didn’t vanish even when you stole the boy she had feelings for.”

“I told you to stop it!” she shrieks, and pain runs through my cheek.

...Did she just slap me?

I can’t believe it for a moment. I mean, did Yuri just hit me? Yuri, the one with more self-control than anyone else?

Yuri is wide-eyed, seemingly more shocked by her own actions than anyone. She stares at the hand that slapped me, opening and closing it repeatedly.

“—Oh.”

Her shoulders begin to shake.

“I-I’m sorry—”

Before she can finish, tears are welling up in her eyes.

“.....I-I’m sorry. But please...just stop... Don’t say such horrible things anymore... Please don’t hurt me any more... Please... Please.”

I’m sure it’s painful.

It must hurt to confront such ugly emotions head-on like this.

She couldn’t even say these things when her deceptions during the second game came to light.

But...

“I can’t.”

...none of that matters.

In fact, it’s precisely why I have to keep going.

“Ngh... Aaah...”

My cold response makes Yuri crouch down and begin to cry, hiding her face.

“If I turn back now, I won’t be able to help the real you. It’s okay if you cover your face, but don’t plug your ears.”

“U-uuuhh...”

Of course, my chest aches when I see her suffer like this. But my feelings don’t matter, either.

“I’m talking about what happened during the second game when you were in my position.”

Now comes the finishing blow.

“Yuri, you killed Iroha.”

Her sobs come to a halt, and she looks up at me with red eyes.

“.....Wh-what are you saying...?”

I don't grant her a response.

"...M-me? Kill Iroha...? There's no way I would do something so extreme! I... I am an underhanded person...but I could never do something like that!"

This is definitely coming straight from her heart of hearts. I'm sure it's true. The only reason she could do such a thing is because she was the player while the rest of us, including Iroha, were NPCs.

However, she still murdered her.

Iroha is now aware that Yuri is a despicable girl who deceived and murdered her.

Nothing will ever change that fact.

As skilled as she is at reading others' faces, Yuri must be able to tell from mine that I'm not lying about her killing Iroha. She doesn't say anything else and simply sits there, distracted, tears running down her face.

I keep up the pressure.

"Yuri. I'll explain in more detail later, but you and Iroha both won the game when you were the player, so you're already set to make it out alive."

Yuri responds slightly to my statement. It seems she understands me, so I keep going.

"But the way things are now, Iroha knows you murdered her, and she isn't going to forgive you. And you won't be able to forgive yourself for doing it. You will have survived, but in the end, you won't ever be happy. This may be hard to believe, but I want to do something about that."

I put it out there.

"I have an idea of what we can do."

Though her tears are still flowing, Yuri looks at me as she appears to come back to her senses.

"You need to reach a certain point. During this round of *Kingdom Royale*, the two of you need to confess your feelings toward each other, help each other in spite of them, and reach a point where you have a relationship of mutual trust.

If the two of you can rely on each other even in this game, then I'm confident you'll be fine from here on out. Iroha should forgive you."

I say the next part slowly.

"That's why you have to tell her all of it. You have to put everything you feel toward Iroha into words."

I wait for Yuri's response.

After a period of silence, she finally opens her mouth to speak.

".....I don't understand," she replies flatly. "I have no idea what you mean when you say that Iroha and I have already survived or that we'll be saved if we can trust each other."

"...I see."

That's fair enough. She knows next to nothing about the real situation, so it makes sense that what I said wouldn't hit home.

"But—"

I raise my head when I hear a contradictory conjunction.

A faint smile has appeared on Yuri's face.

"—I don't need to understand, not now. I can't stand thinking such horrible things just to stay alive... I'm through with it."

Saying this, she suddenly throws her arms around me.

"So...can I rely on you?"

The strength of her embrace is painful—she isn't holding back.

She can't depend on strength so great and unmoderated.

That observation surprises me.

Yuri fought on in her own way all alone, no matter how much suffering it brought her. She always seemed so anxious and uneasy, and through it all, this girl still persevered without losing hope. When she was the player, the guilt of deceiving, cornering, and killing the NPCs threatened to crush her, but in the end, she still managed to recover her will to fight and win.

That's the strong girl Yuri Yanagi is.

"Help...me."

And yet, the only option she has now is to trust in me.

All she can do is cling to the faint hope in front her, unable to exert any control.

In that way, she is just the tiniest bit similar to her.

To Nana Yanagi.

"Okay. I'll help you."

But I won't get "Yuri" and "Yanagi" mixed up in my mind, not anymore.

In order to help the Yuri here with me now, I return her embrace and tell her:

"I swear—I will help everyone."

► Day 3 <D> The Common Area

Despite appearances, I was quite confident all through middle school. My grades were always at the top, and I was so good at piano that I won prizes at competitions. I was head of the brass-band club at school, and I even served as the student council president. Naturally, I had no end of admirers.

Perhaps that was why I subconsciously assumed I was exceptional.

There was no doubt in my mind that this would remain the same in high school, too. However, this throne of exceptionality wasn't waiting for me in my high school life. Iroha Shindo claimed it the moment she made her new-student address at the entrance ceremony.

I didn't give up right away, though. I had faith that I could reclaim my throne. In fact, I was even happy in a way to have found a rival.

I worked even harder than I had in middle school, believing I could surpass Iroha quickly and become number one. I increased my time in front of my desk, putting my studies first and foremost. I wasn't just spending long hours studying, though; I was also working trial-and-error-style to improve other

areas like efficiency and maintaining focus.

But I was still no match for her.

I naturally started to panic. I decided I wanted to beat her in grades, at least, and so I gave up the piano I had played since elementary school, stopped going to the literary clubs I had joined, quit watching the foreign dramas I liked so much, refrained from hanging out with my friends, slept fewer hours, and studied during break periods—and I did it all fully prepared to be mocked for being too serious.

Despite everything, Iroha was always ahead of me.

Even though she was in clubs and the student council the whole time, even though she slept during class and just didn't seem to be displaying as much effort as I was in general...I could never measure up.

It wasn't necessarily an odd thing, though. No matter how hard I was toiling away, nearly a hundred people were also scoring higher than I was on our trial exams already. There were plenty of others better than I was at piano, too, and if I turned on the TV, I could see an endless parade of beautiful people I could never hold a candle to. It wasn't like Iroha was the only person I had no hope of competing against, so this outcome wasn't unexpected.

I simply learned my lesson. I learned that I was just a normal person. That I wasn't anything special.

Thanks to Iroha, I was able to understand this and move on from my shameful self-importance, that's all. Even if she weren't there, I most likely would have found this out sooner or later.

But it still frustrated me.

It frustrated me so much.

Why? Why wasn't I the special one?

It took me so long to realize that by the time I did, I had nothing left. I had distanced myself from my friends; I had no more hobbies or special talents; all I had become was a boring girl with a decent aptitude for studying.

It was around then that I found out Iroha had a crush. She had tried to keep it

a secret, but to me, it was as clear as day. The moment I learned of her feelings, the object of her affections became irresistibly attractive to me. I mean, if Iroha liked him, he had to be a great person—that was my line of thinking.

If both Iroha and I went after him, I wonder which of us he would choose...

The moment I thought that, a wicked idea entered my mind.

If that person were to choose me—

—would that mean...I'm more attractive than Iroha?

I knew full well what a horrible thing I was about to attempt. But not even that was enough to stop me.

I just had to see it.

Iroha, jealous of me. Iroha, envious of me. Iroha, the failure, believing she can never win out over me.

And once Iroha was the loser, she would know.

She would know there was someone who had been frustrated for so, so long because they could never compare to her.

And I succeeded in going out with that boy.

I announced it as if I were just full of innocent happiness, completely clueless of her feelings for him. Inside, I was gleeful and giggling, hoping to see Iroha grit her teeth in frustration. When I think of myself back then, it truly makes me sick.

Hey, Iroha. I hope you're upset. I hope you're jealous. I hope you hate me.

I would've been happy with any of it. As long as she lashed out at me with some negative emotion, I would've been happy. But Iroha's reaction was unlike anything I had imagined.

“Nice going.”

She congratulated me and then mussed my hair with a pleasant smile on her face.

Iroha—was genuinely happy for my success in love, of all things.

For me.

For someone as horrible as I am.

For someone whose mind was consumed with thoughts of hurting her.

I couldn't believe it. I just could not believe it, so I continued my plotting. I tried to ignore the growing realization that my romantic feelings were misguided and kept using the relationship against her. Through it all, no matter what I asked her advice about, or even when I told her we broke up, all Iroha did was support me.

That's when I was forced to see it.

All the hatefulness, pettiness, and wretchedness I had pretended not to see was illuminated by Iroha's radiance, highlighted until I had to confront it.

Yes, I truly understand. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts so much—yet I am not a victim to be protected. I'm a wrongdoer deserving of abuse.

Still, I can't stop.

There's no going back.

I don't want to accept the fact that after all the crimes I have committed, I am not even average—just a complete and utter fool.

I don't believe that besting Iroha—defeating the exceptional girl—will make me any less of a fool, much less merit forgiveness for me.

But this is all I have left. There is no way back for me.

Don't you agree?

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

My crimes are too heavy for those words alone to earn me forgiveness.

“And you think saying that will get me to forgive you?”

Iroha sneers coldly in the common area where we've all assembled.

She must have heard Yuri's confession during their Private Meeting afterward.

"You think that explaining how horrible you are will get me to let you off the hook for your deception?"

Unsure of what's going on, all Maria, Daiya, and Koudai Kamiuchi can do is watch the scene unfold.

"I'll never forgive you, you stupid bitch!" Iroha says. She spits on Yuri, who is stripped down to her white underwear and kneeling before her.

Despite Iroha's cruel treatment, all Yuri does is tremble slightly, saying nothing with her head lowered. Her left cheek is swollen; she was beaten earlier in Iroha's room.

It's not an easy sight to stomach. I predicted things might turn out this way, after all. So this is also partly my fault.

But if I didn't take things this far, I wouldn't have a chance against Iroha.

"...Hey, Shindo, what exactly happened?"

Maria speaks up, unable to bear the sight of Yuri like this.

"Oh, nothing major. I'm just demonstrating what happens when someone ignores their orders and does something stupid even though they joined the Group and swore obedience to me."

"Still, isn't this going too far...?"

As if to reject Maria's warning, Iroha places the sole of her shoe on Yuri's head where she sits.

"Ungh," Yuri gasps instinctively, and Iroha clucks her tongue and increases the pressure of her foot on Yuri's head without another word. She pushes harder and harder until Yuri's forehead touches the floor.

In this position, Yuri is all but groveling before Iroha.

"Who told you it was okay to open your mouth? You need to just keep your head lowered like some figurine. Or are you trying to imply that I'm going to have to beat that into you, too?"

"S-stop it, Shindo!"

"No. But let's put this aside. You know why, right? Time's up. This is when I

bring you all under my rule, too. Whatever this bitch was trying to pull, it's the best plan I've come up with, so there's no need to change it," Iroha declares with her foot still on Yuri's head. "Once I'm the king, I'll put an end to this game."

Yeah, that's who Iroha is.

If it serves her purpose, she can do this to someone she considered her best friend up until a bit ago.

I'm not trying to say she isn't feeling anything. I'm sure she's deeply wounded, and she most likely has guilt about it as well. But she can lock those emotions away. Iroha can temporarily control her own feelings in order to further her goals.

I found this out in the third game when she won by slaughtering everyone on the first day.

Yes, that's why I predicted this.

I could foresee her taking this sort of action.

That's why—

"It's not going to work."

—I'm going to drag her off this false throne of hers.

Iroha slowly brings her foot down from Yuri's head and stares at me. There is a heat in her gaze, with an unmistakable hint of murder, too.

"...So is this what you're trying to say? You're maintaining that you have no intention of joining the Group? That's too bad. You're going to die, Hoshino."

"No. I'm merely stating a fact. As *lenient* as you are, there's no way you could possibly rule anyone."

"Lenient? What the hell are you talking about?"

Her piercing glare is really frightening. But I force my mouth into a smile to build as much confidence as I can.

"I'm saying you're going easy on Yuri. All you're doing is hitting her, spitting on her, and putting your foot on her head. Ha-ha, you're way too soft."

Iroha flashes a grin to show she's just as confident as I am.

"Okay, then what would it take to satisfy you?"

I say the words that will wipe the smile off her face.

"Kill her."

As I intended, Iroha's smile vanishes, and her eyes flare wide.

"You said it at the very beginning, right? You would flush all our rations at the first sign of insubordination. But you haven't, have you? You made a whole show of tearing her clothes off and dragging her out in her underwear, but you haven't done what you said, have you?"

Iroha smirks.

"...Ha-ha. So you're saying it's just for show if I don't actually flush her rations and kill her? You've got a really twisted mind. How could you not tell I was exaggerating when I said that? Don't you see I had to say it given the circumstances, even if I had no intention of actually doing it?"

"Even if that's the case, now that you've been so lax in dealing with Yuri after she went against you, you've shown that you don't actually have hold over your group, haven't you?"

".....So what? Are you telling me I should kill Yuri?"

"Not at all. I'm just pointing something out." I don't mince words as I tell her, "This group system was broken from the very beginning."

"....."

Iroha stays silent, folding her arms. Someone as bright as her has to know she's going to get steamrolled at this rate.

She can mull it over all she wants, though, because there's no way out of this. Everything I've said is absolutely true.

".....Enlighten me on how it's broken."

Her voice is just the tiniest bit weaker than before.

"The Group was founded on your trust in Yuri. But there was never any such thing to begin with. You built this plan on the premise of a trust that doesn't

exist. That's why it's broken. Am I wrong?"

"....."

Almost there.

Just one more push, and I'll drag Iroha Shindo, the one who could massacre everyone with a knife to achieve her goal, who would amputate her own little finger just to make others recognize her, down from her sham of a throne.

I've clearly got her on the ropes here.

—Or at least, I should have.

Iroha smirks in spite of everything. As if to show me she's still good to go.

"Yeah, it may be difficult to maintain this group system. I'll give you that. Still, so what? If forming groups is difficult, then all I need to do is toss that plan out and put together a new one. Are you trying to suggest I can't do that?"

"....."

I sure didn't expect such a comeback; I'll give her that.

Even when she's backed this far into a corner, she still isn't ready to throw in the towel. Iroha is the opponent I needed to take down first—my most powerful foe—so it's only fitting.

If I can do something about my most capable opponent, then I'll accomplish what I set out to do. Daiya and I most likely share the same purpose, and if Iroha and Yuri are with me, we can keep Koudai Kamiuchi's impulsiveness in check so he doesn't kill anyone.

The most difficult part of anything is setting it into motion. If I can get things moving, the rest shouldn't be that difficult.

This is the first step in getting my plan on track: defeating Iroha.

Once I pull that off, I'm pretty much already at the finish line.

That's why there's no backing down for me. I've clearly pushed Iroha to the brink, so I absolutely cannot let up.

I search for that final push.

“.....”

I look at Yuri. I see her trembling with her head still pressed against the floor.

Oh, I guess that's it.

It doesn't matter how much I keep after Iroha, does it?

“...Okay, so you're going to cast aside Yuri, is that it? So you can save yourself and the rest of us?”

Iroha is already aware that she's lost, after all.

Iroha immediately answers my question.

“That's right.”

I predicted her affirmation.

Her blatant lie.

The lie she wants me to see through.

“You can't fool me.”

This is already over.

“Didn't I say it earlier? Go ahead and kill Yuri.”

“__”

“If you're going to give up on her, you should prove it to us right here. Kill her like you cut off your finger, demonstrate your determination, make us all bow down before your power.”

Iroha.

Iroha thinks she's better suited to the role of the king than anyone else. She stands before us now precisely because of this belief. And she's doing it because she's convinced it offers her the highest probability of achieving her goal.

But what happens if she begins to believe someone else might make a worthy king?

She would most likely allow that person to take on the role.

That's why she's testing me now.

She's testing me to see if I can discern this level of falsehood—if I'm suitable for the throne.

“.....Ha-ha.”

Iroha lets out a laugh.

“...You're right. I can't do it. So I can never become the king.”

And that's how *Iroha hands the throne over to me*.

Her lips pouted, Iroha takes a seat. “Phew...” She gives a deliberate sigh, then smiles ruefully.

“...Iroha lost...?”

Yuri has lifted her head up. Wide-eyed, she looks at Iroha, who's sitting in her chair with a defeated expression. Wearing nothing but her underwear, Yuri gets to her feet and walks over to Iroha, then stands over her.

“.....Why? Why won't you kill me? You have it in you, right...? You could do it if it helped you achieve your goal, right?”

When she hears this, Iroha smiles bitterly.

“Yuri. What do you think my goal is?” she asks, looking away with her elbows resting on the chair.

“Huh? It's to become the king...isn't it?”

“Of course not. That was just a means to an end.”

“I—I see. So—”

Yuri is still troubled, so Iroha says the rest to her with a gentle smile, as if she were patiently teaching a child struggling with multiplication.

“My goal...is to protect you.”

Yuri can do nothing as her confusion grows. For her, it's the most unbelievable statement in the world.

I already knew this about Iroha, though.

She told me something as she died in the first game. Just before her life faded

away, she said, “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.”

Those words indicated to me that Iroha’s goal was to protect Yuri.

Of course, she was also trying to safeguard her own life along with the rest of ours. But if you look at the way she conducts herself in life, I’m positive that Iroha puts others before herself. I’m also sure she’d try to save Yuri before a bunch of people she just met that day.

That’s why she can’t kill Yuri, even if it means she won’t be able to maintain her group system.

Yuri is shaking her head in disbelief. “Y-you’re lying. I—I mean, I betrayed you! That’s why you got angry and took my clothes and hit me...”

“Yuri, are you trying to mess with me?”

“Huh?”

“Are you trying to play with my emotions and make me change my goal? Are you suggesting I’m a weakling? Basically, you cooperated with Hoshino. I had to punish you to keep the Group together, even if only on the surface. Tearing off your clothes was good for a performance because it draws attention, don’t you think?”

“.....”

“Well, I was just delaying the inevitable. You see, I had no doubt you would keep quiet and go along with my plan. I never imagined you would fall into Hoshino’s clutches like this. Once we reached that point, I’d already lost.”

Yuri gives Iroha a long look after she says this—then shakes her head again as if to say she still doesn’t accept it. “...I don’t understand. You were trying to protect me? Maybe you were at first, but there’s no way you could still want to help me now that you know how I tried to hurt you this whole time. You’d never help someone as awful as I am.”

“Yuri, you’re kind of an idiot, you know?”

Iroha sighs.

“Uh, wha...?”

“You shouldn’t even have to think about it, right?”

Yuri still looks lost, and Iroha scratches her head angrily.

“...Agh, give me a break! Okay, have you ever tried looking at things from my perspective?”

“Your perspective...?”

“Yeah. You said you always had the top scores, but I was in the same boat. I was always at the top, too.”

Yuri doesn’t seem to get the significance of what Iroha is saying, because she still looks confused.

“I wanted to be in that spot just like you. But there’s someone always working like crazy to overtake me, so all I can do is put my nose to the grindstone, too. I don’t want to lose, either. Do you have any idea how desperately I worked in secret to protect that position?”

Shock spreads across Yuri’s face.

“You say you could never beat me no matter how hard you tried because I’m special? That has nothing to do with it. If you ask me, you haven’t set any clear milestones for yourself. Can you tell me off the top of your head what you want to be or why you’re studying? You probably can’t. The only thing you could think about was trying to beat me.”

“That’s.....”

“You’ll never win with such weak aspirations. You worked hard? I don’t think you can say that. You haven’t worked nearly hard enough. People who really put in a lot of effort never say they have nothing going for them or that they’re a pile of crap.”

“.....So if I put in the effort, I can be like you?”

“Agh, come on! Listen to me! There’s no way you can be like me. *I’m* me. You’re you. No matter how jealous you may be, your abilities and strengths will always be different, so you can never be exactly the same as anyone else. You can envy me all you want, Yuri, but you can’t become me!”

“You’re right. There’s no way I could ever hope to become like you—”

As soon as she hears this, Iroha's eyebrows shoot up, and she gets to her feet. With terrifying severity, she grips Yuri's now-trembling shoulders.

"O-ow!"

"That's right. No matter how jealous—!"

Iroha shouts.

"No matter how jealous I am, I can never be you, Yuri!"

Yuri's grimace of pain is replaced by wide-eyed shock as she stares at Iroha.

"You think I was unfazed when I heard you were going out with him? I was sincerely happy for you? If that's how it looked, I guess I was successful. I would never commit a faux pas like not congratulating my best friend on finding love."

"I-Iroha...?"

Iroha's tough facade has already caved. Though she seemed so calm even when her Group fell apart, she has now completely lost it.

"Who *wouldn't* be upset to see the person they like snatched away? Of course I was torn up over it. Of course I was jealous. But I couldn't do anything, because he chose you! When I heard you were going out, I just thought, *Well, no surprises there*. Can you understand where my mind had to be to think that? Do you understand where I had to be to so readily accept that he would choose you over someone like me? Do you think those thoughts didn't drive me nuts? I'm not you, though, so all I could do was give up!"

"What the hell, Yuri?! How do you fail to see any of this when you're so good at reading people? You wanted *me* to envy you? You must be stupid! I.....I...! From the moment I saw you when I started school, I—"

Iroha's grip on Yuri's shoulders tightens as she yells:

"I was jealous of you!"

Yuri stares at Iroha blankly, unable to comprehend what was just said to her.

It must be hard to believe from Yuri's standpoint. She's probably having trouble swallowing the idea that the one she had come to think of as superhuman, as a rival she would never, ever beat, had actually envied her the

entire time.

I'm sorry, Yuri. I knew.

"But even being the way I was, the first time I respected, envied—and yeah, probably felt jealousy toward someone...was Yuri."

I knew all that from the first game.

It's how I also knew it was their miscommunication that was destroying them.

"I think about depending on someone, too, y'know! But for some reason, I never can. Whenever the thought enters my head...I always think of you," Iroha says, then releases Yuri's shoulders.

As Yuri stares dumbfounded at Iroha, surprise appears on her face.

"Iroha... Why are you crying...?"

"Ha-ha, what're you saying? I never cry—"

Iroha puts her hand to her cheek as if just going along with the joke.

Her eyes go wide. She realizes she really is crying.

"No way... I'm...crying? I don't remember crying even in my earliest memories. And now I'm doing it in front of other people? That's ridiculous..."

But her tears are flowing.

They're really flowing.

The fact that Iroha is crying is undeniable.

Her mask breaks.

"Ngh....."

That face that had been so tense for so long crumples like a child's.

"Wah... Waaaaaaaaah! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Iroha sobs loudly.

The Iroha we knew, the same Iroha who could lop off her own finger to reach her goal, is bawling like a child, unable to contain her emotions.

"I-Iroha...?"

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid Yurii! I trusted you! I...was such an idiot! I trusted that at least you would never betray me!”

The tears pour from Iroha’s eyes, and her nose is running.

“What the hell? Superhuman? Don’t be stupid!! Look at me! It’s not like I want to be the king! This killing game terrifies me! Cutting off my finger hurt! I wanted someone to protect me, too! But I had to do it even if I didn’t want to! I thought I would make the best king, so I had no choice but to take on the responsibility! I had to do it because I couldn’t stand the idea of relying on someone else and then letting everyone die—letting *you* die!”

There isn’t even a trace of Iroha’s usual aloofness as she sobs her heart out here like a little kid.

Still in shock, Yuri asks her, “Iroha... Why did you want to protect me...?”

The question is a little off topic, and Iroha fixes Yuri with a red-eyed glare.

“You know why!”

I then recall something.

A certain question Iroha asked me during the first game.

“Do you think I—actually liked Yuri?”

I didn’t know the answer until just now, this very moment. Iroha has enough control over herself that she can expunge any emotions that might get in her way, and my experiences in the third game weren’t enough for me to see the truth of her heart.

But now I understand very well.

Now that I can see her feelings laid bare, I understand completely.

Iroha’s feelings for Yuri—

“I wanted to protect you because I love you!”

—are love.

“If you died because I failed to protect you, I could maybe bear it if you at least thought I didn’t love you—that’s how much I care about you!”

“Ah...”

Emotion finally returns to Yuri’s dazed eyes.

“Ahh.....”

In an instant, her tears well and overflow. Before long, her face is soaking wet with a river of tears, just like Iroha’s.

These two.

Their mutual admiration was so great that they envied each other.

That led to some mistakes within this Box, but they wouldn’t have come to harbor such powerful emotions if they didn’t care so much in the first place.

“Iroha... Irohaaa.....”

Yuri hugs her.

The two of them embrace each other, sobbing.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

“I don’t want to hear that. I don’t want to hear any apologies from you. I won’t allow it. I’d...much rather hear something else.”

Though it takes her a moment, Yuri, now covered in snot and tears, quickly catches on. Putting on a clumsy smile, one with no trace of deception but rather a desperation that even a flatterer wouldn’t call polite, she whispers gently: “I—I love you, too, Iroha...”

Yep.

When I hear that, it all comes together for me.

The reason why Yuri put on Iroha’s wristwatch during the second game. Why she confessed to stealing the boy she had feelings for, and why she drove her into a corner.

“—Please kill me.”

She wanted to make it easier for Iroha to take her life.

Sure, Yuri probably wanted to beat Iroha. But she also knew Iroha would become the player eventually, so she made sure to say this so that Iroha would

find it easier to kill her as an NPC. Yuri was trying to save Iroha's life, even if it meant earning her hatred in the process.

That's...not an easy thing to do. For instance—

"Iroha... I'll always love you."

—if she didn't love Iroha, she could never do it.

Oh, what the hell.

Whether they forgive each other doesn't matter. If the feelings of love are mutual, then none of that is important.

This doesn't mean the relationship between the real versions of them has improved, of course. These two NPCs aren't the despair-filled girls in the real world.

But I have faith in them.

I have faith that these two can mend their friendship and do away with their hopelessness.

I find that very easy to believe now.

And I begin to think.

Now that my most troublesome opponent is out of the way and I've taken a solid step toward preventing our deaths, I'm certain.

Everything will be fine. I have unmistakably set the wheels in motion. I will arrive at my destination. All I can see in my head are visions of success.

That's right—

I've beaten Daiya.



“I will beat you, Daiya.”

So Kazuki Hoshino declares.

I can't hide my amusement.

“Not a chance in hell.”

I'm absolutely certain of it: Kazuki Hoshino will never be able to achieve his goal.

If he's sure he can win, it's nothing more than a delusion.

Kazuki Hoshino has made a huge mistake, after all.

I can be here in this room where I can see everything—the Master Room, if you will—so I naturally know all about his blunder.

“.....Heh.”

Still...

“Tedium is a monster... Some people might even try to slay it with a bullet to their own brains.”

I'm quite fond of that quote.

Tedium is indeed a monster. If it wasn't, I wouldn't have used a wish-granting Box to relieve myself of it.

“Okay, here I go,” Kazuki Hoshino says, then looks toward the screen. His face is illuminated by the pale white light of the shabby arcade cabinet.

Several transparent hands stretch out toward Kazuki Hoshino where he gazes into the display.

His expression is loaded with disgust as he's engulfed in the hands spilling outward as if to devour him. As if the hands are pulling it out of him, the color gradually fades from Kazuki Hoshino until he turns transparent and eventually disappears.

I applaud your tragic resolve.

But there was never any point from the get-go. Even in the unlikely event you are able to steer things so that no one offs anyone else, it still isn't worth squat.

Because, well, Daiya Oomine isn't the owner of the Game of Indolence.

"That's just the way your core nature works. It catches and alters everything that happens. Things you find enjoyable will just be tedious to someone who's naturally bored."

"If someone consumed by boredom uses a Box, the results will only stave off the tedium temporarily. That's why this is all just a diversion. A pointless game."

It's me—Koudai Kamiuchi.

Thanks for the commentary on me, Daiya.

Kazuki Hoshino just happened to misinterpret it. Daiya Oomine's verbal smoke and mirrors made a complete chump of poor Hoshino. ☆

And that's why—he's doomed to fail.

As if he ever wasn't. It's impossible to win when you've got your sights set on the wrong opponent.

"Oomine."

When I address him, Daiya Oomine looks at me without a word.

"What exactly do you want to do with Hoshino?"

"Why do you ask?" he replies unhappily.

"Well, it's just that I heard your conversation, and I don't really get it. You said it yourself, right? *'If no one kills anyone else for eight days, you can survive.'*"

"I did say that."

"That was a lie, wasn't it?"

Daiya Oomine doesn't answer.

"I mean, having a rule like that is out of the question. Do you think I'm the type to build in such a meaningless escape route?"

Force the game to end. His explanation was so persuasive, even I almost believed it, but if you really think about it, Daiya Oomine has no reason to know a trick like that, since he isn't even the owner.

In short, it was a bunch of BS.

Daiya Oomine has a joyous look on his face. I had wondered how he would react, but this is a surprise.

I can't help but smirk, too. This guy came up with a bunch of crap off the top of his head and got Kazuki Hoshino to buy it, and now he's smiling.

No wonder he beat the first round of the game so easily.

"It doesn't matter whether it's true or whatever. The important thing is whether Kazuki Hoshino believes it."

"Oh, I'd say he swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. I almost feel sorry for him. But what I'm asking is why you did it."

Daiya Oomine scratches his head as he replies, "Would you be convinced if I said I wanted to see Kazu dance around like a fool?"

"...Huh? If you're putting it that way, does that mean you're lying?"

"It's the truth."

I don't know the whole story, but I get the feeling he's being honest, so I burst out laughing.

"Man, you're a real piece of work. You've got Hoshino beat on so many levels."

"I guess," he responds with no emotion, as if it's nothing.

Still, I'm sure that isn't his only reason. I know there's more to him even deeper below the surface. He may be telling the truth, but at most it's just one of the things he hopes to do.

"By the way, why are you doing this? Why did you want to become the would-be guide for *Kingdom Royale*?"

This Box summons the players to this space by force and can put them in stasis until their turn in *Kingdom Royale* actually rolls around. But for some reason, it couldn't put him under like it did the other players.

When I tried asking the man himself why that was, Daiya Oomine said something about how the fact that he's an owner allows him to butt into others' wishes. I'm not going to lie, but that made me real skeptical.

I asked why Maria Otonashi, also evidently an owner, can't do the same thing, and he said that apparently she might be able to. According to him, she's stuck in stasis simply because her turn hasn't come around yet, and that's prevented her from detecting the presence of this Box.

In other words, Daiya Oomine is free to move because he was already released from stasis to play in the first round of the game.

Anyway, Daiya Oomine has used his freedom to explain *Kingdom Royale* to Kazuki Hoshino and brag like he did just now.

"I told you the reason. I want to watch Kazu's clumsy little dance."

"That's not all, though, is it?"

"Let me put it this way, then. I don't want to tell you."

"Oh-ho, that's tough talk toward the owner when he's letting you run around free here. Do you understand your position? But it's fine with me if you don't want to answer. I don't really care that much anyway."

I'm okay with whatever as long as it's interesting. Actually, seeing Kazuki Hoshino turning desperate over a bunch of lies sounds like a good time.

Daiya Oomine sighs, like he's disgusted I backed off so easily. "...Now that I think about it, there's one thing I haven't asked. Why choose us as the players?"

"Hey, might as well get people who'll give me a run for my money, right? Hard mode is more fun than easy mode, after all. So I decided to go with the guys everyone says are the top students at our school."

"And Kazu? Surely you can't call him an overachiever?"

"No, I can't. To tell you the truth, I had someone else in mind. You know, that Ryu Miyazaki guy in second year. I had to nix that, though, since he doesn't go to our school anymore. A guy wants a little consistency in his enemy mobs, right?"

"So you chose Kazu in place of Miyazaki. Seems like a poor substitute."

"There you go again. I know you actually have a pretty high opinion of Hoshino. Besides, that's really not the case. Sure, Hoshino might be a nobody when he's on his own, but if he teams up with Maricchi, he can be real trouble."

Daiya Oomine grimaces with displeasure. "...Maybe so. But did you know that before you started this game?"

"Ah, O told me."

Daiya Oomine seems surprised for a moment to hear this, then smirks.

"What's with that look?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought that might've been the case," he says, then looks toward the screen. Kazuki Hoshino is speaking with Noitan.

The sight of his oblivious sincerity reminds me so much of a clown acting for our amusement, I can't help but laugh.

Daiya Oomine gazes at Kazuki Hoshino's ridiculous show, as if he doesn't even want to blink.

What the hell? I thought you wanted to laugh at him. Why so serious?

"....."

Ah, who cares.

"Hey."

Daiya Oomine speaks up, eyes still glued to the screen.

"...What is it?"

"...I just wanted to check something, but your NPC doesn't know the details of the Game of Indolence, nor that he's the owner, right?"

"If he did, it wouldn't be fair, and that's no fun."

"Hmm, your NPC doesn't have a clue, and he still acts like that. At any rate, you must not think there's any meaning to the Game of Indolence or the bloodshed that takes place in it."

"Huh? Isn't that obvious? Do you think differently?"

"...Whether I do or not, here's how I think Kazu sees it."

"...?"

Daiya Oomine lifts his head and looks at me.

Then he says:

“He’s going to try to give purpose to the Game of Indolence.”

There’s a hint of happiness in Daiya Oomine’s face as he tells me.

“.....”

That expression creeps me out.

It’s like he’s actually counting on Kazuki Hoshino, when he should be trying to play him for a fool.

It’s not the type of thing you expect to see when two guys are supposedly going at it.

What if they’re really working together to try to trap me...? ...Yeah, no way—that’s not possible. I saw how they talked together earlier, and I’ve watched pretty much every interaction they’ve had in the game through this cabinet. If they are in cahoots, I would’ve noticed.

...And, well, even if they are conspiring against me—

—that doesn’t really matter, either.

► Day 4 <D> The Common Area

I'm on the verge of becoming the king.

The fall of Iroha and Yuri really turned the tides. Iroha has quite a presence, which allowed me to finally be able to talk about the Game of Indolence.

I was able to explain pretty much everything except for what happened during the third game, which I decided was best left unmentioned. I laid it all out: that they're all NPCs and that Daiya is the owner observing the game from outside, as well as Daiya's promise to destroy the Box if we all survive for eight days.

Koudai Kamiuchi seems dubious, but with Iroha and Yuri following me unconditionally, it appears he can't protest openly.

Either way, I was able to put it to them clearly:

"We all have to stay alive until the <E> time block of day eight."

I plainly identified our goal.

Iroha's plan was finished, and Yuri was tired of acting, so they both decided to go along with it. All I have left to deal with now are Koudai Kamiuchi's capriciousness and Daiya's trickery.

My first step in weakening the two of them was to have everyone reveal their Classes.

As for who is what...

Iroha Shindo is the Revolutionary.

Yuri Yanagi is the Sorcerer.

Koudai Kamiuchi is the Double.

And Maria is the Prince.

Daiya didn't reveal his Class, but since I'm the Knight, by process of elimination, that makes him the King. I took possession of the knives and rations Iroha had collected from the others.

That should rob Koudai Kamiuchi of most of his power for now. He's the Double, so he can't kill other players as long as the King doesn't act. If he does try anything, it's going to take a lot of determination and effort on his part. Given his personality, he might just decide changing things is more trouble than it's worth and keep quiet without looking for more fun in this game.

Kingdom Royale has pretty much ground to a halt.

But that doesn't mean I've become careless.

When I go to the common area, Iroha, Yuri, and Koudai Kamiuchi are sitting on the ground talking.

"Hey, Hoshino, did you know? Our little Yuri's apparently a virgin!"

"K-Kamiuchi... Stop it!"

That's kinda—no, *really* unexpected.

"Is that true, Yuri?"

Yuri turns bright red and doesn't say anything.

"Oh, so now you're harassing Yuri, Hoshino? You've got a lot of nerve."

"Ah. S-sorry..."

I apologize once Iroha points this out, but Yuri looks away sulkily, still blushing.

...When I really think about it, someone like Yuri, who distanced herself from social interactions to focus solely on studying, probably wouldn't have much practice in that sort of thing.

So, as inexperienced as she was, Yuri was still able to play the part she did in the previous games... *I can see why Iroha would be envious of her ability to charm others...*

As the thought crossed my mind, I suddenly wonder about something.

“...Yuri, have you ever told someone you like them?”

“Wh-why...Why are you asking that?! You said you were sorry, but you don’t seem like you really meant it!”

“S-sorry. I was just curious.”

“.....I haven’t.”

Hearing this makes me smile. So I guess that means I’m the only one she’s ever confessed her feelings to. I’m a little proud of that.

“Huh? Hang on a second, Yuri. How were you able to go out with that guy?”

“All she has to do is flash a smile and maybe take his hand, and she can get a guy just like that.”

“H-hey, Kamiuchi! That’s not how my mind works at all!”

“Ooh, Yuri, you liar. You know it is. Okay, then how were you able to get him to ask you out?”

“Th-that’s...”

“You did something similar and made it so he just had to tell you he had the hots for you, right? Whew, you naughty girl! You vixen!”

“Ngh...”

Yuri’s mood is worsening under Koudai Kamiuchi’s teasing, and next to her, Iroha is scowling somewhat unhappily.

“Why is it always Yuri? I’m quite pretty, too, you know.”

“Hey, that comment was kinda cute, President.”

“Huh? How so? It was just me feeling sorry for myself.”

“The way you put your honest feelings on the table. I dunno—I guess I’m not into girls who are totally self-sufficient. If someone can solve all their problems on their own, then there’s no reason for you to be there beside ‘em, right?”

“...Well, that’s a pretty interesting perspective. If you look at it from that angle, you could say the way Yuri punishes herself and calls herself a bad person over everything creates an aura that makes others want to protect her. Yuri is

quite the devil.”

“Ohhh... Now even Iroha is being mean to me!” Yuri pouts.

Iroha hugs her almost automatically. “See, you’re so cute.”

I feel as though Iroha has softened up a bit since what happened earlier. Perhaps she had a small breakthrough when she let us see her crying like a child.

That’s definitely a good thing.

“.....Iroha.”

“What is it, Hoshino?”

“Don’t worry. You’re going to get more popular with guys, too,” I tell her.

Iroha grins, then replies with a gentle smile still on her face. “Thanks for the condescending advice. It really pissed me off.”

...I guess not.

“At this rate, you’re gonna be a lifelong virgin, President. ☆”

“Shut it.”

“I mean, you’re missing a pinkie, man. It’s freaky. You look like a high school girl who had to settle her tab with the criminal underworld.”

“Ah-ha-ha, go curl up and die, Kamiuchi.”

—Koudai Kamiuchi is dangerous.

In fact, I’ve already conveyed that to both Yuri and Iroha.

I didn’t give them all the details, but I did tell them that he used a knife to murder people directly in past games and that he seemed to enjoy doing it.

Yet, here the two of them are, enjoying their conversation with him.

At my request.

If they’re obviously on guard and let their enmity show, I have no doubt Koudai Kamiuchi won’t have a good time.

That’ll cause him to lash out, plunge us all back into chaos, and start *Kingdom*

Royale. But if he's having a blast like he is now, then that might seem like too much of a pain, which would prevent him from doing anything at all.

Well...I wouldn't say that's enough of a plan to put my mind at ease, though. I've been vigilant the entire time. I've been watching him like a hawk in the fear that the slightest thing might lead him to violence.

That's why, simply put—

"Nah, you're the one who's gonna die, President."

—what Koudai Kamiuchi did next went light-years beyond anything I could have predicted.

Shunk.

With that sound, another tragedy begins.

Iroha's arms embracing Yuri slacken and fall, and her body slides down limply. Still unable to process what's happening, Yuri simply stares in a daze at Iroha's head where it rests against her chest.

Yuri looks at the palms of her hands.

At the red liquid stuck to them.

"—"

She can't even cry out at the horrible sight before her.

Koudai Kamiuchi yanks the knife out from Iroha's back, then grabs her by the hair and tosses her to the floor, faceup. He sits astride her body and stabs her with the knife. Over and over.

He spends a short while destroying her body with a rhythmical *shk, shk, shk, shk, shk, shk, shk, shk, shk, shk*, then stands up with a grin and spits, "Looks like you were a virgin your whole life after all. How sad."

Why would he do such a thing...?

My sanity threatens to flee with each *shk, shk, shk*, but I wrestle it under control and think.

I have the knives stored safely in my room. I know for certain that I have four knives: mine, Iroha's, Yuri's, and Koudai Kamiuchi's.

So how does Koudai Kamiuchi still have one?

.....It can't be.

I think.

How did Koudai Kamiuchi get around my predictions? I know how impulsive he is, so why didn't I come up with a better countermeasure?

I thought I had done my very best. That means there has to be some element I overlooked.

And that element is—

“.....Daiya.”

I murmur his name, but Daiya doesn't look at me.

He just plays with the piercings in his right ear.

I don't understand.

Why would he feel the need to do this?

An idea pops into my head, so I pull out my device and look for something.

Yeah... As I thought, Daiya had a Private Meeting with Koudai Kamiuchi on the first day, the second day, and today.

I'm sure Daiya was wary of me from the very beginning. Then, after seeing how I handled things yesterday, he implemented his countermove straightaway.

“I gotta say, I'm surprised.”

I look at Koudai Kamiuchi.

“Everything is going just like Oomine said it would. The president, Yuri, and you were all going to team up. Then you'd tell me everything would be okay if we survived for eight days and try to make me not want to play. That's why you were being all friendly to me. If he got that much right, then I guess I should assume the rest of what he said would've come true, too.”

“.....What did Daiya say.....?”

“He said that once the three of you teamed up, you would kill the other three

of us."

That's bullshit! How could he?!

"Now that I think about it, that would allow you all to win. I gotta admit, Hoshino, you're smarter than you look. I'm not sure how you knew your own Class, but this must've been your plan all along, huh? Get the three Classes with the ability to kill to realize they can all coexist, then cook up some other condition for survival so that the rest of us lose our will to play the killing game. You were *this* close to having me fooled."

Why does he have to interpret things that way?

But I guess that's how *Kingdom Royale* is. It's a game of deception and murder that makes your suspicions consume you.

I lower my gaze suddenly. Yuri has put Iroha's head on her lap and whispers "Iroha... Iroha..." as she tries to push the organs slipping out of her back in.

Koudai Kamiuchi watches her with a grin of amusement, like he's seeing a comedic duo at work.

"I'll be through once I kill you and Maricchi...but maybe I'll have a bit more fun before I do. It's not like you have any way of fighting back now. Ah-ha-ha, you can't get thrills like this in the real world! That's what makes *Kingdom Royale* so great!"

In the end, Koudai Kamiuchi set off on a path of murder.

I failed.

No, that's not it... I was led toward failure.

"Not a chance in hell."

And Daiya Oomine was the one who steered me there.

"You're an easy read. That's how I know what the 'real me' was thinking."

—Oh."

So that's it.

No wonder Daiya did what he did.

I told him everything. I told the NPC Daiya Oomine what the real Daiya Oomine did. That's how the NPC understood the intentions of the real one.

And once he knew, naturally he would act as the real Daiya would want.

The real Daiya is my enemy.

That's why the Daiya here would of course act against me. He would try to obstruct my goal of having all us survive.

And thus, he brought my victory to a screeching halt.

...Who would've thought it?

I lost the moment I tried to get Daiya on my side.

“—Heh-heh.” Daiya’s laughter is muffled. “You never had a chance of being the king. Not the way you are.”

It makes me realize something.

I once criticized Iroha in my head as someone with a warped view of reality. What a fool I was to think that.

The one with the skewed view of reality...was me.

“.....Ha-ha.”

Only one of us was ever going to become the king.

Daiya Oomine.

And thus, I was cast down from my false throne.

• **Iroha Shindo, dead via seventeen stab wounds to the back and other locations inflicted by Koudai Kamiuchi**

Day 5 The Common Area

Yuri is dead.

She was executed because she didn’t come to the common area when it was time.

Yesterday, I saw how she was so dazed, she didn't try to go back to her own room, so I was afraid this might happen. It looks like she actually went through with it.

Yuri committed suicide passively, and now she's gone.

"Aw man... This really blows! My precious prize gone before I could take it! My sweet Yuri's cherry!"

Despite his words, Koudai Kamiuchi is grinning, holding his head in his hands in an empty show of regret that fills every fiber of my being with utter loathing.

The fact that he's total scum doesn't really matter, though.

After all, I don't have a goal anymore.

The only thing I have left is the guilt I feel toward Iroha and Yuri. All I have are my thoughts for the two of them, who died because of my mistaken belief I could be king.

Maybe I should have done the same thing as Yuri...

I'm so lost as to what to do now that I'm even considering it. I can't think about anything except how my remaining few days of life are out of my control.

That's why I keep apologizing to them in my mind.

I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry.

Of course, the two who died were NPCs, so I can see them again in the real world if I make it through this alive. But that doesn't mean the guilt I have within me is in any way false. Yeah... Now I finally know how it must have felt to have to kill the NPCs when they were the players. I know how Yuri and Iroha must have felt.

The truth is, knowing they're NPCs doesn't do a whit to make one feel any better.

I slump over the table.

There's a single hemp sack on it. Inside is an unusable portable device, along with the orange, beige, and green watches that Iroha had kept wearing even

after what happened.

Daiya puts the watches on himself.

Seeing this, I throw my own light-blue watch at him. Daiya glances at me but just wraps it around his wrist without saying a word.

"The watch is great, but I hope you brought what you promised," he says.

I take the rations out of the sack I brought from my room and lay them on the table without a response. I do it not simply because I've given up, but because I can imagine it might mean my life if I don't.

I made sure to keep enough for myself, so I won't die right away, but this means I've lost the ability to imitate the Revolutionary.

Kingdom Royale has returned to its original cruel state. There's no way to survive now other than for each of us to pursue victory. I wouldn't be surprised if Daiya and Koudai Kamiuchi try to kill me.

Well, should I try to win, too?

.....It won't work. I'm the Knight, and Maria is the Prince. We can't both get through this alive. Trying to win for me would be the same as asking Maria to die.

Even if she is just an NPC, I would never ask for that.

There's no way I can beat Daiya and Koudai Kamiuchi like this.

That's how I know I'm going to die.

"....."

...I'm going to die?

Yeah. It'll probably come down to that.

So—why?

I raise my head.

I look at Maria.

All four of us here know I'm most likely going to be killed. Naturally, that includes Maria.

Even so, she isn't doing anything.

Maria. The one who would cast away her life so readily for the sake of others. What's more, this didn't start just now. She's barely done or said anything since yesterday.

That isn't possible.

“Maria.”

I say her name. I know she must have heard me, but she doesn't so much as glance in my direction.

Maria is secretly biting her lip, and nothing else.

- **Yuri Yanagi, compulsorily executed for failure to return to the common area by 12:10. Died via decapitation.**

Day 5 <C> Private Meeting with Maria Otonashi – Maria Otonashi’s Room

Iroha Shindo	Dead	
Yuri Yanagi	Dead	
Daiya Oomine	→ Kazuki Hoshino	4:10 PM – 4:40 PM
Kazuki Hoshino	→ Maria Otonashi	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Koudai Kamiuchi	→ Daiya Oomine	3:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Maria Otonashi	→ Kazuki Hoshino	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Why isn't Maria doing anything?

There can only be one answer.

Just like me, she has no idea what to do.

But why is she like this? Has something crushed her the way Iroha's and Yuri's deaths crushed me?

When I enter her room, the mood is, unsurprisingly, a little uncomfortable, and Maria doesn't even greet me.

“Maria?”

“.....”

...Something definitely happened.

“...Can I...sit next to you?”

I wouldn’t even bother to ask something like that normally. We just sit next to each other without any protest.

But Maria frowns, sitting on the bed.

“No, don’t sit.”

I can’t believe what she just said.

“...Why?”

Maria closes her mouth. She won’t look me in the face, perhaps because she doesn’t want to answer. I can’t let this go, though.

“...Answer me.”

Not even that gets her to open her mouth. But after I stare at her silently for a moment, she finally, grudgingly, begins to speak.

“I’ve been watching your actions.”

She continues, still not looking at me:

“As you’ve been doing your thing in this game, I’ve been watching and waiting for the moment when you would come to me for help. You fought down Shindo and the others all by yourself, created a foundation for explaining the Box, and even had victory in your grasp for a moment. Koudai Kamiuchi’s actions ruined all that in the end, but in my mind, you were spectacular. That led me to a conclusion.”

Maria tells me:

“You are not Kazuki Hoshino.”

Is that the reason for her hesitant attitude...?

“You...are Kazuki, aren’t you?”

She definitely said something along those lines during our Private Meeting on the second day.

I didn’t really read too deeply into it, though. After all, Maria told me that

even when I was affected by the Week in the Mud, she could tell which one was the real me, so I was sure she knew.

That's why this has to be a joke.

"...What are you saying, Maria?"

Despite this, Maria doesn't tell me she's kidding like she usually does. No matter how long I wait.

"Kazuki."

Instead, she says:

"Our Classes are enemies, right?"

"...What're you saying? Yeah, our Classes are enemies, but... Huh?"

Could this be what Maria is trying to say?

"Do you think I'm going to kill you.....?"

For some reason, Maria doesn't shake her head at this completely ridiculous question.

"C-cut it out... There's no way I could ever—"

"Kazuki." Maria cuts me off midsentence. "I thought I could predict your actions. We did spend an entire lifetime together, after all. But your behavior in *Kingdom Royale* has betrayed all my expectations. That's why I can't be sure anymore. You may not do what I think you will."

"....."

"The victory condition you described was most likely true. But that turned out to be a failure. What are you going to do now?"

"I...still don't know..."

"I'm an NPC, right? Even if you kill me, that doesn't mean the real Maria Otonashi will die, correct?"

"What're you saying...? That that's going to make me...kill you?"

"That's not what I think. I can't imagine you ever taking my life."

"Then..."

“As I said, though, that’s just one of my assumptions, and those have already proven to be incorrect. I have no way of knowing what you’re thinking now that you’ve distanced yourself from me.”

“That’s...”

I approach Maria to try to untangle this misunderstanding.

“Stay away from me.”

Maria rejects me with an outstretched palm.

More than her words or her attitude, it’s her troubled expression that stops me in my tracks.

“Whoever you are, wearing Kazuki Hoshino’s face—you scare me.”

I haven’t relied on Maria in this game.

I knew that if I relied on her, possibly the weakest participant in this game, it could lead to my defeat. I knew that if I didn’t suppress my urge to seek her help, didn’t do away with my weakness, then I couldn’t win.

I was able to do it because of my experiences in the previous games.

I never would have been able to pull it off without this wealth of information. That’s why my actions must seem completely out of character from Maria’s point of view.

I thought she would’ve been okay with that, though.

I mean, she is Maria, right? She knows me better than anyone else does, right?

I had thought it was impossible for her to misread me, that she would accept me no matter what I did.

That was my support.

My faith in our mutual trust is what kept me going.

But—

“.....Why?”

I see Maria’s bewildered face before me.

I brought this on myself.

I get it.

I know why Maria hasn't done anything.

I've already lost her trust.

There's no need for Maria to help someone she can't even identify.

That's why she won't aid me anymore.

.....

I mean, this *is* Maria.

The person before me is Maria, someone willing to sacrifice herself to help others, no matter who they are.

Would she really abandon me...?

Just because she doubts that I'm Kazuki Hoshino?

"Are you really okay with this?" I ask her. "...At this rate, I'm going to die, you know?"

Maria's expression seems truly puzzled and fearful.

But why is she so confused? Why is she so afraid? She shouldn't react like this even if I were her enemy. If she truly thinks of me as a foe, she'd have much more control over herself.

So what is going through Maria's head?

".....The way you are now, you can probably make it through this on your own, don't you think?" Maria says with her gaze lowered.

"No way. I can't kill you, and I can't just let myself get killed, either. There's no way I can defeat Daiya like thi—"

Wait.

It's absolutely impossible for me to kill Maria. I can't win *Kingdom Royale* while she's around. Those are unquestionable facts.

You can put it another way, though.

I have a chance of survival if Maria isn't here.

“.....Maria.”

When she raises her head, I ask:

“*Are you thinking of killing yourself?*”

Maria gazes at me silently in response.

“Are you trying to let yourself die like Yuri did? Just to do what little you can to keep me alive?”

I continue speaking as she remains silent.

“Because the way I am now, it seems like I can probably kill the NPC Daiya...?”

After staring at me this entire time, Maria's expression softens. “The thought did enter my mind. I mean, I *am* an NPC, so it doesn't matter if I die. But all I really did was consider it.”

“Well, stop it...! I don't want to win the game at all.”

“Because of me, right? If I wasn't here, you'd probably be working harder to save your own hide.”

“That's—”

I can't finish the sentence, and Maria lets out a little sigh.

“...Come on, Kazuki. It doesn't seem like I can beat around the bush any longer, so I'll say it, but I don't find this change in you to be a welcome one. I can't read your actions anymore.”

“...And what would reading them let you do?”

“If I could guess what you're going to do, then I could infer how you will act and whether you will survive when I die, for instance. I don't know any of that now, though, which prevents me from doing anything.”

“...What are you saying?”

When I die, for instance— What sort of assumption is that?

But Maria ignores my reaction and presses on.

“You aren't relying on me this time. I get it: I know I'm powerless and not

much use in *Kingdom Royale*. I accept that. But it doesn't matter."

Maria manages to put on a smile as she speaks.

"In spite of all that, I'm still going to keep you safe."

Is she saying she's willing to use her own life to do it...?

Even though she knows full well I would never want that?

"But I still want to protect you, even if it means throwing away my life."

She definitely said that.

During the second game, I'm certain she'd said that.

"When you don't have your Box, it's my job to protect you."

That's why—

“—I won't let you.”

—I will never allow Maria to die trying to keep me safe.

“I told you that it's my job to protect you! I won't allow you to do that!”

Maria's eyes go wide.

Oh, right. She doesn't remember what I said during the second game. The sudden outburst is probably just confusing.

I don't care. I just have to make sure she understands my intentions.

“You're not the one who's going to protect me. *I'm* going to—”

“Wait.”

But she cuts me off. Her wide eyes have narrowed and are now fixing me with a sharp glare.

“What exactly is going on with you?”

“...What do you mean?”

“It's your normal life that you want to protect, right? Not me, but your normal life with Mogi and Kirino, right? That's why you've held on to such firm beliefs, isn't it? Why are you throwing a fit here now? Don't disappoint me like this.”

I'm shocked at what she says. These are her unadorned true feelings.

“.....Oh.”

Only now do I finally see it.

Maria has overestimated me.

She watched me cling to my normalcy, refusing to change my convictions for what amounted to a lifetime. Perhaps that's why it seemed so incredible from her perspective. Even though I simply remained the same within that cycle of stagnant repetition, maybe it made me seem like some sort of superhuman.

Maria thought that since I didn't change over such a long period of time, I would most likely never change.

But that just isn't possible.

I'm normal. I keep saying this. Even O said I would change at some point.

There aren't any superhumans here, either. Not Iroha Shindo, Yuri Yanagi, Daiya Oomine, nor even Koudai Kamiuchi is guaranteed to survive *Kingdom Royale*. There's no way of telling who is superior to anyone else. That alone proves there is no such thing as a superhuman. It's ironic I would awaken to this fact within a Box created to fight off boredom.

So of course I'm not superhuman.

And—neither is Maria.

But Maria has gotten this wrong.

“...Why wouldn't you be in my normal life?”

“That should be obvious.”

That's why she wants to be special. Why she believes she can become so.

“I'm a Box.”

Even though she's just a normal person.

I then think something with no basis or context.

This still isn't over.

I haven't lost yet.

After all, Maria is still alive.

► Day 5 <C> Private Meeting with Daiya Oomine – Kazuki Hoshino's Room

WILL YOU CUT DOWN KOUDAI KAMIUCHI WITH DEATH BY SWORD?

That's the message that appears on the monitor in my room.

I'm pretty sure the message is programmed to disappear during Private Meetings so that other players don't know about them. That's why the message is gone when Daiya arrives.

But at least for now, that's a useless feature.

Daiya, the King, is the only one who could have chosen the target for Murder, really.

“...What’re you playing at? Didn’t you just help Koudai Kamiuchi out?”

Sitting on the table with his legs crossed, Daiya flashes a bold smirk as he retorts:

“Hey, that’s a pretty funny joke. You really think I’d give someone like him a hand? I just used him since it suited my purposes to make him my puppet.”

“...But your Classes, the King and the Double, can coexist.”

“Do you really think my goal is to win *Kingdom Royale*? ”

“__”

I’m speechless for a moment. I never thought he would simply come out and say that winning isn’t his goal.

Just what is Daiya trying to do here...?

“...Okay, then why did you kill Yuri and Iroha? Was that really necessary?”

“...It was, in a certain sense. That said, Yanagi killed herself. I didn’t plan on that.”

“.....So you weren’t intending to kill Yuri?”

But Daiya’s lips twitch up in a sardonic smile. “No, I intended to keep her alive a bit longer and use her. I was going to have Kamiuchi violate her in front of you

so you could see her suffer. It would make you even more aware of the danger.”

I don’t understand.

I have no idea what he’s thinking.

However, no matter the reason, the acts he’s describing are beneath contempt.

“And just what danger should I be more aware of...?!”

“Kamiuchi’s next target after Yuri, for both murder and satisfying his sexual urges, would of course be Otonashi, right? I wanted to let you know what would happen to her if you didn’t do anything.”

“Why?!” I shout without thinking.

But I know—his methods aside—Daiya would never do anything so cruel without reason. There’s no question of that, and it’s something I’ve come to believe.

“.....”

That’s right. Daiya never does anything without a purpose.

There has to be some significance to why he’s put us in this situation, too. He must have his reasons for why he chose Koudai Kamiuchi as the target for Murder and is having this Private Meeting with me as well.

But I have no clue as to what those reasons could be.

I mean, if that’s the case, then what the hell does that make this Box? Why have a Box to do away with boredom? None of that seems very much like Daiya.

“Forcing people into a game where they kill one another? Heh-heh... Sounds pretty unproductive to me. It has no reason to exist.”

Daiya actually said that during the second game. I can’t imagine that a Daiya NPC who didn’t know about the Game of Indolence would have been trying to trick me back then.

“If someone consumed by boredom uses a Box, the results will only stave off

the tedium temporarily. That's why this is all just a diversion. A pointless game."

They're inconsistent. Daiya's remarks don't match up. He has no reason to make a wish just to mitigate his boredom, and that's undeniably the only thing the wish of the Game of Indolence is meant to do. There's no two ways about it; it's just contra— “—”

No.

It's not contradictory at all.

“Otonashi can detect Boxes, interfere with them, and knows about O because she's an owner, right? I'm an owner now, too, so it shouldn't surprise you that I can do all that.”

That's it.

So that's how it's been.

Daiya has been using someone else's Box to his own ends.

If so, then who is the owner of the Game of Indolence?

Only one person comes to mind that fits the bill. I only know of one person who perfectly embodies the state of boredom.

“Koudai Kamiuchi.”

I look up and declare to Daiya:

“Koudai Kamiuchi is the owner of the Game of Indolence.”

That's right—it was never Daiya.

Yeah, Daiya's been dropping me hints all along the way. He has never once said he is the owner of the Game of Indolence, and his NPC sincerely denied it, too. The only falsehood Daiya has spoken was to hide his status as the Revolutionary in the first game.

There were plenty of clues that could have led me to this realization. Daiya was leveling the playing field to a surprising degree.

Despite this, all I did was notice that something was slightly off and overlooked the truth that he wasn't the owner.

Daiya sneers as he speaks.

“Looks like I didn’t need to give you a hint. You caught on pretty quickly.”

“Quickly? ...No, I’m too late.”

Iroha and Yuri both became victims. There’s nothing “quickly” about it.

Thanks to that, Daiya pulled my strings like a puppet and handed me a total defeat.

“__”

Still.

Depending on how you look at it, couldn’t this be a sign of hope?

I lost to Daiya. But that loss was to him and not the owner.

Yes—I haven’t lost to the Game of Indolence yet.

Which means it’s entirely possible there is a way to escape it.

“Hey, Kazu, do you know why you couldn’t beat me?” Daiya says. “Because your objective is too vague.”

“...Huh? My objective is to return things to normal, which is pretty clear... Or it should be...”

I need to not kill anyone in the end. The moment I kill someone, even an NPC, there will be no return to normalcy for me. That’s why I tried to become the king and have everyone survive for eight days to clear the game, according to the win condition Daiya proposed.

“C’mon, Kazu, do you think you’re cut out to be the king?”

He said something like that to me yesterday, too.

“...What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. The only one who can become the king is a person willing to dedicate their life solely to the happiness of others without regard for their own happiness or benefit.”

...Is that true?

If that’s the only type who can become the king, then I could never do it. I

don't want to.

The only one I can think of who wants to be such a person—is Maria.

“There's no reason or need for someone like you who doesn't find happiness in that to become the king. At best, all you are capable of becoming...”

With a hint of bitter amusement, Daiya finishes:

“...is a ‘knight’ sworn to protect a certain someone, isn’t it?”

A “knight.”

An image of the word forms in my head.

I see myself taking a knee, extending my hand to a princess.

I know this scene.

The background is blurry. I can't tell if it's a castle, a terrace, an alley, or a classroom. I'm sure it's been painted over by my daily life.

But I know who the princess is, as clear as day.

I'm positive that princess will become the king unless I take her away from here. If she does, she will never think of her own happiness again. Even if the truth is that she wants to take my hand and flee from this place.

This is the reason why I resolved to betray everything, to make enemies of everyone—in order to protect her.

All for her.

...Yeah, that's right.

Until I met her, I clung to normalcy because of a distortion. It was a psychological measure I had taken to forget what happened with Nana Yanagi.

That began to change when she entered my life, though. I wanted to draw her to my side. I wanted her in my life, in my day-to-day. Having her with me was how I expressed what was “normal” to me.

That's been it all along.

At some point, my goal—

My goal became saving Maria.

That's why Daiya said what he said to me. Why I had "no chance in hell" of beating him.

Because he had deduced that I wasn't clear on my purpose. He was confident he would never lose to me as I was then.

He was...exactly right.

"If you've caught sight of your goal now, then do what you have to."

"...What I have to?"

Daiya matter-of-factly states, "Yeah. What you have to do. Kill Koudai Kamiuchi."

".....Kill him...?"

The Koudai Kamiuchi in here is an NPC, so killing him won't bring the Game of Indolence to an end.

"But... No, I see it now."

If I don't, the Maria in here will be murdered. And not just that, he'll make her his plaything first.

As a "knight," there's no way I can allow this to happen.

I have to kill the Koudai Kamiuchi who is the owner.

".....But..."

Can I really do that?

Koudai Kamiuchi is a horrible person. I mean, if I weren't involved, my thoughts on the matter would probably be *It's just his NPC, and if you gotta kill him, you gotta kill him.*

It's a different story if I'm the one actually pulling the trigger, though. If I choose the "kill" option, I'll never be the same again. Forever altered, I'll be forced to live a lie with Kokone, Haruaki, and Mogi.

However, Daiya is saying I still need to do it regardless. He's saying I should, if I know what's important to me.

But if I kill him and escape from the Game of Indolence, will I really be able to

say I've gone back to "normal" after I've done the deed?

"Kazu, try touching your hand to the monitor for a bit."

I do as I'm told. Nothing happens immediately, since it's shut off, but after about five seconds, it springs to life. The message DISPLAY THE SCREEN? appears.

"If you accept, it'll switch to the screen for using the Death by Sword command. You can make the decision to off Koudai Kamiuchi right here and now."

".....I see."

I press the YES button on the display. As soon as I do, it asks me WILL YOU CUT KOU dai KAMIUCHI DOWN WITH DEATH BY SWORD?

I can take a person's life just by pressing this.

In all the previous games, I never once made this decision in the end. There's probably no avoiding it now, though.

Still, if it will allow me to keep Maria safe...

I reach out toward the switch, and then—

"....."

—my hand stops.

Wait.

Am I okay with this? Am I okay with doing what Daiya tells me to?

Do I really think I can protect Maria by obeying Daiya?

"...What's wrong? Chicken?"

"Daiya," I say, frowning.

He gives me a dubious look.

"This version of you is an NPC, right?"

"...Why are you stating the obvious?"

"That means you don't know everything the real Daiya intends to do, doesn't it?"

Daiya eyes me even more distrustfully.

“Answer me,” I urge him, staring fixedly at him. “What about your promise?”

He lapses into silence as he grasps the implication of my statement.

“I wasn’t able to keep everyone alive for eight days. That means the Daiya on the other side doesn’t have to destroy the Game of Indolence.”

“.....”

“If the Game of Indolence isn’t destroyed, I can’t protect Maria. What’s more, I can’t kill her as the Prince in this game, so I’m undoubtedly going to lose and die. Maria can’t possibly win the game when her turn to be the player comes around. So that’s a failure to save her, too.”

Daiya is still silent. I pay no heed and continue:

“Is it possible you don’t know how the real Daiya was planning to resolve this?”

“.....”

Daiya doesn’t respond. It’s essentially an admission that he doesn’t know the answer.

“...If so, then I can’t just do what you tell me to. I have to find a way to help Maria on my own.”

“.....There is no doubt that you have to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.”

“Yeah, at this rate, he’ll murder Maria, so I’ll have to use Death by Sword, but.....”

...Huh?

No, hold on. What did Daiya say just now?

His uncomfortable expression made me think he was just trying to avoid the question, but was he really?

What if he was answering my question about how the real Daiya is trying to solve this situation?

“.....*There is no doubt that you have to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.*”

I understand the implication very well. I know the simplest way to destroy the Box.

Maybe this is what Daiya is trying to tell me:

You have to crush the Game of Indolence along with its owner.

The real Daiya is going to resolve things by killing the real Koudai Kamiuchi.

But if so, why did Daiya seem to have trouble saying that just now?

Because it's such an awful solution? ...No, he wouldn't have trouble saying something like that.

Daiya is glaring at me. He's telling me with his gaze not to give voice to my realization.

Why is he reacting this way? This is a Private Meeting, and it's not like anyone can overhear what we're saying, so why is he so on guard?

I guess Koudai Kamiuchi could listen to what is said here by using his device. But if that were likely, then Daiya would never have told me to kill Koudai Kamiuchi in the first place.

Does that mean someone else can hear this conversation? Someone who shouldn't hear, for our sakes?

This other person would be—

“.....”

I instinctively look up at the ceiling.

It's a bare concrete ceiling. It doesn't change even under scrutiny.

The real Daiya seemed to know all about the games I had played. I can't say for certain, but I think he may be watching my struggles on the arcade cabinet even now.

Yes, in other words—*the real Daiya and the real Koudai Kamiuchi can listen to this conversation.*

The real Koudai Kamiuchi can't learn that the real Daiya intends to kill him. If it came down to a real fight, the odds aren't exactly in Daiya's favor. All the more so, since there aren't any knives or other weapons there.

But if so, how is Daiya planning on taking out Koudai Kamiuchi?

I go back over what Daiya has said up to this point. *“That’s just the way your core nature works. It catches and alters everything that happens.”* *“Like I give a crap. I know about the hope the Boxes bring. And now that I do, I’m not gonna let anyone take that away from me.”* *“I’m sure you know. I didn’t do anything for a while after I obtained a Box. In short, I had a Box in my possession, but I didn’t use it.”* *“If no one kills anyone else for eight days, you can survive.”* *“That means...I’m your enemy.”*

“...”

I see. So that’s how it is.

“Daiya.”

He scowls and looks at me.

“You heard all about that week, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t say anything in response.

That settles it.

“.....Heh-heh.”

I understand everything Daiya intends to do.

“Daiya. You’re a liar.”

That’s why I can’t stop myself from sniping at him a little.

“*You haven’t beaten me at all, have you?*”

After all, just by exposing what he’s plotting here, I can bring all his plans to nothing. He has some nerve saying he’s won.

“...Don’t get too excited, Kazu. What can you do if you can’t kill Otonashi?”

He’s right about that.

I’ve learned that Koudai Kamiuchi is the owner, but in order to face him, I have to win this round of *Kingdom Royale*. Even though I have no chance of victory, since I can’t take Maria’s life.

But none of that matters to the plan Daiya is attempting to pull off. It will

destroy the Game of Indolence before this happens.

Still—

“You’re saying I should rely on you?”

—that sounds totally crazy.

“You’re supposed to be my enemy. And even if you weren’t, we have no idea if this plan will work or not. Under those circumstances, I’d rather come up with a better strategy on my own.”

“.....”

Daiya closes his mouth.

His plan works well for both of us. I truly understand, and I’m sure Daiya knows I do.

That’s why, if Daiya just humbles himself and asks me to come on board, I’ll go along with it.

He never will, though. Daiya won’t bow his head to me.

He will never, ever let anyone see him in a state of defeat. Protecting his pride isn’t his only reason. I still don’t know what it is he’s after, but I’m positive his goals won’t allow him to humble himself.

Just as Maria will never allow herself to be broken.

And so Daiya, without the slightest show of humility, just keeps glaring daggers at me.

As earnest as a prayer.

“.....Daiya.”

That’s why I’ll bend.

If I don’t, then Daiya may get killed. And I know I don’t want that. He’s been my friend for so long, after all.

“I have a favor to ask. Will you hear me out?”

To tell the truth, I’m not asking him for anything. This is something he has to hear. It’s something he has to do, even if he keeps his mouth shut.

“For just one day, I want to persuade Koudai Kamiuchi not to hurt Maria.”

If Koudai Kamiuchi does go on a spree and Maria dies as a result, I won’t be able to hold back any longer.

If that happens, I will kill Daiya.

Then Daiya can’t beat me. Because he won’t be able to kill me with the plan he thought up.

“.....”

Though Daiya remains silent with an angry scowl, I’m sure that means he’s agreed to my request.

► Day 6 <C> Private Meeting with Maria Otonashi – Kazuki Hoshino’s Room

Iroha Shindo	Dead		
Yuri Yanagi	Dead		
Daiya Oomine	→	Maria Otonashi	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Kazuki Hoshino	→	Maria Otonashi	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Koudai Kamiuchi	→	Kazuki Hoshino	4:20 PM – 4:50 PM
Maria Otonashi	→	Kazuki Hoshino	3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Daiya’s smooth talking must have worked. Koudai Kamiuchi ended up keeping quiet for a day.

However, it’s plain to see he won’t keep himself in check any longer after today. He is unable to completely conceal the thirst for violence within him, and he radiates it to everything around him.

I recognized that dark, black atmosphere like condensed desire in that hidden Master Room.

Daiya has left out one person’s perspective.

Namely, what Maria is going to try to do.

Daiya’s plan requires time to go into effect. The real Daiya won’t make his move until we’ve run out of rations and are on the verge of being mummified. I know this.

But Maria obviously doesn't know what he's planning. As before, she still thinks I'm going to die once time starts running out.

Naturally, she's likely going to help me win *Kingdom Royale* so I can survive, since she knows I can't fulfill my victory conditions unless she perishes.

In short—

—Maria will try to die so that I can win.

I have to get through to her and prevent her from doing this. I'm well aware she isn't going to cave so easily, though.

That's why I asked Daiya to coerce Koudai Kamiuchi into holding off.

I couldn't kill him then. There's something I absolutely need to have Maria witness in order to persuade her.

—The moment I kill Koudai Kamiuchi.

And now, I face off with Maria as she arrives in my room.

What is this?

Now that my objective is so clear to me, something feels immensely wrong about Maria. Her profile seems fuzzy, as if my center of focus is off.

"Kazuki."

As I expected, Maria doesn't sit next to me.

I'm sure she still doesn't accept that I'm Kazuki Hoshino. As things stand now, she won't ever recognize me with my clarified sense of purpose.

"It seems I need to die after all."

Unless things change, I won't be able to put an end to this foolishness of hers.

"As things stand now, I'm only holding you back. You won't win *Kingdom Royale*. Thankfully, I'm an NPC, though, so you won't need to feel bad about it," she says, perfectly calm.

I let out an involuntary sigh.

Stopping Maria really is next to impossible.

"Maria, you don't need to worry about that."

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.”

“__”

She is speechless, but the surprise soon disappears from her face.

“I truly don’t know you anymore.” Maria frowns. “You must be in league with Oomine. That’s why you made such a horrible choice.”

“It’s already decided.”

“...I see,” says Maria, looking away. “I don’t even consider murder to be an option. No matter how effective a solution it may be, it’s inhuman and barbaric. I said something to this effect in the Rejecting Classroom... But, well, I guess you wouldn’t remember.”

I’d be lying if I said Maria’s rejection doesn’t affect me. But no matter how much it hurts, I can’t turn back.

“Taking your own life is much more twisted.”

“For a human. I’m a Box.”

“Stop using that excuse! You know I would never want you to do such a thing!”

Maria’s eyes open wide at my outburst.

“.....Are you still saying that? Why do you keep being so weak? If anyone can do it, it’s you. You can prioritize the normalcy of your daily life over me.”

Are you still saying that? she says.

I’m the only one who should be saying that, here.

I begin walking and touch the monitor in front of Maria as she watches suspiciously. A message appears.

WILL YOU CUT DOWN KOUDAI KAMIUCHI WITH DEATH BY SWORD?

If this is how it’s going to be, I’ll just have to show her.

I’ll show Maria that I’ve already changed. I put off killing him for a day just so I could do this.

Then I'll get her to trust the new me.

I'll convince her there's no need for her to die.

In order to do this, I reach out for the word KILL? appearing over Koudai Kamiuchi's eyes.

"S-stop!" Maria rushes up, her eyes wide, and grabs my arm.

".....Why?" I honestly didn't expect her to get this upset.

"...Why what?"

Maria averts her eyes slightly as I ask the question again.

"Why does it bother you so much if I change? I know it's not good for me to do this. But do you need to try to stop it so desperately? It might save both of us, you know?"

I recall my Private Meeting with Maria yesterday.

"Whoever you are, wearing Kazuki Hoshino's face—you scare me."

"Why is it so scary for you if I change?"

"....."

She doesn't answer the question.

"Let me tell you something. There's no point in stopping me from pressing that button. Even if you put me in a full nelson, I'll just press it as soon as you're gone."

"...I know that."

So she says, but her grip on my arm tightens.

"I mean, I stopped you because I'm getting emotional. Okay, I'll admit it. I don't want you to change, ever."

"...But there's nothing you can do about that," I tell her quietly.

Maria stares at me. "...It would seem so."

And with that, she releases my arm.

"I can't stop you anymore."

I gaze at her, unable to understand why that would be so heartbreakingly.

Maria opens her mouth to answer. "Hey, Kazuki. What's my objective?" she asks me with a trace of sorrow.

"To get a Box, right?"

"Correct. I'm trying to obtain a Box. I'm looking for it in order to perfect my wish. The reason I'm with you is because you've snagged O's attention. That's my excuse."

".....Yeah."

"But I'm a Box. I'm not allowed to exist in the normal world. I was never meant to be by anyone's side. I will destroy the normalcy of that person's life, so I can't get too deeply involved. The only reason I can be with you is because I have this pretext for doing so."

"....."

"You've begun to change. I can't guess what you're thinking by your face alone anymore. Little by little, we're losing something special... In the end, maybe this was a foregone conclusion. Our relationship began as a by-product of your feelings for Mogi, after all."

"That's—"

I start to offer some unfounded protest, but Maria cuts it short with a hand over my mouth.

"I don't need any benevolent lies. You yourself should be able to tell that we aren't special anymore."

".....Ungh."

"You're about to kill Koudai Kamiuchi. He may be an NPC, but I know that once you murder someone, there's no going back to your old values. You'll change even more. Your peculiar attachment to your normal life will wane, and you'll become like everyone else—unable to fully use a Box. What do you think will happen then?"

Maria tells me.

“O won’t be interested in you anymore.”

Her hand is no longer covering my mouth, but I remain silent.

“O going away is a welcome prospect. I should be happy for you, too. But in my heart of hearts, I can’t truly appreciate the thought. Not because it means losing my lead on a Box. It’s because if you don’t interest O anymore, then—
“—*I’ll lose my justification for being with you.*”

After she gives her reason, Maria rests her head against my shoulder.

“If O stops pursuing you, then I’ll have to leave your side. It’s that simple. If I don’t, I won’t be able to complete my mission.”

Oh, so that’s what it is.

Maria has been afraid of this since yesterday—even before that.

Namely—

—saying good-bye.

“Kazuki, I won’t stop you anymore.”

Maria removes her head from my shoulder.

“The truth is, I shouldn’t have stopped you. I have no right to, nor any need to. I thought I knew this whole time, but still.”

Her smile is kind and resigned as she says:

“Staying together with you was just a fantasy.”

“__”

I turn back toward the monitor, unable to look her in the face.

Underneath the words *WILL YOU CUT DOWN KOUDAI KAMIUCHI WITH DEATH BY SWORD?* on the screen, my mind adds, *Will you accept this good-bye with Maria Otonashi?*

“.....No way.”

I could never accept that.

What the hell? Protecting Maria means I have to let her go? I know if we leave each other, she’ll be all alone with her misery. And yet, it’s still the only way?

"I can't stand the thought of you dying. It pains me. I hate it. It hurts. I want to be with you."

Why am I always so powerless?

I can't do anything despite knowing Maria Otonashi's feelings for me.....

...Another way must exist. I'm a knight; there must be someone I can cut down to rescue the imprisoned Maria.

Who the hell could ever banish Maria to solitude like this?

I think. *Think, think, thinkthinkthinkthink—*

“—Ah.”

.....*So that's it.*

“—Ahhh!”

I know. I finally know my enemy!

Why didn't I notice? They've been so near me all this time. I knew this. I've always thought of this person as an enemy!

My confusion dispelled, I reach out for the monitor again. One last time, I read the words **WILL YOU CUT DOWN KOU DAI KAMI UCHI WITH DEATH BY SWORD?** and the decision is effortless.

Sure.

The word **KILL?** is still written across the picture of Koudai Kamiuchi, and I tap it.

“—Oh.” A sigh escapes Maria. “So the fantasy is over.”

“You're wrong.”

I've become an unabashed murderer, and I am indeed different now.

Yes, the normal life I want to protect is different now.

If that drives O away, and Maria realizes this, I'm sure she'll try to leave.

But—

“Right now, the Maria here with me doesn't have the Misbegotten Happiness.”

—if things go as planned, she will escape from the Game of Indolence without ever having to view a Replay.

She'll never remember this conversation.

She'll never know this Box changed me.

“And a Maria without the Misbegotten Happiness isn’t a Box.”

Maria’s round eyes suggest she’s struggling to grasp my meaning.

“During the second game, I told you it’s my role to protect you when you don’t have your Box. I plan to follow through on that. So I’ll continue to keep you safe from evil.”

“...Evil? Do you mean like Koudai Kamiuchi?”

“Yes, of course, but he’s not the greatest enemy.”

My objective has become saving Maria.

Who has been the greatest hindrance in the Game of Indolence—since even before?

What odious foe convinced Maria that throwing her life away was her only option?

Maria shouldn’t need my help to survive, *per se*. Someone with her abilities shouldn’t have much trouble winning *Kingdom Royale*.

But Maria will absolutely never kill anyone, no matter what. If it comes down to it, she’ll throw away her own life instead. That’s why she doesn’t have the slightest chance of victory in this game.

As a knight, I once swore I would betray everything, turn all and sundry against me, in order to save Maria.

In response, Maria said that with patience as her only virtue, she would await my arrival.

Maria must be aware of her situation, if only just subconsciously. She must know she’s imprisoned. That she can’t resolve her situation on her own.

Who has taken her captive? Who is trying to make her king? Who do I have to strike down to save her?

I finally know.

“It’s Aya Otonashi.”

That is the name of my foe.

I once faced her for a lifetime, and I will fight her from here on.

“I will defeat Aya Otonashi. I will teach her that no despair is too great to be resolved in a normal life. I will show her she doesn’t need to use a Box, and I will defeat her.”

If I do, this won’t be good-bye for us.

C’mon... Don’t bring Maria into this, Aya Otonashi. The only one who can’t be with me is you.

“—What are you saying?”

Maria’s eyes are wide with shock.

I can see why she’d react like this. Amid those days of repetition, Maria was able to create Aya Otonashi, the idealized version of herself she longed to become. Yet, here I am saying I’ll destroy all of that.

“Is that—your way of declaring war on me?”

I smile and reply, “Not at all.”

If I said what I did to the Maria in the real world, it might actually be a declaration of war. And then, if Maria knew my intent, she might leave me.

But we’re in *Kingdom Royale*. Maria won’t retain her memories here.

“I know the Maria from the very first transfer.”

Maria is still gazing at me with shock, as if she can’t understand my reasons for suddenly saying such a thing.

“I’ve lost almost all my memories from back then. But I remember a Maria who wasn’t fully Aya Otonashi yet. And I remember what she said.”

I tell her.

I repeat what Maria said back then, standing there on the dais.

“I want someone to stand beside me.”

Maria closes her mouth and stares at me.

“Maria. You aren’t a Box now. That’s why I want to hear it from you. I want to hear how you truly feel, not as Aya Otonashi but as Maria Otonashi.”

“.....Kazuki.”

For just a moment, her mouth softens gently, but a severe expression soon follows. She purses her lips and turns her back on me.

“I know more or less what you want from me. But I won’t say it. You can tell me I’m not Aya Otonashi now all you like, but I can never go back to being who I once was. I thought I wanted to be a Box, and I still do. Saying what you want me to say would mean rejecting that decision. So—”

She clenches her fists.

“So I can’t say it.”

Maria spells it out:

“I can’t ask you to help lonely Maria Otonashi.”

Yeah.

That’s good enough.

I know full well how you feel.

Now I’m prepared to devote my all to defeating Aya Otonashi.

“You won’t be alone, Maria. I won’t let you.”

Suddenly, a thought pops into my head.

I know the Maria from the first transfer. But the Maria back then was already an owner; she just wasn’t fully Aya Otonashi yet. She was already a Maria possessed of tremendous will.

Is that the original “Maria Otonashi,” though?

I don’t think so. The original was probably a much more normal person.

That means I don’t know the Maria Otonashi who’s just a girl one year younger than me.

I don’t know the one from when there were no times, when she had yet to

transfer even once.

That girl is probably still in tears somewhere inside Maria. At the bottom of the sea in Maria's chest.

All by herself.

That's why I'm going to see her.

"I'll go meet the zeroth Maria."

I'll greet her, bring her back, embrace her, and stay with her forever.

I believe this will be Maria's definition of happiness, and I'll make it happen.

Maria has stopped clenching her fists. I can't read her emotions from her melancholy expression or downcast eyes.

With a deliberate lack of emotion, Maria walks up to me unsteadily and presses her head into my chest.

"...I will become a Box. I will live for the sake of others... That's why I'm begging you, please just stop this. Don't try to protect me."

She says this nonsense in a faint voice I've never heard from her before.

That's why I answer, "I understand. I'll go and meet her no matter what."

"...You...don't understand at all, do you? I don't want you to suffer. I don't want you to suffer by getting involved with me. That's why you should get away as quickly as possible."

"It's okay. I'll stay with you."

"Leave... Please just leave..."

No way. I can't comply with that. After all, my enemy is saying it, right?

So, in defiance, I wrap my arms around Maria.

No one would ever call her robust, not even by mistake, but as I embrace her slender form, I'm surprised by how fragile she feels yet again.

But this is the last time for that.

This is how she should feel. Maria Otonashi is just a girl a little younger than I am, so *this* is what she feels like.

“Maria.”

Though I say her name, Maria doesn’t reply. She just keeps her head pressed into me so that I can’t see the look on her face.

I’m sure the expression buried in my chest is one she would never, ever make in the real world. She’s making the same face she once told herself she must never make, when she swore she would never depend on anyone else.

She’s most likely showing this side because this Maria doesn’t have her Box. Because she is in *Kingdom Royale*, she’s revealing the barest glimpse of those inner feelings that her real self has on total lockdown.

My words might be able to reach Maria Otonashi now.

They might be able to reach her undiluted, with no interference from Aya Otonashi.

I open my mouth to speak—

“Kazuki.”

—but she beats me to the punch. She hugs me around my back with trembling arms and says, “Even still, this is just a fantasy.”

I know that.

So I’m going to change that fate.

► Day 6 <C> Private Meeting with Kamiuchi Koudai – Kazuki Hoshino’s Room

Despite everything, Maria will not become Aya Otonashi in this game, which means she won’t let herself die.

I’ve done everything I need to do, so this Private Meeting is simply a means of passing the time.

“Once_Death_by_Sword_iS_aIREADY_conFIRmed_it_wILL_go_into_eFFect_ev eN_if_the_Knight_dIES.”

According to the rules, Death by Sword is carried out five minutes before the

end of the <C> time block. That's why Koudai Kamiuchi is still alive for the time being.

But his death is guaranteed.

Once he's confirmed this with Noitan, Koudai Kamiuchi tosses a knife on the table with a rueful grin.

"So there's no point in offing you, huh? Damn... I'm really up the creek without a paddle here," he lightly quips, scratching his head without any personal investment.

He has no stinging barbs for me even though his killer is standing before him. He's not even getting emotional. I'm sure the only thing going through his mind is that it was a mistake to play along with Daiya.

Even though he's going to die after this.

He gazes at the knife he tossed on the table.

The Game of Indolence is nothing more than a way to ease boredom.

Until now, I could never really understand his capriciousness. Once it became clear he was the owner of the Game of Indolence, and I learned its ambience was due to his influence, I've been able to glean at least a little insight into him.

Koudai Kamiuchi doesn't feel like he lives in the real world.

The things that happen to him, he sees as events inside a game. Such a person doesn't even find playing *Kingdom Royale* to be anything special. That's why this unrealistic Box became an "external type," where the owner believes their wish is possible.

Given his nature, Koudai Kamiuchi doesn't feel any panic at the prospect of his own murder. He doesn't connect with the reality of killing others, so he also has no sense of guilt. It's easy to see how he came to live for the moment as a hedonist.

Though it is rare to see such an extreme case, this isn't anything special. I know that losing this game will result in my death; not even I can assert with complete confidence that it feels real to me.

All of that runs through my mind, but I decided to end the train of thought

there. After all, understanding him is pointless.

I take up the knife on the table.

“Oh? What’re you planning? Ah, maybe you can’t stomach the way I killed the president, so you’ve decided to do me in with your own hands?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I don’t feel like talking with you. I’m not the one who’s going to be doing that, I think.”

Koudai Kamiuchi’s eyes go round in surprise.

“Noitan.”

“WhAT_is_iT?” answers the green bear on the screen.

“I think of you as sort of the symbol of the Game of Indolence. If someone made a mascot to represent the heart of a person who cares for nothing but relieving their own boredom, it would be like you.”

“HmM?”

“That’s why I’ve been wanting to say this to you for a while now.”

With that, I turn toward Noitan’s monitor and plunge the knife into it as hard as I can.

The knife is jammed right in the center of the green shape.

“*You’re disgusting.*”

A crack appears in the center of Noitan’s forehead.

“—What?”

That revolting green bear breaks apart within the monitor. In an instant, he shatters into hundreds of pieces, like an unfinished puzzle. Noitan curses me (“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”), but the cracked screen can no longer display those bulging eyes. All that appears are flickering red spots in his open mouth and bloodshot eyes.

The effect is very much like bleeding.

Noitan can’t feel pain, though, so he continues hurling insults at me despite his miserable condition. Like he’s completely unaware of the position he’s in.

It's pitiful.

That oblivious state is pitiful.

Now that he's nothing more than hundreds of flickering points of green and red, Noitan can't even maintain his shape. Little by little, the flickering stops, the light fades, and then he's gone.

"...Was there any meaning to that? All you did was break the monitor."

Koudai Kamiuchi's tone is icy.

"Okay then, what's an act that has meaning to you?"

"Wha...?" His mouth hangs open stupidly. "Uh, I guess maybe there isn't one. People all die in the end anyway."

It's exactly the answer I thought it would be.

"All right, Koudai Kamiuchi. Let's say someone out there can't find meaning in anything other than curing their boredom, okay?"

"What're you going on about all of the sudden? And I'm sensing a bit of rudeness here."

I ignore him and continue, "How would someone defeat such a person?"

"Oh, come on... What is this? And, like, the person in your example is obviously me, right? I can figure out that much, you know. But beating someone like that would be impossible, don't you think?"

"Why?"

"Because you can't make them lose. I mean, like, unless you found a way to get them in the ring with you, see? If you toss around someone in the audience, it's just assault."

I get your point. I can definitely accept that.

"I see." I put my thoughts into words. "So I need to remind them we're in the same ring."

Koudai Kamiuchi's mouth drops open at this.

Even so, he still hasn't realized each and every one of us was in the ring the

entire time.

And with death around the corner for him, he has lost beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“I haven’t lost because I wasn’t really playing” is a child’s excuse, and it won’t affect the outcome.

But getting the facts through his head seems like more trouble than it’s worth. I’m just saying what I think.

“You said nothing has meaning, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“I have no idea if my actions mean anything or not. So here’s what I think: If they don’t, I’ll give them meaning. I’ll even give meaning to someone’s attempt to cure their boredom.”

I clarified my objective in the Game of Indolence.

I think that’s tremendously significant.

I took this Box, this frivolous Game of Indolence, and gave it a purpose.

Maybe I can put it this way:

—I rejected the Game of Indolence.

However, he can’t do the same thing, and he’ll keep losing because he won’t face reality. He’ll suffer defeat after defeat until in the end he breaks apart like Noitan.

But while I’ve said this many times before, I’m not going to be the one to impart this truth to him.

The one who will defeat Koudai Kamiuchi is Daiya Oomine.

Still—

• **Koudai Kamiuchi, dead via Death by Sword**

► **Day 10 <D> The Common Area**

Still, I think.

"If it had been me, I could've done much better."

Yuri's and the others' rations ran out, and I only had two portions left for each person. I handed them over to Maria and Daiya, so I have no more.

It's finally time for the real Daiya to go into action.

Something occurs to me.

Daiya was able to operate behind the scenes because his turn came before mine. If I had been first, I would've been the one to face down Koudai Kamiuchi.

None of us would've had such a difficult time if I had.

If I had succeeded, we may not even have had to play *Kingdom Royale*.

At the very least, I'm sure Yuri and Iroha wouldn't have suffered so much, and there would have been no need to kill Koudai Kamiuchi.

I think all this as I look down at the light-blue watch I got back from Daiya.

But this awful outcome is probably what Daiya wanted. So when it comes down to it, he really is my enemy.

All the same, I'm sure even Daiya doesn't truly hope for this. He may not be aware of it, but in his heart of hearts, he likely wanted us to reach an end where we can all be happy.

"That's what comes of thinking you can find hope in a Box."

Daiya doesn't answer me and just plays with the piercings in his right ear.

Well, the rest is up to you, Daiya.

Then it's farewell.

I don't want to see you anymore.

After all, if we do meet again, you will have used your Box. You could never hope to use it properly. I'll most likely attempt to destroy it.

This means that next time, you and I will be enemies in the truest sense of the word.

And that's why I hope I never see you again.



Back in middle school, I dated a girl I didn't care about.

Yeah, she was sophisticated for a middle schooler, and her slender yet voluptuous legs underneath her rolled-up skirt were attractive enough to get me going.

But her stupidity and lack of integrity were more than enough to cancel out her charm. All our conversations were just her talking trash about other people, and not even in a witty or interesting way that made it fun. She was boring. Unpleasant. And so I mastered the skill of automatically giving her a “Right, right” while I was mentally solving simultaneous equations.

I never would have approached her, so she must have been the one who asked me out. But why did I ever agree to start seeing her when plenty of other girls had told me they liked me? Did she just turn me on?

Anyway, by comparison, quiet, submissive girls are more my type. Speaking of, there was one upperclassman I had my eye on who fit that image to a T. Her eyes were always downcast, like she wasn't sure of herself; she wore her hair long, like a Japanese doll, and had thick glasses—a textbook “gloomy girl.” Her face was usually hidden behind her hair, but if you gave her a closer look, you'd find her features were lovely and well proportioned. I somehow got it into my head that I was the only one who noticed her allure and became strangely possessive of her.

...Ahhh, that's it. I was completely astonished when I found out she had a boyfriend, and that was when I started going out with Rino, even though I couldn't have cared less about her.

Even though she didn't matter one whit to me, Rino was apparently pretty popular.

Not long after I started seeing her, someone called me out and said to meet him behind the school gym. It was a classmate of mine with blond hair. Our teacher had given up on him as a lost cause.

“You tryna start somethin' with me, punk?!” he said, even though we'd never had a real conversation before, so I obviously wasn't. As we talked, I figured out his incomprehensible outrage was triggered by my relationship with that girl.

“Break up with Rino, you cocky bastard.”

He didn’t lay his cards on the table at first, perhaps out of a strange sense of pride, but eventually, my blond classmate got fed up with my confusion and grabbed me by the collar to threaten me.

I wasn’t really attached to her, so I probably should’ve just said, “Yeah, sure, no problem.” But, well, I was a bit of a troublemaker myself at the time, and his idiotic demands just pissed me off. In the end, I replied, “And why do I have to follow your orders?” I may or may not have added another extremely accurate remark to the effect of “Don’t blame girls for not liking you. You’re a jackass.”

And that’s how I started taking regular beatings.

It irritated me, so I stayed with a girl I didn’t care about just to spite that idiot for messing with me. Blondie, your plans really backfired.

Not to change topics here, but I really like my mom. She’s young, I think she’s pretty, and most importantly, she raised me all on her own. My father was apparently a despicable man who began abusing my seventeen-year-old mom in an attempt to abort me when he found out she was pregnant. Because of that, my mom was always telling me to “never turn to violence” like a broken record. “Violence never solves anything.”

It may sound hard to believe, but I still think she was right. She’s told me ever since I was small, and the mantra is still firmly rooted in my mind.

That’s why I never fought back when Blondie came after me—I just took it.

However, even though only one person was getting violent, it still left its marks. I could hardly bear my wounds, and my mom began to suspect I was fighting—turning to violence. *“Why do you have these bruises? Are you going to throw away everything I’ve taught you? Are you turning into the man I hate more than anything?”*

It’s ridiculous; my beloved mother lost hope in me, even though I was still respecting her teaching. I had to put an end to this.

And so I came to believe I had no choice, that violence might be okay, just this once, as a means to an end.

I told Blondie to meet me out behind the gym. I couldn't possibly lose to an inferior blond monkey. I punched him. I kicked him. In just a few blows, he was off his feet. I could never let the news of my violence spread, so I decided to threaten him into keeping his mouth shut. The blond monkey was pretty stubborn. I beat him until he was unconscious. I tore out his hair, ripped out his nails, pissed on him, and forced him to eat centipedes until he passed out, and I finished by stripping him naked and leaving him in the gymnasium where the girls would be doing club activities. Thinking back on it now, I guess I went that far because I had built an even bigger grudge against the guy than I had imagined.

The blond monkey said something to me before he lost consciousness: "You don't actually care about Rino at all. You're just using her to get off, like some sex toy. That's why I hate your guts." I remember thinking that maybe the monkey actually did have genuine feelings for that worthless girl.

I didn't give a rat's ass.

Monkeys don't have rights.

In fact, wiping the floor with that jerk just pissed me off even more. I mean, in the end, he was just a weakling. This nobody caused me so much grief? And not only that, he forced me to break my taboo against violence? This pathetic monkey who never stood a chance against me?

Fuck off. Well, thanks to him, I unfortunately learned something.

The pleasure of using violence to control.

Before then, I was powerless against dirty maggots who strutted around like the king of the hill just because they had the guts to fight, even though they were obviously inferior to me. Their internal compasses only pointed to whether a guy was good at throwing down. They competed for superiority purely on someone's skill in a fight; they didn't care for all those other abilities like athletics or studying. What disgraceful values. Violence can never solve anything; only trash would cling to that. They're an inferior species. They live worthless lives, just like my father, who tried to kill me before I was even born.

But in the end, they bow down before violence.

There's no meaning in that. Subjugating a bunch of apes on a lower rung of the genetic ladder is absolutely pointless. It's all about the pleasure of it, really. That's all the meaning it needs.

Violence need only be for pleasure.

That moral code is pretty on point, if I do say so myself.

I called out Blondie again. He'd been avoiding me out of fear after the last time, but then I warned him that if he didn't show, I would pass Rino around to a bunch of other men at a hotel. He arrived meekly enough. I took him to a river canal near the school along with several of our classmates, a few of Blondie's former buds, Rino herself, and some of her friends. The waist-deep canal was filthy, the type of place where you'd often see dead dogs floating by.

"Hey, monkey. You're in the swimming club, right?" I said to him. "As it happens, I'm pretty bad at it." I looked at Rino to make sure he saw that she was giggling at him. "How about you give me a few pointers here?"

I didn't let him refuse.

"Hey, you aren't thinking of swimming in your clothes, are you? That's crazy," I added, and he stripped down to his trunks without any additional prompting. I wasn't going to let him off that easy, though, so I made him drop those, too.

Rino and her friends ewwed at each other like a bunch of brainless idiots.

Blondie began swimming with big splashes. I could tell he was trying very hard to keep his expression under control. When I ordered him to do the butterfly, he showed us a thrilling performance in that shallow canal. The sight was so funny that I kept cracking up while I was kicking him around. Half the kids there were turned off by all this, but Rino was clapping her hands loudly and laughing.

I made sure the blond monkey could hear me when I said, "Hey, Rino. Let's go to a hotel after this."

"What? C'mon, Kou, not in front of everyone else. It's embarrassing."

"Not up for it?"

"N... No, of course I am."

"Then let's go."

“...Okay.”

“Let’s get really dirty, like we did last time.”

“Sure, but... C’mon, don’t talk about this in front of everybody! You dummy.”

Blondie threw up in the canal.

After that, I took Rino to a hotel, as promised. There were several men there waiting for us. I left her there, got some money from the strangers, and went home.

Naturally, I made sure Blondie heard the truth. I never saw hide nor hair of him again.

So yeah, violence truly doesn’t solve anything. It only gives rise to new hate. That’s what happens when you just throw it around unawares.

But I ended up paying a price for using it, too.

The incident at the canal blew up, and my mom ended up hearing about it. Once she knew the details, she started acting terrified of me and kept me at arm’s length. She won’t even really talk to me anymore. Even though I love her as much as always.

Still, I continued to betray her. I kept wielding violence. I had already become so addicted that I couldn’t last long without tasting its pleasures.

I do believe violence doesn’t really solve anything. But it can destroy anything and everything. No matter how much pride or fame or money someone has, it can be smashed to pieces by a single act of violence. When I abuse someone with the knowledge that it will destroy their life, a crackling white light races through my head, courses down through my entire body, and melts my heart in its thrill. The ecstasy is so great that I can’t stop.

I’m sure someone else will destroy me someday, too.

I imagine my insides sinking into a lake of sulfuric acid and dissolving. For some reason, the idea gives me peace. Just fantasizing about my body turning into a shapeless, runny mess fills me with amazing relief.

I don’t feel like pondering why.

But I do have one thought: Maybe once I've turned to liquid, that'll be my proper form. I suffered violence before I was born; maybe it would've been better if had just come out as some sludge before I could take on the shape of a human.

“Do you have a wish?”

So this question poses a problem for me.

I’m going to be destroyed someday; are you suggesting I wish for something?

When it comes down to it, I—and not just me, but everyone else, too—is going to lose everything in the end. Does anything have meaning in that case? If it does, I’d love to hear what it is.

Once you learn that meaning doesn’t exist, the world turns to sheer tedium. And like Daiya Oomine said, tedium truly is a monster, one that threatens to consume me.

That’s why the ability to escape it is enough.

And thus, I created the Game of Indolence and started *Kingdom Royale*.



The first round of *Kingdom Royale*—

It was all so fresh and so much fun. The killing and the deception went exactly as I imagined, and I could feel in my heart that *this* was the game I had been looking for.

Well, thinking back, maybe I was a tad disappointed that Daiya Oomine was such a powerhouse as the Revolutionary. He was way OP in that role.

The second *Kingdom Royale*—

It was awesome. There was plenty of fan service, so it was a blast to watch. When Yuri begged Kazuki Hoshino to kill me immediately after she seduced me, I laughed so hard I couldn’t do anything else.

Still, Yuri is pretty damn scary. When she offed my NPC at the end, her hollow expression and tears were just part of her act as a mentally broken girl to make me let down my guard, so when I tried to cheer her up, she stabbed me to

death. Totally brutal. A real demon. I'll never trust a woman again, let me tell you.

The third *Kingdom Royale*—

It all ended so fast I couldn't help but laugh. The president killed Yuri first, and man, her face freaked me out. But I guess maybe it's okay if things go this way once.

And then, the fourth *Kingdom Royale*—

Not only was I starting to get tired, but Kazuki Hoshino tried to keep everyone from killing anyone, so this round was missing all the good parts. That guy doesn't get it at all. Push 'em harder to kill one another. Make 'em deceive one another more. Screw all this reviving-friendships-and-reconciliation crap. That's not the drama I'm after.

What this all piles up to is that I wasn't focusing much on the fourth *Kingdom Royale*. I only watched the scenes where there wasn't something interesting happening, like somebody kicking the bucket half-heartedly. It follows then that I also didn't observe Kazuki Hoshino's Private Meeting with Daiya Oomine very intently.

"You haven't beaten me at all, have you?"

At least until I heard Kazuki Hoshino's cheeky little comment.

Where does he get off saying that when he couldn't even get the owner right? I laughed it off sarcastically, but watching his face during his later conversations made me wonder something.

Could he have realized I'm the owner?

I don't have enough information to decide one way or the other, since I haven't really been paying attention. It does seem that way, though. Oh well. I don't think he can do anything, even if he has figured it out.

As I kept watching Daiya Oomine and Kazuki Hoshino afterward, a suspicion I'd held earlier resurfaced.

These two really are working together in secret, aren't they?

It's entirely possible Daiya Oomine has some plot up his sleeve. Well, it's more

natural for him to be scheming anyway.

But I can't imagine Kazuki Hoshino knows the details of his plan. Daiya Oomine didn't tell him directly in any of the scenes I saw, either. And is collaborating even possible under these circumstances?

Maybe it's less teamwork and more that Kazuki Hoshino put two and two together and gave his tacit approval of Daiya Oomine's plan.

I peer into the arcade cabinet. As his mummification approaches, Kazuki Hoshino is slowly saying something to Daiya Oomine in the game.

The Kazuki Hoshino in the cabinet is saying:

"If it were me, I could've done much better."

What exactly is he talking about?

I suddenly notice that Daiya Oomine has looked up from his intense, almost prayerlike observation of the screen and is watching me.

You know, I think I really have seen this guy somewhere before... Did Oomine and I go to the same middle school? ...But I don't remember such a handsome upperclassman who would have pierced his ears against school rules.

"You had a girlfriend in middle school, right?" Daiya Oomine asks me an odd question out of the blue.

"I had several, so I don't know which one you mean... But I'm guessing you mean Rino?"

"...Yeah, that's the one."

"You know her?"

Hey, what was Rino's full name anyway? I'm pretty sure the nickname came from her last name.

"I've known her since we were little kids, yeah. That's why I also know what you did to her," he replies coolly.

Nothing about his blank expression strikes me as out of the ordinary. There's something creepy about it, though, so I can't help but wonder.

"Are you thinking of getting revenge on me?"

Still, Daiya Oomine's face doesn't change.

"You can't forgive me leaving the girl you knew at the hotel, so now you're going to try to get revenge on me? That's why you acted as the guide for *Kingdom Royale*—Still, I can't really see the need to go to so much trouble," I say, scratching my head.

"Revenge? Not at all. All I'm doing is taking steps toward my own objective. I pretended to be a guide for the game because I realized watching it could prove a useful step toward bringing it to fruition."

"Your objective, eh...? Huh? You're an owner, right? You could take care of that easily with your Box, couldn't you?"

"Yeah, exactly," he agrees.

I frown. "Then shouldn't you just go ahead and use it? You think you're too good for it or something?"

"Hmph, don't assume everyone is like you. Don't assume everybody can just believe that wishes can be granted. I'm a realist, see."

Now that I think of it, when Boxes grant wishes, don't they even include the resigned beliefs of an owner who doubts their wish could ever come true?

"I knew right away I wouldn't be able to use a Box properly when O explained the details to me. So even after I accepted it, I didn't use it immediately and instead went searching."

The corners of Daiya Oomine's mouth quirk upward slightly as he speaks.

"I wanted to find a way I could use my Box to the fullest," he says.

There is definitely something off about him. His tone is the same as ever, but his words are weighty and pointed.

"...And how do you go about searching for the correct way to use a Box?"

"You're right; it's not something you can just hunt down. I lucked out in a certain sense, though. From talking to O, I learned that Kazuki Hoshino has a hint. On top of that, I happened to get drawn into this Box and meet another person besides Kazu who has used their Box fully."

“...And that’d be me?”

“That’s right.”

I finally get what Daiya Oomine meant by a “step” toward his goal.

He needed to become capable of using a Box properly in order to fulfill his objective. That’s why he never tried to escape.

Yeah—

“It was to observe you two and find the technique for mastering my Box.”

That was the step.

Daiya Oomine used the Game of Indolence to watch and discover the key to making the most of his Box.

“...But what does observing us really change? We’re able to use Boxes properly because we’re the type of people who can. I don’t think it’s possible to mimic the nature of another person.”

“True. I can’t imitate that. I can’t replicate the hatred of boredom that defines your nature, for example. However, in addition to your nature, a big part of why you can use your Box so well is that your wish is realistic. That’s where I found the answer to my objective.”

“...? What’s a realistic wish?”

“What you put into your Box wasn’t some grand thing you would call a ‘wish.’ Right?”

“Well... Yeah, that’s true. All I wanted was to not be bored anymore.”

“Yeah. And no one believes a cure for boredom is unfeasible. You must believe the events of *Kingdom Royale* are impossible in the real world yourself, right? The details of the game didn’t matter to you, though. All you cared about was that the game was entertaining for you. So whether you believe in the game’s system or not is beside the point.”

“...I’m not sure what you’re getting at here, but...I’m sure I wouldn’t buy a wish like ‘I want infinite do-overs no matter how many times I die.’”

“That’s what I mean. The reason your use of the Box seemed so effective

wasn't due solely to some factor of human nature; it was also because you tried to grant your wish in a roundabout manner." Oomine chuckles and continues, "Thanks to you, I came to understand my own way of mastering a Box. Say I want to destroy the world, for example."

"That's unsettling."

"But even if I put that wish into the Box, in my heart I would believe it was impossible. However, in actuality, the means to destroy the world already exists. Nuclear weapons and so on. Of course I can believe in those. And I know I can at least imagine myself getting all the nukes."

"Why?"

"Because being immersed in the Game of Indolence allowed me to experience the miracle of the Boxes. After witnessing so much power at work, I now find it feasible that Boxes can do anything."

"...Ah, so watching what it could do with your own eyes was also part of why you wanted to observe?"

"Correct."

Man, just how deep does this guy think...?

"Even the wish of a realist like me can be granted if it's obtaining an implement to destroy the world."

I'm a bit unsure as to whether I see his logic, but I get the gist of it.

Daiya Oomine can use a Box now.

"__"

The moment I understand this, a chill runs through me.

Why am I so sure something bad is going to happen?

Perhaps because of this premonition, I end up asking something.

Though I shouldn't care even if Daiya Oomine did seriously wish to destroy the world, the conversation leads me to voice the question.

"So what is your wish?"

When I do, the change is instant.

The atmosphere around Daiya Oomine is different.

I should have noticed something off about him. Instead, I went and gave him that final push.

“You see, there’s a type of person I can’t stand.”

Daiya Oomine touches the piercings in his right ear, his expression neutral.

“People who shut off their brains and don’t think for themselves. They pretend to think on their own when all they’re doing is hitching a ride on others’ opinions and letting themselves be controlled. It’s like they have no self. Their existence is meaningless. I can’t stand shallow-minded scum incapable of any thought they haven’t borrowed from someone else, oinking away like pigs and gobbling up the slop in front of them. Just breathing the same air as they do pains me.”

“.....What’re you getting so worked up about?” I scoff.

Daiya Oomine gives me an icy glare.

“Because they consume.”

“What—?”

“And occasionally, they’ll even eat good people.”

I find I can’t move, transfixed by his cold gaze.

“You can probably imagine my wish—and my objective, can’t you?” An uncomfortably tense, crooked smile appears on his face as he says, “My wish is—to do away with all such scum.”

Daiya Oomine can’t conceal his enmity any longer. As his eyes turn toward me, they contain an unmistakable gleam of madness despite the appearance of calm, as if he’s spent months and years hiding it behind a veneer of black.

“Hey, are you listening to me, Koudai Kamiuchi? No, maybe I should call you something else.”

He makes himself clear.

“You utterly apathetic, brain-dead farm animal.”

He's made me his enemy, and he's going to destroy me.

—Ha-ha.”

A dry laugh escapes my lips.

Destroy me?

That can only be a joke. It has to be. Maybe if Daiya Oomine were armed, I could see it, but empty-handed, he doesn't stand a chance against someone as versed in the world of violence as I am. I'm certain of that.

So what is this?

What is this horrible chill? This fear welling up in the depths of my heart?

“Hey, Kamiuchi, what do you think is going to happen to Kazuki Hoshino now?”

He suddenly changes the topic.

“.....He's going to turn into a mummy and die?”

“Heh-heh...,” Daiya Oomine laughs. “What gives? Are you taking Kazu lightly? So you're implying he won't do anything even though he knows he's going to die?”

“...That's because he *can't* do anything.”

“That sounds about right coming from unthinking cattle. Don't lump him in with you. All he did is piece together what I'm doing. Pretty ballsy of him,” Daiya Oomine says almost ruefully. “Kazuki Hoshino will not die, and that's because I'm going to crush this rotten Box you call the Game of Indolence before it can happen. He figured this out.”

He looks at me with the same level of disinterest he would give to the lead of a broken mechanical pencil.

“I don't really need to tell you how I'm going to do it, do I?” He spits, “Kill Koudai Kamiuchi and crush the Box.”

It's like a proclamation of death from the grim reaper.

“.....Urk.”

I can't keep calm after all. I break out in a heavy sweat, feeling the truth of his words.

What the hell is this sensation? Though we were just NPCs, both the president and I killed Daiya Oomine in *Kingdom Royale*. There's no reason I should be this afraid of him.

So why is he this confident?

And why am I feeling so desperate?

“.....Are you saying you’re going to take me down with violence?” For some odd reason, the words are hard to say.

“That probably wouldn’t work.”

“Huh?”

Is this guy for real? Why is he acting this way?

“What’s so surprising about that? I could never beat you in a fight. Despite how I look, I’m just an honor student who hasn’t ever really played sports, much less fought. I don’t have any experience with martial arts, either. If I were shooting for a draw, then yeah, maybe I could pull it off.”

“...Okay, then why are you so confident?”

“That goes without saying,” says Daiya Oomine. “Because it’s already over.”

“Huh?” I say dumbly, again, and someone grabs ahold of my body.

“?!”

It’s not Daiya Oomine. He’s still there in front of me. His arms are crossed and definitely not gripping my shoulders.

A friend...? That’s stupid; they couldn’t be here. We’re inside a space created by the Game of Indolence.

Still, someone has definitely seized me. I feel the head of my captor against my back.

I look behind me. All I can see is the top of their head.

Long hair... A girl?

She's much shorter than I am and doesn't appear to have a very powerful build.

“—Ungh!”

Despite this, she must be using some trick, because I can't shake off the arms restraining me.

This long-haired girl in pajamas lifts up her head from where it was resting on my back.

I look at her face—

“You haven't beaten me at all, have you?”

For some reason, what Kazuki Hoshino said crosses my mind.

The basis for Daiya Oomine's persistent confidence was his knowledge that she would appear and hold me back, thus saving him.

I'm sure Kazuki Hoshino came to understand this during that Private Meeting, too. I don't know how, but at any rate, he figured it out.

Then he made sure the version of me in front of the arcade machine didn't catch on that Daiya Oomine was working to kill me. He knew that if I learned the truth, I wouldn't let him roam free. I might even kill him if things went south.

Wait a sec. Why didn't this girl come to his aid right away? Maybe she had no choice but to come help him precisely because a certain condition was met?

So what was that condition?

Why does this girl have to help Daiya Oomine? Would it be bad for her if he dies?

What would happen, say, if he died in this situation? Daiya Oomine kicks the bucket before accomplishing his goal. The Game of Indolence isn't destroyed. *Kingdom Royale* goes on. And then— —Kazuki Hoshino dies as a mummy.

“.....”

“If no one kills anyone else for eight days, you can survive.”

That was the lie Daiya Oomine had told. But something felt wrong about it.

Why would the boy who hadn't misrepresented the things that really mattered tell such an uninspired falsehood?

...I put together a hypothesis.

A hypothesis that this lie was actually the truth.

If everyone lived, their rations would run out in eight days, and they would all be mummified and die. *Kazuki Hoshino would meet the same fate, of course. Just as he is going to now.*

"You heard all about that week, didn't you?"

I don't know what he meant by "that week." I have no way of knowing.

But it's possible he learned something during that time.

That's right. The two of them—

—knew that if Kazuki Hoshino was on the verge of death, this girl would appear and put a stop to it. They knew they could survive if no one died for eight days—no, if Kazuki Hoshino was going to be mummified.

“—Heh-heh.”

This girl I've never seen before, whose face I don't recognize, is smiling.

“.....Who are you?”

The girl answers, “Nana Yanagi.”

“.....Nana Yanagi?”

“Yeah. But perhaps it would be better if I put it this way.”

The girl flashes a mysterious grin as she speaks.

“I'm O.”

A sneer rises to Daiya Oomine's face.

“Hmph, I was wondering who you were supposed to be, but you're Kazu's first love, eh? Why take her form?”

“There's no deep meaning, really; I just thought this would be the most fun form to wear when I met Kazuki Hoshino. That said, thanks to you, it looks like I won't be able to show it off to him.”

“Actually, Kazu saw that form almost as soon as he arrived here.”

“That’s true. But he stepped on me. How cruel. And he didn’t even seem to know who I was. You’d hope a boy would at least recognize his first love from a glance.”

“Whatever. So this is what Nana Yanagi looks like, huh? Since Kazu tends to only go for hot girls, I would’ve figured she’d be the same. But she’s pretty plain and nondescript.”

“That’s quite rude.”

As I listen to this incomprehensible exchange, I think: *O?*

Did they say “O”?

Yeah, it has to be. Only *O* has a grin that mysterious. *O* is the only one who could ignore the rules of Boxes and force their way in. That’s why I accept that it is them.

But why would this alien being, all but a god, do something as silly as help Daiya Oomine? Why would they need to save Kazuki Hoshino’s life?

How can these two tell what *O* is going to do?

As I uneasily wonder, Daiya Oomine scoffs at me.

“Your face says you don’t understand why *O* is helping us. Okay, let me tell you.”

He begins to clarify.

“As it happens, *O* is very fond of Kazuki Hoshino. You didn’t know that?”

“.....That still doesn’t explain anything.”

“You’re such a slow-minded waste of space. If their favorite guy is about to bite it, of course they’re going to help him.”

“And you’re saying you predicted that?”

“I didn’t predict it. I knew. I heard all about how things went down with the Week in the Mud.”

There’s no way I can understand anything from an unhelpful explanation like

that. What the hell is the Week in the Mud anyway? ...But, well, maybe it's true that O helped Kazuki Hoshino during this mysterious week...or tried to. That's how he knew O would come.

He knew that, so he turned it to his advantage. Now that's he's finished learning about his Box, he's using O to dispose of the Game of Indolence and me, since I've served my purpose.

He used a being that could be considered a god.

“__”

What kind of crazy idea is that?

He's using a being of such a high caliber; there's no way I could ever think of doing that.

Someone who could dream up such an idea—

—is not human.

Ah, I've finally figured out why I'm so terrified.

Say what you will, but I've never laid eyes on a person more skilled than me. Or at the very least, I've felt it before. I've always thought of myself as powerful.

But this is the wake-up call. Compared with this man—

—I am overwhelmingly inferior.

“—Oh.”

My body wobbles limply.

I feel dizzy, and the sensation doesn't stop. It seems like my legs are sinking down into the blackness that reeks of paint thinner... No, they aren't. That's just how it feels.

What—what's going on?

Someone is laughing at me. Cackling and kicking me—*Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha*. It's not Daiya Oomine or O. A black shadow is laying into me, trying to take me and conquer me.

Who are you?

I get the feeling it's my father, who I've never even seen in pictures. I glare at the shadow rising up, my mind filled with all the hateful things I could say to him. Yet, the moment my frigid gaze lands on him, my father disperses and becomes another person.

Yeah, of course I know who this guy really is.

It's me.

"Man... This is going according to plan so well it's almost funny."

The words come from Daiya Oomine's mouth.

Yeah, I'm sure it must be.

I'm going to be destroyed after this, as he planned. Just like I did to someone else in the past.

That means I might be able to go to the place I've been longing for. I might be able to become what I always wanted to be.

O releases me.

I slump down onto all fours.

My hands make contact with the bottom of the space. It feels like my palms are touching rotten flesh. It's sticky and warm yet also gritty, and it crumbles in my hands.

I finally feel it.

This place—it's disgusting.

"Hmm, it's going according to plan, is it?" O parrots Daiya Oomine. "Well, I would imagine things went according to plan for Kazuki Hoshino, too, though."

"...What're you trying to say?"

"I have no ulterior motives. By the way, Daiya Oomine, there's something I would like to ask you, too, so may I?"

O looks at Daiya Oomine, seemingly indicating that I am not worthy of the being's attention anymore.

"It's a question about the contradictions in your behavior. I don't understand

why someone like you would do something that isn't to your benefit."

"...What do you mean?"

"Heh-heh, no need to play coy with me. Your strategy took advantage of my affection for Kazuki Hoshino. None of it would have worked unless I came running. Yet, despite this—"

"Not necessarily."

Daiya Oomine cuts O off and explains.

"I had already won *Kingdom Royale* and survived, so I didn't have to destroy the Box. And while I was confident you would show up, it wasn't guaranteed. Even though he lost, he put up a good fight, so I'm just lending him a hand out of sympathy. If he had won his contest with me, I would have kept my promise and found some way to pull this off without you coming. I was prepared to accept a draw with Koudai Kamiuchi."

"Sympathy, eh...? Surely you must be aware whether you were the sympathetic one, or whether it was the other way around? I haven't heard that part of the explanation yet."

O calmly dismisses him.

"I'd like for you to quit dodging the question. I'll put it to you once more. Even though you would have been in trouble if I had not come, you—"

And then O says:

"You tried to change Kazuki Hoshino and make it so I'd lose interest in him."

"—"

"The way things were, Kazuki should have been able to keep everyone alive for eight days. However, you went to the trouble of riling up the Koudai Kamiuchi NPC, getting him to kill Iroha Shindo, and making it impossible for Kazuki to win that way—in order to force him to change. Why would you do that when all you needed to do was arrange things so that I would arrive?"

Daiya Oomine gives O an angry look.

"You're so kind. I'm sure you wanted to help your friend Kazuki. I'm sure you

wanted to free him of me. But of course, this isn't enough of a change to make me lose interest."

O continues with a grin.

"Still, you certainly did lower the probability of my arrival. It's not like you to weaken your chances of winning."

"...What I did could definitely be taken that way. But the one who did it was my NPC. He can't see that Kazuki Hoshino would be mummified and die if you didn't come here. I can make mistakes like that, too."

"Even if it were the misunderstanding of your NPC, as a copy of you, surely he wouldn't have behaved as he did if you didn't have some desire to change Kazuki? Furthermore, that's a lie. You said only a moment ago that everything was going according to plan."

"A figure of speech."

"It was more than that. Things *are* going according to plan. And I'm sure you never would have allowed Kazuki Hoshino to die, even if I hadn't come. You were most likely planning on trying to kill Koudai Kamiuchi, prepared to accept that it could mean the death of you both."

"That's ridiculous. Why would I have to do all that for Kazu?"

"Because he's showing sympathy to you."

Daiya Oomine can't make a comeback.

"Because of your failure, someone who showed you compassion and agreed tacitly to your plan would be killed, and a prideful boy like you would never allow that."

".....How do you know all that?"

"That's what Kazuki Hoshino thinks, not me."

"What?"

"Though it saddens me, Kazuki has no faith in my whims. That's the reason he didn't think your plan was a guaranteed success. Yet, despite this, he still placed his fate in your hands. Now that you know that, an astute fellow such as

yourself must surely know why.”

Daiya Oomine’s eyes go wide, and he bites his lip.

“He trusted that even if the plan failed, Daiya Oomine would save him,” O says.

Daiya seems vexed for some reason.

“In truth, things probably went just as planned for Kazuki.”

“—How much does he intend to mock me?”

“Heh-heh, he’s not mocking you. It’s just that he understands you very well, don’t you think?”

“Shut up... Okay, I understand. Fine, I’ll admit it. I tried to get Kazu away from you. You’re tearing into me now because you don’t like that, right?”

“That’s not untrue.”

“Relax. This is the only time I’ll be doing anything like that. Next time he stands in the way of my goals, he’ll be an enemy I can use. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“But I do think his oblivious smiles complement him well. I don’t want him to be tangled up with Boxes. A normal life suits him best.”

“Oh? If so, why did you try to make protecting Maria Otonashi into Kazuki’s goal? Isn’t his involvement with her another thing that pulls him from the mundane?”

Daiya Oomine chews his lip.

“.....It was probably the only way my NPC could come up with to keep him from getting mixed up with you.”

“That is a definite possibility. However, judging by the look on your face, it would appear that isn’t all,” O says, then deliberately claps their hands, as if to say they have an idea. “I know. I’ll let you in on a little something, even if all it does is make you more aware of yourself. It might be good to inform Kazuki Hoshino and Maria Otonashi as well,”

O says jubilantly to the now-frowning Daiya Oomine.

“This girl—Nana Yanagi—is alive. Oh, and as it turns out, so is her former lover, Toji Kijima.”

His frown deepening, Daiya Oomine asks, “...If they’re alive, then where are they?”

Nodding in satisfaction at this response, O tells him.

“Inside the Box of Maria Otonashi.”

Daiya Oomine’s eyes go wide, and he freezes.

“Do you see it now? Maria Otonashi’s presence further removes Kazuki Hoshino from normality. So if you want to accomplish your objective, you need to ignore your emotional hang-ups and get those two together as planned.”

“...What’re you talking about?”

“You want her to be with Kazuki Hoshino, don’t you?” O says. “*Kokone Kirino.*”

The name I remember from long ago.

“You’ve always thought he would be a good match for her. Out of consideration for her happiness, you believed it would best if romantic feelings budded between the two of them. Kazuki most likely wouldn’t reject her no matter what he learned about her, after all. However, when this was on the verge of actually coming to fruition because Riko Asami was possessing him, you got violent with him. This time, too, you made protecting Maria Otonashi his goal. It would seem your actions are not consistent with your objectives.”

“.....Shut up.”

“You hope to become the type who doesn’t mind sacrificing their own life for their cause, right? Unfortunately, at present, you have a long way to go before you’re anywhere near Maria Otonashi or Iroha Shindo. As long as you’re attached to Kokone Kirino, at least.”

“I told you to shut up!”

I watch Daiya Oomine as he balls up his fists and shouts.

Why did O say that name.....?

Why does Daiya Oomine react to it that way?

Why does the name of that quiet upperclassman who caught my eye seem to cause him pain?

“—Oh.”

That's it. I remember now.

I remember the old Daiya Oomine.

“Do you truly think you can carry out your goal? ‘*No matter what you do, no matter where you go, there's no escaping who you are inside.*’ You're the one who said that to Kazuki. Even though you pierced your ears to embody your determination, even though you cut off your feelings for her, your human kindness, cowardice, and foolishness will never change.”

Daiya Oomine fixes O with a gaze full of enough malice to strike anyone else dead.

It's no wonder I didn't remember him. His entire demeanor is completely different now. He didn't have any earrings, and his hair wasn't silver in middle school. Back then, Daiya Oomine was the eloquent and relatively polite upperclassman with a gentle smile whom all the girls loved as their “prince.”

He was the perfect boyfriend—for that quiet girl I wanted.

That was why I gave up so quickly. It wasn't like I knew all that much about him, but I just felt Kirino would be way happier dating him than me. I realized I wasn't the only one who had discovered her charms. I also knew deep down that I wouldn't be the one to cultivate them. That was all it took to shatter my selfish delusion that she was special to me.

I see it now.

Daiya Oomine was the very one who prompted me to start seeing “Rino”—Miyuki Karino.

“.....Heh.”

Daiya Oomine stops glaring, unclenches his fists, and eases his frown.

His grin as he recovers his composure is bold and brazen, without a trace of his former softness.

“Maybe so. But it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t matter, eh? But you’re undeniably suffering.”

“Yeah. I don’t care how much it hurts; all there is for me is completing what I’ve set out to do. That emotion might get in the way, but if that’s all it’s doing, I’ll just wrestle it under control.”

With great interest, O asks, “And why is that?”

Daiya Oomine’s reply is frosty. “I am guided by an emotion greater than my suffering; that’s why. It can even override the deepest part of who I am. That’s how vast...my hatred is.”

He asserts himself forcefully.

“Ever since then, I have despised normality.”

I haven’t the slightest idea what he is talking about when he says “then.”

“I’m pleased.”

However, O smiles with satisfaction at Daiya Oomine’s answer.

“You have gifted me with the sound of your heart screeching. You let me hear it as easily as one would pluck a note on an instrument.”

“I’m sure that’s why you gave me a Box. I don’t want you to feel I’m holding out on you, so I’ll let you hear it all you want. All I care about is reaching my goal. That’s why I’m just grateful to you.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that. There are so many people who say the most illogical and hateful things to me, even though I explain everything and grant them a Box with no strings attached. It often leaves me disappointed.”

Saying that, O brings me to my feet and restrains me again.

“Now then, Kazuki is about to be mummified. We must hurry.”

“That goes without saying,” Daiya Oomine snaps, then approaches me. “Koudai Kamiuchi.”

His lips move up into a cold smile.

“You are the worst kind of scum I know. You’re the dregs of all the other scum who capitulate to their boredom, hurt others, and lead meaningless lives. I don’t think you can ever turn over a new leaf, and I don’t think you’ll give up your Box, either.”

He extends his hands toward my neck.

“Just as Kazuki Hoshino changed, so will I. To do that, I must purge myself of weakness. I’m going to use you for that end.”

His grip tightens to strangle me.

“I will kill you and eliminate my way back for me.”

And then, the boy who was once called a “prince,” says:

“And so I will become the king.”

Still, don’t go to the trouble of saying that to me. The way you’re talking, it sounds more like you’re trying to convince yourself.

.....Hey, maybe that’s exactly what he’s doing?

Daiya Oomine had reasons to drag this out without destroying the Game of Indolence until now. He had a motive not to kill me straightaway. He needed to understand how to use a Box. He needed to wait until O would take action. He needed to get Kazuki Hoshino to change.

Looking back on it, though, maybe he built up all these reasons just so he could put off the decision to kill me?

I’m just deluding myself, of course. However, there’s no doubt in my mind that he wants to convince himself it’s okay to murder me. At any rate, he’s the prince who has yet to become king.

My vision flickers.

I’m going to die.

So I’m going to lose to Daiya Oomine, am I? ...No, I’m pretty sure I’ve been losing over and over for quite some time now. And not just to Daiya Oomine, but to everything. I’ve been racking up losses by default for as long as I’ve been

running away.

My legs are swallowed up by this space, so like condensed desire. I'm guessing that if it keeps swallowing me, I'll melt away into sludge.

In the back of my mind, I had always thought that would be paradise on earth for me.

What an idiot.

What lack of imagination. People can only think that when they haven't actually confronted death. I don't want it to end like this without ever knowing what it is I wanted.

Unfortunately, I have no choice but to accept this outcome.

So I need to get in just one last counterattack.

"Eh.....ulp, mh."

Though I try to say my last words, my crushed vocal cords can't produce them. That's okay, though. It doesn't have to be coherent; it just has to get through to him.

Even if everything is going to turn out as Daiya Oomine wishes, I can still at least give him some grief.

I look into his eyes. I can see the slightest shade of doubt.

Oh yeah, it seems he understood—

"Help me."

—what I was trying to convey.

That isn't going to change the way this ends, of course.

But I know this much. I remember who he was back when he was the prince, when he stood smiling next to Kirino. I know.

The one who is going to keep losing from now on is you—Daiya Oomine.

I mean—*do you really think you can be king as you are now?*

It feels like darkness has completely engulfed my body. My vision has gone completely black, and I'm blind. I can hear Daiya Oomine's voice in my head like

some sort of echo.

“.....Kazu, do you really...think you could have done any better?” he asks with a trembling voice, most likely believing I’m no longer conscious. “Even if I hadn’t decided to use Kamiuchi’s death, this probably would have been my only option for destroying the Game of Indolence. Are you saying it would’ve been different for you?”

Naturally, I can no longer see his face as he says these things.

I feel something splash on my face. What could it be? My nostrils pick up a sour odor.

Oh, is that it? ...He threw up.

C’mom, don’t hurt yourself, Daiya Oomine.

Well, I guess I can’t really talk. Even I puked in the street on the way back after I left Rino at that hotel. I can’t explain why. But I don’t doubt I was still suffering back then.

So when did violence become pleasurable to me?

I don’t know. If I don’t know now, that means I never knew my entire life.

I fall into darkness.

But it really isn’t all that different from where I’ve been until now.

Just how long have I been in this darkness? A void like this is unbearably dull. I run this way and that; I shout; I stretch my hands before me, unable to find anyone, and fear overtakes me.

But if I search around just a bit more, maybe I’ll reach out and touch someone?

Heh-heh.

No, I won’t.

After all, not even my mother is beside me.



For some reason, the last thing that appears to me is Kazuki Hoshino’s face.

I turn to him and ask something.

Hey, if that's really you—

—did you teach me my true wish?



Koudai Kamiuchi's funeral takes place on a day with high humidity after the rain the day before and an excessive heat index.

Those in attendance are scowling, unable to maintain their best behavior because of the heat. It's exactly as if they have forgotten they are mourning the deceased.

Even so, quite a few people are crying. From the snippets of conversation I overhear, I can tell he was well-liked. That doesn't seem right to me, since I knew his dark side, but maybe it's only natural considering how friendly he was.

Then a young, pretty woman, who I'm guessing is his mother, breaks down sobbing, as if every last drop of moisture is being wrung from her slender frame.

The truth squeezes my chest tight.

A part of my mind wants to just be done with him and not worry about it. It wants to think this was bound to happen because he was such a horrible person.

But even he has people who love him. That's to be expected, though.

It's why the result of Daiya's actions really is detestable. It's also partially my fault.

Of course it is.

Just like Daiya, I killed Koudai Kamiuchi, too.

Kamiuchi's mother keeps muttering "It's my fault," even though she's obviously not the one who strangled him. Her desperation sounds like a curse she's placing upon herself, willingly plunging herself into sorrow.

When I look at Kamiuchi in his portrait, I see his eyes are squinted a little, with just his mouth turned the slightest bit upward. I'm sure it's supposed to be a smile, but it doesn't look that way at all to me.

Next to me, Maria has probably noticed something amiss in my expression, because she asks, "...Did you know him?"

I shake my head as if it's the most natural thing in the world and reply, "Not at

all.” Though she most likely never really spoke to Kamiuchi, Maria is truly saddened by his death. She says little, and later, when we visit a coffee shop, she even leaves a bit of her strawberry tart uneaten.

In that sense, I think it’s a good thing Maria doesn’t remember the Game of Indolence. If she did, I’m positive she would feel responsible for not being able to save him and blame herself.

The Game of Indolence, huh?

It truly seemed as if Kamiuchi had gotten the most out of his Box. He didn’t, though. Mogi and Asami held reservations about the feasibility of their wishes, which thus weren’t granted properly; in the same way, Kamiuchi couldn’t utilize his Box to the fullest, either. In fact, you might be able to say he was the least successful of them all.

I mean, the wish of the Game of Indolence itself was born from such reservations.

If so, then what was his real wish?

I give it some thought...but in the end, I don’t know.

I didn’t have the opportunity to come to know him that deeply. So I don’t have a clue.

Even so, when I look at his portrait, I can tell this much:

I think Kamiuchi...was lonely.



It’s the last day before summer vacation arrives, and Daiya is still missing.

The entire school hasn’t stopped its uproar over yet another murder, but that will probably die down by the time summer vacation ends.

Of course, an unpleasant feeling continues to come and go in my chest. I’m fine with that, though. My decision to be fine with it is what brought us here, after all.

Nevertheless, summer break starts tomorrow.

“.....Okay.”

I dismiss my downcast mood. Ignoring the way my shirt sticks to my skin with sweat, I put on a smile and enter the classroom.

“.....Huh?”

Kokone is crouched down in the corner of the room for some reason. She’s sitting hunched over with her knees pulled to her chest, squirming restlessly.

...What in the world is she doing?

“Yo, Hosshi!”

“Good morning, Haruaki... Hey, what’s up with Kokone?”

“Oh. It’s just her usual cry for attention, so don’t pay her any mind. Just like those little black things you see skittering around in the corners of rooms but are still super-annoying. We should start calling her ‘Koko-roach’ Kirino from now on!”

“Who’re you calling a cockroach?!”

Ah, she definitely heard that.

As she looks back at us balefully, I see that she’s done up her hair with a barrette today, showing the nape of her neck. And— “Oh, glasses.”

—she’s wearing light-blue frames.

Kokone seems to wince and curl up a bit more at the word.

“I usually wear disposable contacts, but, wellll...I forget to buy new ones. Ohhh... I’m super-bummed. I look awful in glasses.”

“...That’s why you’re in the corner of the classroom?”

“Yeah. I don’t want anyone to see my face. I’m moping.”

As far as I can tell, you were actually drawing more attention, though.

Judging by her expression, however, it would seem she’s pretty serious about her aversion to being seen in glasses. I don’t see anything wrong with it every so often, but maybe that’s how a girl’s mind works.

“Don’t worry. They look good on you.”

“No, they don’t! Are you blind?! If you can’t see, maybe you should get some

glasses, stat! Or maybe you're just blinded by your love for me?! You really are a complete womanizer!"

"...Uh, that's not it at all, but..."

"Don't say that! Hurry up and start liking me instead of girls' clothes!"

This is horrible; she's getting it all mixed up...

"C'mon, Kazu, say it. Just now, you were thinking *I'm not the only one who wouldn't like you; nobody in the world would!*"

Haruaki makes it worse yet again.

"Grr. What did you just say, Haruaki?!"

"I said neither Hosshi nor anyone else has any interest in you."

"What, is that some kinda roundabout confession?"

".....What part of what I just said would make you think that?"

"I just want to think it. A hot-cold confession, like 'The oh-so-popular Lady Kokone will probably captivate people all over the world... I'm the only one who should be interested in her.' Looks like I don't have any choice. As a reward for your love, I'll give you one of my used facial wipes later. Keep it as a family heirloom."

"Oh, I'll burn it with a lighter as soon as I get it; I'm sure it'll go up in a flash! Man... What a narcissist. I bet the sound of a sliding door sounds like a profession of love to you, huh?"

"Well, I can't say that's entirely wrong. The whole world loves me, so it's a stretch to say that all its sounds are displays of affection toward me!Oh, but the world won't love me with my glasses on... Just Japan at most..."

That's plenty.

"Ugh... And here I'm supposed to meet Kasumi today... She's gonna have to see me in glasses."

"Huh?"

I think she just said something I can't ignore...

“Kasumi...? Do you mean that Mogi is coming to school?”

When I ask, Kokone clamps her mouth shut with an expression that plainly says *Now I've done it*. She looks off in another direction and gives a weak smile.

“...Ah-ha-ha, I'd never spoil a surprise Kasumi told me to keep secret! Uh... When I said Kasumi, I meant, y-yeah! The ‘*kasumi sleeve*’—like the hermit, see!”

I've never heard that term before in my life...

“You've got quite the vocabulary, Kokone... By the way, what hermit are you talking about?”

“U-uh... One who put a quail egg in the palm of his hand and broke it with nunchaku.”

Oddly enough, I feel like you could find a hermit like that in reality.

.....At any rate, it seems I need to get ready to act very surprised.

But...I am happy that I'll be able to see Mogi at school.



There's no sign of her arrival even after the closing ceremony.

Maybe she's going to come after school and hang out with us then?

As I glance at my classmates making a fuss over the grades on their report cards and their plans from tomorrow, someone calls my name.

“Kazuki.”

I look in the direction of the voice to see Yuri peeking in from the hallway.

When our eyes meet, her face lights up with pleasure. Her cheeks are just the slightest bit flushed, likely because she hurried over here after homeroom was over.

...*What for?* I wonder as I stand up, and I feel a hand come to rest on my shoulder.

“...Huh? What's up, Haruaki? Um, Yuri's calling for me, so I'd better go...”

Haruaki nods okay with a big grin. “Aha, I see. You call her Yuri, do you?”

“...Huh?”

“See... Well, I know you talk to her sometimes, but, like, I guess I might call it a tipping point, you know?”

“Yeah... And, uh, Yuri is—”

“Lemme just say this represents the opinion of the guys in our class.” Haruaki’s grip on my shoulder becomes stronger. “I hope these come off.”

He seizes my crotch in a viselike grip with his free left hand.

“Aaaaagh!!”

H-he’s gonna crush them! I didn’t even do anything!

But I can see the frosty looks my classmates have been giving me begin to thaw afterward.

...It’s a bit complicated, but this could actually be a good thing. That said, thanks to my confession of love to Kokone before, this whole topic is a minefield for me. Maria is fine, since everyone has come to realize she’s on a whole other level, but Yuri...is definitely trouble.

Could Haruaki have done what he did because he knows that? ...No way, this is Haruaki we’re talking about here. He didn’t go easy on me, either. It really hurt. What a jerk.

My hands on my groin, I totter out into the hallway.

“A-are you okay?” Yuri glances between my face and my groin with concern.

“P-probably... Most likely... I’m sure...I’m fine... Anyway, that’s enough worrying about my crotch. Did you need something?”

Yuri turns bright red. “W-worry about your crotch...? Don’t say things like that!”

I didn’t say anything bad!

“U-um, I need to talk to you about something, so can you come with me for a moment?”

“Hmm... Okay, but we can’t talk here?”

“No.”

Looks like it's going to be a proper talk...

“Sure. Let’s go.”

“Thank you. Okay then, follow me.”

She walks off as soon as she says this, so I wobble after her, still in terrible pain. Yuri notices my strange limp right away and stops.

“A-are you really okay?”

As she says this, Yuri stoops over slightly and looks down. *Uh... I don't think looking is going to do anything...*

Just then, I notice something.

“Eep!”

Maria is there. Most likely, she was also headed to classroom 2-3 once homeroom ended.

She observes Yuri, who is peering at my crotch. Very intently.

She then gives me a look dripping with disgust.

...Huh? Is there something wrong with this...?

“I-it’s not what you think, Maria. Yuri’s just worried about me, is all...”

“What’s with the excuse? I know all about you. I bet Usui saw her come to your classroom, then got jealous and attacked you or something, right?”

She’s so spot-on it’s almost like she saw everything, so I nod enthusiastically.

“I know, so I’ll just say one thing.”

Maria tells me:

“I hope they come off.”

Why?!

Fleeing Maria’s chilly gaze, we arrive at the landing between the third floor and the roof.

After checking to make sure no one is around, Yuri bows her head.

“Really, thank you.”

“Uh...?”

What could she be grateful for?

Apparently sensing my confusion right away, Yuri quickly fills me in.

“For trying to do something to fix my friendship with Iroha.”

Oh...so that's it. Well, I guess I can understand that.



Kingdom Royale ended suddenly, like an elephant stepping on a paper balloon to smash it flat. As soon as the sensation hit me, I found myself in my bed in my pajamas.

I checked the date immediately. Though I spent all that time in the game, only a few hours had passed.

Soon after, a wave of emotion surged over me, and I called Maria. I absolutely had to see as soon as possible if she had any memories of the Game of Indolence.

“What do you want?” she said in a somewhat lower voice than usual, and from that alone, I knew instantly that she didn’t remember anything.

I was speechless with relief. Maria yelled at me for calling her out of the blue so early in the morning and then not saying a word. It was so true to form that I laughed happily, which made her yell at me again: “You think it’s funny to piss me off?”

Once I was sure she recalled nothing about the Game of Indolence, my mind turned next to Yuri and Iroha.

I went to school without any sleep and looked for them. But I didn’t have any luck. Both of them were absent.

...It was possible they would never return.

With that fear, I asked for their addresses from their teacher, who seemed dubious of my intentions, and then visited them at home.

Both were in terrible shape.

Yuri would burst into tears at the slightest thing without any rhyme or reason. Iroha had punched holes in the wall and would occasionally give an unsettling cry.

Regardless, I was at least able to confirm what kind of state the two of them had been left in.

They had forgotten about the existence of the Box itself, but they had clear recollections of what they had done. Since they hadn't seen the Replay, the final game when I was the player was also missing from their memories. Apparently, they had been left in this state. Without any recollection of their reconciliation, all they had were their memories of Yuri deceiving everyone in the second game and Iroha's massacre in the third.

Seeing me seemed to make them even more unstable. That's probably to be expected, since the sight of me would have reminded them of the game.

It even entered my head that perhaps it would be better to stay away and wait for them both to recover naturally.

But that wasn't going to work in the end.

After all, I was the only one they could talk with about what happened. They would certainly get better over time. But they would lose their ability to recuperate in the fullest sense.

I had to get the two of them to see that what had happened wasn't their fault. True, they both exposed their worst sides in that game. I could see how that would make it difficult for them to forgive themselves.

Still, at the very least, I forgave them. I didn't hold any lingering grudge against them.

So over the next week, I visited both of their homes regularly. A few times, Iroha's family almost threw me out, but Iroha herself was able to stop them. Yuri's mother didn't know the full story, but she was still very welcoming.

I spoke to them a lot, though it was mostly one-sided. In particular, I told them over and over about the final game when I was the player.

I could vaguely sense something.

When their relationship mended, it would be like destroying the Game of Indolence to them; the Box would not have defeated them.

That was why I absolutely wanted the two of them to reclaim the friendship they had shown me so clearly during the final game.

I still couldn't tell if they were doing better after a week or so of regular visits. But they did start coming to school.

Iroha would only exchange greetings with me at school and nothing more, but I often spoke with Yuri during break periods.

Both have yet to believe they made peace during the last round.

That's not unreasonable. Unlike back then, their relationship is completely shattered. It'll be difficult to come back from that.

I still have faith, though.

The two of them can come to a place of mutual trust again.

After all, I know how much they care for each other.



“...Have you talked to Iroha?”

Yuri shakes her head and briefly replies, “Not yet.”

“...Yeah, I guess you wouldn't have. It's not that easy, I guess.”

Yuri just smiles. “I envy Otonashi.”

“...Because she can't remember the game, huh?”

“That's not the only reason.” Yuri's still smiling as she continues, “I envy her because she's the most important thing to you.”

And then, out of nowhere, tears are pouring down her face. It's so sudden even Yuri is startled, as if she didn't even notice herself. Ever since the game ended, Yuri sometimes cries for no reason, almost like a broken faucet. Her expert control over her tears is gone.

I'm completely used to this automatic weeping by now, so it doesn't faze me.

Yuri speaks to me with a smile still on her face.

“Eh-heh-heh, I’m crying again...”

But there’s nothing dark about her expression.

“I’m really jealous. Since she is so important to you, she doesn’t have any memories of the game. You did everything in your power to protect her, so she never had to be the player. She didn’t get hurt.”

“.....Maybe so.”

I guess all my hard work did pay off.

“Lucky her,” she says quietly. Her grin broadens as she wipes away her tears with a handkerchief.

The expression really puts me at ease, so I smile, too.

“Oh, you’re smiling.”

“Huh? ...Yeah.”

“Cause you saw my tears? Um, you can lick them up if you want, you know?”

...What the—? This is getting weird here, okay?

“You have a tear fetish, right?”

“.....Did I tell you about that?”

“You did. Something about how licking up tears turns you on.”

I know I didn’t say that much! And hey, why’re you talking about turn-ons?! Did you decide to stop acting innocent?!

“A tear fetish is pretty kinky. ♥”

“Wh-why are you teasing me now, too?!”

“Huh? Well, you’re into girls who toy with you, right? Like Otonashi?”

“That is a *huge* misunderstanding! It really bugs me!”

“You can’t get aroused unless you’re acting like you don’t want it... It’s genuine...”

“Wh-what’re you saying?! This isn’t you, Yuri!”

“Hmph. I know that! I have to work harder and get better at teasing you!”

Where are these comebacks coming from?!

“It’s just...making you squirm is so fun...”

Man, this is going downhill fast!

“Ah-ha-ha. Oh, I’ll go ahead and tell you why I asked you to come here.”

“Huh? It wasn’t because you wanted to say thanks?”

The way Yuri shakes her head is cute. “I want to ask you for a favor.”

“A favor?”

“Yes. I’m still unstable, and I haven’t recovered at all. I’m going to be in trouble if you don’t keep coming to visit me in my room for a while. I’ll be a mess if you stop now that we’re on summer break, so I wanted to ask you ahead of time...”

“Uh... Sure. I will.”

“We’re going to talk about the game, of course, so come by yourself. You won’t bring Otonashi, will you?”

“.....Uh, okay?”

Something doesn’t seem right here.

“Oh yeah. Yesterday, my mom asked me about you. She wanted to know if the boy who stopped by all the time was my boyfriend.”

“.....And how did you answer?”

“I acted shy and giggled at her. Tee-hee.”

“She is *definitely* going to get the wrong idea!”

“I mean, I know that.”

“Whaaaaaa—?! Why are you acting like I’m Captain Obvious here?!”

She’s acting way out of character... Or maybe she’s just being more open, since I know how she was in the game...

“.....You’re pretty brazen, aren’t you, Yuri?”

“Eh-heh-heh, you’re only noticing that now? Just so you know, I’m not going

to give up so quickly, okay? Even if your feelings are for Otonashi."

"...Uh, you know, you did trick me quite a bit in the past. I'm not going to let you fool me so easily anymore."

"Ah-ha-ha, I guess I deserve that. But you see, if you know how calculating I am, I can work that to my advantage. Basically, everything I do is part of a concerted effort to seduce you, right?"

Yuri softly brushes my hand.

My heart leaps at the girl's touch.

"You got excited, even though you know my intentions, see?"

I hate to admit it, but it's true.

"I'll keep manipulating you like this."

She then brings her mouth close to my ear and whispers:

"I'll make you think my desperation is so cute."

My face turns red, just as Yuri intended. *Ngh... I really am easy.*

But with a rueful grin, I think, *If she's acting like this, Yuri will probably be fine.*

Yuri steps away from me and, blushing, goes down the stairs by herself.

"By the way, Iroha seems to be getting on well with that guy recently. That one she always had feelings for," she says as she descends.

"...Huh? How? She's not in great shape."

"That's exactly why. Look, she's at a weak point now, so she's leaving herself open in ways she wasn't before. It's cute."

Now that I think about it, Kamiuchi also said girls who don't need anything aren't attractive.

Yuri reaches the bottom of the stairs, then looks back at me.

"Um, I know I joked around quite a bit, but please do come to my place. I'll be waiting for you."

"Okay. You honestly had me scared there, but I'll come by. I do really worry about you, you know."

“Eh-heh-heh... Ah, I’ll make time for you whenever if you get in touch with me, but I have an important errand, so today doesn’t work. Sorry.”

“Hmm. What kind of errand?”

Yuri turns away from me again, still smiling. “I told you a minute ago that I haven’t talked to Iroha yet, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s true, but actually, I did text her. Just a bit before I met up with you.”

I’m surprised.

That must mean—

She turns back and says, “Today I promised to go out for a bit with someone important.”

With a carefree smile, she tells me exactly what I’ve been hoping to hear.

Yep... They definitely haven’t talked yet.



When I return to the classroom, hiding my glee behind a hand, I see that a crowd has gathered.

Their eyes are shiny and moist, but everyone is smiling.

What’s all this about? I think for just a moment.

—*Oh, right.*

I know immediately who’s in the middle of that crowd.

...If only Kokone hadn’t let it slip, the emotion could have hit me full force...

Cursing her in my mind, I work my way into the crowd. I see an unfamiliar metal frame and tires. And then— “—”

I take back what I said just now. I’m glad I found out beforehand.

If I saw her without any warning, I might have cried.

“Mogi...”

She’s here in the classroom wearing her school uniform.

Even though I see her all the time in the hospital, it's enough to make my voice tremble.

"Hoshino." Mogi spots me and smiles.

"Are you out now?"

"Of course not. They just gave me permission to go out for a bit. I still can't live normally on my own. I contacted the school and got permission to come by after school, and my mom brought me to the classroom. I can't do anything by myself," Mogi says, smiling so it won't sound like she's berating herself. "But I wanted to come see you at school, even if it meant inconveniencing everyone a bit."

When she hears this, Kokone smiles smugly and asks, "See who?"

Flustered, Mogi yelps, "A-all of you!"

It's enough to make everyone laugh.

"Come oooon! It's been so long, and here you all are teasing me... Oh, Hoshino, come closer so we can talk."

"She says 'Don't tease me,' but Kasumi sure isn't trying to conceal who she's got the hots for, is she?"

"Sh-shut it, Koko!"

At Mogi's request, I approach her. Feeling like I should say something, I comment, "...Pretty cool."

"Huh?"

"Your wheelchair."

"You're telling me what you think of my wheelchair at a time like this?! Shouldn't you be talking about how something else looks?!"

Mogi snapped at me...

Appearances, huh...? I take in the sight of her. Her cheeks flush a bit, perhaps because it makes her feel awkward being scrutinized like this.

Now that I think about it, her physique is almost back to normal.

“You’ve put on weight.”

“.....I know what you’re trying to say, but no girl likes to hear those words, Hoshino.”

Everyone laughs again.

“U-um, so what am I supposed to say...?”

“You’re asking me now...? Fine... Um, here, how about commenting on the clothes I’m wearing?”

“Oh yeah. I noticed.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m asking you how it is to see them after so long...”

It looks like she got a brand-new uniform, in mint condition. I get the feeling the skirt is much longer than it was before. My guess is that since she’s sitting in a wheelchair, if it’s too short, then...well...you can probably see a lot.

What should I say, though? I can’t just say, “Hey, it looks like you’re making sure no one can see your underwear.”

Yeah, let’s go with something safe.

“It’s cute.”

“Huh?”

Mogi’s eyes go round... Huh? That’s not quite the reaction I expected. Let’s try saying it one more time.

“Your uniform looks cute on you.”

Mogi blushes all the way to her ears.

On top of that, she can’t even look at me directly. She lowers her face and starts jabbing me.

Um...? Maria would probably just brush it off and go, *So what?* Kokone would puff out her (E cup) chest and go, *Of course I do!* and my older sister, Roo, would probably act like she didn’t hear me even though she’s the one who asked. So what’s up with Mogi’s reaction here? This is new.

Haruaki’s hand lands on my shoulder with a *thump*.

“I see—so this is how you do it.”

“Huh?”

“Did you hear that, everyone? Shamelessly saying such pretentious things is this man’s modus operandi! This natural-born womanizer used this method to corrupt Maria and the other women!”

Why’s he talking like that?

“Kazuki Hoshino’s lady-killing requires capital punishment! Now then, I sentence you to being gagged with socks that Kiri’s been wearing for three days straight! Capital punishment indeed!”

“What’re you calling capital punishment?!” Kokone fires back. “That’s totally a reward!”

“I’ve heard some have died from it. There’re also theories that Kokone’s three-day socks generate a toxic substance known as tri-kokone ethylene.”

“Oh, that’s not possible. See, I’ve had requests for help from NPOs because they can make vaccines that save children in Africa from my socks.”

I don’t even know what these two are talking about anymore.

But I feel my lips soften into a smile.

Though Mogi is in a wheelchair now, nothing has changed a bit from when she was in the classroom. As ever, she is well-liked, while Haruaki and Kokone are idiots.

It’s as if we’ve gone back to how things used to be.

“.....”

—Like we’ve gone back to how things used to be?

I can’t stop myself from looking around the classroom.

Back to how things used to be? Why should that even be possible?

It shouldn’t be.

No way, not when Daiya Oomine isn’t here with us.

I look at Kokone. She’s smiling with enjoyment.

That's when I notice.

I see it now.

Also absent...is Maria.

"...Hmm? What's the matter, Hoshino?"

What is this anxiety in my chest?

Daiya is one thing, but Maria probably just isn't here at the moment. She might have returned to her classroom or gone home before me because she would be uncomfortable here while we're reminiscing.

That's all. It has to be.

I know this, but the restlessness won't go away. It's actually getting worse. I feel a pressure mounting in my chest, like someone's squeezing my heart.

".....Mogi."

"Hmm?"

"Sorry, but I have to step out for a bit."

"Huh?" Mogi's eyes are round.

"What's up, Hosshi? Gotta take a dump?"

"No. It's just Maria—"

—I feel I have to go see her.

But I can't explain.

Because I saw Mogi.

I saw the gladness of her expression change into something different.

"...Mogi, I'm sorry."

".....Huh? Why are you apologizing? Um...you aren't going anywhere, are you?"

"Sorry."

".....Um... Well, I—I have to go back to the hospital soon, so I don't have much time. Will you stay with me until then? Will you?"

“...I will, if I can get back in time.”

Mogi’s eyes begin to tear up at the words she doesn’t want to hear.

“Why?” she pleads in a trembling voice. “Stay with me, okay? You can see Otonashi anytime, right? You won’t even see me off after I went through so much to come see you?”

Of course, I feel awful. I can see in Mogi’s expression and hear in her tone that she’s on the verge of tears.

Maria just isn’t here with us at the moment. I simply need to fight down my impulse to run to her. There’s no need to hurt Mogi so thoughtlessly.

Shouldn’t I stay here with her?

“—”

I made a decision, though.

I want to protect Maria, more than anything or anyone.

That’s why—

“Sorry!”

—I rush out of the classroom.

I don’t turn back at the voices calling for me to stop.



I can’t reach Maria on her phone.

Despite school rules, she commutes to school on a motorcycle, which she always parks nearby. But her bike is already gone from its usual spot.

Even though she always waits here for me if she has nothing else going on.

After confirming that her bike isn’t there, I run over to the station and get on the train.

Impatient at the knowledge that I can’t hurry any quicker, I come to understand the true nature of my anxiety.

I’m deceiving Maria. I’ve kept quiet about the Game of Indolence and lied by saying I didn’t know Koudai Kamiuchi.

And I haven't said a word about how O might have lost interest in me.

So even though I may not always be aware of it, a certain thought is always lurking in my mind.

Maybe Maria is going to disappear, possibly even at this very moment.

Seeing Mogi in her school uniform probably made it impossible to contain this anxiety.

When Mogi was in the classroom, Maria wasn't. She wasn't in my normal life. And that's not all. Just as I transformed Koudai Kamiuchi's Box into a catalyst for growth, Maria also changed Mogi's Box into something similar.

Maria and Mogi are inseparable.

So even though I have no evidence, I think:

When Mogi returns to the classroom, won't that mean Maria is already gone?

“.....”

Next, I think about Daiya and Kokone.

Daiya is gone. Yet, Kokone doesn't seem worried about him at all. Daiya certainly isn't a minor presence in her life, but his disappearance seems to have merely annoyed her. She acts like she hardly cares.

Why?

Here's my hypothesis.

—What if Kokone suspected Daiya would vanish someday?

I'm sure she probably didn't think he would do it like this, of course. I doubt she knows anything about Boxes.

But what if she knew he was going to leave her, at least? What if she knew Daiya's mission all along?

That would be why she's given up on the idea of his swift return. She's already prepared herself for Daiya's eventual departure.

I don't know what occurred between the two of them. It's a mistake to accuse Kokone of being cold for apparently accepting Daiya's disappearance so easily.

But I'm not the same as Kokone. Though I know Maria's objective, though I know she'll try to vanish someday, I will not give up.

I will never, ever allow her to leave me.

I arrive in front of Maria's apartment building.

As soon as I try to go in, I remember you can't even go through the front door of a building like this without a tenant with you. I can't even make it to the elevator.

What should I do?

I loiter for a bit in a panic. Drawing on what rational thought remains in my brain, I pull out my phone again.

After dialing the number from memory, I make the call. The phone rings. I pray *Please answer* with each ring.

And then—

“What's up?”

—Maria's voice.

“__”

Ahhh—

Though I just heard her voice a little while ago, even though it's as brusque as always, I can't even make myself give a response.

“Hey? What is this? A silent phone call? You didn't even hide your number.”

“N-no.” I can finally speak. “I'm out front at your place now, so can you let me in?”

“What? Fine by me, but...why didn't you call beforehand? Oh, you did. Sorry, I was on my bike, so I guess I didn't notice.”

“It's okay. Anyway, I'm on my way up, so buzz me in.”

“Okay.”

I end the call, and the door opens.

My legs carry me to the elevator of their own volition. My heart won't stop

racing—not while I wait for the elevator, and not while I’m on it.

When I reach the fourth floor, I find myself running to room 403, even though it’s not very far.

I ring the bell, then hear the click of the door unlocking.

Maria’s face peers through the crack.

That, at least, gives me a glimmer of hope.

Before the door can open fully, I push my way into the room, almost leaping on Maria.

“...What’s the matter, Kazuki?” Maria questions, her eyes round at my odd behavior.

“Maria... Why did you leave before me without saying anything?”

“...I left early because I’m not a fan of Mogi; you know that. Why is your face so pale? And why are you here so early, too? You don’t need to talk to Mogi anymore?”

“No, it’s fine.”

I tell her:

“You’re the most important person to me.”

Maria’s eyes open even wider—

—but then quickly narrow.

“I see.”

She then strokes my head gently.

“I swear... You’ve been different recently.”

Maria’s caught on to the changes in me a little bit.

“It’s all in your head.”

So I play it off as nothing.

As payback for Maria’s head pats, I run my fingers through her long hair.

The shy smile rising on her face still contains a hint of melancholy to me, and

yeah—it's frustrating.

AFTERWORD

(This will touch on the story, so be forewarned if you haven't finished the book yet.)

Hello, Eiji Mikage here.

This is the resolution of the Game of Indolence, the fourth volume of *HakoMari!* (I'm really starting to like that nickname).

I kind of assumed everyone would understand why it isn't "Vol. 3, Pt. 1" and "Vol. 3, Pt. 2" even though the books deal with the same Box, but what do you think?

Oh yeah, I have an apology to make. In the afterword of Volume 3, I wrote that this volume "should be out in the spring," but it was released in June. I'm truly sorry... I'll work harder.

Now then, I'd like to talk about the story a little bit.

As an author, I was a little surprised by something that happened during the writing of Volume 4.

The Classes in the final game were assigned in a way that fit the image of each character perfectly.

To be honest, it wasn't deliberate. I gave the characters their Classes in order to heighten the drama, so whether they suited the character's image was secondary.

And yet, things worked out that way.

It's possible this was no coincidence. Since I was thinking so much about the story, the things I couldn't see during the conceptual stage revealed themselves in the end.

It feels wonderful to go beyond your superficial comprehension in crafting a tale.

And now for the acknowledgments.

To the illustrator, Tetsuo: Thank you once again. It may sound like lukewarm flattery, since I say it every time, but I think it must be truly difficult to draw appealing images that fit my work so well.

To my new editor, Miki: Thank you for the keen pointers and assistance. I know I'm a difficult author who writes in a quirky way, but I look forward to working with you more in the future.

Now, as for my plans for upcoming work, there will most likely be a bit of a longer window than usual before Volume 5 comes out. I don't know if I can call it a replacement, but sometime in the summer, I'll be taking part in a certain project, so please pick it up and give it a look if you're so inclined. It won't bear the name Eiji Mikage for various reasons, but I think all of you who have read this series will know the book when you see it.

See you next time!

Eiji Mikage

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