





KAGEROU PROJECT

# **KAGEROU DAZE**

VOLUME 8: **SUMMER TIME RELOAD**

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATED BY SIDU



NEW YORK

## Copyright

KAGEROU DAZE, Volume 8

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by SIDU

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KAGEROU DAZE VIII -summer time reload-

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# CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Crying Prologue

Summertime Record side -No. 8-

Children Record side -No. 8-

Summertime Record side -No. 6-

Children Record side -No. 3- (2)

Summertime Record side -No. 2-

Children Record side -No. 9-

Summertime Record side -No. 2- (2)

Children Record side -No. 7-

Summertime Record side -No. 2- (3)

Summertime Record side -No. 9-

Summertime Record side -No. 2- (4)

Summertime Record side -No. 10-

Summertime Record side -No. 7-

Marie's Imaginary World

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

## CRYING PROLOGUE

...I've always had this aspiration.

Like, for my parents who loved me, the strangers who passed me by on the street, and even the people I wound up being friends with. There's always been this aspiration for them, deep inside my heart.

Kind of like the drive of someone who takes a girl suffering in the darkness and exposes her to the light again. Or someone who tosses a smile to a boy in some corner of the city, struggling under the unfairness of it all.

Or someone who guides a friend who's struck by despair, in the middle of an all-too-familiar story, and brings them closer to hope.

I always wanted to be a perfect little icon like that. I could do nothing but put up with the violence; I couldn't keep a safe place for myself; I cowered at the destinies people wove for me. And I wanted to change that.

Right. That was what I wanted to do.

Or it should have been.

But this aspiration was a curse.

That drive to become something became a panicked worry that I *had* to be something. I began to openly despise myself, this monster who couldn't live up to the aspiration. I turned my eyes away from the ugly being I had become, envying others, falling into this bottomless pit... It was that kind of curse.

Real monsters live at the bottom of that kind of darkness. Creatures that can't love anyone, aren't loved by anyone; things that just crave the unhappiness of others and the continuation of their own lives... It's aspiration that creates those monsters.

All this time, I've been hearing the voices of these monsters, dragging me in the opposite direction from my ideals, even as I reached out to those shining hopes of mine.

I kept living under the motto that I, of all people, would never wind up like them. Just continually reaching out, from within that inky black void, wearing the skin of a human being...

But I never noticed the light. Not until that hand I stretched out finally reached its desires.

I found something I needed to keep safe. I had been weak, but now I had power. And I was blessed with friends who said they needed me.

But no matter what I did, I couldn't find the courage not to run away.

And really, if I couldn't obtain that, it was all for the better.

When you take hold of an aspiration, all that waits on the other side is the desperate anxiety that you'll lose it, along with a bottomless sort of emptiness. You tremble at the thought of how fleeting the person you want to protect is. You're tormented by the heavy weight of being a friend.

Is aspiration a curse?

Is happiness poison?

Is hope a sin?

I didn't know anymore. I couldn't save her. I was already a monster.



## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 8-

*If I could have covered my eyes...*

Such was the silly thought that crossed my mind as I stared blankly at the gruesome landscape, “focusing” my viewpoint. Seeing a person, whom I had been joking with just this afternoon, spewing blood and falling to the ground. Seeing another, who looked out for that tiny little worry that I had, being shot by that bullet and lying still. Watching him transform like that and carry it all out, as if squashing a bug that had wandered into the room.

It was all there, as if projected onto a movie screen, and all I could do was just stand there blankly and watch.

If I could have spoken to him, should I have called out his name?

If I could have reached out to him, should I have punched him in the head?

If I could have been there...

...But I know. I understand, more painfully than anyone else, what I’m capable of.

I know I can’t do anything.

That must be why this ability chose me.

## CHILDREN RECORD SIDE -NO. 8-

The moment “focusing” was banished, I could feel the warmth fade from both of my eyes.

The vision I had, of that gloomy laboratory, switched to the sight of dark, bare concrete, as if it were slapped against my head. It was such an unusual experience for my body that, until my own vision returned to me, I didn’t even realize I was on my hands and knees.

My ability was shut off now, but the tragedy that had just unfolded in that room encompassed my mind, so realistic that I could practically smell it. Soon, I could no longer contain the nausea I had held back. I heaved out the contents of my stomach multiple times.

Just a few seconds ago, I had been using my ability to watch Shintaro’s team storm the enemy hideout to stop the evil plot being carried out by the “clearing eyes.” They went by the ridiculous name of the Mekakushi-dan, but at the very least, they treated me well. Now, they had been trampled, cruelly and mercilessly, and lay on the floor unmoving, like dolls.

The sight of these lifeless piles, fresh blood pooling around them, remained vivid in my mind. This was death, something shown to me countless times back in the Kagerou Daze. But those faint memories that darted through my head—memories of living together with them—refused to allow me to accept this death.

The dark colors of the afterlife began to infect my heart. I gritted my teeth, as if chewing away at this reality thrust before me.

*No. Don’t think about it. Don’t swallow it.*

*For now, at least, I can’t let this despair take me. I’ve got to stand up to it and figure out what I can do about it. That’s our job. The job of the living.*

I frantically ruminated over these soundless words in my heart—only to realize it was calming me. The fast beat, ready to make my chest explode; my

own heart, deeply disturbed and chaotic—it was all becoming tranquil, like a fever passing from my body.

I wasn't getting used to it. I wasn't forgetting about it. I was just withstanding it. And for now, that was fine. The one thing I couldn't do was let the sadness and regret shut my eyes to this.

As my ragged breathing soothed my esophagus, burned by all the stomach acid that had just coursed through it, I began to hear shouting from a throng of people.

I was on the roof of an abandoned building a few hundred yards away from the school, and it made the noise from the ground sound completely different. The sounds of people talking, if they made it up here at all, arrived only in small fragments. Most people would hear only white noise.

Still, I could tell that the great throngs that covered the ground outside were probably talking to each other about Momo Kisaragi. It was easy to imagine what it sounded like.

I took a deep breath and picked myself up. Then I rested my back against the metal fence that ringed the roof and looked down at where the noise was coming from. It was the middle of the night, yet the large path that extended from my vantage point was buried in a sea of people. It was like the source of a mighty river, the school serving as its mouth. It spilled out into the roadway beyond, snarling traffic.

It was a huge event, one that required little explanation—the fruits of Momo's diversionary tactics, carried out as part of the gang's infiltration. It was meant to grab the eyes and ears of the general public, and on that front, it was a massive success.

“Momo Kisaragi is there.”

That vague piece of information, all by itself, was enough to make all these people take action. Was this her ability at work, or was she engineering something else entirely? I couldn't tell, but no matter how you looked at it, it was far beyond the realm of common sense.

There's nothing like a departure from common sense to grab people's

curiosity. No matter how it turned out, there was no doubting that the day's events would be a climactic chapter in the history of Momo's life. Even if she quit her pop-idol career—no matter how she tried to explain the current situation—this event would be burned into everyone's memory.

But Momo was fine with that. No matter what kind of sin she had to bear as a result. Today, at this moment, she stood strong, so we could blaze a future for all of us.

Come to think of it, she was always like that. Ever since I met her. I was a total stranger to her, but she worried for me like she was personally involved. She unwaveringly swore she would help me, even.

She was a gullible idiot who recklessly dove into things. Hanging out with her was guaranteed to put you in danger. But she was the best. And because Momo was like that, I was able to fight for myself like this. She taught me what being a *friend* was like.

So there had to be something I could do for her.

I looked up at the starless night sky, which looked like someone had applied black paint to the space above me, and juxtaposed my own future with it in my mind.

*Is there anything left I can do? And if there is, can I pull it off?*

“...Ughhh, this sucks.”

The voice was a small, reluctant groan.

Looking to my side, I saw Takane Enomoto lying there, fighting with a hoodie that was much too big for her as she struggled to get up.

She and I were providing rear support, and thanks to the nature of our abilities, we were dangerously defenseless. Our similarities meant we were huddled together here, on the roof of this derelict building, not too far away from where the operation was unfolding.

Thanks to her “opening eyes,” her spirit had apparently been separated from her body for the past two years. It was a crazy story, one right out of movies or comic books, but I’d gotten used to things like that over the past few days.

Ene, her spirit, had returned to Enomoto, her body, just yesterday...meaning that she was back in the physical world for the first time in two years. I couldn't even imagine how excruciating that must feel to her. If I overdid it with my own skill, taking my vision and essentially tossing it away from my body for too long, it would exhaust me. But Enomoto must have felt a thousand times worse. Just thinking about it made me want to express my gratitude a little.

"...What? What're you looking at?"

*...She scares me.*

I mean, look at her. Her eyes are *scary*.

Back when she was Ene, she was always—you know—peppy. Not a word you hear much anymore, but it perfectly matched the insane, sugar-fueled impression she made. Now, back in her physical body, she looked like a drained middle-aged woman on the way home from work.

*I guess my dad was right. If a salesman smiles at you, it never means anything good.*

"Whewww," she muttered as she managed to get herself seated, looking at me with her eyes. "That wraps *that* up... So how's it going down there?"

My heart, calm up to now, began to weakly limp forward.

Ene's job in this mission was to undo the security in the enemy hideout, use the Internet to spread the word about Momo's impromptu live concert, harness the school's audio equipment to support her performance, and so on. A lot of stuff on her plate.

Thinking about that, she probably didn't grasp what the invasion force—in other words, Shintaro—was up to right now.

My role was to support the infiltration team, keep tabs on its situation, and report on it to the team members on the outside. If I wanted to carry that out, I'd have to tell Takane Enomoto everything about the disaster I had just witnessed.

I was careful not to let the emotion overcome my voice as I told her.

"...It's getting pretty bad."

Enomoto paused at the frank appraisal, then let out a soft, but still kind of long, sigh. Her eyes went up, toward the night sky.

“...Are they hurt?” she asked quietly.

I could easily tell what she meant by the question: “Are they *just* hurt? Did anything *worse* happen to them?” That kind of thing.

Struggling to find words to respond, I simply shook my head. I was hoping that’d be enough to get the message across to her. Kido was one thing, but Ene had spent hours upon hours hanging with Shintaro. I’m sure he was a vital friend to her.

And if that friend was now dead, even if she would find out about it sooner or later, I just found it too difficult to say it with my own lips.

But Enomoto kept staring at the sky, all but begging me to make it official. I found myself less and less able to stand the silence as it dragged on.

“...Shintaro and Kido are dead. I didn’t see what happened after that.”

More silence. The chaos down below seemed far away as my own pulse bubbled up to my ears.

After another pause, Enomoto spoke, her voice unaffected.

“...Did he keep himself together?”

The sight of Shintaro’s last moments flashed back into my mind.

There had been nothing “strong” about his personality. I was sure about that. But right there, at the very end, he didn’t whine about his fate one bit. He was a really nice guy. He didn’t deserve to die.

And the thought of that made it beyond what I could stand.

“He did. He had a gun pointed at him, but he didn’t run away.”

Large tears welled up in my eyes as I spoke. I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t do a thing. It was all so soul crushing, so cheerless, so hopeless.

“...Oh. He sure held out, didn’t he?” Enomoto let out a weak laugh.

It must have been even more soul crushing and sad and hopeless for her, but she didn’t shed a tear. I knew full well, almost painfully well, that it wasn’t

because of any heartlessness on her part.

The two of them were dead, and we were alive. And if we were alive, that meant we had to do something. But our powers weren't anything that could pummel our enemies into a pulp. If we mindlessly rushed them, we'd be killed before we could lay a finger upon them.

Enomoto and I understood that well enough. We understood it, but we still had to fight it out.

Marie and Kano were still in that room. I could only hope they made it out okay, but that might be a tall order. What was going on with Momo right now? She must have planned to regroup with Kido later, so she could hide herself after attracting all that attention.

*But Kido's gone now. Hopefully Seto can find a way to get her out of there.*

Our plan was falling apart, and as time wore on, it increasingly began to look like a lost cause. No—there was no chance this plan would work out; there hadn't been from the very start. It just wasn't that kind of battle.

*If we can't even reach our goals, it's fair to say this can't get any worse.*

*So...what? What can I do right now, at this moment? Think. What should I do...?*

"...Hey, um, do you play any video games?"

The question from Enomoto snapped my mind out of the swirl of self-doubt it had fallen into, dragging it back into reality.

...Video games? I mean, about as much as anyone else, I suppose. But why did she ask *that*? When every second counts? Thinking about it didn't generate any answers, so I just shrugged and said "A little."

She knew Shintaro was dead, but if anything, to my side, Enomoto looked refreshed. There wasn't a single trace of fear in her voice.

"Well, I'm totally addicted to them. Mainly because I couldn't make too many friends, I guess...but up until high school, I pretty much did nothing but play games."

She put her hands in the air and began batting her thumbs around, working

an invisible controller. I still wasn't grasping the point. She was starting to irritate me, but I just nodded at her, prompting her to continue.

"So my teachers and my grandma kept getting pissed off at me about that, you know? They were all like, 'You only live once, y'know! You can't let those games hook ya! Back in *my* day,' blah blah blah."

I gave her a look. It sounded like either her teachers or her grandmother were straight out of the mid-twentieth century.

"Oh," she bashfully added, "I kind of exaggerated that. But you know."

"Ah," I replied, unsure how to respond.

"But I was always thinking: Games are a lot more fun than real life, you know? You've only got one life to live, but with video games, you can continue as many times as you want after you die. Like, if you think about how you've only got this one chance, it paralyzes you, right? You're too scared to do anything. And even when you lose or die in a game, it still makes you a better player, the more you do it. It's like that 'ooh, just one more game' feeling. That's what makes them fun. It makes you stronger at them."

Enomoto turned to me. The smile she constructed on her face had the unmistakable look of grief upon it.

"You know, you remind me a lot of him, way back when. You're just smart enough that you keep moping around, worrying too much about the future. Like, you're carrying all this weight you don't have to carry."

She must have been talking about Shintaro. This appraisal didn't ring true to me at first, but—as much as I hated to admit it—she was right. Thinking about our future right now made my mind numb.

"...If you mess it up, then just try it one more time. That's the way you gotta approach this, or else you won't get anywhere. Besides..."

"...I died once, and I'm still here."

She reached over to tousle my hair. I could have yelled "Quit it" and pushed her aside, but I guess I didn't want her to get a look at my face. She was admonishing me, but I was sure she was just trying to tell herself the same

thing.

“If you mess it up, then just try it one more time”? It was so stupidly optimistic, so uncaring of the consequences, so irresponsible. But somehow, the words wriggled themselves deeply into my heart.

Satisfied with the job she had done on my hairdo, Enomoto pulled her hand back and stretched out. “Well,” she almost whispered, “I think I’ll go give it a shot, too.”

Something in me had figured she would say that. I took a deep breath, eyes turned downward, preparing for the worst, then turned back toward Enomoto.

“I’ll go, too”...is what I *meant* to say, of course. But before I could find the words, the events unfolding before me took me wholly aback.

Before my eyes, there was a huge screen in the darkness, shining in a dazzling array of colors. Looking to my side, I saw Enomoto sprawled out unconscious, her cell phone thrust toward me. And before I could even marvel at all this, a boundlessly bright voice boomed from the phone’s tiny speaker. Its tone was completely different from the sluggish one of a moment ago, but it was definitely the same voice that had just spurred me into action.

*“All riiight! So now that we got that sor! ted! out! it’s time for me! Ene! your ever-humble servant! to go sallying forth into enemy territory! I’ll have to leave you for a little bit... Yeah, I’m sure the thought makes you wanna cryyy and stuff! But you know, kid, this is a little thing I like to call star ✰ crossed ✰ love...! A forbidden fruit that will never have the chance to grow! For now, you’ll just have to bottle up those feelings in your heart and save them for the day true romance comes hopping along. Yes, I am positive you’ll find someone who’s just perfect for you before— Ahhhh! Wait! Hear me out to the end! Don’t throw me away!”*

I grabbed the phone from Enomoto and was just about to throw it out into the nightscape before I snapped out of it. I must have been brainwashed into the idea or something. She might be a pain in the neck, but—for better or for worse—this Ene was one of us. As hard as it was to believe, she really was the spirit, or something, of Enomoto, who was sleeping before me.

Repressing my feelings of irritation, I reluctantly focused back down on the phone. Ene’s cheeks were puffed way out in rage.

*“Ugh! I was just trying to take your mind off the heavy stuff for a few moments! Get with the program! You’re never gonna hit it off with the opposite sex if you act like that all the time!”*

*This is awful. She’d laugh at a funeral.*

*“So listen! I got some serious stuff to say now!”*

*You weren’t being serious before?*

Ene brought her face right up to the screen, one index finger stretching out from her floppy sleeve. She didn’t look all that serious to me, but I decided to take her at her word.

*“I want you to take this phone with you! And don’t you daaaaare leave it anywhere!”*

*Leave it? This is Momo’s phone. What gives you the right to say what happens to it?*

*“And,” she continued at breakneck speed, “if you can make it out of ‘today’...I want you to hold down the bottom button and say ‘Big Bro!’ as loud as you can. All right? That’s your mission.”*

*“...Huh?”*

Ene still had that same kind of jokey attitude as she spoke, but something told me she wasn’t screwing around with me. *What kind of crazy “mission” is that, though? Why’s she springing this on me now, of all times? If there were something I needed to do right now, Shintaro would have told me about it in advance.*

*“All right,” Ene whispered to herself as I pondered her words. Then she turned around on her heels, or whatever she had in her cyber-world.*

*“That,” she said, her back turned to me, “was all he asked me to tell you. But if you want to know my own personal take...you two are really exactly the same. I know there’s been a lot of stuff, with our abilities and trust issues and so on...but I think my master chose you because you reminded him of himself a lot.”*

*“Wha...? That doesn’t make any sense! I-I’m going, too! Okay?!”*

Ene didn't answer me, simply turning around a little to show me a smile. Then she whizzed away into the horizon on the far end of the screen.

Left alone, I was soon greeted by the loud droning of a helicopter passing above my head. *If it's the media, they're a little late covering all this furor. I mean, Momo's not even here anymore.*

The phone now showed the picture of the Mekakushi-dan that Momo was using for her lock screen. It wasn't really a flattering pic, but we were all looking right at the camera, enjoying ourselves.

And then I realized something all over again. We were probably all friends. People who were irreplaceable to each other. And now I probably wouldn't get to see them again.

So I just stood there, battered by waves of frustration, of loneliness, and of a kindness that was far too large for me to withstand.

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 6-

If anyone ever asks me what I think about this journey, I'll probably say "None of us knew a thing about it." I think I heard someone say something similar about it once, but I won't let that bother me. It's not like anyone's going to ask anyway.

Calling it a "journey" might be exaggerating things a little, but it seems like the perfect word to me. I lost my body, I lost my friend—and then I woke up in this world where I only exist as a consciousness.

I've spent two years like this. Flying around this virtual world, as if fleeing from something. I wound up over on his computer to hide from it all.

And yet now I am here. To face it all down.

Looking back, I think my life's been pretty awful from start to finish, but all these things that happened to me—and the pain they brought—made me feel I was still alive, whether I had my body or not.

I don't mean to sound like I'm thankful for it, but I'm pretty sure that I don't hate my life or anything. It's been an adventure, one I was completely unprepared for. Nothing ever went right. I was scared, I stumbled around, but I still managed to fly all the way here.

Once this battle is over, maybe I should write it all out on my favorite web forum. Then, when people start commenting about how made-up it sounds, we can all gather around the screen and laugh at it.

I fly on, soundlessly, through a world the color of green rust. All I can tell—and I don't know how I know this, but I do—is that there's no turning back from where I am.

I recall the events that led me here, the situations I shall never again return to:

The first time I fell in love, and found myself unable to express my feelings.

The time I realized someone I hated was actually a pretty cool guy.

The moment I realized that I was almost astonishingly incapable of doing anything.

That, and the fact that someone like me still had people who called her their friend.

I'll likely wind up losing something again.

But up ahead here, I'm bound to obtain something else.

No, I have absolutely no regrets for this awful, yet wonderful, life.

No matter what kind of ending's waiting for me.

## CHILDREN RECORD SIDE -NO. 3- (2)

*Even when everybody's gone, I'm never going to cry. We can cry once we see each other again.*

We had made that promise, and so I thought I was prepared for whatever might happen.

*But...I'm sorry. This is just so hard.*

This is the third time my family's disappeared before my eyes. Really, what kind of unlucky star did I need to be born under to have all these terrible things happen to me? You hear people proclaim there's no God a lot, but if there really weren't, maybe I wouldn't have had to go through this crazy life of mine.

I don't think God doesn't exist. There's some god out there, probably with a really evil personality, constantly hovering over all of us. Or something.

Whenever something bad happened to me, I'd play out these silly thoughts in my mind over and over again. It's not like having a god around would change anything. I was aware of that much. But for some reason, I couldn't shake the desire to see God for myself someday, to see what he's like.

*...Ah, but that might be part of the reason, too.*

*"Maybe she's him. Right in front of me."*

I couldn't be blamed for the thought. Not with the divine, almost overwhelming presence Marie was now projecting to me.

It all happened just a little bit ago.

Shintaro's "operation"—not exactly the most detailed of plans, conceived overnight, but still almost too well devised—had ended largely as planned. We would use Marie's power to halt our enemy—the "clearing" snake that had taken my father for itself—and capture it there. The process leading to that was carried out all but perfectly.

Things rapidly began to change after that single moment. The dark shadow

that appeared in the center of the dimly lit laboratory killed two of my friends in the blink of an eye. The “clearing eyes” snake that jumped into my father’s body had, out of nowhere, jumped into Konoha’s.

Konoha’s ability was called “awakening eyes,” something that powered up the body it possessed in one way or another. He must have never expected the “clearing” snake to ever take him over.

Its vulgar, ridiculing laugh echoed across the room. I think I could hear Marie screaming in the midst of it, but by that time, all I could do was just stand there, faced with the tragedy in front of me. His incredibly powerful body, the incredibly cruel things in his mind... It was, in a word, the worst.

But by the time I realized that, the smiling face of Konoha, already twisted in a sinister sneer, was coming closer to me. I was lifted up by the throat, which forced my eyes shut, not even able to gasp for breath...and that’s when it happened.

I cringed at the voice that reached my ears.

*“...Bring it on, Kagerou Daze!”*

For a moment, I didn’t realize it was Marie’s voice.

Marie wasn’t afraid to act angry at us whenever we went overboard with picking on her. I should know—I was the one who picked on her the most. I was probably the one out of us who had seen her angry the most times. But the sheer rage behind those words when Marie spoke them was on a whole ’nother level.

At that very moment, the “clearing eyes” stopped moving on the spot. It was for just an instant or two, but the expression on the snake’s face seemed like one of pure terror to me.

Then, ripping through the frozen air in the room, a gigantic mouth, pure black in color, appeared. It was like every single ominous, eerie sight in the world compressed into a single thing, and it immediately snatched up Shintaro’s and Kido’s bodies, ferrying them off to parts unknown.

I don’t know whether it was the devastating impact of the sight or of the face that belonged to the fingers still clutched around my throat, but that was the

last thing I saw before I lost consciousness.

...I couldn't say how much time passed after that. Within the perfectly silent darkness, I awoke—only to find *her* in front of me, taking the form of Marie. Countless scales covered her cheeks, and her faintly glowing eyes featured large, slitted, dark-red pupils. Her formerly long, cottony hair was shorter now, and her bright, cheerful, still-childish face had an expression that made her seem like someone completely different.

Her sneer was aimed squarely at a figure that looked like Konoha, but done up completely in black. He was standing bolt upright, just as my father had been when Marie froze him just before. But while they looked the same, the circumstances were completely different from the situation with my father. The Konoha figure kept gazing forward, his face blank, as if he was peering right into the depths of despair. Marie's power, as I understood it, didn't make people do *that*.

Maybe it was instinct saying it to me, but if she could make the “clearing eyes” inside Konoha react like that, she had to be something beyond a mere human being. Someone who looked like Marie, but wasn't. I recalled the word “Medusa,” and it made me gasp.

She turned to me, perhaps hearing my racing heartbeat, then wordlessly turned her feet in my direction. Her expression, glaring down at me, slowly advanced closer and closer. Once we were practically face-to-face, she crouched down and pointed at her own chest, speaking to me with her familiar voice.

“...Is this girl family to you?”

That wasn't how Marie spoke. I hesitated for a moment, but judging by the question, it didn't sound like she was trying to scare me into submission. I opened my mouth, attempting to answer, but I wasn't sure what I should say. “This girl” meant Marie, I assumed—but if so, I wasn't sure “family” was the right way to put it. Saying yes seemed a little difficult to me. Calling her a “companion” or “teammate” would be painting our relationship with too broad a brush. “Friend,” maybe? I wasn't exactly sure. I wasn't ready to do away with the “family” appellation entirely, however.

As I agonized over this, she let out a soft grunt and opened her mouth once more.

“Are you her husband, perhaps?”

.....

“No!!” I immediately replied. Not that I found the idea disgusting or anything, but I didn’t want any misunderstandings.

The girl blinked at me, perhaps surprised at the volume of my hurried voice. Then she took a deep breath and chuckled a few times.

“Ah, so you *can* talk? You just had your mouth hanging open, so I thought that was how you communicated with people.”

She heaved a sigh of relief—all was well with her. The stern look on her face was gone now, and it even felt as if her body was a little smaller.

But her manner of speech was still nothing at all like Marie’s. As fluent as she was, I doubted this was just Marie falling into a different speech pattern out of all this chaos. And that left few possibilities. Some kind of trigger must have replaced Marie’s personality with *hers*. Or someone else’s. Who was to say if it was even a girl?

“...Um, who are you?” I bluntly asked.

She blinked at me again. It must have been a nervous habit of hers. It felt like she was carefully observing every word I spoke, every move I made. I thought she was doing that to avoid revealing herself, but then she spoke again, not interested in hiding the truth.

“My name is Azami.”

When I heard that name, the theory in my mind became proven fact. Azami, the Medusa who had written the diary Shintaro found in the house where Marie’s family had lived, was now possessing Marie’s body.

“I am the mother of Marie’s mother.”

“Oh... I see...”

How awfully forthcoming of her to say. By the looks of things, she might be a

much more approachable woman than I pictured from the stories.

Now I had a grasp of the situation. If I was willing to believe Azami, she had jumped into Marie's body just as "clearing" had jumped into Konoha's. That would explain why she had the power to neutralize "clearing" like that; she was, after all, the origin of all the abilities that had been given to us. We were just borrowing those powers for our own use, but she could harness all of them much more directly, and powerfully.

It was kind of like we were a bunch of children fighting in the playground, and now there was a grown-up on the scene.

Yep. Made sense.

Talk about a real crappy story.

"Why... Why now?"

The words fell from my lips. With them, a torrent of memories ran through my mind, making my voice quiver.

"You're way too late showing up, man! How many people you think have died already?! If you had been here...been here earlier, to help us..."

I couldn't have said exactly what I meant by "earlier." Maybe back when that robber attacked my mother, or when my father was caught in that landslide, or when my sister ended her own life. Those were all possibilities, but they probably weren't what I meant. What I said, I said with the meaning "I wish you could've been here before Kido had to die, at least."

But I told her nothing else. The feelings of helplessness kept me from expressing any more of my fury. Instead, the tears welling in the corners of my eyes did the talking.

"Ah...ooh..."

Azami softly, weakly whimpered at my words, bewildered eyes staring into space. I'll bet she was confused. I knew very little about Azami overall, but she was a victim of the "clearing" snake's scheme, too. Having someone chew them out like this out of nowhere would perplex anybody.

Simply having her here now, to lend a hand, was a blessing. I knew I was being

unfair as I attacked her, and I didn't really think what I said to her was right. But I still just couldn't stand it. We were being victimized, trampled, and thinking about the helplessness of all the people who had been swallowed up just made me want to lash out. Anybody would do.

"I—I am sorry. I couldn't even imagine the pain you've all had to go through. But...as much as I wanted to help you, I couldn't."

Azami kept her eyes down, like an innocent child, as she warbled out the words. They didn't feel like an excuse, and I had no proof that any of it was a lie.

"...So why are you here now? At least tell me that."

Azami shuddered for a moment. "My body and my spirit," she half whispered, "were at the end of their rope once I lost my abilities. Right now, I, speaking to you through her body like this, am just a memory."

"A memory?"

"Yes. I had the memories of my life transported into the mind of my granddaughter from the other world. I only wish I could have done so sooner..."

She pointed at her temple, probably referring to Marie.

"This girl's 'locking eyes' have the power to take over the Kagerou Daze. Until she uses them, I can't intervene in this world from where I am."

She'd sent her memories into Marie's mind?

Certainly, I suppose, we're all kind of defined by our memories. If a baby's raised in an English-speaking country, they'll know how to speak English; if they're raised in the jungle, they'll probably learn a lot of hunting skills. Our memories are our personality, the most core aspect of our life experience.

*So does that mean the memories of Azami and her life are burned into Marie's mind now? If so, that would explain why Marie is speaking as Azami would...*

But there was something else that mystified me about this.

..."Kagerou Daze."

The exact same term that Marie had shouted a moment earlier.

*When that thing appeared and swallowed up Shintaro and Kido just now,*

*Azami's memories must have flown in here with it.*

But that sounded so strange to me.

Azami claimed that Marie had the ability to control the Kagerou Daze, but Marie herself had never breathed a word of that to us. She might have been hiding it, perhaps, but it'd make more sense to assume she never knew in the first place.

Would that even be possible for Marie? To fully accept her Medusa side and call the name of the Kagerou Daze like that?

As I thought this over, Azami suddenly lowered her eyebrows. "...It's all thanks to Tsubomi," she whispered.

The unexpected name from her lips made my eyes shoot open. She didn't appear to notice.

"Before, when Tsubomi came from my world to this one, I asked her to deliver a message for me. I said that should she ever encounter my granddaughter, tell her to call for the Kagerou Daze for me. The 'concealing' in Tsubomi is attracted to the 'locking' within this girl. I figured they would run into each other sometime, and she would relay the message without fail."

Azami's voice wavered a bit at the end. Her expression seemed all too human for a so-called Medusa monster.

"I was so weak spirited," she squeaked out. "But she carried out my ridiculous request. She was such a good girl, but...but I wasn't in time. Nothing could possibly be more frustrating."

Her tears ran down the scales that had appeared on Marie's cheeks. The soft sobs she let out made it impossible for me to ask her any more questions.

To be honest, there was a lot I found fishy about Azami's story.

Why hadn't Kido said a single thing about the Kagerou Daze until now? And why had she been able to relay that message to Marie here, in this building? I couldn't lie—I wanted some answers. But trying to get it out of her in detail right now? I wasn't sure it'd be worth the time and effort. You can't change the past. Knowing the meaning behind it all wouldn't do much apart from assuaging

my own feelings of helplessness.

But Azami's tears absolutely convinced me of one thing.

...Apparently Kido wound up saving my life just now.

I let out a sigh and covered my face with both hands. I felt like there was no place left for me to go, and that feeling made my stomach churn.

Why? How come? And what now...?

For better or worse, none of the feelings that ebbed and flowed within me formed words in my exhausted mind.

"You were friends with Tsubomi?" Azami asked, a more cautious tone in her voice. She must have picked up on my feelings. And hadn't she asked me a similar question earlier? She'd asked whether Marie was my family. I didn't see any need to apologize for not answering that, but I opened my mouth anyway.

"Yeah...pretty much. We've been together since we were both little. She was really stubborn and awkward...but I liked her. I liked her a lot."

It was a blunt way of putting it, I thought. But I wanted to express exactly what was on my mind. Hearing it, Azami gave me a short nod, said "I see," and sniffled a little. I turned my face up, finding this odd, and saw that she was now quivering from head to toe, the tears larger than ever.

"It—it must be so sad for you. Being separated from someone you spent so much time with is painful. Like a burn extending across your entire body. *Ngh...* *ugh...* I don't even know what to say..."

*Huh. Like...she really is human, isn't she? Showing so much empathy for someone she only met a moment ago... You don't see that very often.* The term "Medusa" seemed less and less appropriate for her by the moment.

The snake eyes letting out that well of tears bore the color of pain, like the blood in my own veins. A repugnant color, the color of constant torment.

I wasn't willing to accept everything Azami told me at face value, of course. But I had good reason to—a small detail, but an important one. We were derided as monsters; we were reviled, shunned, and it made us feel so lifeless—and she understood all of that. No way I could hate someone with that kind of

eyes.

*...I'm pretty sure that's how Kido would put it. Let's try emulating that a bit.*

"Well, that's how it wound up. Kido did everything she could for us. It's gonna be really lonely without her, but if she's let me keep on living, I can't sit here and cry forever."

I stood up. About half of what I'd said was my own true feelings. But there were some lies in the rest of it. I had to stay confident and keep going forward before those lies melted from my mind.

"Thanks for talking to me about this, Ms. Azami. So what should we do now?"

"Azami," she curtly replied, after one more convulsion of sobs. "The 'Ms.' part is unnecessary."

"Oh. Um... Is that important?"

"Of course it is. It's my most precious of names...one given to me long ago."

*...Yeah, I'll bet it's important. How human of her. Really.*

"All right," I replied. Then I turned back toward "clearing," housed inside Konoha.

It was still standing there, no different at all from before, and with the expression it was making, it was a pretty freaky sight to see. There was no light in its glassy eyes, as if the soul had been plucked right out of it. I couldn't sense even a shred of emotion on the face.

With things as they were, an impartial observer might think this battle was already over. But this couldn't be all. Not yet.

For one, we couldn't just leave Konoha like that—not when his body had been taken over that way. There was no telling when it might start moving again, and striking at us.

That's why we needed something that addressed the root cause of this. Some way of taking down "clearing." We hadn't been able to do it before, but we had to now.

"With my granddaughter's power," Azami went on as I thought this over, "I

imagine we can only immobilize him for a few minutes at most. So I took advantage of ‘concealing’...of Tsubomi’s power.”

The revelation made me ache inside. No matter how much I intellectually understood it, this was a reality that I still had trouble freely accepting.

Azami gave me a look, perhaps because I hadn’t given her any response. I mentally shook off the cobwebs and reconsidered her words. *What does she mean, she used “concealing”?* Kido had had the ability to thin out her existence, unchaining it from reality to the point of becoming invisible.

“Um, it doesn’t look like his body’s fading away or anything... How did you use it?”

“His body? ...Ah. Well, fading out of notice is only one way to use ‘concealing.’ It’s actually pretty simple.”

She pointed at “clearing,” then ran her finger around in a circle, tracing the area around where he stood.

“I relieved him of every sense he has that picks up on stimuli in this world. He is no longer capable of recognizing sound, light, even his own heartbeat. It is like I have thrown him into a completely darkened world. I doubt he could even figure out how to move his body anymore.”

I shivered a little. It sounded almost coldhearted, the way she put it. Her expression, as she stared “clearing” down, had none of the caution or reserve she’d shown to me earlier.

Robbing someone of all their senses went far beyond the realm of reality. This wasn’t just a matter of mastering a special skill or whatever. Once again, I realized that this woman in front of me was a true-blue Medusa, a monster to be feared.

“But,” she added as she walked toward “clearing,” “all this does is buy us some time. It won’t last for long.” I hurried over to join her, and once we were in front of “clearing,” Azami peered intently at him, studying each detail. Then she let out a deep sigh.

“I knew it. He’s recomposing his body, little by little... Using ‘awakening,’ probably, to build a body that my powers can’t affect. I know he has full

knowledge of my abilities, so I shouldn't have expected anything less, but..."

"So what does that mean?"

Azami frowned, a cold sweat appearing on her forehead. "Not much longer from now, he'll have a body that will be impervious to this approach for the rest of time. Then he'll start taking action again."

The fresh memory of my throat being half-crushed in his hand flashed back to me. That evil smile on Konoha's face, so different from his usual soft expression. Just recalling it made me shudder, as if I'd lose it and faint on the spot.

"Uh, that, that's really bad, right?! We can barely take him as it is... What're we supposed to do now?!"

"W-wait, wait! Calm down!" She frantically shook her arms in the air, then crossed them, her breathing still ragged. "You should know that I expected something like this to happen! I haven't been sitting in that other world twiddling my thumbs the whole time. Naturally, I've been thinking of measures to take."

*Hmm. That makes sense, actually.*

"Clearing" had been one of Azami's original abilities. Unless the enemy had some surprise attack or other trick up its sleeve, Azami's Medusa powers had to give her a decisive advantage.

I began to feel more than a little embarrassed for carrying on so viscerally at what was basically just a scary story. Azami seemed pretty confident in herself.

*Let's leave it to her and see what happens.*

"Just watch me," she said, and I watched expectantly.

Thrusting both hands out toward "clearing," she quietly closed her eyes. "No matter how much knowledge it has, no matter how powerful the body, it is still nothing more than an *ability*. One that lives under the rule of 'combining.' All I have to do is drag it out and make it bend to my will...!"

Her eyes still closed, Azami broke into a low, deep murmur. It seemed to fill the air with a rarefied, almost divine feel.

*Is this it? The final curtain on our long battle? I've been through a lot—lost my*

*family, lost my friends. Even when this ends, it won't bring back what I've lost.*

But the things that Shintaro, Kido, and my big sister had tried to keep safe remained out of our enemy's hands. That fact alone felt like salvation to me.

*I'll have to thank Azami for this later, too. If it weren't for her, I'd probably be...*

“...Huh?”

The tone of Azami's voice hadn't sounded too rosy to me just then, but I was sure it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I was pretty sure she *had* said “Huh?” though.

Azami had her eyes shut tightly, applying a fair amount of mental force to something. She talked about “dragging out” “clearing” just now, but by the looks of things, it wasn't that easy a process.

*Well, hang in there, Azami. This isn't really a win-lose kind of thing, but I really hope you won't lose this for me.*

She kept grunting in that low voice of hers.

*...Um, is she really all right, or what? That sounds like it's pretty physically demanding. You okay, Azami? Hang on—did she just give Konoha's face a weird look? Like, “What the hell, why isn't it out yet,” that kind of look?*

*You okay over there? Didn't you just say that you weren't twiddling your thumbs over in the other world? Why're you looking like you're about to cry? Come on, Azami, seriously...*

“...It—it's no use.”

By the time Azami turned around, her face was white as a sheet. Gone was the solemn majesty of her Medusa side. And I suppose my face looked much the same. The room was wrapped in gloomy silence, the air heavy and moist... and then that silence was broken.

“Wait, what?! Wait a second! I thought you were, like, totally confident just now! You said it was just another ability or whatever! What went wrong?!”

“Shuuu-shut up! How should I know?! I did everything I could! I don't know why, but it's just not listening to me, and...I just don't know. It's no use.”

“What do you mean, ‘It’s no use’?! I was expecting a lot more than that from you! Now what’re we gonna do? Huh?!”

“What?! Look, I’m trying my best here! You don’t have to speak to me in that tone of voice! If you think you can do better, go right ahead! Let’s see it!”

“Are you kidding me?! You know I can’t do anything like that! What the hell did you even come here for?!”

We wasted our breath on this pointless bickering for a little while longer. But suddenly, with a loud bang, the laboratory door flew open.

“Aaaaaahhh!!”

I jumped into the air, spooked by this sudden noise from an unexpected direction. So did Azami. She flew up even higher than I did.

“Are you all right, guys? Did it work out okay?! Um... Whoa, Marie, is that a new look for you?”

It was Momo Kisaragi there, half out of breath at the doorway. The sight of the possessed Marie made her raise an eyebrow in confusion. Looking at the reptilian scales covering her cheeks and calling it a “new look” was a pretty serious stretch, I thought—and *that* was the first thing she said when she zoomed in here? That was typical Kisaragi, that was for sure.

But if *she* was here, that meant *he* should be here, too...

I turned my eyes beyond the door and spotted a larger-framed figure wobbling up to it.

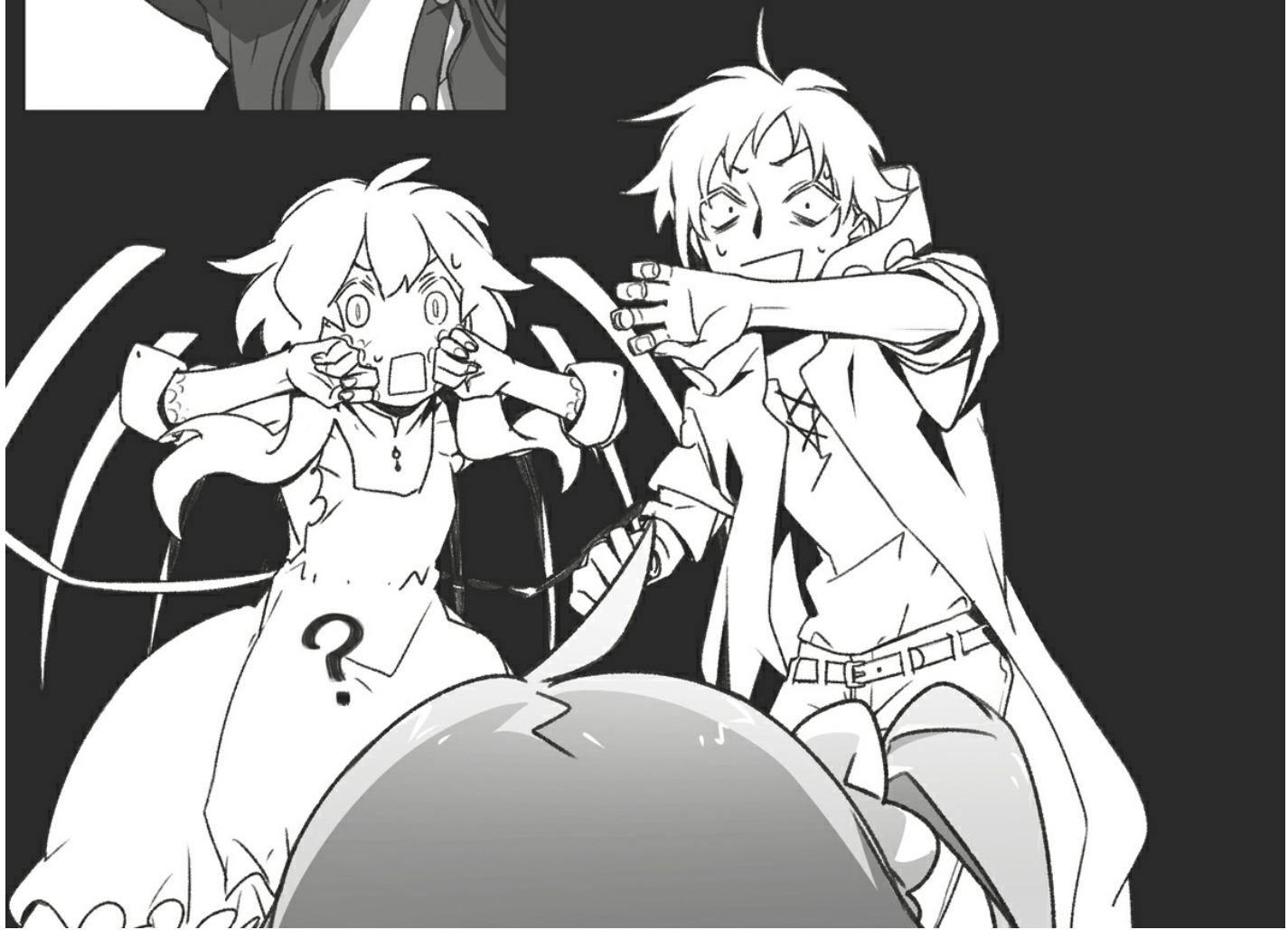
“Y-you, you’re...going too far ahead, Kisaragi...*Huff...huff...*”

Seto, breathing hard, just barely managed to wheeze his words out, as if just completing a marathon.

Kisaragi was supposed to meet back up with us after her little diversion. If Seto was with her, that meant things must’ve largely gone as planned.

Seto’s role here, to put it simply, was to be Kisaragi’s bodyguard. He’d seek out any unfamiliar “voices” that could indicate enemy reinforcements in the area and make sure she was kept far away from any foes. He was a kind of sonar, in other words. I didn’t think he’d be too enthusiastic about it, given how

it meant he'd have to use his ability a whole bunch. But he just said "I'll take care of it," all bold and confident, which was a surprise.



Of course, looking at how out of breath he was right now, he must've used and abused that ability a lot.

"Oh, Seto..." Kisaragi bowed her head in apology. "Sorry I went so far ahead. I didn't realize you were so, you know, slow, so..."

"Sorry," Seto replied with a weak smile, eyes turned downward. I figure Kisaragi could've put it in any number of better ways, but she had a point. Seto was brawny, but not exactly quick on his feet. And so here was Kisaragi, of course, leaving her bodyguard in the dust. What a tour de force.

Of course, her ability *was* pretty decently strong, so if she decided to *really* bust it out, I doubt she'd have much trouble taking out one or two enemies at a time.

"So, Kano, um..." She swiveled her head around and gave me another confused look. "What am I looking at here?"

Hmm. She must've noticed that Shintaro and Kido were missing. The realization made me feel like ice-cold water was being pumped into my stomach. I had tasted real despair a moment ago, and now it was Kisaragi's turn.

While I failed to find it in myself to answer Kisaragi's question, Azami suddenly began tugging at my shirt.

"Is this your friend, boy?"

There was a fair amount of distance between us and Kisaragi still. "Yeah," I whispered into her ear, making sure the newcomer couldn't hear me. "She's part of our team. The younger sister of the guy the Kagerou Daze just took in."

Azami groaned. I remembered how vividly she'd responded to my earlier confession. With everything I'd told her, I'm sure she could understand why I was hemming and hawing right now. But that's how things were. We couldn't hide the fates of those two, or Konoha, from her forever. If "clearing" started wreaking havoc with us again, it was game over for sure. Everyone living and breathing in this room would be reduced to a pile of lifeless flesh in the blink of an eye.

But how should I put it to her?

*What if I mess this up and they both lose all will to keep fighting? Or, for that matter, what if they're too frozen in place to run, if the circumstances call for it?*

Before I could even begin to think about it, Azami pushed on ahead of me.

“Your brother...has been swallowed into the Kagerou Daze. So was Tsubomi. They fought courageously here, and then they died.”

My heart skipped a beat at the all-too-sudden announcement.

“Y-you stupid...!”

There had to have been a better way to report the news. But Azami just stood there, firm, and her presence was enough to silence me.

Kisaragi’s face tensed up. She uttered a few syllables, like “huh” or “ah” or whatever. Seto looked pretty shell-shocked, too, shivering a little before easing up and lowering his eyes again. The reactions pained me so much that I averted my own.

Now they knew. All about this new reality that we were all helpless to do anything about. I began to wonder how much time they’d need to fully face up to it. Or was there any point in even trying? Would they be able to stand it?

Despite my worrying, however, the silence didn’t last long.

“Oh...right. I see, I see...”

She pushed out the syllables, doing what she could to hold back the onrush of emotion.

“I know this must be beyond your strength to handle,” Azami replied, now carefully choosing her words. “But if we do nothing here, their sacrifices will all go to waste. We have yet to solve anything here. So...”

Before she could finish, another voice spoke over her.

“...I understand. Is there anything I can do?”

I looked up. Ahead of me, Kisaragi wasn’t betraying a single iota of hesitation. Her mind was numb, but she was baring it for the world to see, as if the sun itself were illuminating it.

As far as I could remember, I had seen two other people make that face. One was on that unforgettable day when my big sister made her resolve clear, up on the roof in the evening. The other was when this girl's own brother made that face as he went in ahead of us. Kisaragi was trying to take on her brother's mission—and witnessing that, Seto gave a silent nod of his own, although his eyes were a little watery.

After looking at one, then the other, Azami turned back to my own face, all but asking what I wanted to do... I felt like I was going crazy. Tortured by all these unfair events, faced with utter despair time and time again...but none of us were willing to give up. I suppose the resolve from every team member was stronger than I gave them credit for. I only wished our boss were here to see it.

Suddenly, my mind recalled the "final objective" of the plan that Shintaro had laid out for us. That was kind of a silly, childish way of phrasing it. His face had been deadly serious when he came out with it to us, so we had all busted out laughing. But we all had understood. We had known, after all the abuse we faced, that it was something worth risking our necks to reach out for.

"...There's just no outdoing him."

I had to snicker a little. Right up to the end, he was always himself.

Thus, we all reaffirmed with one another that we were in this for keeps, come what may. But before we could talk things over, there was one thing left to do. I took a short breath and offered some advice to the Medusa next to me.

"Well, how 'bout we start with introducing you?"

She pouted at me, as if I were talking nonsense. That innocent face of Marie's, but with a sternness I had never seen before. The other two both nodded at me, clearly ready to ask for themselves if I hadn't butted in.

...I mean, given how her whole character had changed, this was definitely more than just "a new look."

\*

The air that prevailed in the lab, smelling thickly of pharmaceuticals, was as tense as always. There, under the garishly bright light from the LCD screens that lined the walls as far as I could see, we put our heads together and

brainstormed. I'm not sure if Azami's awkward self-introduction had fully come across to my two friends, but we had at least shared what we knew with each other.

The situation wasn't looking great. As Azami put it, attempting to control and neutralize "clearing" was dead in the water—but even as we tried to come up with some alternate plan, nothing came to mind. We couldn't see anything like a clock in the lab, and that made things all the more uneasy for us. Some invisible time limit was looming over us, chipping away at our mental outlooks.

In the midst of this, I decided to ask Azami about one of the root issues bothering me.

"Like, Azami, didn't all these eye abilities originally belong to you? You definitely use 'concealing' a hell of a lot better than *she* did, even. Why's 'clearing' the only one you can't control like that?"

Azami shrugged and rolled her eyes, as if this were the dumbest question in the world. I wanted to bop her on the arm for it.

"Look," she muttered, "if you're hungry, you eat, right? And if you're tired, you sleep. There's no need to explain that. And in much the same way, each of these abilities have certain 'desires' that take priority with them."

She gave Kisaragi a poke on the chest. Kisaragi didn't bother trying to dodge it. I couldn't help but notice Seto averting his eyes from the scene.

*This isn't the time to act all prudish, man.*

"For example, your 'drawing eyes' skill has a natural desire to attract attention from other people. It *loves* doing that. And each one of those abilities has desires like that, which serve as the 'food' that allows them to keep existing. If they are kept away from their desires, they *hate* that."

I thought I might have been told something like that when I obtained my own ability, come to think of it. Azami made it sound like a physiological desire, but it seemed natural in my mind to picture it like a hungry snake. They say that snakes can be tenacious, vengeful, and maybe that's why these "abilities" were so easy to imagine as snakes—creatures that lived off their day-to-day desires.

"But it's not just a matter of these abilities blindly consuming what they want

like that. People have the ability to handle and restrain their desires with *reason*, yes? And ‘combining eyes’ serves that role with all the other abilities. Right here.”

Azami took the finger jabbed into Kisaragi’s chest and brought it up to her own temple.

“Oh, okay,” Kisaragi murmured, nodding briskly, although it didn’t look like she understood too much of it.

“Most abilities fully submit to ‘combining’ without question. Collect all of the abilities, and you could even create an entirely separate world, like the Kagerou Daze. But ‘clearing’ isn’t submitting to ‘combining,’ because it’s likely following a terribly strong desire that takes priority over that. I don’t know what that desire is, but if I can’t control it, there’s nothing to be done.”

She hung her head, defeated. All those crazily strong and versatile abilities she’d created, and she seemed pretty helpless, herself. It gave me a lot of doubts.

*But hang on. Maybe that’s why the abilities were born in the first place—created to help fulfill the assorted desires of the weak, helpless Azami herself. And when these abilities wound up creating the Kagerou Daze—in whatever way they did, I don’t know—the abilities jumped over to us, because we had desires like Azami used to.*

Following that logic, all these snakes were attracted to us for the unique dilemmas all of us in the gang faced. If Kisaragi’s “drawing” skill craved attention, then Seto’s “stealing” must have been reacting to the desire to know what other people were feeling, or something. Consuming those desires, making them come true, allowed these ten abilities to continue existing.

We could harness these abilities only under certain restrictions, but Azami, with her “combining” skill, could harness “hiding” with the full force of “clearing” backing it up—and it’d be an utterly irresistible force, one that went against all natural laws. If that was the full latent power of these abilities, they all existed in a dimension that went beyond eerie. *Far* beyond.

For example, could you use “hiding” to make it impossible for someone to recognize anything in the world? Or maybe “deceiving” to make them think that

everything in the world was actually something else? And did it even have to be targeted on a single person? What if you applied it to the whole world, for example?

The abilities would cause the world to lose its own reality, no doubt—they'd turn fantasy into the new reality. And when you made the world mistake that fantasy for reality, those ten abilities would be all you needed to make reality do whatever you wanted.

It was a wild story, the kind of thing that'd be laughed off if you wrote it in the margins of your notebook. But if you thought about it, it seemed that our abilities and the Kagerou Daze were connected.

If these abilities had the power to rewrite the rules of the world, it made sense that “clearing” went through all this trouble, concocting an incredibly intricate scheme, to strike at our abilities and Marie’s “locking.”

And that reminded me of the words “clearing” had told me there, under the sunset on that roof. If it had our abilities, those words could easily become true.

But for what? *For what?* We still didn’t know, but there was no doubting it: It would use those powers to make its desire into reality.

It would use the Medusa powers to rewind everything in this world and simply reset everything to zero.

The final scenario I had hazily understood in my mind up to now was beginning to look like merciless reality to me. I could tell that my mind, unable to come up with any decent ideas, was being eroded by the despair that was beginning to rear its ugly head. Try as I might, I couldn’t think of any brilliant ideas that would banish the despair. Maybe this really was the end for all of us. No matter how you thought about it, there was just no way to fix this wild state of affairs.

*Clear...clear...*

*Wait a minute.*

***Whose name came up in my mind just now?***

“Ah...hh...”

The weak, feeble groan was like the manifestation of the despair coiling itself up inside my brain. It easily penetrated my eardrums, going right through my skull and burning the word “death” into whatever slight hope my brain clung to.

Driven by survival instinct, the three of us immediately put distance between ourselves and him. Azami, on the other hand, promptly went right up to him, stretching her thin arms out as far as she could as she stood strong.

“Get out of here! Don’t think about anything! Just run!”

The sheer force behind her voice made it hard to imagine it was coming from Marie’s throat. It made my fingertips reach for the exit—but, sadly, I wasn’t so infatuated with myself that my mind was willing to put my own safety first. The other two were the same way. We all stayed there, unwilling to heed her command.

“Wh-what are you doing?! Hurry up...”

“You know that I’d want to, but our boss taught us that we need to follow through on what we say, to the very end. Besides, even if we run, we’ll still get killed eventually, won’t we?”

I was able to sass back at her because my mind was numbed by it all, no doubt. My body was shaky, unstable, but at least my mouth was still listening to what I told it.

“He’s right, Marie...um, I mean, Azami! There’s no way we could just leave you here. I mean, really, fighting by yourself? Stop trying to act so cool like that!”

Was that really a nice way to speak to a Medusa? I swear, Kisaragi’s a legend in her own time. It made Azami speechless, apparently, but in a few more moments, she gave up, muttering “You stupid fools” at us. She was right. Unable to do anything, no matter what kind of crap we spouted... We *were* fools. It was just creating more weaknesses for us.

There, before us, the darkened version of Konoha slowly kicked into action, brimming with ominous doom for all of us. His eyes remained glassy, and he didn’t turn them toward any of us. His spirit must have still been bobbing for air out in the world of darkness, but it wouldn’t be too long before he regained his

original agility and lunged for us all.

No more time to conjure up a plan now.

But now, of all times, I suddenly had a revelation.

It was definitely an amateur's approach, but given the lack of any other ideas, it was worth bringing up. The light of hope that had flashed in my mind for a moment earlier finally revealed itself fully—and it was the half awakening on Konoha's part that had finally jarred it into existence.

"Hey, Azami...can you call for the Kagerou Daze?"

She turned toward me, her eyes splashed with the red of an overripe pomegranate.

Those eyes, the "combining" eyes, had called forth the Kagerou Daze a bit ago. If it could swallow Konoha's body up for us, it'd at least defuse the current situation, if not provide a permanent solution. It meant plunging him into that other dimension; there couldn't have been a crueler thing to do to him. But Konoha had just had his body taken over, that was all. He wasn't dead or anything.

All of us had come back from the Kagerou Daze once, exchanging our own lives for those abilities. If Konoha was alive, there had to be a way he could come back to this world, didn't there? Were we going to face the ultimate, unthinkable bad ending of having our minds taken over and being forced to torture each other to death? Or could we bring this to extra innings and get some more time to think things over?

Either way, I didn't want to think that the former was the future we were granting the friends who were already in there.

"...When did you notice that?"

There was more than a bit of panic between the words of Azami's question. It wasn't her way of saying "I didn't think about that!" or "Deliberately swallowing him up? Amazing!" It had that sort of awkward nuance that indicated she wished I had never picked up on the idea.

"Just a second ago," I reported as I picked up on her discomfort. "If we can

have the Kagerou Daze take him in, we can at least keep from all getting killed here. Of course, I'll want to ask you later if there's a way to rescue Konoha, but..."

"...Well, yes, I can use 'combining' to open an entrance. But...that's all I can do."

My suggestion didn't surprise her after all. It wasn't a totally impossible idea, either. The panic I'd caught a glimpse of earlier was now written all over her face.

"But the Kagerou Daze only takes in people on the brink of death," she added. "If I want it to swallow up someone so beyond the concept of death as he is, I would need to change the very nature of the Kagerou Daze itself. But..."

She fell silent for a moment, resigning herself to something, before strengthening her voice.

"But it takes more than just the 'combining' power to change it. I'd need to take in at least half of the ten abilities...and that would come at the exchange of your lives."

"Our lives...?"

The snakes lined up in my mind.

Marie's "locking."

Kisaragi's "drawing."

My "deceiving."

Seto's "stealing."

And Kido's "hiding," already part of Marie.

Blithely counting up the number of lives on hand, I realized that this was exactly half of the ten right there.

"I already tried it. Right after I froze him...while you were unconscious. 'Combining' and 'hiding' alone were enough only to let me open the portal. But...I didn't want to say it. You aren't running; there isn't a trace of doubt in your minds. If I said this, I thought you would..."

Her crimson eyes grew watery, like those of a child about to cry. In them, I could see no trace of the Medusa she was, the “monster” that people feared and loathed.

In the short time we’d known each other, I was starting to get the impression that she empathized with other people a little *too* much. None of it was happening to her personally, but she cried for it anyway, accepting it as her own. Most people weren’t wired that way at all, but she pulled it off with ease. It almost made me laugh.

I mean, really. This insane life I’ve led, and I’ve run into nothing but the kindest, gentlest people out there.

Kisaragi walked up to Azami, bending down a bit so they were the same height, then gave her an embrace.

“...Thanks for worrying about us. But I think we’re all safe with leaving this to you. You’re related to one of our best friends.”

“*Nnh...eh...*”

Azami sobbed pathetically, unable to reply. It didn’t exactly fill me with confidence to see, but I completely agreed with Kisaragi. When I looked up at Seto—checking on him, just in case—he gave me a grin that indicated I should never have doubted him.

*I’ve been through a lot with all these guys.*

That freaky haunted house we went through was a nostalgic memory for us now. Those days we spent on the bunk bed, looking at each other, laughing, crying, figuring out whether there was any happiness for us somewhere out there, seemed so vivid in my mind that it might as well have been yesterday.

Really, it was a good thing we didn’t have time to spend the whole night waxing nostalgic with each other. If we started talking, after all, we’d start to look forward to what was coming up in the future.

...And then it came. All too suddenly, and all too mercilessly.

“Graaaaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Twisting the body it occupied, “clearing” let out a beast-like yell. Its dull

yellow eyeballs swiveled around, running across the entire room, then stopped once they found us.

“Too bad, you little pieces of shit.”

The twisted voice was like the sound of a snake licking its lips. It smashed against my eardrums, irritating my very spirit. There was no longer any sign of the friend I used to know.

“...!”



My body convulsed, as if the fierce chills and sense of danger would make it fall apart. “Clearing” was now a living personification of despair, its arms hanging lifelessly down as its ferocious eyes crawled all over us. It set its sight on Azami, its lips curling upward into a terrifying grin. Then...

...A single step.

With his jet-black right leg, he stamped down on the floor with astonishing force, summoning a roaring explosion that almost ruptured my eardrums and making shards of metallic tile smash against the displays on the wall.

This kinetic force propelled “clearing” forward like an ebony bullet fired from a gun, immediately closing the distance between itself and Azami.

This overwhelming bout of violence took place before anyone could say a word.

And faced with this hopelessly overpowered attack, Kisaragi, still embracing Azami, suddenly pushed her to the side.

Azami’s crimson eyes, as she floated up into the air, were open wider than ever before.

There was no sign of any “ability” within Kisaragi; as she made herself into a shield, she all but sealed her immediate future—but her resolve, the very force of her soul, left me enraptured.

Azami’s shout was drowned out by the loud rumble coming for the two of them.

Kisaragi faced up to the dark shadow coming for her—and gave it a soft, somewhat distressed-looking smile.

“It’s up to you,” she said—and then her body flew back, bouncing off the wall like it was made of rubber, creating a small ocean of blood on the wall and floor behind her.

It was so one-sided a tragedy that no one could even scream in horror. Then, as if it were checking items off a mental list, the eyes of “clearing” descended upon the sight of Marie’s body.

Another instant, and it was right in front of Marie. It grabbed her by the neck

and effortlessly brought her up off her feet.

With a look of sheer ecstasy, “clearing” glared at the sight of the intensely terrified little girl.

“Stop...please...”

Before she could continue, the monster grabbed Marie’s right arm and twisted it off like the cap of a plastic bottle.

“Aaahhh!!”

He smiled broadly, satisfied at a job well done, as she screamed out in pain.

“Did you think I *wouldn’t* kill you? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

My vision grew hazy as that vulgar laugh echoed in my brain. The creature’s right fist rose up to land another devastating blow, digging itself deep into Marie’s side. A virtual waterfall of blood flowed to the floor, making wet, squishy sounds as it did.

*...Ahh, it’s over. It’s all over.*

*I suppose I’ll never be able to see how that world I dreamed of turns out. Well, that sure sucks. We were almost there, too, it kind of felt like. If I ever get another chance at this, I’m pretty sure we could put up a little more of a fight, but that’s not gonna happen now. This isn’t some game I can reload.*

*But, hell, I had that parting shot to give the dude, at least. As useless as I’ve been my whole life, I can’t let myself take credit for how this ends without having tried to help at least a little bit.*

The pain had dispelled the illusory Marie I had put up. My lips curled upward in anticipation. Something about the surprised look “clearing” gave me filled me with happiness. There was no more pain from my arm, or my side. It was the second time I had experienced this, and I knew what it meant.

In my fading consciousness, I could see the “real” Azami appear, undoing her “hiding” skill, five white snakes poised behind her as she fumed. I guess *my* ability was hers now, too.

It had given me nothing but trouble, but I was gonna miss that thing, I think. I mean, getting to pair up with Kido’s “hiding” one more time, at the very end,

wasn't exactly a bad thing. If anything, it went better than I would have thought.

Somewhere along the line, I had been thrown to the floor. It wasn't at too lucky an angle, either, so I had to look at the detestable, hopeless glare of "clearing" right up to the end. I *really* wished it wouldn't look at me with the face of my friend like that.

The Kagerou Daze opened its mouth. Quietly, I closed my blinded eyes—and right at the end, in the darkness, I heard a phone vibrate.

*Oh yeahhh... She was here, too, wasn't she? Well, there you go, I guess. Talk about thoughtful of her.*

And then, I came to an end.

Before I did, for just a moment, I thought I heard the voice of someone I liked a lot. She sounded angry. I turned around.

There was nobody there. Which was so incredibly *like* her, of course.

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 2-

I turned on the TV for the first time in a while. After a few seconds, it came to life, showing a string of colorful cars zooming down the street, from one end to the other. Behind it, a woman droned on about how “further traffic headaches are expected across the greater Tokyo area as summer break comes to a close” and so on, sounding deadly serious about it as she read her script.

The scene switched to a man in the prime of his life, steering wheel in hand as he drove a blue minivan. There was someone else in the passenger seat, two smaller figures in the back. I couldn’t see their faces, but it was the classic image of a loving nuclear family.

I thought about watching it for a little while, but my finger wound up tapping the power button of the remote instead. A few boring moments went by like that, and the sound of a crying cicada wafted into the otherwise empty room.

I never liked that sound very much. It was nice enough if you thought of it as one of the classic natural signs of summer and stuff, but when the crying just went on forever and ever, it got painful after a while.

They were hella loud day and night, and yet they wouldn’t even survive past the summer. Some people treated that like, “Ooh, look at ‘em, making the most of the one summer they’re given.” I knew that well enough. But seeing their dried-up bodies lining the sidewalks, like they undoubtedly would before long, seemed unbearable to me. Lying on their backs like that, desiccated, as they waited for the earth to claim them again—I wondered what they thought about it. I wondered if they were even interested in what the world looks like after summer.

If they *did* have thoughts like that, I couldn’t imagine how cruel it was for them. Once summer wraps up, winter soon follows, freezing your body and your soul. Their bodies weren’t made to survive that. God never gave these guys anything past the summer at all.

I remembered how Kano used to whine about how God must be this totally awful thing. Everybody around us seemed so happy, but it was not so with us. We had to face all this misfortune alone. The way he saw it, it was all God pushing this torrent of unhappiness upon us.

I just laughed it off and told him “You said it” at the time. But maybe that offhand remark made it to the well-honed ears of God after all. We looked for “happiness” without knowing what it really meant, and I’m sure God must have scorned us for it.

*I feel depressed. This sucks.*

Letting out a sigh, I turned my eyes to the frog-shaped clock looming large next to the TV. It had been almost an hour since she had gone out shopping. Considering the distance she was traveling, she’d likely be back home in a few minutes.

But this was *her* we were talking about, of course. If she ran into a puppy dog or something on the way home, you know she’d spend the next couple hours chasing it around town before getting back. Assuming she ever did. If she didn’t, it’d be up to me to spend the entire night combing the streets.

“Ughh...”

A second sigh crossed my dry lips. Maybe I should have gone with her. But if the suggestion brushed her the wrong way, she’d likely just slip out while I was distracted by something else. It’s not like she was asking me to play the gallant, brave leader role or anything; if she told me to lay off, I would.

*But I can’t fully quell my worries about her. My mind can be such a pain that way sometimes.*

She deserves my respect, yes, but she’s still the most important person in my life. I want her to live whatever life she wants for herself, but I don’t want her getting caught up in anything too hazardous. We still haven’t figured out the right balance to strike.

“What’re you staring into space for?”

*Yeah, I guess I might be doing that, a little.* A little conversation should help snap me out of it.

“Oh, just thinking about things a bit. Like, about how hard it can be to find the right distance to take in relationships...”

She was here.

“Ahhh! When—when did you get back?!”

I fell off the sofa, landing hard on the floor on my right elbow. My face twisted in pain as I turned around to look up at her. Marie was there behind the chair, giving me an honestly perplexed expression. Checking the clock, I saw she had come home exactly one hour after she left.

“W-wow, Marie, that’s great!” I said, voice filled with joy. “You actually got back home on time...”

“All I did was go home like normal,” she said. I guess she did. She had her eyes averted, a bit put off by this. “You were worried about me, weren’t you? I told you I’d be fine.”

“Ahh... Well, just a little bit. Really. Just a bit.”

“Oh? Just a bit?”

Marie’s piercing gaze poured itself over me. It was incredibly unfair, like a vast minefield spread out before me. But I knew dwelling over it was pointless, so I got up, spilling some of my tea along the way, and faced Marie with the sofa between us. Now she had to look up at me. She hefted the shopping bag in her hand.

“This needs to go in the fridge.”

Considering how she’d boldly declared that she could go shopping by herself, she sure didn’t seem too interested in any of the other chores around the house. I picked up the bag from her trembling, furtive hands, then lifted an eyebrow at how heavy it was. All I’d asked for was a few ingredients so we could make curry for dinner. That included a bag of flour, but not *this* much.

“Huh? Did you buy some extra stuff, Marie?”

Her eyes sparkled, as if she had been expecting this. “Yeah! There was something really good I found! Umm...”

She stood up, anchoring her body against the back of the sofa, and thrust a

hand into the bag I was carrying. I knew I'd asked her for a six-pack of eggs as well. Seeing her rifle through the bag struck fear in my heart, but even Marie must have been looking out for them. If she hadn't been, those eggs would've been history before she even came back home.

Her hand found something inside that it scooped out, immediately lightening the load in the bag. I looked at it, then let out a surprised gasp.

In Marie's arms was a large, round, thick, and no doubt very expensive fish. It was the dead of summer, and the store hadn't offered anything like an ice pack to keep it cool. Encountering this whole, raw fish, as if she'd hooked it from a stream and just plopped it in the bag, made me yelp in shock.

"Aaaahh! Wh-what are you doing with this?!"

"Oh? Flour. They ran a pole through the spine to keep it fresh."

Ah. I'd asked for flour; she'd picked up a flounder. A large one, from the Matsumae Peninsula of southern Hokkaido, and it had been processed with the *shinkei-jime* method to keep its umami intact. Pretty impressive stuff, I supposed to myself, as she hefted the flounder onto the sofa, then crossed her arms in a show of pride. Some kind of juice was already oozing out of the thing and into the upholstery.

"You said you needed flour, Seto, but I guess they sell flour really fresh these days."

*Yeah, it doesn't get much fresher than this.* It was like seeing a pun from a children's joke book laid out in the living room for me.

"Marie... You really like this stuff, don't you?"

"Yeah!" She nodded. "I don't like my curry too spicy, though."

"Can you explain how we'll make curry from this?"

"Umm, well, you know, you pour it over rice."

She used both hands to trace a circle in the air. I wasn't sure what that had to do with curry. Maybe she was referring to the plate. I pressed on.

"Okay, but how are we going to take this and turn it into curry?"

“I dunno, um... Boil it in a stew?”

...A stew?

Maybe there was some miracle appliance deep inside the pantry I wasn’t aware of, but I couldn’t think of a stew pot that you could toss a huge, boned flounder inside and have it turn alchemy-like into curry. Marie turned her sweet, innocent eyes up at me as I lost the ability to speak. Seeing them, I lost most of my interest in scolding her about it anymore.

“...Well, I guess it’s flounder curry for dinner tonight,” I sighed.

Marie leaped into the air in excitement. “Wow! So there’s *two* flours in it? Boy, it’s gonna be *really* good now!”

I picked up the lifeless flounder baring its all for us on the sofa and ferried it over to the refrigerator. We still had some extra leftover vegetables. It shouldn’t be too hard to accommodate this sudden change in the menu.

Then I took another peek at the bottom of the shopping bag. Spotting the crushed pack of eggs lying there, I thought about what kind of egg-based side dish I could whip up alongside this.

## CHILDREN RECORD SIDE -NO. 9-

“Well, it is what it is. That’s all.”

“...Huh?”

The “huh” that meandered out in my pathetic-sounding voice was quickly absorbed by the imaginary realm we were in, a space of pure white as far as the eye could see. Or was it a “huh” at all? Maybe it was more like a “guhh” instead.

He stood there by the bed, scratching his head. “I mean,” he said softly, voice not making it very far past his lips, “you know... I think you’re just overthinking this, is all, Haruka. Killing or being killed... What’s that even really matter, you know?”

Then he sat down on the bed.

“Man, there is just jack shit to do in here, isn’t there?”

*...Huh. I guess I’ve really told him a lot in here, haven’t I?*

Konoha was the full nature of my ability, and it was that ability—me, I suppose, in so many words, as Konoha—that had killed Shintaro, the young man who was before me now.

But for all the impact it seemed to have had on him, I might as well have said “Remember that book you lent me? Well, I kinda lost it.”

*Did the message come through okay? Maybe I better try it again.*

...Yeah. One more time.

“Um, so listen! Shintaro!”

He looked up at me, startled, motioning for me to continue.

“Uh, I’m gonna go over this one more time, so would you mind hearing me out on this?”

“No, I definitely heard you, Haruka. You said Konoha was your ability, and it’s Konoha’s fault that I died. That sort of thing, yeah?”

“Huh? Uh... Oh. Yeah.”

I guess my story *had* come across, actually. So well, in fact, that it took me aback.

Perhaps exasperated at my wavering little act, Shintaro let out a long sigh. “I’ve been remembering a lot of things,” he said. “What I was doing before I went to the Kagerou Daze, why I’m here, that kind of thing. That ‘clearing’ dude got me after it jumped into Konoha’s body. It’s not your fault.”

“B-but... I mean, this whole thing is happening because I just wanted to see my friends one more time. If I didn’t have to *think* about anything like that...”

That girl had said her abilities had the power to make their masters’ dreams come true. And Konoha was definitely the result of that. It had created him, and then he’d run into the Mekakushi-dan. If I hadn’t had any stupid ideas like that, there wouldn’t be any Konoha at all. Shintaro wouldn’t have had to lose his life.

Even now, the sheer hopelessness, that bottomless pit of despair when I lost my life was fresh in my mind. And now I had made a precious friend of mine taste those same emotions. Looking through Konoha’s eyes at the outside, I naturally knew how much of a bad guy that “clearing” person was, and how terrible the powers he had. But even so, I just couldn’t will myself to think that none of this was my fault.

“...Well, if you’re gonna put it that way...”

Shintaro slapped a fist into his hand.

“...I mean, that thought never would’ve occurred to you if I had never made friends with you in the first place, right?”

“Wha...? No!” I sat up, leaning forward to protest. “No, not at all! None of this could possibly be your fault, Shintaro!”

Shintaro just gave me a nefarious grin in response. It was his way of saying that he wasn’t serious. I loosened the vise grip I had just put on my bedsheet and relaxed back into bed.

“You know, knowing that you wanted to see me... Nothing could’ve made me happier. There’s no way I could pin the blame on you.”

Now Shintaro had a cheerful, sincere smile all over his face.

*...Ah, here we go again.*

I had been stealing peeks at the outside world the whole time through Konoha's eyes. When Mr. Tateyama said I looked like one of his students, when Hibiya and Hiyori were sucked into the Kagerou Daze...you name it. I sat and watched it all, like an idiot, unable to do anything.

Every time Konoha met someone new, I started to loathe him more. He was passive, cowardly, oblivious to everything... Exactly like me. I hated his guts. But Shintaro still called someone like that his friend. Right up to the end, he looked out for someone as wishy-washy as I am, trying to protect my weak, irresolute heart, which could fly away at a moment's notice.

Even when I spoke to him on that summer's day about my illness, Shintaro was just as gentle with me. He's always been this kind of savior to me.

“...Wh-whoa! No crying, Haruka! I hate it when people cry on me!”

“Huh? Oh, um, s-sorry...!”

Having had it pointed out to me, I hurriedly wiped the corners of my eyes. The backs of my hands were now dripping, it felt like. I was crying out a river.

“Dahh, all this snot! Um, something to wipe this with! Anything! ...I guess there *isn't* anything, huh?”

“Nngh...”

I felt so pathetic, so embarrassed. I'd been trying to be this mentor figure to him, and I'd completely failed at it. I fought off my flowing tears, exasperated at myself. It wasn't until I had a small puddle in my hands that I finally regained my composure.

Shintaro breathed a sigh of relief, crossing his arms behind his head. “You know, though,” he said, “what's up with all this?

“I mean, I died and all, so I shouldn't expect much else, but I guess we can't do much for them from over here, huh...?”

His eyes swam in the air, seeking out some magic solution within the sheer white that surrounded us. I could see why he was worried. Everyone in the

Mekakushi-dan, all those friends who'd accepted Konoha, were probably having a terrible time right now. And thinking about how it was Konoha who'd triggered it all... It just sucked the cheer right out of my body.

"It's just so...frustrating," I said. "I haven't been able to see a single thing through him since 'clearing' took over."

"Yeah, well, I doubt having a view of the action would change much. There's nothing we can do to get back to the other side, right?"

"No... I don't think so. At least, I can't think of anything."

The Kagerou Daze swallows up people on the brink of death. And once it does, it only lets you out once it grants you a new life...one instilled with an "ability." Azami's ten abilities had found ten suitable candidates to take over already. In other words, we had no way of getting out right now. This, at least, according to what that girl had told me.

*Hell, though, even if there was an easy way out, I'm not sure I'd be in much of a mood to use it.*

Everyone was caught up in this world because they were mere seconds away from death. Being in this weird thin line between life and death was what allowed us to talk to each other, but going back without an ability to help us survive would probably leave us just as vulnerable to a quick death. If Shintaro went back right now, without any ability finding him suitable... Oof. I didn't want to think about it.

"Well," Shintaro said, "I guess it wouldn't be good for the dead to go sticking their noses back into things anyway. Like, I suppose dead men *do* tell some tales sometimes, huh?" He gave me a self-effacing smile.

I stiffened up. *Talk about black comedy.*

As far as I could tell, Shintaro didn't have any physical injuries. Neither did I. The Kagerou Daze tended to depict people as they pictured themselves, no matter what they actually looked like. And I guess my consciousness affected more than how I looked. This white space we were in seemed to be a reflection of my mind as well.

Come to think of it, when I first ran into that girl in this world, that was kind of

the first thing she told me. The moment she appeared, the world of white around me exploded in a rainbow of colors. It really captivated my eyes.

...Yes.

I had only started to think about that because the pure white that had enveloped us suddenly began to change. It was that “golden hour,” when the orange sun seems to melt into the dark-blue night sky. In the blink of an eye, the white that was my world was repainted into a fantastical array of colors.

“...Eep?!”

Shintaro almost fell off the bed, so surprised was he at this near-instant metamorphosis. The unexpected “visit” made me hang my mouth open, unable to close it. She was always so *sudden* like that.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard the footsteps of someone wearing loafers. Looking in their direction, I found her, standing still on a familiar wooden classroom floor.

“Um... I guess it’s been a while...huh?”

Out of nowhere, Ayano was there, hiding her pleasant smile as she stood in the middle of the sunset-drenched school classroom. The wind coming in from the open windows made her trademark red scarf bob up and down. I could only imagine the indescribable shock this must have been to my friend.

The mere two years of eternity that had separated the two of them had begun to come apart once more.

“Nah, not really. Pretty short, if anything.”

I couldn’t guess what Shintaro meant by those stout words, or by the tears that fell from his eyes. But I was such a crybaby that the same thing happened to me.



\*

*...Ah, how long have these two people been waiting for this moment?*

They'd probably both dreamed about it, time and time again. They had a lot to talk about, no doubt—I felt a little guilty about being here. But I couldn't just make myself disappear.

*Ugh, this is so frustrating...!*

“...So,” he began. “Do you think you could tell me a little bit about what’s gonna happen now?”

“Sure. Let’s start with that ‘clearing’ guy...”

*Yeah. True. “Clearing” comes first. I bet she’s been aching to discuss it for ages. First off, “clearing” and its...*

“...Huhh?!”

My astonished shout echoed across the classroom. The two of them, now seated and ready to begin their strategy conference, both shot dirty looks at me.

“Wh-what, Haruka? Are you in pain or something?”

“Yeah, just get some rest, okay? Don’t push yourself too hard.”

This felt needlessly mean to me. I didn’t need “rest” in the Kagerou Daze. My bed had disappeared while I wasn’t paying attention anyway.

“It’s not that!” I complained as I waved my arms excitedly. I sure had never acted that way before.

*I guess I’m starting to appreciate black humor a little, too.*

“I just mean, you haven’t seen each other in forever, right? So, um... You know? I figured you had other stuff you wanted to talk about...”

Shintaro gave me a puzzled look, as if I were speaking a foreign language. Ayano, meanwhile, brought a hand to her chin, thinking something over, then looked into Shintaro’s eyes.

“...Maybe once this is over?”

Shintaro returned the gaze, not really following her.

“Yeah, once this is over, I suppose?”

I began to wonder what the point of this conversation was. I wasn’t asking them to get all lovey-dovey with each other. They were just leaving me to wither on the vine here.

But ah well.

Even I knew now was no time for messing around. But if they didn’t see any need for even a bit of pleasant chat, then it was time to face up to cold reality.

*I can’t say we have a lot of time, but we aren’t totally out of it yet. This is the Kagerou Daze.*

Thanks to my having both my perspective and Konoha’s, time passed totally differently for me between the two worlds. I had been biding my time here, really—chatting, hanging out with Ayano, and such—and it had seemed like I had an almost unbelievable amount of time on my hands to do it. I hadn’t seen a clock over on the other world lately, so I couldn’t be sure, but it definitely seemed different over there.

*In fact, I’d probably guess that, in the whole time Shintaro’s been here, not even a second of time has passed over there.*

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 2- (2)

It was late at night, and the sound of flowing water resonated loudly in the room. I had just wrapped up the dishwashing, making sure the sliced-up flounder filets in the pot were cooled down before pushing it into the fridge. The fish could keep for a few days, but with this summer heat, I'd better not chance it for too long. Marie really liked it, I guess, so maybe I could wrap it up into smaller portions and put them in the freezer.

*Oh right—better think about what we'll have tomorrow.* The unexpected bounty meant we had a ton of flounder and not much of anything else. We'd need to go shopping, or else it'd be a pretty out-of-whack dinner tomorrow. The sponge we used to clean the bathroom was getting pretty worn out, too—we'd better buy a new one of those.

*Man, there's no end to the chores around here. But I'll have to start working pretty soon, too, or my wallet's gonna look pretty empty.* I enjoyed the part-time stint I had at the flower shop, but that was strictly a day job, so I needed something else to take up the nights.

As I thought over all these unfamiliar topics, I realized that I was about to wash the same dish I'd rinsed off just a moment ago. *Look out, man. Gotta keep it together, or else I'm gonna be feeding Marie that new sponge for dinner tomorrow.* Tossing the dishwashing sponge back into the wire holder in the sink, I headed for the living room to take a break.

Having no particular drive to return to my room, I headed over to the sofa to have a seat, only to find Marie in her pajamas, rubbing her eyes as she staggered in. She had gone to her room to sleep about an hour before. Maybe she'd had a scary dream or something.

I opened my mouth to ask, but she spoke up first.

“...Can I help you with something, Seto?”

“Huh?”

That was a rare offer. Marie was never the type to volunteer for household work; even when she did, it was always light duty like making some tea. I was glad to hear it, but sadly, there was nothing left I really needed a hand with.

"Oh," I said with a smile, "I actually just wrapped everything up, so that's all right. You can help out the next time I need something."

"...All right. I'm going to bed then."

With that, Marie staggered back into her room. It seemed a little dangerous, the way she almost fell over on her feet. I didn't think that was just fatigue.

I began to wonder a bit about her hair. Marie didn't seem to take much note of it, but her white hair used to come down to her hips; now it didn't even reach her shoulders. Considering how much lighter my head felt after a quick trim, losing so much of her hair must've been enough to change the entire way Marie's body moved. I opened my mouth to say something else to her, but she had already disappeared behind the door before I could come up with something coherent.

The door shut behind her, the sound echoing into nothingness shortly. The silence returned.

Left alone in the living room, I tried closing my eyes to rest my mind a bit. But my brain naturally began thinking about Marie again.

The events of this evening had come as quite a surprise. Wouldn't that be the first time, in fact, that she'd offered to go out shopping by herself? The mere idea of going out would make her a nervous wreck before. Something big must've changed in her heart.

"A change, huh...?"

My chest began to stir, in stark contrast to the quietude of the room. But I couldn't let that omen seize my mind. So I lay there, my mind clear, counting the seconds until the fatigue finally knocked me out.

\*

The sun had pretty well reached the apex of its ascent by the time Marie's voice flew over me, serving as my wake-up call.

"You can't do that, Seto! Just because there's nothing to do, you can't sleep

*this late!*"

I laughed a bit. It sounded like a mother scolding her son. But I had definitely overslept, so I shot up out of bed.

Then I instantly regretted shooting up without any destination in mind. I had pretty well collapsed under the comforter without preparing for sleep, so I looked, shall we say, less than decent. I feared what Marie would think, but she just gave me a funny look, as if nothing bothered her at all.

Whew. If the sheets had gone *this* way instead of *that* as I zoomed up, it could have been a real disaster. I calmed my beating heart and resolved to purchase some full-body pajamas before long.

Gently shooing Marie out of my room, I switched to some casual clothes and headed for the living room.

I'd had a hard time getting to sleep the night before, so when the morning sun had first poked into the sky earlier, I had decided to go to bed with a little breakfast prepped. I had it all set up so it was just heat 'n' serve, and I guess Marie must've eaten it, because there was an empty *natto* container on the floor.

I picked it up, tossed it in the kitchen garbage, and then ran into Marie back in the living room. There were two teacups on the tray she was carrying, the sweet scent of tea wafting up and naturally relaxing my facial expression.

"Good morning, Seto. You missed most of it, though."

She smiled. It startled me, but not enough to keep me from wishing her a good morning back. The day had begun, more or less.

"Oh right. There's a big show today. I heard about it eating the curry yesterday."

"A big show?" I said as I blew on my tea, the two of us seated on the sofa. A *show*, a *show*... Given her mistaking flour for flounder the night before, I didn't want to make any assumptions about what she meant by that. Given the time of year, though, I thought I had a decent idea.

"You mean a big fireworks show, Marie?"

"Yeah! That! The ol' man said I should go to it."

I didn't want to guess what kind of "old man" she'd gotten to talking to at the supermarket as she purchased that flounder. But I understood what she meant. Mostly.

"All right," I said. The clock had just passed eleven. "Why don't we go see it together? It's a little early still, but once it's closer to evening, I bet there'll be a lot of stands to check out, so..."

This brightened Marie's face considerably. She practically jumped on top of me. I winced at this sudden assault—her hand battering my shoulder—but considering the cup I had in my hand, I could do little but pull my head back.

"Stands?! What're those? Do you go around 'n' around on them? Is it fun?!"

"N-no, it's not a carnival ride or anything! Like...they're these little buildings that sell food you can't get anywhere else, or let you play all kinds of weird games. They're run by these guys in funny outfits..."

I was making them sound much creepier than they were. I struggled to define them as I spoke, my guidance collapsing into a pile of incoherence. But my shoddy explanation still piqued Marie's curiosity. "We *gotta* check them out," she vowed, the tempo of her breathing going up.

Come to think of it, I'm not sure I've ever been to an event like that.

I was invited to things like the fair at my father's school in the past, but I just recoiled at the idea of being anywhere a lot of people were. The idea of someone like me inviting Marie out to see some fireworks was pretty weirdly out of character. Dealing with her, I guess, was making me act in all kinds of unpredictable ways.

"...Wait, Seto. Wouldn't it be too late if we go in the evening?"

"Huh? No, I think that's the perfect time if we want to see the fireworks..."

"But we can't see them in the dark! Do they have lights?"

I froze, not following her for a moment. Then, realizing what she meant, I wound up laughing in her face. Marie puffed out her reddened cheeks at this, resenting my picking on her.

“Well, what? Am I wrong? You can’t look at fireworks when it’s all dark!”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry. You’re wrong, though, Marie. You’re *supposed* to enjoy fireworks at night. It’s like these great big flowers of fiery light that bloom in the night sky.”

“Flowers of light...in the sky...?”

She was probably having trouble connecting my description to what she knew about flowers. The look on her face was puzzled, questioning. She must’ve thought I was still messing with her.

“R-really! It’s true. And it’s a lot prettier when it’s dark out, so they set off all these fireworks at night. I mean, they disappear really quick up there, so that’s why it attracts all those people. They want to be sure they don’t miss out on them, and stuff...”

This explanation was ample for Marie. She nodded to herself, her face back to normal.

I guess it *was* kind of odd, now that I thought about it. The idea of “flowers” blooming in a space occupied only by the moon and the stars, usually. If I didn’t know about it, *I’d* be pretty suspicious, too.

Being questioned about it so innocently like this made me realize I’d been cruising on what I knew about the world, or common sense, or whatever else in my life. Or, at least, that’s how I’d lived until I’d met this girl. I’d probably never be able to live like her, going forward.

“Well,” Marie said with a laugh, “we’d better look at them before they wither.”

Then she gave me the biggest smile in the world.

“Yeah. We better. Don’t want to forget about them.”

\*

“Ooh, an airplane cloud!”

Looking up, I spotted a straight line of white shining in the sky, bursting with layers of blue and scarlet.

“Yeah... Kind of elegant, isn’t it, Marie?”

“Elegant? What’s that?”

“Huh? Ummm... I don’t really know, either, I guess.”

The humidity that coiled around my skin, and the sounds of the cicadas around us, still showed no sign of abating. As much as the city wanted this summer to be over, as far as the world was concerned, we were smack in the middle of it.

I kept Marie calm as she was constantly distracted by this and that around her, and the two of us walked along a concrete levee, going briskly but not too briskly downstream. There were a few people in *yukata* outfits among the crowd joining us, and I was using them as a guide to where we should be headed.

The site of the fireworks wasn’t too far away from our hideout, and by this time of the evening, the heat I had been worried about had dulled considerably. Despite that, there weren’t many clouds in the sky. The people around us chattered about how it was “perfect fireworks weather,” and I had to agree with them.

“Oh, they’re doing something!”

Something else had caught Marie’s attention. She pointed straight ahead at it. The bridge up ahead blocked my view partially, but at the edge of the levee as it curved around a turn in the river, there was a line of several tents. None of them had their lights on yet, but between the traditional red lanterns and the guys in *happi* coats in front of the stands, it was one of those classic festival sights. Fireworks may have been the focus of this event, but these stands were traditional icons of any festival in Japan.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the area were sweeping the whole crowd into an excited furor, pushing them to walk faster toward the party. *This is bound to grab her*, I thought as I looked down at Marie. Her eyes were squarely on the stalls, but she still resisted the urge to run over to them, which I found cute.

Every step we took closer to the site, we saw more people joining us. Before long, we were part of a seemingly vast line of visitors as we made it to the upper area of the festival. Holding hands with the perpetually wobbly Marie, I

went down a stone stairway, only to be greeted by what had to be the most stereotypical summer festival I'd ever seen.

The stands bunched up against the river seemed to stretch on forever, their colors decorating the entire riverfront. My nose was struck by the aroma of sauce from the yakisoba noodle place, only to be overruled by my eyes as they took in the vivid sights of candied apples, chocolate-covered bananas, and other sweets at other stands. A shaved-ice storefront had a blue flag in front of it; right next door was a plastic pool for *yoyo sukui* (a game where you try to scoop small balloon toys off the surface of the water), the splashing sounds making the surroundings seem that little bit less hot.

It was the ideal summer fest, stimulating all five senses at once. I had seen scenes like this on TV, but I'd had no idea they were this mesmerizing.

The bewildering sights made me a little dizzy—but then, a pale little face next to me ran off, eyes blazing in wonder. I guess she couldn't hold out anymore. Reaching out, I managed to grab her sleeve just in time, making her squeal a little.

“Dahh! Don’t go running off by yourself, Marie! What am I gonna do if you get lost?!”

“Aw, don’t be so mean, Seto! And gimme some money, too!”

She was now a slave to her desires, and her hands were looking for the wallet I had sneaked into my pocket. *No, Marie! Don’t succumb to the urge!* I just barely managed to keep her from her goal, putting a little distance between her and me.

“Hee-hee... C’mon, I want some money... Cotton candy... Turtle catching...”

“Ngh...!”

*Oh no... I had no idea a festival could drive someone so far into the depths of insanity like this!* Thanks to all the time we had before arriving, I had explained to her all the things she could expect to see at the fest—and now, I realized, I shouldn’t have done that. Now, as she snickered and furtively grabbed at my wallet, I could see that there was no appealing to her sense of morals anymore.

I couldn’t just fork over my wallet, though. That premium-class fish had

caused serious damage to our finances; they were precarious enough as it was. I wasn't saying we could only mill around and look at things, but if that girl got my wallet, I could guess what might happen. Something I could easily imagine... and something I wished I couldn't.

"Okay, okay! Let's do this!"

I thrust my palm before Marie, stopping her in her tracks.

Whew. At least her ears still worked.

"You and I can play against each other in one of these stall games. If you win... I-I'll give you my wallet. But if you lose, Marie, you'll have to listen to me today, all right?"

"Just one game?"

Marie's oddly calculating reply made my upper body shudder. Her eyes were resolute, observing. They were the eyes of a winner.

"Um, best two out of three," I weakly replied. It couldn't have sounded more pathetic.

"...Okay. That's a promise!"

The murderous intent in Marie's eyes disappeared as she came back to my side, the same as always.

*Man, what is with this girl...? No. Think this over, Kousuke. She's the same lovable Marie she always is. There couldn't possibly be some darker side to her. No. No way.*



“So what’ll we play first?” she asked. “And no cheating!”

I couldn’t guess how I was supposed to cheat at selecting a stall. All of this had happened so quickly, I hadn’t really thought about what I wanted to do. For starters, I decided to take a look around. Goldfish scooping? Nah. I felt kind of bad about handling animals in a game like that. There was a prize lottery game, but the admission fee was kind of high, and I couldn’t see how we could compete in it anyway.

“...Um, how about that one, Marie?”

I pointed at a pea-green stand a ways ahead down the row. She stood on her tiptoes, hopping around to gain a better view. I suppose her height prevented her from seeing over the crowds of people. *Well, no point waiting. If we head there and she says she doesn’t like it, no big deal.* I grabbed Marie by the hand and attempted to take the long way around the crowd toward my chosen stand.

“Tanuki?” Marie asked, perplexed at the sign she could only read part of.

“No, *katanuki*.”

Inside the tent we stopped at was a circle of barren plywood tables, a bunch of children bent over them and working intently on something. Each had a light-pink, rectangular piece of starch-based candy in their hands, each piece stamped with line art depicting a ship, a top, or some other simple object. The idea of *katanuki*, or “die cutting,” was to use a needle, a toothbrush, and other tools to cut the picture out of the candy mold in one piece. If you did it well enough, you earned a prize.

“Hey, hello, hello,” said the well-built man running the place, a white washcloth wrapped around his forehead as he addressed Marie with his husky voice. “Is that your big brother bringing you here, little girl?”

*Big brother...? Do we really look like that? I guess I can’t deny it, can I?*

“Yeah, boss! Boy, you sure are loud today!”

“Boss?!”

Was *this* the guy who’d foisted that flounder on her?! The well-tanned

gentleman flashed his oddly sparkling white teeth at me in a broad smile, as if saying, “Wasn’t that fish good? Hee-hee-hee!” Well, yes, it *was* good. I’d wound up pickling most of it in spices, but...

“Well, a little girl like you, I’ll letcha have one for free, okay? Pick whatever one you want!”

The boys around the table booed this as we were half dragged inside the tent. We pored over the list of designs the boss showed us. There were one or two dozen, from instantly recognizable artwork to overly toon-ified pieces that were hard to figure out at a glance. None of them had captions, so the important thing was the number at the bottom of each design.

One of them was presumably a spinning top—really just a body with a little head and tail added to it—and it was marked “100 yen.” Next to it, a picture that looked kind of like a watering can was listed at 300 yen. Above that, a gourd valued at 500. And so forth.

I had never played *katanuki* before, but my dad had run down the basic rules for me a while earlier. You had to cut out the design from this solid block of candy and hand it back to the proprietor without breaking it along the way. Once you did, you got the money listed at the bottom of the design. The more a piece was “worth,” the harder it was to cut out, and vice versa.

We needed to think about how to adapt these rules in a way that let Marie and me compete in the game. “Whoever makes the most money wins,” maybe?

*Hmm. Maybe this will wind up being pretty fun after all...*

“Okay, Marie! Let’s see which of us can earn more money in this round... Huh?”

I turned around, excited, only to find that Marie was already seated, a needle in one hand as she started chipping away at a candy board with a picture of a tulip on it.

“Keep quiet, Seto,” she said coldly, not even looking up at me, her face deadly serious.

“So, Big Bro, which one are you going for?”

“Ah! Oh, um, I’ll take this one, please.” I pointed at the boatlike design, paid the entry fee for both of us to the man, and sat down on a plastic sake-bottle case they were using for a seat.

The tent, illuminated by bare lightbulbs hung from the ceiling, was a lot brighter than it looked from the outside. I didn’t notice until I was inside, but it seemed like the sun was starting to get pretty low in the sky.

“Okay, here you go! And are you two competing against each other? Ha-ha! I like it! Youth in all its glory! I’ll make sure neither of you start cheating!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, go easy on me.”

I averted my eyes from the boss, lest the glinting from his pearly whites blind me, and took a peek at Marie’s work next to me. I had expected her to pick something like a tulip, but it must have been pretty high on the difficulty scale. The price set on it was 600 yen—six times more than the top, which I saw one boy have considerable difficulty with. It must’ve required a lot of skill to cut out.

Meanwhile, I had selected the 200-yen boat. Not worth nearly as much. But if she broke that tulip, she’d make exactly zero yen off that. I figured the 200-yen level of difficulty was about the most that any regular person was capable of.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” one of the boys exclaimed.

*Well, no duh it’s unfair. Shut up a second, will you? I’m short on money here.*

Either way, I had to start carving this thing. Grabbing a nearby needle, I threw myself into my work. Slowly, carefully, I followed the faint outlines of the picture as I scratched away.

This was kind of addictive, actually. But, as I realized now that I was actually *doing* it, these candy boards were hyper-fragile. Apply the wrong amount of force to the wrong section, and it’d snap in half before you even knew what had happened. Too much power was bad, of course, but if you went too slowly, your focus quickly started to abandon you. Amid the tense environment, I kept my mind clear, running my needle up and down.

Then there was a light cheer from across the tent, although everyone tried to keep their voices down. Instinctively, I looked to my side, then reared back in horror. Nearly all of the excess candy board was already carved off of Marie’s

tulip; she had just one piece to chip off before she was done.

As I watched her chiseled, intense features from the side, she looked like a knight in battle, sharp as a knife, her eyes practically drilling themselves into the tulip. It was like watching a master woodworker on the job.

*...Oh crap. I just broke my concentration.* I had known that Marie had a thing for little side jobs she could do at home, but I'd had no idea her talents could be applied with such astounding success here, too. Meanwhile, my ship was at the point where you could just barely make out the outline of the sail. It wouldn't be setting off on the seven seas anytime soon.

Of course, if Marie got her tulip done, finishing up this ship would be pointless anyway. *Ugh. Who the hell even picked this stupid old ship for 200 yen? Oh. It was me.*

*Ahhh, she's about to chip off the last remaining piece from her tulip...* That tulip... My ship... The tulip...

*Snap.*

“Ah,” I grunted like an idiot, as the tent was shrouded in an uncomfortable silence. There, as I stood next to Marie and was watched over by the other kids, my hand slipped, cutting my ship’s sail neatly in half. And right there, on the table, was Marie’s tulip, its petals in full and magnificent bloom.

“Ooooh!!”

Marie and the boys whooped their approval at almost the same time. The boss was there, too, showing off those white teeth of his as he gave Marie a round of applause.

The tension was gone. I looked down at my incomplete masterpiece and let out a scornful laugh. It was almost beautiful, so total a loss it was.

“L-look! Seto! I won, right?”

“Ahhh! C-careful! You need to give it back to the boss for it to count!”

I put a hand on Marie’s shoulder before she leaped into the air, the tulip in one hand. Then I led her carefully to the proprietor. He gave it a broad nod, took six 100-yen coins out from his plastic cash box, and handed them to her

with as much pomp and circumstance as possible, as if they were a mighty trophy.

"I haven't seen a carving job like that in a while! Looks like your little scheme backfired on you, huh, Big Bro?"

*Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, thanks for reminding me.*

Thus, our first round ended with Marie taking the title. I spent the next little while watching Marie give some carving tips to the other kids before we left the tent, searching for our next game.

The lingering sweet taste of victory made Marie notably lighter in her step. I practically had to chase after her.

"Ooh, that was fun!"

She waved both fists in front of her as she turned back toward me, squealing with excitement.

"A stand as exciting as that... These fireworks shows are so great, Seto!"

"Yeah, I wasn't expecting it to be that fun, either. If you liked it that much, we could've spent some more time in there, you know?"

I tried to act casual with the suggestion. But she wasn't having any of it.

"No, that's okay. We have a promise, too."

*Ugghh...*

The *katagami* game was cheap enough, and we had spent enough time there that I figured she'd be ready to abandon the idea. *But that's exactly the kind of thing that she's a huge stickler for. Well, can't break a promise for no reason. Better get myself together and find our next battle arena.*

Man, though... Tasting defeat in the first battle was something I hadn't even dreamed of. And here I'd been thinking about how I'd go kind of easy on her, so I didn't make her all grumpy. Talk about oblivious. I hated myself for it now. Oh, why did I have to make that promise without fully thinking it through?

Still, here we were. I had to do everything possible to keep from losing the next round. If our home finances took any more damage, we'd seriously be

reduced to miso soup starting tomorrow—and that applied to Marie, too, of course. I had to dominate the next round, for her sake.

Such were my thoughts as I strolled through the crowded aisle of stands, pulling Marie along. This was the first time in practically my entire life that I'd waded through a throng like this, but thanks in part to my height, it wasn't much of a bother to me. I had a commanding view of the area, letting me scope out most of the stands. Hopefully, one of them would stick out to me...

"...What's that?"

I immediately stopped. There, as the aisle curved to the right, I found a rectangular building made from a shipping container that looked terribly out of place. Most of the tents, despite their different colors and décor, were basically the same by design, but this huge container, looming large like it belonged here year-round, looked positively bizarre by comparison.

Looking more closely, I saw the container was spray-painted in a camouflage pattern, like a tank summoned from some battlefield. It wasn't exactly an elegant-looking edifice.

"Wow, what kind of place is that...? Huh? Marie?!"

As the container took my attention for a moment, Marie disappeared without any warning at all. *Oh no. Did she run off to something else that grabbed her interest? If we get separated in this crowd, how will I find her? She doesn't have a phone...*

My heart began to beat faster, an uncomfortable sweat running down my whole body. She couldn't be that far yet. I'd better find her soon, or...

"...Salute! Wait, did I get it wrong? ...Salute!"

*There she is.*

She was in front of the camo container, carrying on with a couple of people in military fatigues. I suppose she was trying to salute, but the pose she took made her look like she was making a stupid selfie face.

"No, not quite that, ma'am. Adjust the angle of your hand here... Ah! That's it! Salute!"

The two men gave sharp salutes as they enthusiastically guided Marie through the process. I supposed they were running the container, and they didn't seem like bad people, but between the uniforms and their tension, they couldn't have been a worse fit for this festival.

"Uhmm... I'm sorry if this kid here's bothering you..."

I wasn't trying to, of course, but I wound up looking like I was Marie's guardian, I'm sure. "Oh! Seto!" she said, noticing me and blithely gesturing for me to join her.

"A-ha! Are you this fine young woman's brother? I was concerned that she had become separated from someone like you, sir!"

He didn't *look* too concerned...but I'm sure this was their own inscrutable way of expressing it. I figured I ought to believe it.

"That's right. I took my eyes off her for a moment, and she was gone. Ha-ha-ha... Okay, Marie, let's go."

I turned around on the spot. *Better not to get too involved with guys like these. Let's take Marie and get out of here. Right.*

So I grabbed Marie's hand, but the moment I was about to set off, I found my legs refusing to carry out the order. Turning around, I saw Marie pulling at my hand, pointing at the container and trying to tell me something.

There was an imposing-looking metallic sign above the door to the building, some kind of weather-aging process having been applied to it. It must have been the name of the place written on it. The red text on black metal was hard to read, but there was just enough sunlight left to make it out.

HEADPHONE ACTOR: RETURN OF THE DANCER

...?

"They said they're a *Headphone Actor* stand! Let's do round two in here, Seto!"

"Huhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?! No, this is totally, *totally* bad news, Marie! This place is really scary, all right? You don't like scary things, Marie; you know that. Right? Right?!"

“I’m all right today. I can do it.”

“Two new recruits, sir! Salute!!”

“Salute!!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

\*

“...So this is a fairly simple shooting game, sir. If you don’t know the controls, I can run through them again for you.”

“Um, okay.”

It was actually pretty normal.

There must have been a basic AC unit attached to the container we were led through. Considering how it looked from the outside, it was actually pretty customer-friendly indoors. With *that* exterior, I had been more than a bit leery —there had been no telling what kind of crazed world was waiting for me. Now, I realized, there was nothing to worry about. I felt silly for carrying on like that.

“What a wimp, Seto.”

Marie made her disappointment in me crystal clear as she gave me a look.

“W-well, what do you want from me? A crazy-looking setup like this, you’d have to be weird to just jump right inside...”

“Aw, come on! It’s more fun to do stuff you haven’t done before...”

She puffed out her cheeks to admonish me as she worked the controller in her hand.

Apparently this *Headphone Actor* was a competitive shooting game. We were both seated in front of a pair of tall, black tables, each with a wireless video-game controller placed on it. Behind these was a simple screen, the projector behind us set up to display the game on it. None of this really jibed with the traditional Japanese festival experience, but maybe this sort of thing was more common nowadays. I hadn’t heard much talk about it, but...

Regardless of the first impression they gave, though, the guys in the combat fatigues were actually pretty nice. They both had regular jobs outside Tokyo, they said, but after running into this game a couple years earlier, they just

hadn't been able to get it out of their minds. This stand of theirs was something of a lifelong dream come true for them. They hadn't developed the game themselves, but they had the permission of the original creators.

All of this they told me with obvious glee, so I couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement a little. They *did* spend about half of their intro gabbing about that instead of explaining the controls to me, though, which was a tad annoying.

"See an enemy, push the button... See an enemy, push the button..."

Marie repeated the mantra to herself, trying to digest what the combat soldiers had told her.

*Dahhh, Marie is just so cute sometimes. Too bad we're enemies here.*

I grabbed the controller on the table and spent a moment coming to grips with it. Really, it had been years since I played a video game. My dad liked them a lot, so sometimes we used to play something together with the whole family, but my big sister was crazy good at them, so I don't recall ever having much fun. Sometimes Kano would challenge me to something or other, but neither of us was the type to really care who won and who lost, so we'd just get distracted by something else halfway through.

So, looking back, I don't remember ever winning a match, but I guess I had some experience. If they had this setup at a festival, I was sure the game was geared for the general public—I was sure I'd catch up with it quickly enough. Against Marie, who had never played anything before, I had the clear advantage. I could win this. I *would* win this.

*...Man, I'm starting to sound really selfish, aren't I? That wasn't good.*

"All right, you two, are you ready?"

My heart began to accelerate at this final question.

"Uh-huh. Anytime."

"Oh, me too. All set."

The lights dimmed in the room as the game's opening sequence finally appeared on-screen. The silhouette of a creepy-looking cityscape appeared

behind the *Headphone Actor* logo. Once each of us had pressed the START button, the game shifted to the difficulty-selection screen.

“...Um, which one should I select?”

“You can choose any level you like, sir! Personally, I would recommend...”

*Ding!*

With a peppy sound effect, the screen faded to black. *Huh? But I didn’t press anything. If someone selected a level for me...*

“Here we go. Concentrate!”

It was her. The hunter. Marie’s eyes were in full hunter mode.

Hurriedly, I steadied my hands on the controller as the on-screen words “GAME START” burned themselves into my eyes. The moment they did, an impossibly huge number of enemies overflowed onto the screen, spreading utter havoc.

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!! What the...! What’s with this thing?!”

I helplessly jabbed at the buttons, the fanciful-looking enemies leaping around with apparent ease to dodge my shots. Then, as they lurched their way toward me, those whimsical bad guys bared horrifyingly sharp fangs that didn’t seem to match them at all, chowing down on my player character. It was nothing but pure horror.

This wasn’t a game for the masses. This was a game meant to *kill* the masses. The insane difficulty level was about to make me hyperventilate when I heard a cheerful voice next to me say, “What do you think? Nothing’s more thrilling than the hardest level!” Yes, sir. Thrilling doesn’t *begin* to describe it. Damn it.

Of course, if I was struggling this much, it had to be even more traumatic for Marie. I was a little nervous about taking my eyes off my character, but—really—I was just pressing the SHOOT button repeatedly without hitting anything. So I left my character alone and looked at Marie’s character, on the left side of the partitioned screen. Over in *her* area, things were...well, pretty gruesome. In the opposite way.

“They...they’re stopped...”

The enemies rushing toward Marie all stopped at once—then, as Marie murmured little grunts like “oof” and “gotcha,” their heads all got shot off. Unable to run, unable to defend themselves, her foes let out plaintive screams as they died. It was pitiful, is the only way to put it.

“Mmm? Is this a bug?” one of the camo soldiers asked the other.

“Perhaps. But this is fun, too, is it not?”

*Ah. Great. Well, as long as everybody's having fun, then whoopee. Sorry I asked.*

As I gaped at the screen, the word “FINISH” flashed across it. The results didn’t need to be explained in detail. It was like night and day.

“Whew! ...Oh? Seto? Wow, it looks like you didn’t do very good...”

Marie frowned, looking a little guilty as she caught her breath. I suppose she’d had an eye on me the whole time.

“Marieee... You used your ability, didn’t you? I can tell. Come on, look me in the eye for a sec...”

“I—I wasn’t cheating. Really!”

But Marie refused to look at me. *Somebody’s* stubbornness must’ve rubbed off on her. In terms of hard numbers, this was Marie’s second victory, but I thought it was a pretty clear violation of the rules—or the spirit of the game, at least. But there was no point bickering inside the container about it, so I stood up.

“Daahh... Well, let’s just go outside and talk a little. I can’t believe you, using your ability for something like...this...?”

After the results screen faded away, the game showed a list of high scores. Marie was way up at the top—probably a perfect game, I assumed. But the names below hers made me stop in my tracks.

No. 1	MARIE
No. 1	SHINTARO_K
No. 3	ENE_
No. 4	KIDO_

...

...

...

“...Hmm? What’s wrong, Seto?”

I couldn’t even breathe until Marie came jogging back to me, concerned. I was then buffeted by an intense bout of dizziness, my heart beating so fast that it was ready to explode.

*Why? What are their names doing on here? Was it just a coincidence? Or some kind of warning—a warning pointed at me, even as I tried to forget about it all?*

“I-I’m sorry! I’ll tell you the truth—I kind of cheated a little. That’s why you’re angry, isn’t it? Isn’t it, Seto...?”

I didn’t answer her. Instead I violently seized her hand and shot out of the container. The soldiers behind us expressed concern about this, but I was in no shape to deal with them.

“Seto! Look out! You have to walk slower, or...”

I just had to get away from here. I worked my way through the crowds in a mad dash to find someplace free of other people. *God damn it... It’s so hard to navigate around here...*

Their faces began to dance in my head. Their eyes were glassy, inorganic, as they attacked me with everything they had.

*No. This is just my imagination. I can’t get caught up in it. I already decided I’d forget all about it.*

*Just keep going. All these people in the way. Keep going. I need to get myself out of here...!*

“What’s with them? Are they running from something?”

“...?!”

...I heard a voice.

*I definitely heard it just now.*

*"Whoa, that guy looks like a freak. Somebody better call the police."*

*Stop it.*

*"Oh, for real? This dude's the last thing I need my girl looking at right now. This is supposed to be our first date!"*

*Shut up, shut up...*

*"Man, just go with the flow and quit running all over us! I swear, some people just don't give a crap about anyone but themselves..."*

*Stop! Shut up, shut up, shut up!!*

My right foot slammed against the ground.

There was no reining in my ability now. If anything, "stealing" was picking up more voices than it ever had before, all marching right into my head in order. I tried my best to force them out, my skull feeling like it'd crack, as I kept moving forward.

*Gotta get out of here. Gotta get somewhere empty of people.*

*Gotta get Marie away...away somewhere far...!*

*"Wow! Running in the middle of this huge crowd? What is he, nuts?"*

I ran.

*"Hey! Did that guy just bump into me and not say anything? Well, screw you, too, asshole!"*

I just ran.

*"Ha! Guy looks like he's running for his life. What's some dude freaking out by himself about at this fireworks show?"*

*...By himself?*

*"...Ow!"*

I lost my footing, and my leg got tangled up against something, the resulting momentum smashing my body against the ground. I screamed out at the pain, the suffocation, and the venom-laden "voices" that constantly showered

themselves upon me. Laughter, contempt, and indifferent desires for my immediate death flew into my brain from all directions, scrambling my mind.

I had to keep my hands from plucking out my eyes—the home of that hateful ability of mine. That was how painful it was as I barely managed to stand up and look around. It was just all people, people, people. An ocean of people giving me confused stares, eyes darting all over the place. But...

“She’s gone...!”

I knew I’d had her by the hand. I’d never felt it slip away from me. So why wasn’t Marie here? I focused my mind on the voices, ready to die trying if I had to, but I just couldn’t spot Marie’s out of them all. Was I missing her, somehow? No way. There was no way I could ever miss that girl’s voice.

...What if Marie had just *disappeared*, though?

“...No.”

*No. Marie would never use that. She hadn’t even realized it yet. There’s no way she’d do something like use Kido’s ability. No. Quit thinking about it. You promised yourself that you’d forget all about it.*

*So please...please don’t remember any of it...*

The voices that echoed across the evening’s darkness went around and around, singing in circles like a swarm of cicadas. In the middle of this living hell, I tied what was left of my conscious thought to my memories of her, and her alone.

Marie, Marie... Oh, poor Marie.

I didn’t care if I couldn’t do anything. I didn’t care if she forgot about everything. I just wanted to do whatever she couldn’t handle. If she could just stay the same as always—stay that same way forever—I wouldn’t want anything else.

If she didn’t have to go through any more trauma like this, I’d happily become a liar or a criminal for her. Whether it was a lie, or a fantasy, or whatever, I wanted to keep this day-to-day life going before it all came apart. I’d gladly forget about her long hair, or her lost friends, or about this entire summer, for

her sake.

*Why do you have to be so unfair, God? You're the only one that noticed, aren't you?*

For years now, I've placed the voices of my friends under the cries of the cicadas.

I've known since practically forever that *they* can never get out of this summer.

So I wasn't going to agonize over it anymore. I'd decided that I'd take this future that you thoughtlessly threw me into, and dedicate everything about it to that girl.

*I'll never let that girl be alone. That is where I'll find my happiness.*

## CHILDREN RECORD SIDE -NO. 7-

If you can't "forget" something unless you made the memory in the first place, then what should the memories you've forgotten be called?

I thought over the memories that I had almost let fall out of my head before I could share them with anyone: the separations that burned themselves into my chest; the reunions that felt like miracles to me; the future that I all but risked my life to reach out to. No matter how preciously I treated them, it wouldn't be enough if I just forgot about them in the end.

Forget about something, and not even loneliness remains afterward. Things you've forgotten about lose their titles as "memories"; they're wiped clean from your mind, as if they never existed in the first place. Really, it's the most absurd thing ever. You can love something with all your heart, but you can't build fences around your memories. If you've truly forgotten about them, you'll forget even to be motivated enough to *try* to recall them.

It's really true. We're here because we've kept on forgetting about things. We've stepped over the corpses of the memories we can no longer remember, wending our way ahead. *That*, I would hope, I don't have to forget.

"...Helloooo? You awake?"

A disinterested voice filled the classroom, stained with an amber-red sort of light. I was in the far back seat by the windows, looking at the darkened cityscape on the other side, presenting itself a bit like a georama. Turning my eyes toward the voice, I saw Ayano one desk ahead of me, face peering into mine as it was bathed in the glow of the sunset.

In this world, where the whole concept of life and death starts to become vague, I wasn't entirely sure if "sleeping" was something I could do, really. Maybe she was just joking with me—but then again, I couldn't be sure that she was thinking that deeply about it.

"How would I sleep with my eyes open?" I curtly asked as I turned back

toward the view out the window. I noticed Ayano shrinking down a bit in her seat. She must have begun to pick up on my point. I didn't mean to bully her or anything, but I couldn't deny it: I was a little pissed.

"Um," she began, stirring a bit timidly as she looked up at me. "Are you angry that I didn't speak to you first, maybe?"

"...About what?"

"Like, how I went over here by myself. You know, without saying anything to you, Shintaro."

She looked down at the floor, stealing glances at my face to judge my reaction.

...Yeah, she just about had it right.

I should say, at the very least, that I didn't hate her. It seemed like she really had a thing for me, through everything that happened. I had helped out with her homework on more than one occasion. And, you know, I'm a guy, she's a girl; we probably both had things we thought it was better to keep secret from each other.

But even beyond that, we were friends. We counted on each other when adversity came our way. That was how *I* saw the thing we had.

So imagine how it felt when those guys in the Mekakushi-dan told me all that stuff about her. I mean, *man!* Going around, investigating what "clearing" is all about, then trying to dive into the Kagerou Daze all by herself. The more we dug into it, the more it turned into a, like, clearance sale of new stories about her.

I mean, her having this crazy secret life didn't bother me, really. I wasn't really keen on trying to uncover every single aspect of her life or anything. Not at all. It's just, as her friend, the way she rashly did all this stuff without thinking about herself for a single moment... It really set me off.

I gave Ayano a glance. She fidgeted a bit, cowering even more in her chair. *Ugh. I hate when she gives me this stupid puppy-dog act. She can try to appeal to my conscience all she wants; it's not gonna work. Does she have any idea how much agony my heart's been through over the past couple years?*

*Maybe some random dude would be willing to forgive her on a moment's notice, but Shintaro here isn't enough of a wuss to bow to her just like that. Not Shintaro. He's not the kinda guy to just let things slide.*

"...Well, I know how things are. There's no point raking you over the coals about it now."

*Pathetic. All it takes is a couple of simpering looks from a girl, and Shintaro just rolls right over, doesn't he?*

Ayano, perhaps having expected me to blow up, stared blankly at me for a few moments, then let out a quick little awkward laugh.

"Aw, you're always so kind to me like that. See, this is exactly why I went over here in the first place, Shintaro."

"Ah, shut up. You aren't too different from me, you know."

I tried to act bitchy at her, dispelling the awkwardness of it all with the act.

It felt like about a day since I had been taken by the Kagerou Daze. I hadn't gotten sleepy at all, though, or hungry, so I supposed I shouldn't rely on my sense of time too much. As Haruka put it, time passed a lot differently here than it did over there. I had anticipated that, given Hibiya's talk about experiencing the same day over and over again—and, indeed, the standard rules of logic didn't seem to apply. It was definitely a world beyond all common sense.

"I gotta say, Shintaro, this was a big surprise to me. Like, you fighting alongside everyone else."

"Yeah, I was the most surprised of all, actually. Giving a crap about someone else like that. Totally out of character."

"Oh, I don't think so. I don't know why, but I've always kinda had a feeling it'd turn out like this. Like, you'd step up and try to keep all of us safe."

She blushed a bit.

"I guess that's why I couldn't talk about it."

She'd *expected* me to fight?

I mean, since Momo had one of those abilities, too, I guess it'd be expected that I would get involved eventually. But *she* couldn't have had any way of knowing about Momo. To Ayano, I didn't have a single thing to do with any of this, but she'd still predicted this would happen? It was hard to swallow.

*Hmm. Wait a sec... Ha! No way.*

"Are you just trying to make me feel better? Because I'm not an ability user?"

Regardless of how it had happened, my social circle in high school had been pretty well stocked with people like her and Momo. And yet here I was, totally oblivious to it all. I wasn't jealous or anything, but I was the only one out of four friends *without* one of those things. Maybe she took pity on me for it.

But Ayano shook her head briskly at my sardonic accusation. "No, I'm telling the truth! I even saw you fighting in my dreams, Shintaro!"

"Ohhh? What kind of dreams?"

"Um, like, you were standing in front of all of us, looking all cool and stuff, and you did this really heroic pose. You had on this red spandex outfit, the sun was setting behind you, and you were all, 'Behold! I am the greatest superhero of the age!' Then you swung this giant mace all around, and..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! What kind of freak do you think I am?! There's nothing even remotely related to your abilities in there! And what about *that* has ever come true, huh?"

Ayano, still lost in the dream of me going all medieval on our enemies' asses, snapped out of it. "Yeah," she muttered. "Maybe that was a different dream..."

"Dude, how much are you dreaming about me?"

I pictured multiple versions of myself in her mind, each wearing a different piece of fetish gear. It repulsed me, but not as badly as when Ayano blushed a bit more and said:

"Um, maybe a lot, I guess? But, I mean, you know how many eye abilities there are. It wouldn't be too weird if one of them let you see the future, right?"

"And you think *you* might have that one? I mean, nothing's gonna surprise me at this point, but..."

“Oh, no way! Mine’s totally not like that!”

She made a big X with her arms to drive home the point.

“Then none of what you’re saying even makes sense! Quit trying to justify all those weird visions of me in your mind. At least strip the spandex off my body.”

“Awww! But if I do that, then you wouldn’t look cool and heroic at all!”

“Huh? So what do you even need *me* for, then?”

This was tiring me out. ...*Ugh, and now I’m remembering my conversations with Ene.* Ayano utterly exhausted me sometimes. It was like she constantly talked just for the sake of talking. None of it ever bore any fruit...and even now, when I was dead and all, this kind of arguing made me shiver in fear.

At least now, we weren’t talking *total* nonsense to each other. Even over here, this girl was shouldering a huge role in the fight over on the other world. In fact, something she’d said just now stuck in my mind a bit. I tentatively opened my mouth, praying this topic would actually go somewhere.

“Hey, you said that your ability doesn’t let you see the future or anything, right?”

“Um, yeah. Correct.”

“So what kind of ability *did* you get?”

...Silence.

“...Ohh! Right! I need to tell you about that!”

Suddenly Ayano shot to her feet, almost sending her chair flying to the floor.

“Hyah!” I spat out in surprise as the sheer momentum of her movement made me fall backward. My head beat against the ground. Seriously, if we weren’t in the Kagerou Daze already, she’d be guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

“Ahh! Sorry, sorry! So about my ability...”

“W-wait a second! You’re going too fast! At least let me put my seat back up.”

I scrambled back to my feet and put my desk back in order. Here I was, just trying to have a decent conversation, and already I was out of gas.

“Okay now?”

“Yeah,” I said, composing myself.

“So, um, it’s probably better if I start by telling you what happened when I first got in here. The Kagerou Daze.”

“Sure. Can you tell it to me so it’ll make sense?”

“N-not really...but I’ll try.”

*Great. That’s the spirit. Let’s hear it.*

“So up on that roof that day... You know, when I kinda did *that...*”

“...Whoa. Don’t just put it like that. It’s not like you were having lunch up there.”

“Oh, come on, I was trying to be nice with this! Just shut up and let me talk!”

She gave a light slap on the desk to emphasize her point. Oops. Made her angry. Better keep quiet for now.

“So, like, right after I entered the Kagerou Daze...I ran into this girl named Azami.”

...Azami. The woman who had created all these abilities in the first place—and the first victim of “clearing” and its schemes. I didn’t know what had happened to Azami herself once her abilities got caught by everyone else; was she still conscious and staying here in the Kagerou Daze? I couldn’t imagine Ayano was lying about it—if she said she had met her, I figured she really had.

“She was in, like, really bad shape. She managed to keep her spirit alive in the world with the power of ‘opening eyes,’ which she wound up giving to Takane, but with that gone, it was like the end of her rope.”

“Yeah... So that’s when Enomoto became Ene, huh?”

“Right, right. And, man, Takane, you know... She’s, like, this total ball of energy now, isn’t she?”

I don’t know if it was out of respect for her or whatever, but Ayano seemed to be choosing her words as carefully as possible. Still, she couldn’t hide the nervous twitching around her lips too well. *Don’t worry, Enomoto. Your*

*underclassman friend's still being considerate toward you.*

"...But anyway!" she said, spotting my grin. "Azami lost her body and her spirit, but she still had one ability left."

She brought a finger to her eyes.

"That's the one I got."

"The last one? I don't know about that one."

The ten abilities recorded in Azami's diary had already been pretty well named and described. All except one. She'd only covered nine in that text—the ones that had been spread around to people in the outside world. In other words, Ayano had the *tenth* ability. The one the diary didn't mention.

She tapped her finger against her head a few times. "This ability is kind of a weird one," she gingerly began. "It works, like, a little differently from the others...or I guess you could say it comes straight from Azami's heart. Like, it was created by her desire to...you know, bring something across? You see what I mean?"

"No. Not at all."

"...Yeah, I'll bet." Ayano sighed deeply—but if anything, this was a better effort than usual for her. "But... Oh! How about I just do this?"

The next moment, Ayano's dark-brown eyes began to take on a deep shade of orange, as if sucking up the evening sunlight. She was activating something, which I had seen many times before, but there was none of the intimidation I tended to feel from the other abilities.

"This is probably the easiest way to explain it to you, I think...but hopefully you'll be willing to accept it."

Her words, the movement of her lips, made me nod and press her for more.

"...All right. Thanks. I'm gonna pass it on to you, okay?"

The sun-like hue dancing in her eyes began to burn more intensely. I left my body to them and their innate attraction.

"She called these...‘favoring eyes.’"

\*

...I was in a dark place.

There was no left or right, no up or down.

There was no cold, nor any heat I could feel.

It was that kind of place.

*“...You’re going to disappear, Azami.”*

The voice rang out in the darkness. I chased after it, but couldn’t see whom it belonged to.

Then, another voice. It crept up to me, getting close, and the words began to pile on top of each other.

*“Yeah. I’m glad I got to speak to someone like you, in the end. I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything for any of you. I really am.”*

*“Oh, stop crying. I’m trying to hold back right now, too...”*

*“I-I’m not crying. I just have a runny nose. Besides...my memories have already reached your heart.”*

*“...Yeah. They sure have. I’ve received them all, Azami. So I’m not lonely here anymore.”*

*“Oh? I am relieved to hear that. Perhaps these memories may serve to help you in the future. My memories are not everything about myself, but...they represent everything I have lived through. They are precious to me.”*

*“They really are. Your memories... I feel like I understand them. Like I made them myself. You’ve really lived for a long time, Azami. You tried so hard.”*

*“...Ngh...snif...”*

*“Ahh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make you cry...”*

*“No, no. I... I just never even dreamed that someone would ever say that about me.”*

*“Aw, you’re such a crybaby, Azami. Don’t worry! I... I swear I won’t forget about them...”*

*“Look at you. You are crying now, too, aren’t you?”*

*"Hee...hee-hee-hee. Guess we're together on this."*

*"We are. Together."*

*"....."*

*"...It's almost time. Before I go...I will give this to you."*

*"...Nph..."*

*"This is my heart...my 'favoring' ability. The power to convey thoughts, and memories, to other people. I know you can make use of it..."*

*"...All right... I'll try to. And I'll make sure I can convey it all to her, too. So... sleep well, Azami."*

*"....."*

*"....."*

*"....."*

*"...Ngh...wehhhhh..."*

\*

*"...You back with me? Did all that make it to you?"*

*"...Yeah, it did."*

The crimson shades of the classroom softly took me in again as my consciousness sprang back to life. I now had the clear memory of Ayano and Azami talking to each other. It hadn't been shown to me; she hadn't told me about it—but it was there, as if I had been hanging out with them in the scene.

*"...Are you crying, Shintaro?"*

*"No. I just have a runny nose."*

Ayano studied my face for a little bit. Then, realizing what I was referring to, she smiled, a little embarrassed.

*...Ayano.*

The environment she'd been exposed to during her life had been so impossibly tough, it made me want to puke. She'd lost her poor mother; she'd had her father, the only blood relation she had left, transform the way he did;

her siblings and high school classmates had been taken hostage. It just made your stomach churn. So she threw herself off that roof and ended her life to plunge into the Kagerou Daze.

As Kano had conjectured, she did it because she had connected her mother's notes with "clearing's" plan to collect the abilities and make a Medusa for itself. As she saw it, if she could obtain one of the ten abilities, she'd be able to put a stop to it.

When I'd run into the Mekakushi-dan, when I'd talked with them and gone over all their pasts, I finally knew what was motivating Ayano's behavior. And it filled me with an anger I felt helpless to do anything about.

So I fought, using that anger to drive me. I wanted to take this crappy world—treating us like idiots when we're just trying to live; pushing all this absurd nonsense upon us; trying to take away our *futures*—and beat the shit out of it.

And now, here we are.

I haven't saved anybody. I haven't engineered any miracles. The strategy I somehow whipped up out of nowhere wound up rescuing none of them.

The only thing I *did* accomplish was becoming a conversational partner to one of my dead friends. It was all so pointless.

Still, though. Dying like this—letting my flesh rot—still wouldn't let me escape from the truth. In the other world, outside the Kagerou Daze, the Mekakushi-dan was still fighting against its foes.

Just because I was dead didn't mean I could just declare it to be over. And it looked like I wasn't the only one with that thought.

Ayano and I looked at each other, trying to affirm that we were of the same mind.

"...We gotta carry this out to the end, don't we?" she said.

"Yeah. This sure ain't over yet."

The resolve in Ayano's voice confirmed something with me. I suppose both of us were predicting the exact same ending to this battle.

From the very start, this fight had come with some preconditions. The enemy

was an ability in itself, and therefore immortal. Only a Medusa could rule over it, and none of those existed in this world.

With an undefeatable foe like that, as long as Marie didn't become that Medusa and neutralize the threat, our fates were sealed. We could run and buy as much time as we wanted; sooner or later, all the ability holders would be massacred.

But if we wanted Marie to play that Medusa role, we had to pluck all the abilities from their current homes. And that meant taking their lives.

In other words, from the get-go, there was absolutely no way this fight could ever have involved all of us surviving.

It was a hopelessly cruel story, but that was the truth behind this battle. The only way we could step up and declare that we'd won was by ensuring none of us survived. Everyone in the Mekakushi-dan understood that, and they threw themselves into the fight anyway.

...If only I could have known about this faster. Earlier than I did. It was just too late to gnash my teeth over it now. By this point, we were just a few inches away from the end of it all.

But there was one way. Just a single step we could take. Maybe. And as long as that existed, no matter how meaningless it was, we *had* to fight. Because if that one thing was still in our hands, there might not be *any* winning this—but there wouldn't be any *losing*, either. After all, “winning” wasn't even the goal here.

“...There's one thing I left on the other side,” I said as I took my phone out of my hoodie pocket and put it on the desk.

Ayano gave it an odd look. “I don't think that's going to work from here...”

“Yeah. It wouldn't, normally. But we got someone on the other side who ain't normal at all.”

It was way beyond a do-or-die bet. Maybe not even a one-in-a-million chance. But it was still there. Even if it paid off, it didn't mean our enemy was a goner. All I hoped for, as I played my final hopes upon her, was that we could take it into overtime.

"You know, even if I had thought about that, I'd never try it, normally."

Ayano, picking up on my plan, gave me a wry grin.

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe I'm getting too abnormal for my own good."

This wasn't so we could live, or fight, or whatever. Wagering our lives on simply having this *choice* to work with must seem crazy to the outside observer.

I ruminated over the silly goal we'd put up for ourselves back at the hideout. That childish, stupid goal of never giving up on our future.

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 2- (3)

I couldn't say how long I wandered around, no particular destination in mind.

My mind was still a mess, but the cacophony of voices in my head had finally settled down. I no longer heard all their thoughts; it was just a slight undercurrent of static now. Somewhere far away, I could hear the distant echoes of a pop song—the music accompanying the fireworks show, I quickly realized.

Without turning back toward it, I finally sat down by the levee. I must have covered a lot of distance.

The babbling of the river in the darkness made the solitude all the starker for me. The dark-gray concrete was cold against my body, making me feel even more helpless.

“Marie...”

I couldn't have possibly acted any more stupidly. Marie had been looking forward to this so much, but now it had all gone to waste. The fireworks and everything else.

I'd *thought* I had come to terms with this. I had been prepared to forget about everything, for Marie's sake. But try as I might, I just couldn't keep my head cool. Not with their names listed on-screen like that.

It must have hurt her, me latching onto her arm like that. I couldn't guess what she must have been feeling when she activated “hiding.”

...Well, no. I could easily guess. Whenever Kido or I activated our abilities, it was always because we were anxious. And that's exactly what my hand had done to her back there. It had scared her.

“...!”

I couldn't keep the tears from streaming down. I had no right to see her.

It was back on that day, the day when the Kagerou Daze swallowed up my

friends and our enemy. It left only me and Marie. She was unconscious, and I have only vague memories of carrying her back to the hideout.

My memory only kicks back into motion when Marie woke up, looked at my face, and flashed a big smile.

It was right after this epic battle where we lost our friends, and she was smiling. I couldn't imagine. It made me realize that Marie had lost her memories. I couldn't tell how much she remembered and how much she didn't, but at the very least, any recollections she'd had of this most recent fight were completely gone.

I wondered whether I should tell her. It was a thorny question. She had lost friends that were irreplaceable to her. They had sacrificed themselves, really, so we could live. We would have to *live* with that, from now on.

...There was just no way I could tell her.

I only had to think about it for a moment. One moment was all it took for her frightened, tearful visage to flash into my mind. It scared me. I had to throw it all away and keep that smile of hers with us.

There was no need for her to recall a past that she had forgotten about anyway. If she did, I was sure it'd crush her. There was just no way I could make her go through that.

So I just glossed over it all. Right up to today.

I watched her favorite cartoons with her. Whenever there was some scary show on TV, we both sat on the edge of our seats, anticipating what would pop up next. When I found out about a new restaurant nearby that got good reviews, I splurged on it a little with her. She wouldn't eat carrots, so I ate half of them for her.

She was this innocent, unknowing girl, and I kept my eyes squarely focused on her. All my thoughts were about her. I didn't want to give her a single shred of sadness.

The city lights reflected off the river's surface, shining like a starry night. Each one of those lights represented somebody's life, the way they lived it—and as I thought about that, it just seemed so grossly, viscerally real to me.

Everybody has a little darkness in their hearts that they foster, glossing over it as they live out their lives. Their lips might say “yes,” but their hearts say “no.” Their lips say “thank you” while their hearts say “just die already.”

For me, having heard all those voices for as long as I could remember, this was all completely normal. Nothing strange about it. All the people in the world, living these incoherent lives. As beautiful as the world might look, just peel off a single layer of it, and it was a stagnant pit of hell.

...I should know. I was fleeing from all the “voices” the world had for me when I first ran into that girl. Just like today.

It all started that day because the voices from the people passing by on the street started sounding a lot like Kano to me. It was all exactly like him, so mean and disgusting, and it just drowned me in anxiety.

My family were all nice people. Kano, Kido, my big sister... I almost feel bad about how nice they were with me. That’s why I was so incredibly scared of the darkness lurking in all of their hearts.

*What if Kano actually hates me? What if my sister thinks I’m just a burden?*

The moment those thoughts entered my mind, it was like someone had untied the bag I kept my ability in. I couldn’t control it anymore.

In a single moment, a landslide of those awful, chiding voices swallowed me up. I couldn’t take them. Even when I ran back home, it didn’t let up a single bit. I ignored my family’s concerned questions and flew outside, running like mad.

I think it was the longest I had ever run at once. I ran, I ran, I ran...and eventually, I stopped hearing anyone’s voice.

By the time I noticed how deep I was in the mountains, far away from any human settlement, it was well into the night. I had no idea how to get back, nobody I could rely on. I was just stuck in the silent darkness...and I couldn’t have been more comfortable.

*That was when I heard that girl’s voice for the first time.*

It was huge shock to me, like a paintbrush of golden light was doing its work on the black sheet of darkness around me. There was no front or back to it, not

a single speck of mud or dust. It simply changed the world, her beautiful voice, and it filled my soul with the happiness to come, stealing my heart in an instant.

I ran toward it, dragging my aching legs forward, and right there in that house I found Marie.

Her light-pink eyes, framed against her soft, white hair, were as pure as jewels, reflecting me perfectly in the pupils. Then, even as young a child as I was, I realized: *I was born to protect this girl.*

From that point forward, she became the only thing on my mind.

But unlike her own fantasies, the world spread out before her was a cruel place. It was all a den of corrupted minds and swirling hatred. If someone as innocent as her ever stepped out into it, it would stain the pure canvas of her heart a hateful shade of black forever.

All I thought about was how I could become stronger for her. If it meant keeping her safe, I was happy to be just the storybook prince she wanted. I seriously thought that.

In this world, buried in the voices of the dark and corrupt, that was about the only reason I could find to keep on living.

Even when I heard the voice of “clearing” once it occupied my father—even when I learned it had set things up so my entire family, me included, was reported dead—Marie was all that occupied my head.

I couldn’t leave her alone. I absolutely refused to let her have any sad thoughts. And the more I thought that way, the more I began to neglect my family, my friends. My heart grew black, ugly, corrupted.

The night before our final battle, when I heard Kano’s shouting, I kept the facade going, bottling up what my heart wanted me to blurt out.

Kano was...a nice guy. Really. I wish I could’ve helped shoulder the burden of whatever he carried in his mind. He was kinder than anyone else; he knew what I thought more than anyone else. He just had an awkward way of acting on that sometimes. As siblings, we couldn’t have been much more alike.

But I even weighed *him* on the scales against Marie in my head.

And despite all that, I couldn't do anything in the end. I couldn't fight, I couldn't abandon her... I just kept running away, and now here I was.

That girl's smile meant everything to me. It was the only thing that brought me happiness. That was a proven fact in my mind. But now...

Now, the echoing of my own voice couldn't escape my ears. *I was wrong.*

Suddenly, a sentence dredged itself up from my mind. I cowered at it, and my own wretched self, and I couldn't stop crying.

"I'm sorry, Ene. I just can't do anything..."

During the final battle, when Azami summoned the Kagerou Daze to swallow up "clearing," I had been prepared to stake my life for the cause. Just like Kano and everyone else. It pained me to leave Marie and go off by myself, but all I could do was trust in Ene and the rest. I hoped they could find a way to save Marie for me.

But right after the Kagerou Daze appeared, I heard Ene's determined voice booming in my ears.

"It's all right. I'm going in. You're the only one who can protect her, aren't you?"

Why didn't I realize, right at that moment, that she meant those words for me?

I didn't realize that she gave her life for me until after it was all over, when I saw Kano's broken phone by my feet on the floor.

Driven by my memory, I took my phone out of my pocket. There was nothing but a picture of Marie, with the current time on top. No new messages from anyone, of course.

If I'd had the courage to fight, would something have changed? Would anything have gone differently, in this script to a tragedy I could barely even conceive of?

...No. I couldn't have done anything. I'm so weak that I couldn't even hold on to Marie's hand. No matter what I did, I'm sure it would have amounted to nothing.

I clenched the phone display with all my might, gritting my teeth.

*Why am I, of all people, going on about protecting Marie?*

I was coddled. Protected. I kept running and running. Of all the outrageous things I could have thought of! My friends, my family... They're all gone. No more voices left to hear.

I wanted to see Marie. I wanted to see my friends. They could hate me and scorn me all they liked. I just wanted to talk to them all, one more time...!

“...Are you crying?”

A voice.

“Are you okay? ...Are you lonely, by yourself?”

I could definitely hear Marie’s voice.

Confused, I stood up, looking intently at my surroundings. I couldn’t see Marie around me. Was that “hiding” in effect...? No. That voice had been...closer. Like I could almost touch her.

Why? What was going on...?

“S-Seto! I’m right here!”

I doubted my ears for a moment. Marie’s voice was coming from the phone in my hand. Shocked, I looked at the display.

“What?”

Marie was there, floating in the screen, just like Ene used to. I blinked helplessly at it, unable to speak.

“Ahh, you finally noticed! I’m sorry! Did I surprise you?”

“Y-yeah...?”

My mind still hadn’t caught up with this. My heart beat itself into a whirlwind. I couldn’t stop it. What I was seeing had to have been engineered by Ene’s ability.

Right now, counting her original “locking eyes,” Marie possessed four skills. It wasn’t like there was any ban on her using them, but...first “hiding,” and now

*this?*

“Marie, what are you...all of a sudden... Like, where’s your body?! You didn’t leave it somewhere, did you...?!”

“*Ah! Um, um, calm down, Seto! It’s all right; it’s...around, so...*”

Her face clouded a bit on-screen.

“Around where?! Let’s go right now! Tell me where...it...”

I was cut off by an intense, burning pain that spread across my body.

“*Let’s go*”? *Where do I get off saying that? Tricking Marie like this, making her forget about her own friends...* What would “meeting” her again accomplish? What could I even say to her?

Did I seriously think that keeping up this charade of lies, day in and day out, would *achieve* anything for her?

...I had known all along, really. I wasn’t any kind of prince at all. I couldn’t stop thinking about Marie, but I couldn’t forget about my friends, either. I was a monster, unable to make up my mind about anything.

It no longer mattered to me if it was too late. Maybe telling her would make her cry. But I didn’t want to dirty this girl’s mind with lies anymore.

“...Marie, listen to me. I want to tell you something.”

I couldn’t bear to look at her face. What did she think I was gonna say? How much time would it take to explain every piece of it to her? And when I was done, would she be willing to accept any of it?

*Marie doesn’t know a thing. I’m sure of it. She’s so pure and innocent. She needs me to protect her.*

...Yes. I believed all that, no matter how little I knew about her. Until she replied to me.

“...*I want to tell you something, too.*”

She spoke to me in a voice that I didn’t know.

“*So let’s go, Seto. Everybody’s waiting.*”

\*

I went up the stone stairway, one step at a time.

There wasn't any light in the hanging lanterns. All I could see, in the groves of trees on both sides of me, was darkness.

I was unable to hear Marie's voice on the phone. Unable to ask her much of anything.

The only sound was the repeated grinding of my feet against gravel on the steps. Even the commotion of the faraway fireworks was gone now. There wasn't the cry of a single insect, or any other creature. It was a silence I had only felt surrounding Marie's house when I was there.

Was it meant to keep people away? Or was there some other meaning to it? Either way, I began to vaguely realize that this was Marie's "hiding" at work.

In a silence that seemed to house nothing but death, I could only hear Marie's voice fade in and out in my mind.

She'd said she wanted to talk about something. That "everybody's waiting." I wondered if she knew something that I didn't...and why she wanted to tell me.

It was awful. I couldn't even guess at what it was. Maybe I thought, somewhere in my heart, that I knew absolutely everything about her. Seriously, a fool like me, being some royal savior for her. How presumptuous can you get?

*Everything's going to end today, I'm sure.* But despite that conviction I had, I couldn't even begin to guess what that "end" would bring.

Finally, I arrived.

I was at the open grounds of a Shinto shrine, and as the lack of sound indicated, it was deserted. But then I swallowed nervously, there on the stone path to the main building, as I spotted a figure of pure white ahead.

"...Why?"

I spotted her in an instant. It was Marie, turning to see me, and she had transformed right back to how she'd looked on that long-ago day. Those scales that covered her cheeks—and those eyes, red with burning blood. Her slitted, snakelike pupils narrowed, as if responding to my question.

"Thank you for coming. This was the best place I could find for this."

She spoke just like Marie, but her usual timid body language was all gone now.

Before I could ask what was going on, she interrupted, anticipating the question. “Was it all right to use ‘stealing’? I’m sorry; I was so scared that I couldn’t keep ‘hiding’ under wraps...”

I couldn’t hide my surprise at all of this. Had she ever used the names of those abilities before? Sensing my confusion, Marie didn’t wait for me to offer a reply.

“...I’ll go first. I have to apologize to you about something. I knew I wanted to say it at some point, but I just couldn’t before.”

Marie dolefully averted her eyes. I couldn’t even nod at this confession, so unexpected it was.

“Ever since that day...when the battle ended, I’ve been lying to you.”

The mention of the word “battle” was like a shot to the heart. A word that I had deliberately avoided from that day to this one.

“N-no... The ‘battle’? Marie, did you remember...?”

“I remembered it all this time. I haven’t forgotten anything. I smiled, back there...and I guess you took that the wrong way.”

Marie’s face took on an even grimmer look. The expression, and her words, effectively threw my brain into a blender.

She hadn’t forgotten anything? That was...crazy. That couldn’t be.

Marie had smiled at me in the hideout, after we got back from the fight. One look at that, and I was positive that she didn’t remember a thing. If she did, why did she *smile*? Uncontrollable sobbing would be one thing, but *smiling*? That couldn’t be...

...*Smiling*?

A single thought came into my mind, making the shallow assumptions I had put so much trust in collapse.

No. Marie hadn’t smiled because she was happy. There was another meaning to it. No...

“...You did it because you didn’t want me to be worried?”

Marie nodded lightly, giving me a weak smile. “Yeah... I mean, Seto, you looked so sad back then. If I started crying, too, you’d be even sadder, wouldn’t you?”

A soundless wind blew through the empty shrine grounds. Faced with the truth, my body drained itself of energy, as if someone had cut my strings. My legs, losing their support, collapsed, both my knees falling to the ground. I felt a dull pain from them, but my mind was so clouded that I couldn’t even process *that* normally.

This girl had been helping *me* this whole time.

She’d smiled on that day so she could make *me* smile. She’d kept pretending she had lost her memories so I wouldn’t be sad anymore.

Had knowing her friends were dead crushed her? Not at all. She’d accepted that, and then she’d stepped up to keep *me* safe.

Did I even get a full look at her face? Did I even listen to her?

Was that shopping trip, and her offer to help with the chores, just part of her fervent effort to support my fake life?

Unable to respond, just standing there without a word, I listened to Marie go on.

“But I started thinking that this couldn’t go on. You tried so hard to forget about everything, and it was all my fault. So I thought about it a little...with him.”

Marie pointed a finger into the air, above my head and behind me. I turned around, still kneeling on the ground—and found a fellow member, someone who had just made it up the shrine steps. He wore a sky-blue shirt, a vest, and a pair of shorts—just as he had on the day of the battle.

“Hibiya...”

He scratched a cheek at my feeble greeting. “I wasn’t trying to trick you or anything. She just said I should keep quiet about it.”

“Thank you for coming, Hibiya. I-it’s okay. I already told him.”

I valiantly tried to keep up with their conversation. Why was Marie in contact with Hibiya? Of course I knew why. Because she had “opening” at her disposal.

Marie remembered everything about that battle. She recalled how bravely they’d all fought, how much they’d protected us, how hard they’d tried to carry out our plan.

We’d sworn never to give up on the future, and Marie had never forgotten about that. She was far, far stronger than I gave her credit for. She wasn’t afraid of dirtying her mind at all.

Ever since that day, she must have been using her abilities to form a plan with Hibiya. Amid the pain of losing her friends, and the pressure of having their futures in her hands, she’d never revealed any of it to me for a moment. And Hibiya had worked with her, driven by the same thought. I’m sure his eyes were just as focused on the future the whole time. That was why he was here.

*...Ahh, I can’t stand it. I can’t give them a single word. I gave up everything for Marie, unable to do anything else. Me. The only one. And here’s Marie, fighting fiendishly against all this despair...!*

Kneeling there, in the middle of the shrine, I let out a long, deep sob. It went beyond shame or dishonor. I just felt so pathetic, unable to reward them for any of their efforts. I just wished someone would judge me for it. Kill me for being a coward. *Please. Anyone...*

“...Don’t be so scared. It’s all right.”

A voice rang in the darkness.

“You can’t berate yourself for this, Seto.”

*No, Marie. Stop.*

“Nobody’s hating you for this, Seto. I know you were fighting for us.”

*I have no right to feel your embrace. There’s no way I could receive your forgiveness.*

“Thank you for protecting me this whole time. Thank you for thinking so much of me.”

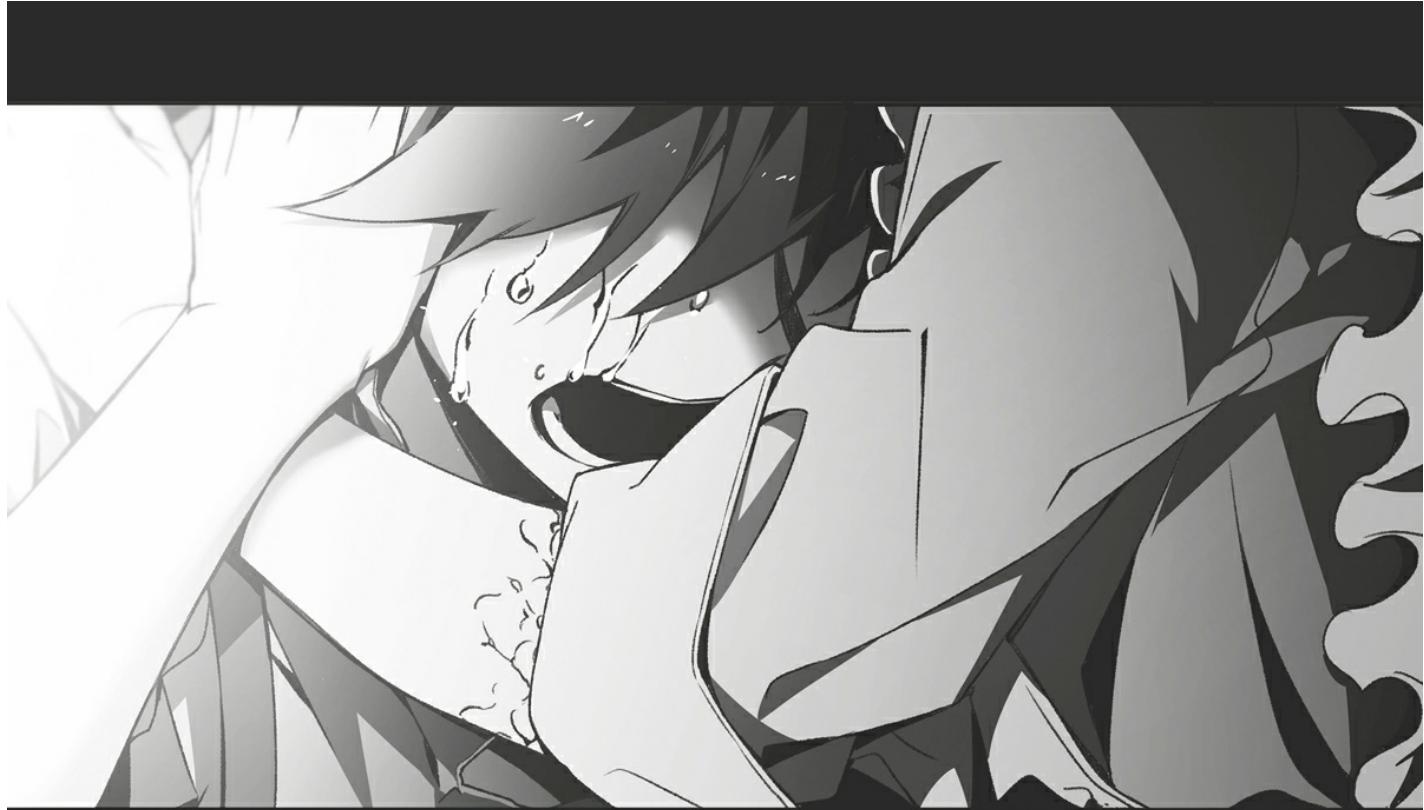
That voice, unchanged from that day, was now destroying my world. I’d

dedicated my whole life to that voice. And now... I...

“Thanks to you, I’ve come to love this whole world.”

Opening my eyes, I set them upon the most beautiful tears in the world. Whether you compared them to light, or a flower, or hope, there weren’t enough words in the world to describe how priceless they were.

I just wanted to keep her safe. I wanted to get her out of this endless summer.



If God didn't have anything beyond this summer for us, I wanted to create it with her.

Ever since that moment, I was hopelessly in love with this girl.

"Um, Seto? Do you think we'll have a good view of the fireworks from here?"

My unattainable hope melted into the summer night.

Here, in this place without sound, without any light to be found...

Her warmth was the only thing I was sure of.

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 9-

Having the whole story get wrapped up when I take my eyes off him for a moment... I really think Shintaro's gotten off, like, *super* easy, you know?

I mean, come *on*, I had to go through that same story, like, dozens of times.

Plus, I think Takane only gave the story a serious effort the first couple of times or so. You know how much she hates repeating herself. I'm glad to see she's gotten a little more cheerful, though. I kind of liked how snippy she used to be, too, but you know what? I like Ene, too. All that frenetic energy.

The thought crossed my mind as I carried on with my sullen, barren existence.

“...Um, you know you’re saying all that out loud, right?”

“Oh, was I? Sorry. I guess being here is kinda numbing my senses, huh?”

“Nice excuse...”

We were inside Takane’s Kagerou Daze, sitting on top of a pile of rubble in the ruins of a city, and our conversation was just as unproductive as ever. She was next to me, in a blue hoodie and black skirt, and she was just as miffed as usual.

“But, hey, why do you have to be in such a bad mood around me? ‘Cause when everyone else was around, you were all like, ‘Oooh, *maaaaster*’...”

“Daaahhh! Shut up, shut up! Ugh, just *talking* to you is exhausting.”

“You say that, but it’s not like you can really *get* tired in this world—”

“See? That! *That’s* what exhausts me! You see?!”

Between that and our other exchanges, I was actually starting to enjoy things. I knew it was a fake world and everything, but just getting to see Takane left me pretty satisfied.

“Oh, but did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“We’re gonna get a phone call pretty soon.”

“Oh right. Guess we better get going, huh?”

A short silence. I looked quizzically at Takane. She was still pouting. “This world,” she began, a bit forlorn. “Doesn’t it seem like a bugged-out video game to you? It’s like anything can happen inside it. It rubs me the wrong way.”

...Ah. *I get it now.* I crafted a smile for her.

“You always were a sore loser, weren’t you, Takane?”

She crossed her arms at the jab, sniffing in her detached way. “Of course I am! You think it’s fun to keep losing all the time? I keep playing until I win. What about you?”

I gave an unhesitating grimace to her world-beating smile. I guess I pick up on other people’s habits pretty easily. *Her* habits anyway.

“Well, what do you think? Next time, for sure...”

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 2- (4)

“Okay, I’m calling.”

Legs spread out, looking kind of uncomfortable, Hibiya began concentrating his mind on Kisaragi’s phone. “He has to pose like this,” Marie explained, “or else he can’t focus enough to connect.”

We watched him for a few moments. Then, out of nowhere, Hibiya screamed “*Big Bro!!*” and handed the phone to me.

“*Huff...huff...* We’re connected...”

It was a pretty goofy act Hibiya put on, but then, there was nothing average about what he was doing.

Over the past little while, Hibiya had been developing his “focusing” skills to make them work over mobile phone waves. That allows him to connect directly to phones in the Kagerou Daze—way out of range usually, to say the least—and speak with people on the other side.

“I swear, that girl thinks up the craziest things. We pulled it off that one time, but she didn’t explain anything to me about it... I had to spend, like, a whole week shouting ‘Big Bro’ at random.”

The apparent intention was to help the technologically illiterate Hibiya make the call by having him use voice recognition to call a number from the address book. Apparently Ene, in the midst of explaining this, abridged the story a little too much.

“Hey, you want him to hear you? You’re gonna be calling the guy himself in a second...”

In that battle, we lost most of our gang to the Kagerou Daze. I’d never expected to hear from them again. The idea of just calling them up on the phone was something that, honestly, still didn’t seem real to me.

“So,” Hibiya said, “are you gonna talk to him? About what we’re doing now?”

It's, like, just as I told you."

"...All right."

\*

Finally, I took the phone from Hibiya. My call's destination was on the screen, along with a clock counting the seconds of our chat.

He must have anticipated it'd wind up like this. He'd known that we—the survivors, the people they'd sacrificed themselves for—would see that we had a chance to choose a future for ourselves, and thus hesitate to act.

I gave Marie a glance. Noticing this, she gave me a nod back.

"It's all right. I'm just like you, Seto. I want to live for tomorrow...with everybody else."

Her eyes were strong, unwavering, as they looked straight ahead. I was no longer lost. I put the phone to my ear, ready to talk about my feelings.

Once, I tried to forget about my friends. My friends had risked their lives in battle, and I didn't want to desecrate that effort anymore. They could berate me all they wanted, and we wouldn't have any defense to turn to.

But Marie knew all that, and she still let *me* be the one to tell everyone on the other side what had happened. The answer was clear now. The question was, would he—would they—be willing to forgive us...?

"...Hello? Can you hear me?"

Ever so slowly, I opened my mouth.

Apparently, he had already used this method to speak with Marie once before. So he must've known. He knew full well that I'd tried to put all my friends behind me, once.

"...Seto?"

Shintaro's calm voice made me tense up even further. I ignored my racing heart and tried to stick to the script.

"Y-yes... Shintaro, I have to apologize to you. After the battle...I tried to forget all about you guys."

The sound disappeared. The silence lasted for less than a second, but it may as well have been hours to me.

*“...Yeah. Well, you probably figured you were doing it for Marie’s sake or something, right? I guess I can’t blame you.”*

“...Um, what? I mean...yeah, but...?”

He hadn’t changed a single bit from how he used to be. He was cold, he was blunt, and he had an insight into the depths of people’s minds that beat anybody else’s in the world. But I couldn’t depend on his kind words forever. What I’d done couldn’t be *that* easily forgiven. I mean, look at me.

*“So what do you think you’re gonna do? ...Because everybody over here’s ready to leave it in you guys’ hands.”*

...Everybody?

*“By the way, are you...? Hey! Wait a sec! Stop pushing me! I told you, we’ll all go in order... Dude, give it back!”*

I could hear a group of people griping at each other in the background. Then:

*“H-hello? Kousuke?! Can you hear me? It’s your big sister! Ngh, I’m—snif—I’m so sorry... Coming over here all by myself...”*

“...Sis?! Whoa, this is too sudden...Uh... Huhh?!”

*“Ooh, wait a sec! I’m gonna pass it on to the next person! Um, talk to you later, Kousuke!”*

*“You swiped the phone just so you could say that? Hey!”*

More shouting and carrying on. But all the voices were familiar to me.

*“Hey, Seto. It’s me. Kido... Sorry I couldn’t see you over there.”*

It was that husky voice, one I had spent ages living with. Even over there, it remained as reserved and monotonous as always—and even after she’d died, she was being so nice to me.

“K-Kido,” I said, my voice going faint. “I’m sorry, I-I’ve been so bad to all of you...”



*“...Whoa! Agh! C’mon, Sis! I’m used to talking like this! It’s fine! ...Oh, sorry! My sister, not yours!”*

*“Dahh! Come on, let me go up next! You already talked with him a little, master! Sshhh!!”*

*“Kousuke! Do you remember me? We had some flan together once? ...Oh, you better talk to Shuuya too after this! He’s too embarrassed to get on the phone, but I’ll bring him around later, okay?”*

*“Ha-ha-ha! Seto, can you hear me? Lemme talk to Marie once you’re done, okay? I wanna chat with her for a little while!”*

*“Guys, shut the hell up! Shoo! Go away!”*

*...What was that all about?*

It was sort of how...like, it’s New Year’s Day, so you call your family out in the country and they all try to come on the line at once.

*But we kind of have some serious stuff to talk about, don’t we? Are we even prepared for this at all?*

*“Whew... Seto, you still on? It’s Shintaro.”*

*“Oh! Good. I was wondering how long we’d be able to keep this up...”*

Fatigue bled through Shintaro’s voice now. Guess things were just as exhausting for him in *that* world, too.

*“I swear, nobody here ever listens to a word I tell them. But...sorry about that, Seto. Didn’t mean to bother you.”*

He let out a large sigh. I didn’t mind it. At least he seemed to be looking out for me. He could read people’s minds that way. He’d seen how I was troubled, hesitant, so he’d let me hear everyone else over there before continuing. *I bet that’s what that was.*

*“So...uh, I guess you can hear how things are over here. Nobody’s got a grudge against you or anything. So no regrets, okay? We just want to hear your take on all this.”*

Then he made one final confirmation with me.

*“What do you want to do with your future?”*

“...Seto?”

I looked over at Marie. She had taken my hand, her crimson eyes upon me. I gently squeezed hers.

“Well, what do you think? Our future’s gonna be...”

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 10-

...He handed it to me. After I *told* him not to.

It's not like we had anything else to talk about, at this point. I had no interest in hearing his voice. This sucks. It sucks so much, I don't even know where to start griping at him about it, but, like...it just *suuuuuuuuuucks*.

And what's with all these people? As old as they are, calling themselves the "Mekakushi-dan"? Are their heads on all right? They asked me to join them, I said no, and they kept on bugging me, over and over... Especially that *really* annoying one with the blue hair. What is *with* that dude? Ugggh, it pisses me off so much.

At least this world isn't all bad. As pissed off as I am, it's not tiring me out at all.

Though, you know, it was even worse when he was over here.

Every single day, I had to see him die in assorted ways—dozens, hundreds, thousands of times. Ahhh, I hate even having to *think* about it. And plus—I mean, look at him. I go through the trouble of helping him out, and then he's all like "I gotta save them" over on the other side. How stupid can you get?

I am *sooo* pissed off about all this.

I've thought up, like, a thousand ways my life could've gone, but no *way* did I expect it to end like this. I wish I could've at least gone into a nice school in the city, where there were a hundred cute guys I could have fun with, before I got married to the prince of a country somewhere and just goofed around for the rest of my life. I'm pretty surprised *that* didn't come true, either. I tell you, that other world's gonna seriously regret losing a sweet young girl like me.

Still, not like I could do much now. I was dead. You can't whip up something out of nothing—and I can't really want something that doesn't exist.

Though, you know, I guess life was pretty fun. My future didn't really matter

to me, but at least I didn't have to experience anything *too* weird. It wasn't bad.

*"...So how much longer are you gonna sit there, picking your nose? I'm trying to talk to you."*

The voice on the other end of the line sounded angry. This whole time, he had been all like "I'm sorry" and "I couldn't save you" and "I feel so worthless" and *uggghhhh*. I couldn't take any more of it.

...Still, I guess I'll let it slide today. He's this ugly, shrimpy, pathetic, worthless piece of crap, but at least I'm glad he's putting in an actual effort.

*...Ugghhh*, how long is he gonna keep on griping at me?! I should just hang up already. I never should've taken the phone.

...Oh right. I haven't told him one thing yet. This call wasn't really meant for me, but oh well—might as well mention this, too. Not like I'll be talking with him again, probably.

Let's hang up once I say it. I *so* want to.

*"...I love you, all right? So swear you'll come here to save me next time."*

## SUMMERTIME RECORD SIDE -NO. 7-

A lot of the time, you see people who look back on their lives and say “Boy, I’ve sure come a long way.” But rest assured, my friend: You haven’t gone anywhere *near* as far as I have. I mean, this is a whole ‘nother world.

I wish it could’ve been a sword-and-sorcery world with elves and big-breasted maids, though, at the very least. There isn’t enough high adventure to this place. Something that can get my soul soaring to the beat of my passion...

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Oh, just about my friends. Like, they were pretty nice guys.”

I was trying to act all cool and nihilistic, but Ayano just gave me a weird look and said “Hmm.” She must’ve seen right through it, with those downward eyebrows of hers.

Ayano and I were strolling down a promenade the Kagerou Daze had made.

Haruka had mentioned that the Kagerou Daze created scenery for us that reflected what was in each of our hearts, but it sure concocted a pretty boring-ass one for me. It was just the road I took to and from my high school. That’s it.

Looking back, I couldn’t think of anything particularly happy that had happened to me here, on the way home. In fact, if *this* was the number one scene of my life, the thing that summarized my years, then it was making me feel like I left a pretty bland-ass life behind.

I don’t know why, though, but Ayano seemed to like this setting. She was grinning the whole way. I swear, I’ll probably die before I understand what women are thinking about. Oh! But I guess I *did* die, didn’t I? Oops.

“...So I guess we decided to rewind it,” Ayano offhandedly said, kicking a pebble on the side of the path.

“Yep. I figured it’d end up like this, really.”

She passed another pebble to me. I took it and gave it a dropkick down the

road.

...We couldn't beat the "clearing eyes."

Not that it really felt that way to me, but being able to stop the world from unfairly regressing upon itself was, maybe, the same thing as saving the world. We could crow about it all we wanted to, though—it's not like anyone would believe us. If we couldn't prove it, it'd just sound like a bunch of fiction.

And even if they did, and we all got lauded as heroes for it...even *that* would be a big waste of effort. After all, the final decision we'd made—to rewind the world—was exactly what "clearing" had been trying to do this whole time.

That guy was gonna rewind this world sooner or later anyway. The idea that we should do it ourselves, that nobody was gonna know the difference anyway... Really, I couldn't think of a more awful plan. The world's going to go right back to zero, without anybody knowing about it, like we pressed some giant reset button. All of "clearing's" hopes and dreams—come to life.

"I mean," Ayano whispered, "was there even any...*purpose* to fighting it?"

I looked at her—and, as I'd expected, her face didn't betray much concern about the question.

"I think there was," I said as I kicked another pebble. "Because once we knew the world was gonna end, I think we all pretty much lost hope."

"Yeah... I guess. If we didn't know about it... If we never noticed... It would've just rewound anyway."

"Maybe you'd think the battle was meaningless if you didn't know the world was going to end. But we *did* know that, right? So I think—to us, at least—there *was* a point to it."

The pebble bounced into the air and rolled into the gutter.

"...How many times have we talked about this?" Ayano laughed, as if expressing the ridiculousness of it all.

"Probably a few hundred times by now." I grinned along with her. "Funny how we never get bored of it."

We continued walking, toward a setting sun that never quite made it all the

way down. No matter how many days, how many years we walked, I was sure we'd never reach our destination.

"You know," I added to break the silence, "I bet 'clearing' didn't want to disappear at all. It had its own consciousness...but it was still just an ability. If it could make a wish come true, it'd disappear, right?"

"Probably, yeah. That's why it tried to flip the hourglass on the world so the wish could stay alive. The longer it didn't come true, the longer it'd survive."

"Right. So...probably, if you ask me, we've fought this battle hundreds of times already. Thousands of times. And every time, we just hit the rewind button on the world. The story wouldn't add up if we didn't."

Ayano stopped. "Did...did 'clearing' say that to you?"

I gave a mischievous grin at her concerned face. "Ooh, I like that idea. A friend... Someone that it took over."

"Look, I know this is the end of it, but I really don't want to go treading into dangerous territory like that."

She puffed out her cheeks. I felt a little bad for making that joke.

"Just kidding, just kidding," I said, strolling onward. Ayano joined me, making sure her pace matched mine.

"Kind of rare for you, Shintaro. Using the word 'friend' like that."

"Oh? Yeah... Maybe you're right."

"So, um... What about me? Am I...a friend?"

The evening sun still hadn't set, but the end of summer was definitely near. I wasn't sure if I'd remember this feeling until the next one came along. I was sure the memory would escape me, but—for some reason—I had this weird dream that I couldn't possibly forget it. It seemed like such a sure thing.

I won't forget about this battle.

I won't forget about the people I ran into.

And whatever it is that I swear I won't forget, I *won't*. Even if I die trying.

Ayano prompted me for an answer.

"Well, who knows?" I listlessly replied, continuing to walk.

## MARIE'S IMAGINARY WORLD

I came across the strangest of stories.

In it, I was a princess who was all alone, living in solitude.

Then, one day, a little prince came along. "It's all right," he said. "You don't need to be afraid anymore." Then he brought me outside.

The world was full of all kinds of people. Soon enough, I was on a journey with lots of new friends.

They all kept arguing with each other, their eyes turning bright red and things—but they were always laughing, too. I laughed with them, a lot.

I was a princess without a beautiful dress to wear, but traveling through this world I admired so much made me very, very happy.

But during our travels, this evil snake appeared. We fought it, but we lost. That was the only really frustrating part of it.

So I made a promise to the prince.

"The world's going to end," I promised him, "but next time, I swear we're going to travel together again."

On the last day before the world ended, the two of us saw a large flower, a symbol of our promise.

The magical flower, lit up in the night sky, was larger than anything I had seen before. It was so beautiful, I could never forget about it.

What kind of wonderful world will the next one be?

What kind of mysteries are waiting for us in the next story?

No matter what kind of world it is, I'm sure I'll be happy.

Happy, as long as I can see you there again.

I know I'll be.



## AFTERWORD

### **Where Your Eyes Don't Go**

Good to see you again. Jin here.

Once again, over a year has passed since the last volume was published. I know, I know, so worthless of me every time...seriously... *Sorry* (half shouted)!!

So, hopefully you have enjoyed *Kagerou Daze VIII -Summer Time Reload-*.

There might be some brash rebel kids who decided to read this afterword ahead of the book, so I'll try not to comment on the story too much. But let's go into it a little anyway.

I know I've written things like "This was really hard to write; I started having bloody stools" in every afterword so far, but—as expected—writing this one was this awesomely, crushingly difficult ordeal. Bloody stools weren't the half of it—something even redder (?) came out, actually.

First off, did you see how large the character lineup is for this? It's huge. Like, a whole, whole lot (he said, regressing back into kindergartener mode). The writing for this series started briskly enough—"I called them a *gang*," I thought, "so I ought to give it ten members"—but starting around Volume 2, it was like "Whoa, this is a crowd." In this one, they were *all* here, sidling up to each other. That was, like, "Gaaaahhhhhh!!" (How do you like my novelist's vocabulary there?)

It was difficult to narrow my focus to a single protagonist in this volume as a result, but I think Seto put in a pretty good effort.

Seto's ability to peek into the internal voices of people is—in the realm of *Kagerou Daze*, a look into young people's encounters and the stories behind them—kind of a joker card. Thanks to that, he's a character I've deliberately avoided digging too deeply into. But imagine! Him thinking of himself as a wild

card...Neat (back into kindergartener mode).

It's kind of funny to think about, but even though I wrote this, I still feel like I don't really understand these guys.

"They're *your* characters!" you might protest. And you're right. But I really don't feel that I created them at all. It's like I was in a constant conversation with them as I wrote. I expended a lot of effort getting to know them, and I had to think about what kinds of things *they* were thinking about the whole way. The result, I suppose you could say, is *Kagerou Daze*. Pretty funny story, really.

Anyway, this volume is the concluding novel of *Kagerou Daze*. That long, long summer has reached one of its potential closes.

As a lot of you know, way back in the day, I released a number of musical tracks on the Net under the Kagerou Project umbrella. These *Kagerou Daze* novels got their start when my publisher, listening to these tracks, suggested that I should put out a book.

I leaped at the offer at the time—I'll get to weave my tale in a book! I can't believe it!—but the writing process after that was a long procession of suffering. I couldn't write well. I couldn't bring across my ideas correctly. I received a lot of criticism. I was discouraged. And at one point, I was so distraught that I wasn't sure I could continue with it.

That I was able to write up to this point anyway is thanks to all my readers saying "I like *Kagerou Daze*." It might sound really cheesy when I put it like this, but they gave me a lot of courage. It's thanks to them that I wanted to keep going with this story—no matter how much people looked down on me or treated me as stupid.

I couldn't thank all of you enough. And the only way I can make up the difference is with this series itself. Once again, thank you very, very much.

...Oops! I'm almost out of space.

One more thing, then.

All the awkward "heroes" of this story are also the friends of the awkward *you* reading this book. So I hope you'll hang out with them somewhere else again. I'm sure they'd love to see you.

I'll see all of you again somewhere. Thanks very much for reading.

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

...And with all that pretend-serious stuff out of the way, *guess what* (said the kindergartener)? I'm already thinking about the next novel. Oh, not *Kagerou Daze*, I mean. The story of a new Mekakushi-dan.

Encountering new friends is always such a fresh and exciting experience, isn't it? I'll have to introduce them to you sometime soon.

Like, maybe next summer, for example.

THANK YOU

Whoa...

Shidu

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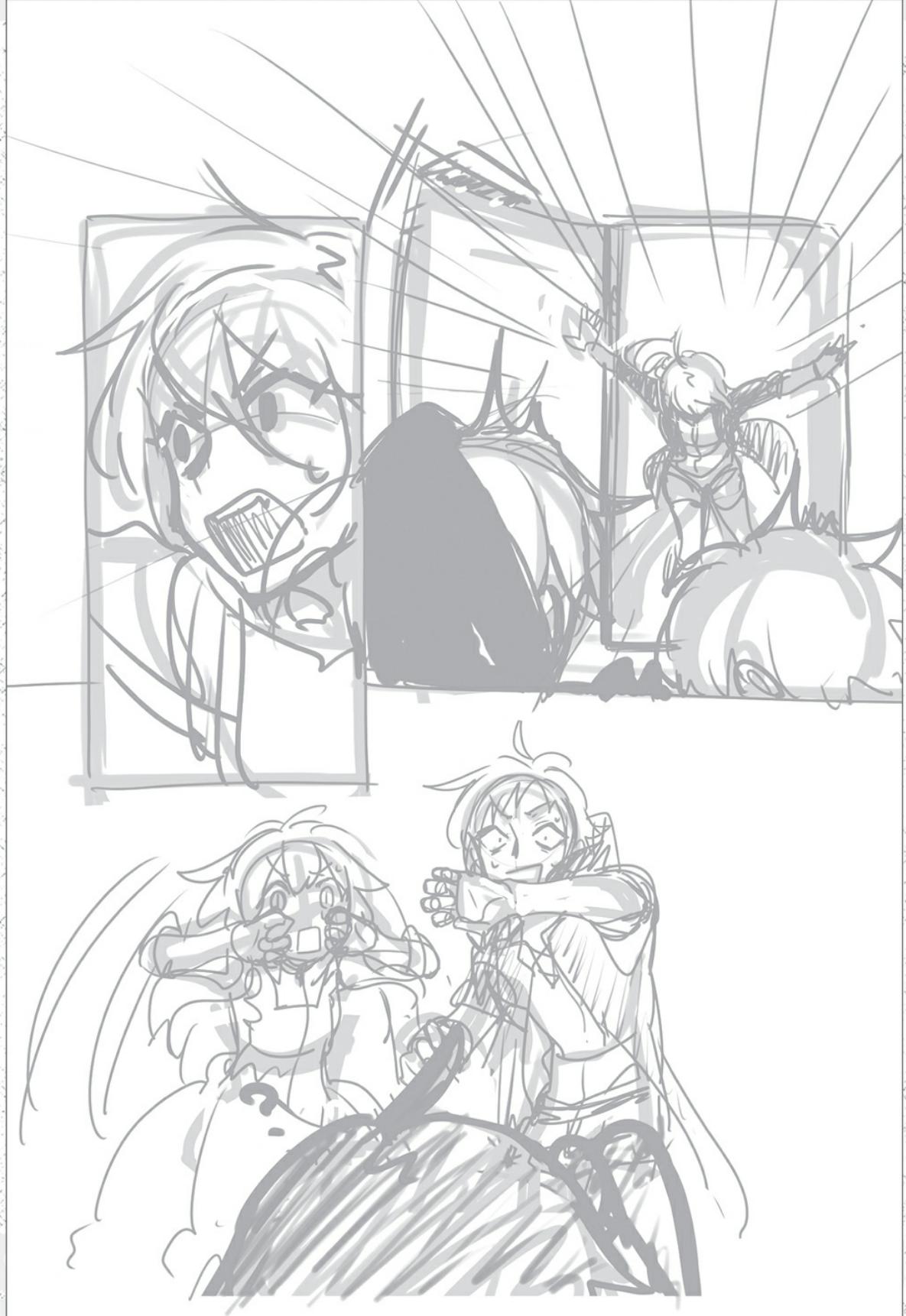
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**Frontispiece Sketch**



**Illustration 1 Sketch**

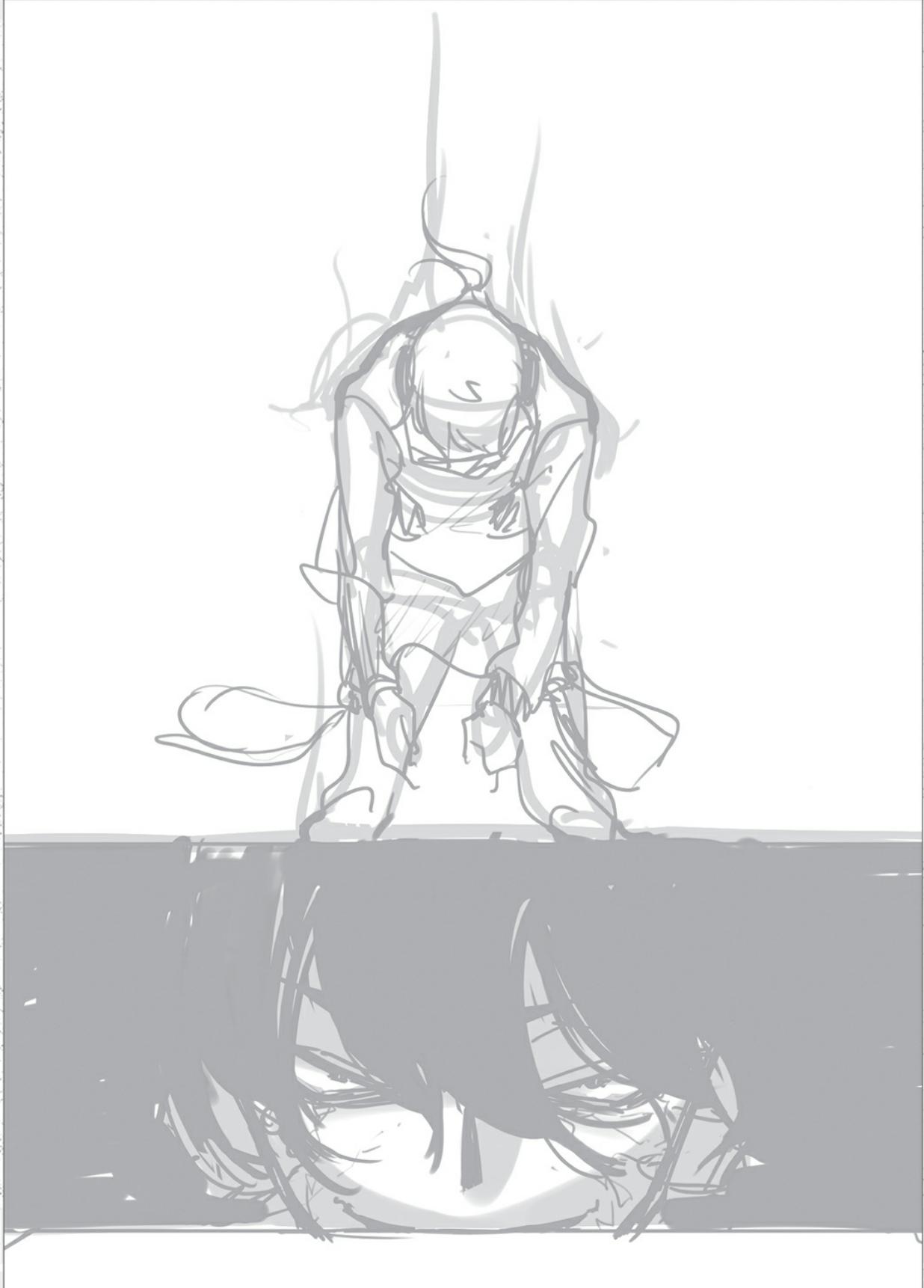
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**Illustration 2 Sketch**

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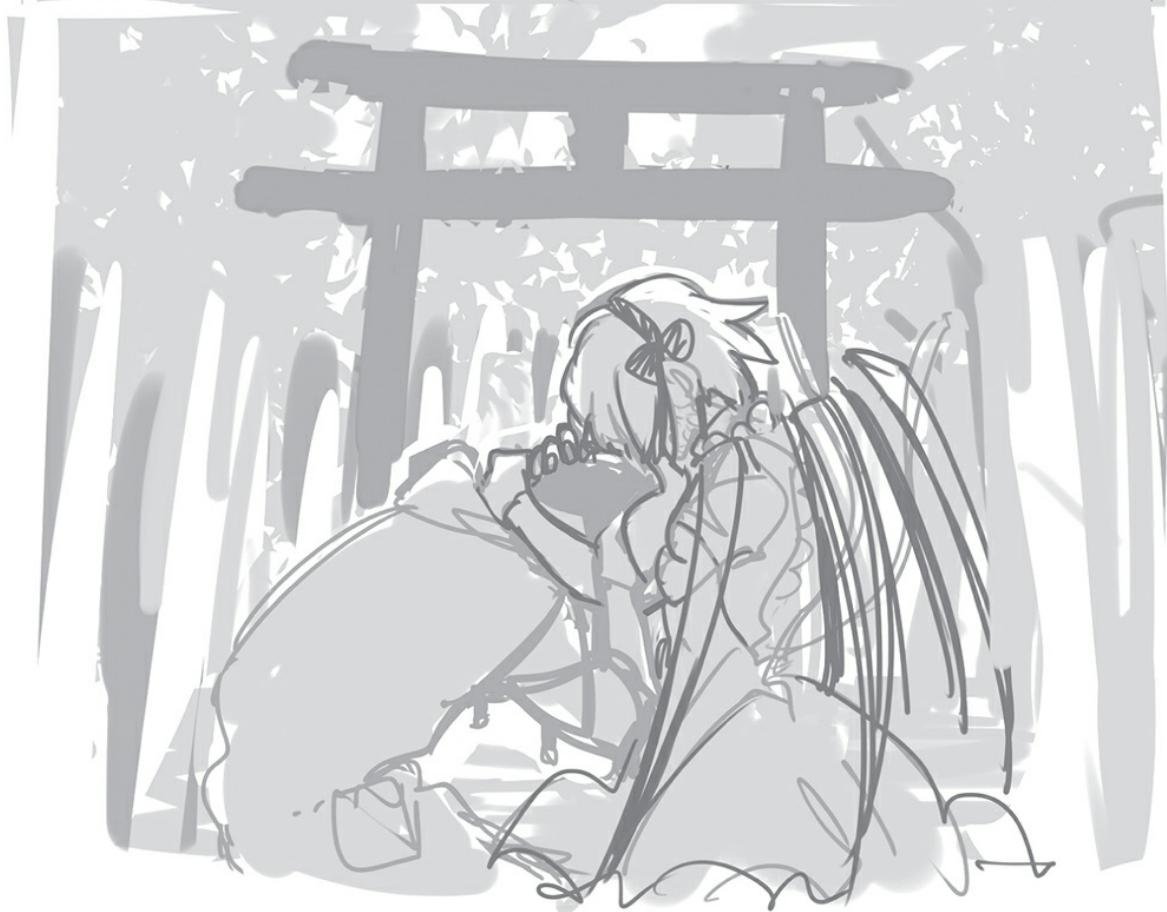
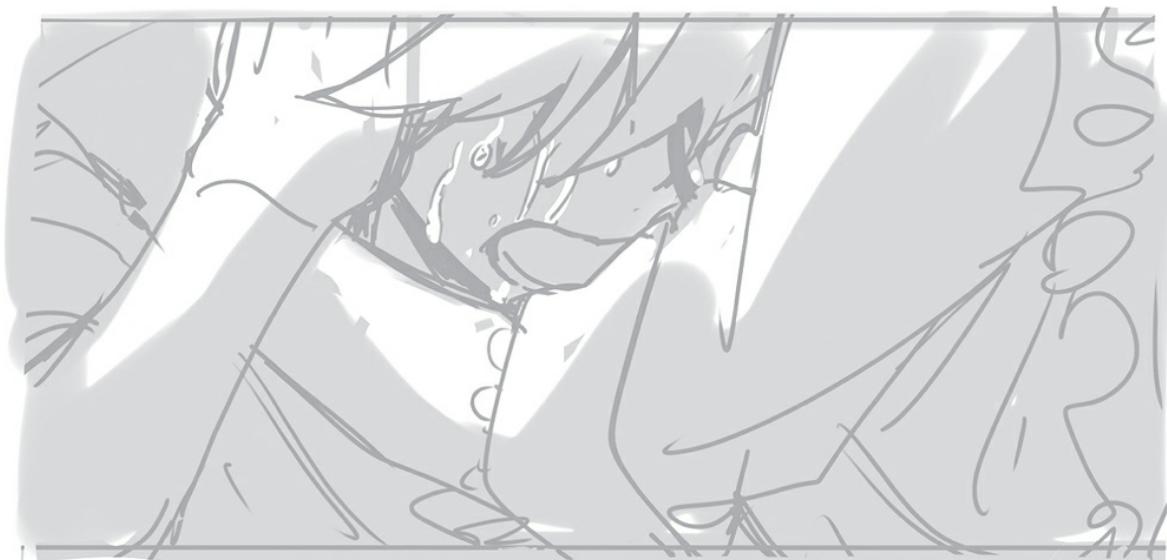
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**Illustration 4 Sketch**



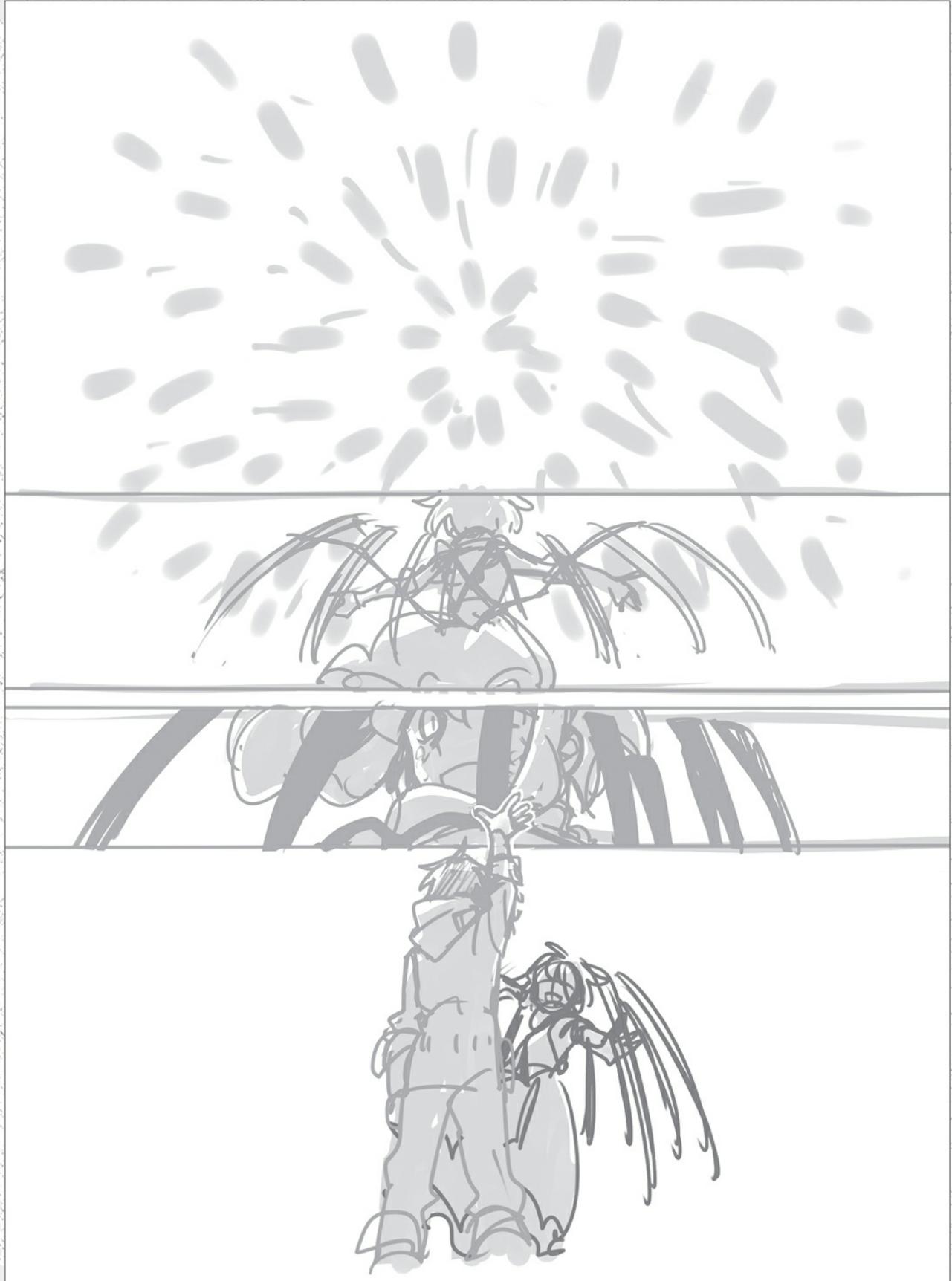
**Illustration 5 Sketch**



## Illustration 6 Sketch



## Illustration 7 Sketch



**Illustration 8 Sketch**

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