Ao Oni
VENGEANCE
Original Work: noprops
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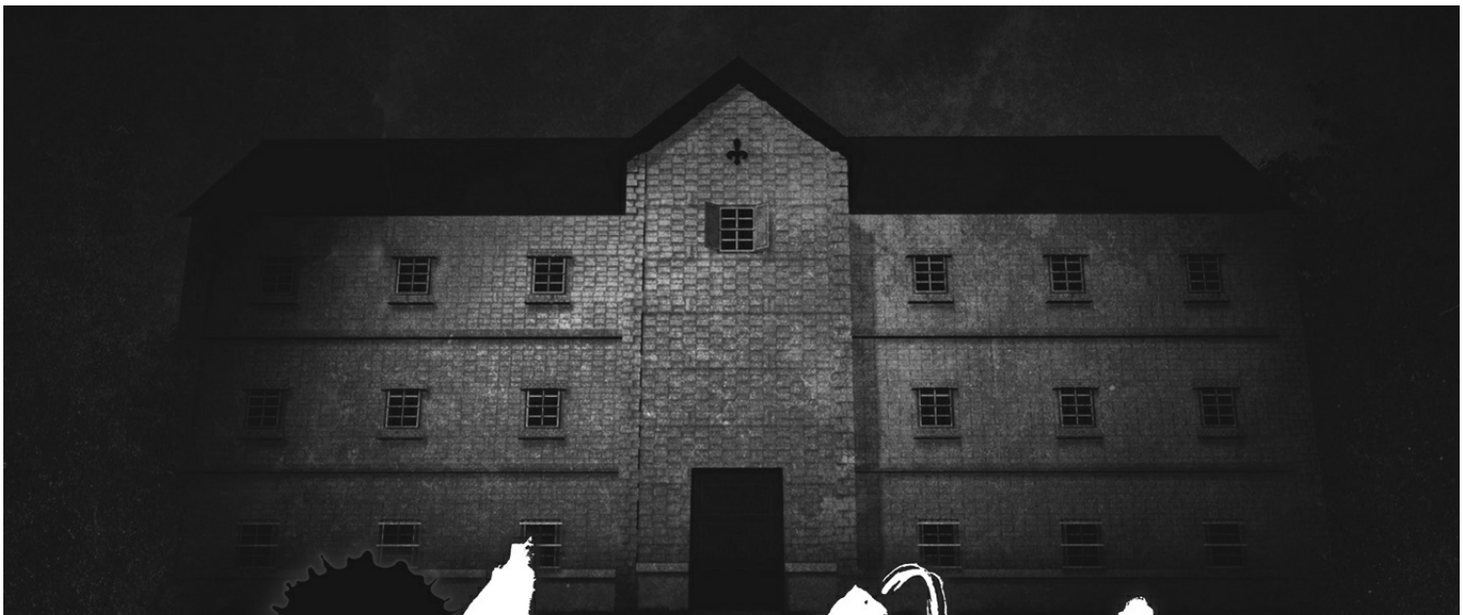

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MGH...
UGH...
I CAN'T BELIEVE I FELL DOWN THE STAIRS...
WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME?!
NO MORE!

AND WE CAN ONLY RUN FOR SO LONG BEFORE IT CATCHES AND EATS US.
WE CAN'T FIGHT IT.
SQUEEZE
ぎゅ…

THERE'S A MONSTER IN THIS MANSION.

I WONDER IF HE ACTUALLY MANAGED TO FIND A WAY OUT.
HIROSHI...

WELL, I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU JUST WANT TO STAY HIDDEN.
I DO TOO, HONESTLY, BUT WE'LL NEVER ESCAPE THAT WAY.

YOU RAN INTO THAT MONSTER TOO?

IF WE DON'T GIVE UP, SURELY WE'LL FIND A WAY OUT.
COME WITH ME.

SQUEEZE
BUT...

I SHOULD HAVE GONE WITH HIM...

WHAT...

LOOM

SHFF

IT'S... THAT BLUEBERRY-COLORED MONSTER!
ニヤ...
SNEER

NO! STAY AWAY!
RISE
N...
NO...
DRAG
FWUMP
WHY CAN'T I MOVE MY LEG?
...?

EEK!
SHUDDER
MY LEG'S BROKEN...
I CAN'T RUN LIKE THIS!
NO...
NO...
AHHH!

Ahhhhh!
Ahh!
HELP ME, TAKURO...
DO I STILL...

...REALLY EXPECT HIM TO SAVE ME AFTER EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED?
CRUSH
ガシャ...

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Chapter 1

CONTINUE

1

Where there's smoke, there's fire. Those were the first words to come to Shinichi's mind as he headed toward the banquet hall where the creepy noises were coming from.

The boogeyman. Bloody Mary. Sewer alligators. Various such urban legends exist all throughout the world. They're easy enough to laugh off, sure. After all, most of them are nothing more than tall tales. There's almost always an explanation for such far-fetched nonsense. A bad prank. A joke gone wrong. A misunderstanding, even. But maybe, just maybe, there really is something to them sometimes. Ever heard the one about the monster with blue skin that haunts the Jailhouse?

Let's turn the clock back about 20 years.

Scary stories about a creepy blue monster had been around since Shinichi's parents were children. On the edge of town sat an abandoned mansion, nicknamed the Jailhouse for its high stone walls that made it seem impenetrable. They were so high it was nearly impossible to even get a peek at the place. A thick padlock held the front gate shut, too. It really was like a jail.

But it was also a rumor mill. It seemed like someone had a new story about it on a daily basis. Someone claimed they'd been chased by a blue monster near the property. Another said someone's friend snuck inside and was stung by a blue grasshopper-like bug. They then came down with a high fever and passed away a few days later.

Most of the stories involved a blue monster of some kind. Its height varied between two and five meters. It was supposedly the result of an actress's failed plastic surgery, or the terrible side effect of a drug used on a sick young girl. Some said the monster ripped the skin from the poor souls who wandered inside the mansion and wore them like clothes, but others were quite sure that it ate its victims. Each iteration of the story was crazier than the last.

Shinichi couldn't help thinking it was stupid whenever he saw his classmates shivering in fear over such gossip. If a monster like that really existed and was

attacking people who came near the mansion, there'd be a huge uproar. The police and the government would be all over it. Besides, most of the "eyewitnesses" hadn't actually seen anything themselves. There was nothing more unreliable than a story that came from a friend of a friend.

But about half a month ago, Shinichi had started having a recurring nightmare. In it, night after night, he was eaten by the blue monster.

Have all those stupid stories gone to my head?

He resented it.

The Jailhouse monster is nothing but a lie.

So last week, he had finally decided to prove it and rub everyone's noses in it. His plan was to sneak into the mansion, record what it was really like on the inside with a video camera, and then play the footage at school to show his classmates what gullible fools they were. His bravery might even impress some of the girls.

But getting into the Jailhouse was harder than he'd imagined. He tried setting up a stepladder he'd quietly borrowed from the storage room at school to climb over the surrounding stone walls, but they were topped with barbed wire. The lock was thick, so there was no breaking in the front gate, either.

Unable to find a way in, he nearly gave up on the idea. Then one day, as he was walking around the perimeter of the property with his best friend, Kota, he spotted a square hole about 50 centimeters across along the bottom of the wall. No such hole had been there the day before, but why it was there wasn't what mattered to Shinichi. This was his chance to get in.

Shinichi got down on the ground to crawl through the hole. Kota followed, and once on the other side, they found themselves on the mansion grounds. They ran across the yard, which was wider than the field at school, and made their way to the front of the building. Slowly, carefully, Shinichi reached out for the doorknob. The heavy door creaked as it opened.

"Hey, Shinichi. I think this is a bad idea," Kota nervously called to him as he peered inside the building.

"What're you talking about? Don't tell me you believe in all those stupid

monster rumors.”

Shinichi had laughed off Kota’s worry at the time, but he should have known better. Kota was great at rock-paper-scissors, and he could guess his way through even the toughest exams. His intuition was never wrong. He must have sensed something creepy the moment they stepped foot in the mansion. That was why he’d tried to warn Shinichi.

“Let’s go home. This is dangerous,” he’d said.

But dragging the sniveling Kota along, Shinichi forged ahead. He turned on his video camera, intending to record every room, but he never expected what he’d actually find.

Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Truer words had never been spoken.

Before Shinichi now towered a naked giant, easily over two meters tall. Its cobalt blue skin gleamed, covered in some kind of liquid. With every move it made, its abnormally large muscles swelled like balloons. Its hulking form appeared masculine, but it had no male genitalia between its legs. It had no features on its chest to make it appear feminine, either. Its skin was as smooth as could be without a single hair on its blue body. And since it was slimy, it almost seemed like an amphibian. Whatever it was, it wasn’t human.

Shinichi held his breath and gulped. He reached up and touched his favorite New York Yankees cap to pull himself together. He was dead if the monster found him. Trying not to make a sound, he took a step backward. Kota must have realized the same thing. He took a step back as well. But then...

With the worst timing possible, Kota’s wristwatch started beeping a shrill alarm. The monster slowly turned towards them. Its head was wider than its shoulders, and horribly unbalanced. It was like a super deformed cartoon character, but with none of the inviting cuteness. Its bald head was elongated and malformed, and it oozed a strange, green liquid. Its disturbingly large eyes glared at Kota. The horrible sight must have been too much for him. Kota’s knees buckled and he slumped weakly to the ground.

“H-Hey! Get it together!”

This was bad. Shinichi took a step to his right to try and help Kota, who was

staring blankly into space like he was catatonic. Unfortunately, the monster was more agile than he expected.

Its right arm reached out for Kota's neck so quickly that he had no time to fight back. As his eyes opened wide in horror, five long, narrow, blue fingers wrapped around his neck like snakes. The next instant, Kota was dangling high in the air, held aloft by the monster.

He kicked his legs, but the blue giant showed no sign of letting go. Instead, it began to tighten its grip. Kota looked down at Shinichi. Bright red blood filled his wide eyes. His expression distorted painfully as he tried to shout something, but the crushing pressure on his throat prevented any sound from escaping.

Shinichi was frozen to the spot. He couldn't do a thing. Incalculable fear prevented him from taking even a single step.

The monster let out a low growl, and Shinichi heard the sound of something tearing apart. Kota's pupils swiveled to opposite sides of his head, his tongue lolling from his mouth. He never moved again.

Expressionless, the monster shoved Kota's head into its mouth. Its face still blank, the monster tore off Kota's right arm and tossed it aside as if the wristwatch disgusted it, then pushed the rest of his upper body into its mouth. Only his two legs dangled from the corners of its thin lips.

The monster chewed and chomped, not bothered by the lower half of Kota's body spilling out of its mouth. Blood spurted everywhere, gathering on the floor in a pool that quickly reached Shinichi's feet.

"Oh... Oh God..."

Shinichi desperately tried not to scream. He knew he couldn't afford to. The monster seemed to be focused on eating Kota; this was his chance to escape. He stepped back, still watching the monster. Despite it being the dead of winter, sweat dripped from his temple.

The monster's right cheek bulged. It didn't take Shinichi long to figure out why. It was Kota. The monster was sucking on Kota's head like it was candy. It pursed its lips as if trying to blow a bubble with gum. Kota's face then popped out from between its lips. His hair, which he'd proudly styled with buckets of

wax in order to make it stand on end, was now slick and dripping with the monster's saliva. He looked nothing like he had when he was alive.

The monster began rolling Kota's head in its mouth with its tongue, either bored with eating or not particularly enjoying its taste. Kota's eyes were rolled up into his skull, his mouth agape. Shinichi had to look away. His entire body was shaking uncontrollably. Loud chattering echoed inside his mouth as his molars clacked against each other over and over.

The monster then spat out Kota's head along with a great glob of saliva. It spun through the air and landed with a wet smack at Shinichi's feet. A sticky, dark red fluid spattered from his brow. Unable to hold it in any longer, Shinichi let out a scream so loud his throat nearly split.

"Someone! Someone help! Heeeeeeeelp!"

But the only one that heard him was the monster.

2

Closing the thick field guide he'd borrowed from the library, Hiroshi let out something between a yawn and a sigh. The cottony insect he'd caught a glimpse of that morning on the way to school was definitely a Prociphilus oriens. In flight they resembled falling snow, so they were commonly called snow bugs throughout the northern hemisphere. He'd heard they were mostly found in Hokkaido and were rarely seen in Honshu. This was his first time ever spotting one himself.

He loved insects so much that whenever he came across a rare one, he fell victim to a sort of tunnel vision. Normally he would have feverishly gathered data on it and dashed out of the school building as soon as class was over in order to observe the subject more. Right now, however, his head was somewhere else altogether. The reason was obvious.

Putting the field guide into his bag, Hiroshi turned around. Many of his classmates were still hanging out in the classroom, chatting away.

"Where did they go this time?"

"Shinichi mentioned he wanted to go snowboarding. Maybe they ran off to find a snowy mountain."

"Last time they hitchhiked to Disneyland, right? The teacher really reamed them for that one, but they just never learn."

They were all talking about Shinichi and Kota, who had skipped school that day. They were both free spirits known for doing as they pleased without regard for the consequences. They weren't bad kids, but they were a headache for the teachers. And no one seemed to know where they'd slipped off to this time.

Normally this would be cause for alarm, but these two disappeared so often that no one was really surprised. The teachers and their parents only sighed defeatedly and shook their heads, wondering where they'd managed to run off to now.

But who really cared, anyway? They'd slink back home later that night when they'd run out of money and were starving, just like they always did.

Hiroshi's gaze moved to the desk by the window in the very back of the classroom that had been vacant for a week. Judging by his classmates' attitudes, no one seemed concerned about the person who should have been sitting there. They were so unconcerned, in fact, that Hiroshi almost started to wonder if that seat had always been empty.

In the third trimester of the school year, a new kid named Shun had moved to town. He was extremely introverted, and Hiroshi hardly ever saw him talking with anyone in class. Hiroshi himself never would have gotten to know him if he hadn't gone chasing after an out-of-season Curetis acuta two weeks ago.

He'd stumbled across Shun in the hills behind the school, where he was working away on his computer game. He'd offered to let Hiroshi play it, and Hiroshi was so enthralled with it that he'd found himself running out to the hills every day after school to play more and discuss the game with Shun. Then, last Thursday—a week ago—he'd finally managed to beat Shun's game.

After that, Shun had stopped coming to school, and Hiroshi hadn't seen him since. He had no idea why. Nothing had seemed amiss when they'd parted ways that evening. Their homeroom teacher said he was out with a cold, but Hiroshi wasn't the type to blindly believe what he was told. Shun was in good health when he saw him last, and no cold would keep him out of school for a whole week.

What could have happened?

Hiroshi smirked when he realized he was concerned for Shun's well-being.

You okay, there? Maybe you're the one someone should be worrying about.

Hiroshi was voraciously inquisitive. Whenever he found something that piqued his interest, he abandoned everything else to study it intensely and at length. Curious phenomena made his brain kick into overdrive, and he would puzzle them out until he arrived at a satisfactory explanation. His interests were varied, too. Though he was primarily into biology, subjects such as physics, astronomy, philosophy, architecture, and anthropology also tickled his fancy. When it came to the unscientific, however, Hiroshi turned his nose up at it. Things like the occult held no interest for him whatsoever. It was pure delusion. But there was something else—something very real—that Hiroshi had tried and

failed to understand: the human heart.

The voices of three girls whispering around a table reached his ears.

“Doesn’t she just piss you off lately?”

“I know, right?”

“She’s, like, such a brag.”

They were trying to talk discreetly so no one would hear them, but as the conversation became more heated, their voices grew louder. The girl they were talking about was the fourth member of their little clique. Hiroshi had seen all four of them chatting away with smiles on their faces just moments ago. He hadn’t sensed any friction between them then. But clearly something wasn’t right. The minute the girl in question left the room, the others had begun talking behind her back. It just didn’t make any sense to Hiroshi.

No matter what theories he tried to put together or complex equations he tried to use, there was no solving this mystery. He’d invested a great deal of time in researching the subject, but it didn’t help. In fact, the deeper he dug, the more baffling people became to him. In the end, he’d given up on trying to understand.

And yet here he was. Shun hadn’t been to school in a week, and during that week, Hiroshi hadn’t stopped thinking about him. That was why not even the Prociphilus oriens had been able to hold his attention.

“Well, this is unexpected. I’ve never seen you look around the classroom so restlessly, Hiroshi,” said a female voice from just over Hiroshi’s shoulder.

He turned around to see Anna, the class president. Her long, black hair swayed in the breeze coming in from the window.

“Usually you’re either absorbed in a book, writing strange equations in a notebook, or studying an insect.”

She spoke to Hiroshi with a friendly smile, but it couldn’t hide the traces of exhaustion on her face. The area around her eyes was puffy, as if she hadn’t had much sleep. Her eyes were also a bit bloodshot. But it was understandable given that she’d lost both her parents in a tragic accident at the end of last year.

It had barely been a month since then.

“And what about you? You talking to me is equally unusual.”

“Well, I happened to notice you staring over there,” she said as she pointed to Shun’s empty desk.

Hiroshi wasn’t easily shaken, but her sharp intuition shocked him a little.

“I wasn’t staring.” Feeling like he’d been caught, he quickly tried to explain himself. “I was just wondering what would make someone miss an entire week of school.”

“So you *are* staring.”

Hiroshi shut his mouth. It wasn’t like him to give up on a debate, but there was no way he could confute Anna. She was completely right.

I’m intensely concerned about Shun.

But even he couldn’t explain why.

“Have you heard anything from him?” Anna asked.

Hiroshi shook his head.

“Why would you think I had?”

“Well... You two have been getting friendly recently, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t done anything of the sort,” he said coldly as he pushed up his glasses.

“Huh? Really? But I’ve seen you two talking about games during breaks.”

“The game he made was very interesting, and I was curious as to how one would create something like that, so I was asking him for advice. That’s all.”

“So you *are* friends.”

“Is that... how it works?”

The word “friend” didn’t sit well with Hiroshi. What did it even really mean? If being friends with someone meant talking trash about them as soon as their back was turned like those girls did, then Shun was no friend of Hiroshi’s.

But then... what is Shun to me? I love the game he made. The mind that

created such a thing is fascinating to me. Thus, talking to Shun about games is fun. And now that I'm denied it, I've been restless all this time.

"Hey. Want to go visit him?" Anna suddenly suggested.

"Who?"

"Jeez... Shun, obviously."

"Wouldn't that be a nuisance while he's sick? It's not like a visit is going to cure him. It's a pointless venture, in my opinion."

"Oh, listen to yourself. You're obviously dying to see him."

Hiroshi's eyes opened wide. She was absolutely right again. It was like she could read his mind.

"Come on. Let's go."

Anna then grabbed Hiroshi's hand and, half-pulling him, led him out of the classroom. Everyone turned to watch, wondering what in the world two people who'd never spoken to each other before could be getting up to. Hiroshi shrugged off the awkward attention and followed after Anna.

3

With Anna's help, they reached the public housing where Shun lived. She went directly to the building marked "C" without consulting a map and proceeded to the top of the stairs.

"Have you been here before?" Hiroshi asked.

"Yeah. Yesterday and the day before," she quickly responded.

"Three days in a row? Isn't that a bit much? That's far more than what your role as class president calls for."

The exquisite scent of European pears wafted from the small box she was carrying under her right arm. She'd bought it at the fruit shop by the train station on the way. Hiroshi now realized why the cashier had given her a strange look.

"Stop it. I wouldn't impose every day like some sort of stalker." Anna pouted in front of the easternmost door of the building. "It's the opposite, really. I buy the fruit as a gift and get to the door, but never have the courage to ring the bell."

"Why not?" Hiroshi asked, head slightly cocked. What she'd said made no sense to him.

"I mean... Shun is probably not coming to school because he hates it there. Yet here I am, someone who will remind him of school. That'd be insensitive, right? I want to cheer him up, but I'm a little scared to face him... So I always end up turning back at his door." She looked down at the box in her hands and gave a small smile. "Then I get depressed about how worthless I am and eat all the fruit myself. I've gained two kilograms because of it."

"There's no need to worry. Fruits are mostly water, so you'll pass it quickly. They say that it takes approximately 7,000 calories to generate one kilogram of fat. If we use that pear as a basis and just assume it's 200 calories, you'd need to eat seventy of them to gain two kilograms. Or did you actually eat 14,000 calories in two days?"

He tried to explain it gently since she seemed concerned about her weight, but for some reason, Anna flashed her pearly white teeth and started giggling.

“Thanks. I’m glad I brought you with me. I feel a lot better than I have the past two days.”

Why was she so hesitant to see him? If she disliked him so much, then there was no reason for her to come in the first place. There was a great deal about this that Hiroshi didn’t understand, but he could at least see now that she was using him as a pretext to visit Shun. In that case, he only had to play his role. And so he reached out a finger to ring the doorbell, but Anna suddenly grabbed his hand.

“Wait, I’m still not ready.”

“If you’re feeling so uneasy, we can simply leave.”

“No, it’s okay. Could you just give me five seconds?” she said as she closed her eyes and pressed her left hand to her chest.

What could possibly change in five seconds? The human heart continued to baffle Hiroshi. He checked his wristwatch, counted out five seconds, and rung the doorbell.

“Ah! Why’d you press it?” Anna asked frantically.

“You said to wait five seconds.”

“I know, but... Oh my gosh. What am I going to do?”

Apparently quite distressed, she hunched her shoulders forward and began pacing around Hiroshi. She looked like she might run if the door actually opened. Hoping to avoid that, Hiroshi grabbed her wrist firmly. Anna then stopped pacing and seemed to steel herself for what was to come. Practically standing at attention, she kept her hand pressed against her chest.

They waited for a bit, but there was no answer. There wasn’t any sound from inside, either.

“...Maybe they’re out?” Hiroshi suggested.

He then pressed the doorbell three more times, but the results were the same.

“Shun? Are you there?” Anna called out, but no one answered.

Hiroshi’s shoulders drooped. It must have gotten cold out with the setting of the sun. His breath as he sighed looked like a puff of white cotton candy.

“It would seem no one is home. You might gain a little more weight, but perhaps we should give up and go home for today.”

Hiroshi let go of Anna’s arm and turned to leave just as the door flew open.

“...What’s this? Why are the two of you here together?”

Shun appeared from behind the door. He looked healthy for being out with a week-long cold. In fact, he looked great.

“We came to visit.” Her cheeks red, Anna took a step forward. “You haven’t come to school all week. We were worried you might have caught something serious.”

“Oh, sorry. But as you can see, I’m A-okay,” Shun said, swinging his arms.

It was just as he said. He was perfectly fine. He even seemed happier and healthier now than he normally did at school. He was smiling and everything. Hiroshi could feel his heart lighten to see him like that.

“My parents are at work, so it’s just me here... Want to come in?” he asked, shyly looking away.

“We... won’t be imposing, will we?”

“Not at all. You came at a good time. There’s something I wanted to show Hiroshi,” Shun said and beckoned them inside.

At his insistence, they stepped into the foyer. Hiroshi bent down to remove his shoes when he felt a sharp gaze boring a hole into his left cheek. Looking up, he saw Anna glaring at him.

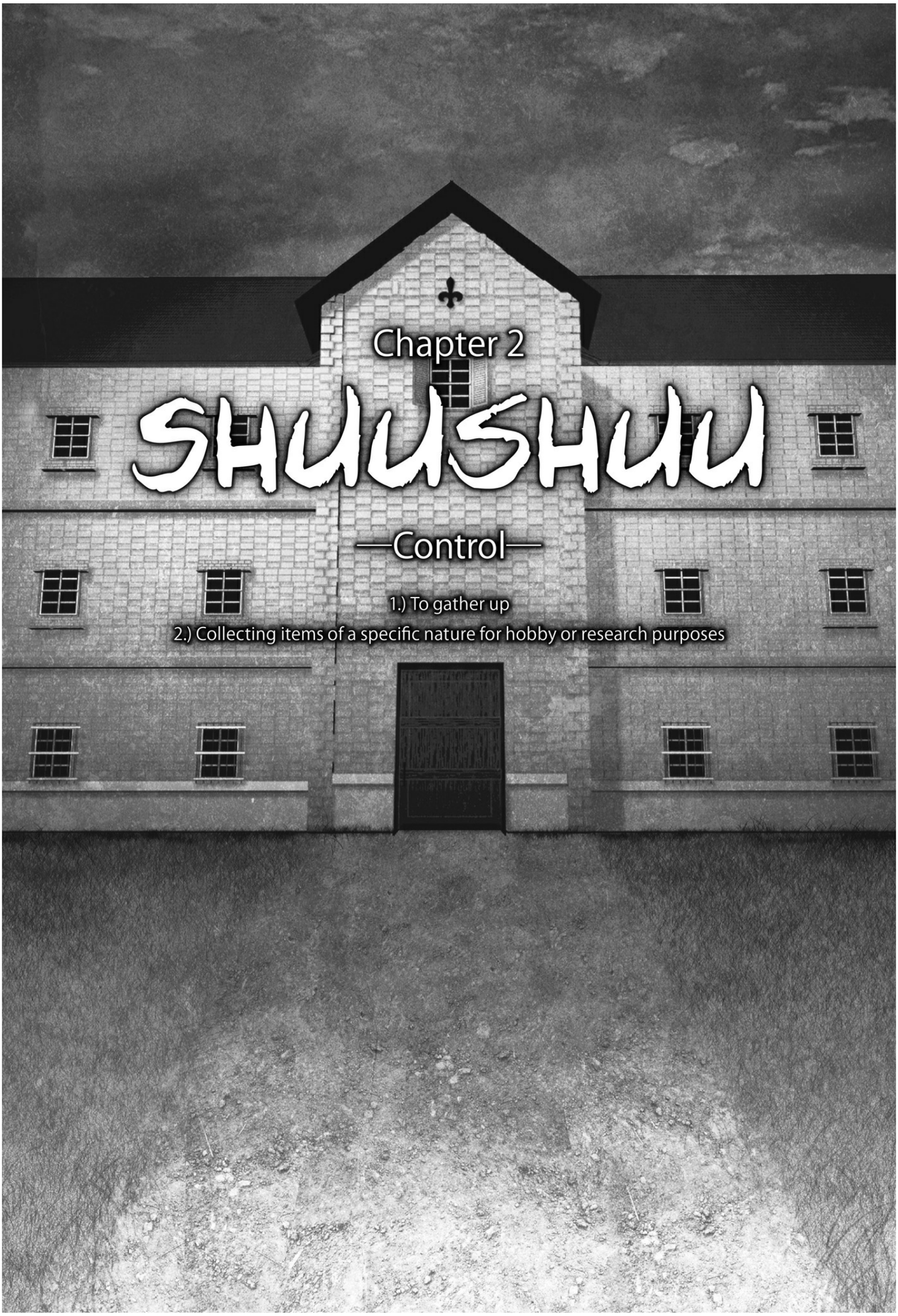
“...What is it?”

“Nothing,” she said and turned away, lips pursed into a pout.

“Are you angry or something?”

Anna didn’t respond. It seemed Hiroshi was dead-on about her being angry, but he had no idea as to why. Unlike math or physics problems, he just couldn’t

figure people out no matter how much he racked his brain. He decided to give up on trying for now and followed Shun into the apartment.


Chapter 2
SHUUSHUU
—Control—
1.) To gather up
2.) Collecting items of a specific nature for hobby or research purposes

1

Shun led Anna and Hiroshi to his bedroom, a Western-style room about twelve by nine feet. In one corner lay a bed with a bookshelf next to it. Most of the desk by the window was taken up by a computer and related peripherals. Books on programming, game consoles, and video games were all neatly sorted on the bookshelf, which spoke to the methodical nature of the room's owner as well as his interests.

It was all about as much as he'd expected, so it didn't leave a huge impression on Hiroshi. Anna, however, stared at everything wide-eyed as if she'd never seen anything like it before. She seemed especially interested in the controller on the desk for a flight simulator. She cautiously touched the joystick and then looked around the room to see if anything had happened. Hiroshi had never seen her act this way at school.

The door opened as Shun returned to the room. He was holding a plate with the pears carefully cut into pieces.

"Sorry the room's so small. You two can sit wherever."

"Oh... Sure."

Anna returned the controller to its original position and timidly sat at the corner of the bed. Shun took a piece of pear and sat down at the desk. He put his right hand on the mouse. Hiroshi recognized the game on the monitor screen; it was the freeware game Shun had made. At first glance, it appeared to be the same as the one he'd cleared the week before, but when Hiroshi took a closer look, he could see that the graphics were much more detailed, the map was more complex, and the overall feel was somewhat different.

"Is this a new version?"

"Yeah. I stayed up all night to finish it. I was just about to upload it to the site," Shun explained as he pulled up the newest screenshots.

The base game was the same as the previous version, but there were a few new items Hiroshi hadn't seen in his playthrough, like a birthday cake on the dining room table and a world map poster on the inside of a closet.

“This seems interesting.”

“I upped the difficulty, so it should be even more fun, but there are still a few bugs left. I’ll start debugging first thing in the morning, and before I realize it, the sun has already set. It’s been like that for a while. A day goes by so fast... At this rate, I could turn into an old man in no time.” Shun kept chatting as he typed away at the keyboard, his expression indicating he was joking. “Check it out. There’s a bug here I just can’t seem to fix.”

A 2D attic was displayed on the monitor. Toward the back was a small door that opened to the outside. If the player exited that way, they would fall to the ground below and it would be game over. At least, that was the idea, but the game bugged out and reset instead. Shun demonstrated by moving the protagonist through the door, causing the screen to freeze. After a while, the opening sequence began to play.

“Hmm, still no good.” Shun scratched his head as he chewed on a slice of pear. “I’ve tried everything I could think of. I wonder what’s wrong...”

Unlike at school, Shun was being quite talkative. Hiroshi had worried they’d find him ragged and thin as a rail, but he appeared happy and healthy. Hiroshi let out a sigh of relief, but then a new worry crossed his mind.

Sure, Shun seemed happy. But it was like he was forcing himself to be—like it was just an act. There was no way for Hiroshi to be sure, however. After all, he was virtually incapable of reading people’s emotions.

Many introverted people were meek as lambs outwardly, but when they were somewhere comfortable like in their own homes, they could be quite lively. That seemed like a reasonable explanation, especially for someone like Shun who had just moved to town and hadn’t found his place yet. But he was being so chatty that Hiroshi was inclined to think something else was at play.

When people are trying to hide something, they tend to become unusually talkative. Hiroshi recalled reading something along those lines in a book once, and it seemed to apply to Shun now. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for him to avoid eye contact, but today his eyes were restlessly darting all over the room. He seemed anxious. That, combined with his loquaciousness, made it clear to Hiroshi that he was trying to hide something.

“I’d like to hear your thoughts, Hiroshi, so please try it out. You can download it from my site for free.”

As Hiroshi was conducting a human study for once in his life, Shun was still going on about his game.

“It’s different from the previous versions, but I tried adding an ending where everyone survives in this one. As you can see, it’s still quite buggy, but if you wouldn’t mind giving it a try...”

The gears in Hiroshi’s brain turned as he thought, drowning out most of what Shun said. Anna, on the other hand, seemed quite lost. In essence, Shun was talking to himself. No one was responding, yet he rambled on and on like a madman.

“Hey, Shun,” Anna blurted out in the brief moment Shun stopped talking to take a breath. “Why aren’t you coming to school?”

“...Huh?”

Shun’s expression clouded over. His fingers, which had been fluidly tapping away at the keyboard, stopped suddenly.

Why he wasn’t coming to school... That may have been the subject Shun wanted to avoid most of all. He was at a loss for words. For the first time since they’d arrived, silence hung over the room.

“Do you remember what you said to me after school when we ran into each other outside the Jailhouse, the day before you stopped coming to school? ‘If you’ve got something on your mind, don’t keep it bottled inside. You can talk to me. I might be able to help.’”

Shun made no reply.

“I could say the same to you now... Or is this something I can’t help with at all?”

“...Sorry.” Still looking at the monitor, Shun hung his head slightly. “I can’t really talk about it right now. Could you wait until I’ve sorted it out in my head a little first?”

Shun’s answer was barely a whisper. His talkativeness had vanished. His eyes

darted around the room as if he were a hunted animal, and his quivering lips made it look like he was freezing despite the heater being on.

Anna shut her mouth. Seeing him like this, how could she press him for answers? With both of them quiet, the uncomfortable silence continued.

“H-Hey,” Anna said cheerfully to try and start a conversation. She wanted to talk about something. Anything. She just couldn’t take the awkwardness anymore. “There was a fire near my house last night. Someone’s curtain caught fire from a heater, they say. Scary, huh? I tend to get sleepy and doze off with the heater on, so I guess I should be more careful.”

Neither Shun nor Hiroshi responded. The oppressive silence was only getting more and more stifling.

“I need to tell you guys something...” Shun eventually said. He sounded hesitant, like whatever he had to say might offend them after they’d come all this way just to see him. But his eyes were still locked on the monitor. He didn’t even look back at Hiroshi and Anna. “Don’t go near the Jailhouse.”

Hiroshi cocked his head at such an out-of-the-blue statement.

“I know there are lots of rare bugs around there, but please don’t do anything foolish like sneaking onto the property to observe them.”

Based on what Shun was saying, Hiroshi assumed he was talking to him. But why? Hiroshi tried to simulate Shun’s thought process in order to discern his intentions, but this was much more complicated than trying to work out a math problem in his head.

“And if you hear anyone talking about sneaking inside, tell them not to be stupid. I think the most likely culprit would be Shinichi. He’s always going on about proving the monster isn’t real.”

Hiroshi and Anna looked at each other. There was no way that Shun knew Shinichi had been missing since the previous day... But should they tell him?

“I doubt anyone knows this, but Takuro’s father actually owns the place. If you tell them that, I think it’ll probably quash any funny ideas about breaking in.”

Hiroshi had never heard that before, nor had he heard that rare insects existed in the area. So how could a new student—much less one who hadn't come to school in a week—know all that? The more Shun talked, the more questions Hiroshi had.

"Shun, do you know why Shinichi and Kota are missing?"

It was Anna that spoke up first. She must have been wondering the same thing Hiroshi was.

"Huh? What do you mean? They're missing?" Shun finally turned to his friends, clearly perturbed.

"Shinichi and Kota haven't been home since last night. No one seems to be worried, though, since it's not all that weird for them."

"No... The monster..." Shun muttered under his breath.

"Shun. You do know something, don't you?" Anna's tone grew more serious as she drew closer to Shun.

"You mustn't go near the Jailhouse," he repeated, looking at Anna and then Hiroshi. He continued, as if begging, "Please. If any of our classmates say they're going, you have to stop them."

"Then explain this so we can understand, too. Why do we have to stay away from it? What's in there?"

"It's an old urban legend. You guys should know better than me!" Shun shouted, his lips trembling. "A man-eating monster lives there!"

2

There's a certain age in middle school where teenagers start taking issue with their parents, teachers, and other authority figures. The rebellious phase. "You can't do this. You can't do that." The more rules that are forced upon them, the more they want to break them. Shinichi and Kota, who continued to run away from home no matter how many times they were scolded, were the perfect example.

Even Hiroshi, who the adults at school considered a model student, was no exception. But in his case, he didn't rebel indiscriminately against each and every little thing. If he was told to do or not do something, he'd always ask for a logical explanation. If it was satisfactory, he would oblige without resistance. But in the event he didn't get a sufficient answer, that only enticed his curiosity. He was the type to go directly to the source and experience the forbidden for himself in order to uncover the truth.

And that was partly the reason he headed straight for the Jailhouse after leaving Shun's place. Shun had told him to stay away, but he just couldn't accept an unscientific explanation like "a monster lives there." He had to find out why Shun would say something so ridiculous. Anna followed him silently, though he hadn't extended her an invitation. Most likely, she too was unsatisfied with Shun's "explanation."

The stone walls around the Jailhouse stood over five meters tall. They were like castle ramparts. Looking up at them, Hiroshi drew back a few steps.

"It would require a remarkable degree of athleticism to be able to scale a wall of this height. I certainly couldn't do it."

It would be a difficult task even for Shinichi, who excelled at sports, or Kota, the tallest kid in their class. Parts of the wall were crumbling and falling apart, but there was nowhere to get a good hand or foothold. It would take serious climbing gear to get over it.

"It'd be easier if there were a hole somewhere. Oh, what's this?" Hiroshi said curiously as he bent down.

“What? Did you find a secret entrance?” Anna asked as she came over to him.

“No, but look.”

Hiroshi indicated a small patch of weeds, perhaps Plantago asiatica, sprouting at the base of the wall. Among them was a bluish grasshopper the likes of which he’d never seen before. It was rubbing the jagged spines of its front legs against the leaves of the weeds.

“I’ve never seen a specimen this color in any field guide. Is it a new species? This could be a huge discovery.”

Hiroshi’s mind immediately went into overdrive.

No, this is exactly when I need to remain calm and collected...

He put a hand to his chest and took a moment to steady his breathing. Try as he might, however, he couldn’t quell his excitement.

“Is that really a grasshopper?”

“Judging from its shape, it could be a mutation of Patanga japonica or Locusta migratoria.”

“But its eyes are huge for a grasshopper.”

Anna knelt down next to Hiroshi to get a closer look at the bug. And she was right—its eyes were mammoth compared to that of a normal grasshopper. They were so large that they appeared to take up the majority of its head.

The more Hiroshi observed the insect, the more it became apparent how strange it really was. Normally, he would have forgotten all about Anna and gotten lost in studying this blue grasshopper. He would take it home, extensively analyze it, and then add it to his collection box of rare insects. However...

“You mustn’t go near the Jailhouse.”

Shun’s words echoed in his head, keeping him from really focusing on the creature in front of him.

“...How?” he whispered. “How did Shun know this would be here?”

That wasn’t all, either. He’d talked almost prophetically about Shinichi’s

disappearance. Moreover, no one at school knew that Takuro's father had bought the Jailhouse. So how was it that Shun, who was still new in town, had come across its inner secrets? Hiroshi looked to Anna. He hoped she might know something, but she simply knit her brow and shook her head.

"...Shun *was* acting a little odd the other day though," she recalled, looking up and to the left.

"The other day?"

"Last week... The evening before Shun stopped coming to school, I met him right here... It was strange. He knew exactly what I was thinking without me saying a word. It was like he was reading my mind. No, that's not it. It was... more than that." She looked Hiroshi square in the eyes with a somewhat frightened expression on her face. "Usually he's so reserved, but that day he was nothing short of chipper. So I asked him if something had happened, and he said the weirdest thing... He said, 'I'm happy because nothing's happened.' It was like he knew something bad was about to happen... Do you think Shun has the ability to see the future?"

Hiroshi stared at her in silence. On any other day, he would have scoffed and told her such a presumption was ridiculous. There was no way something so unscientific was possible. But today, Hiroshi didn't laugh. The truth was that the same thing had crossed his mind. Granted, he couldn't understand why he was even entertaining such a preposterous idea.

"Shun doesn't talk about himself a lot, so it's hard to get a grasp on his true feelings," Anna said and sighed as she stood up. "Well, not that I'm any different."

"But he looked to be in perfect health, which is a relief. He was clearly never sick in the first place. It seems we have nothing to worry about in that regard, but we're left with the question of why he hasn't been attending classes."

"True. But that... I think that, at least, I can explain."

"...Huh?"

"It's probably Takuro," Anna said in a low voice, incredibly conscious of the fact that they were standing right next to land owned by Takuro's father.

“What are you talking about?” Hiroshi asked, still sitting on the roadside.

“I guess you haven’t noticed it, either.” Anna turned away and sighed again, this time gloomily. “Shun’s being bullied by Takuro.”

“Bullied?” Hiroshi asked reflexively, almost in disbelief.

“Did you think our class was above that sort of thing? Well, I don’t blame you. We’re not perfect, of course, but everyone seems to get along pretty well. On the surface, I suppose it really doesn’t seem like anything’s wrong.”

Hiroshi still didn’t follow. Really, he’d only started paying attention to the class ecosystem after Shun stopped coming to school. Before then, he couldn’t have cared less.

Moreover, in all likelihood, Hiroshi was the odd one out in their class. He was always alone during breaks, and he hardly ever spoke to anyone. He didn’t exactly fit in with his peers. If anyone was going to be bullied, he’d be the only logical target. At least, that’s what he’d always thought.

“I see... Takuro, huh?” he spoke in a hush, his hand on his chin.

Takuro’s bright personality constantly put him in the spotlight. He was the center of attention in class, and a naturally charismatic leader in that regard. As the star of the class, he was the last person anyone would suspect of being a bully. But Hiroshi knew Anna wouldn’t accuse him without just cause.

“Hey, do you mind if we chat while we walk? This place is a little...”

A pained expression on her face, Anna headed for the main road. Hiroshi honestly wanted to stay and study the new species of grasshopper some more, but he followed her anyway.

“Remember how Shun sprained his ankle two weeks ago?” she asked practically in a whisper as Hiroshi caught up to her. “That was Takuro’s doing.”

Her words hit him like a truck.

“But that wasn’t the start of it. He’d take Shun out during breaks to secluded places and punch him in the stomach or make him eat dirt... all kinds of horrible things. And then one night, Takuro ordered him to jump from a third-floor classroom window to see if it would kill him...”

“That can’t be...”

It was hard to swallow at first, but it made a certain amount of sense. In Shun’s game, there was a character clearly modeled after Takuro. The game enemies would attack and brutally murder him every playthrough. Perhaps that was Shun’s best attempt at fighting back.

“But why? Shun just moved here...”

“That’s probably exactly what made him an easy target. Takuro knew he hadn’t made any friends yet, so he had no one to go to for help. Not to mention he showed up right after Naoki passed...” Anna stopped there. She looked at Hiroshi, as if trying to discern his feelings.

Naoki was their classmate who’d died in a tragic accident at the end of the previous year. There were even stupid rumors that he’d been killed by the curse of the Jailhouse monster. Of course, there was no way anything like that was true.

“Can you explain this so I can understand? How are Naoki’s death and Shun’s bullying connected?”

“Naoki was bullied by Takuro too,” Anna said, raising an eyebrow. “You were his classmate for the better part of a year, and you didn’t notice at all, did you?”

She was absolutely right. Hiroshi was silent, unable to respond. Hurriedly, Anna followed up.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make it sound like I’m blaming you. Hardly anyone noticed, honestly. That’s just how good Takuro is at hiding it.”

After walking a few hundred meters down the street from the Jailhouse, they came to a busy county highway. Evening traffic flew by them at high speeds. Hiroshi could sense Anna stiffen as a truck raced by, horn blaring.

“Is this where...”

“Yes... It’s where Naoki died.”

Anna sounded especially pained as she answered, but it was obvious why. The accident that killed Naoki was the same accident that took her parents.

“I think it was just over there. A truck swerved to avoid Naoki when he

jumped out into the street, and flipped on its side...”

The spot she pointed out was marked with a flower in a plastic bottle and a can of juice. She walked over, knelt down in front of them, and put her hands together. Hiroshi hesitated, but bowed his head as well.

“That accident... People said it was the curse of the monster, but they don’t know who the real monster is,” Anna said as she lifted her head. She spoke quietly, almost as if she were talking to herself.

“What do you mean?” Hiroshi asked.

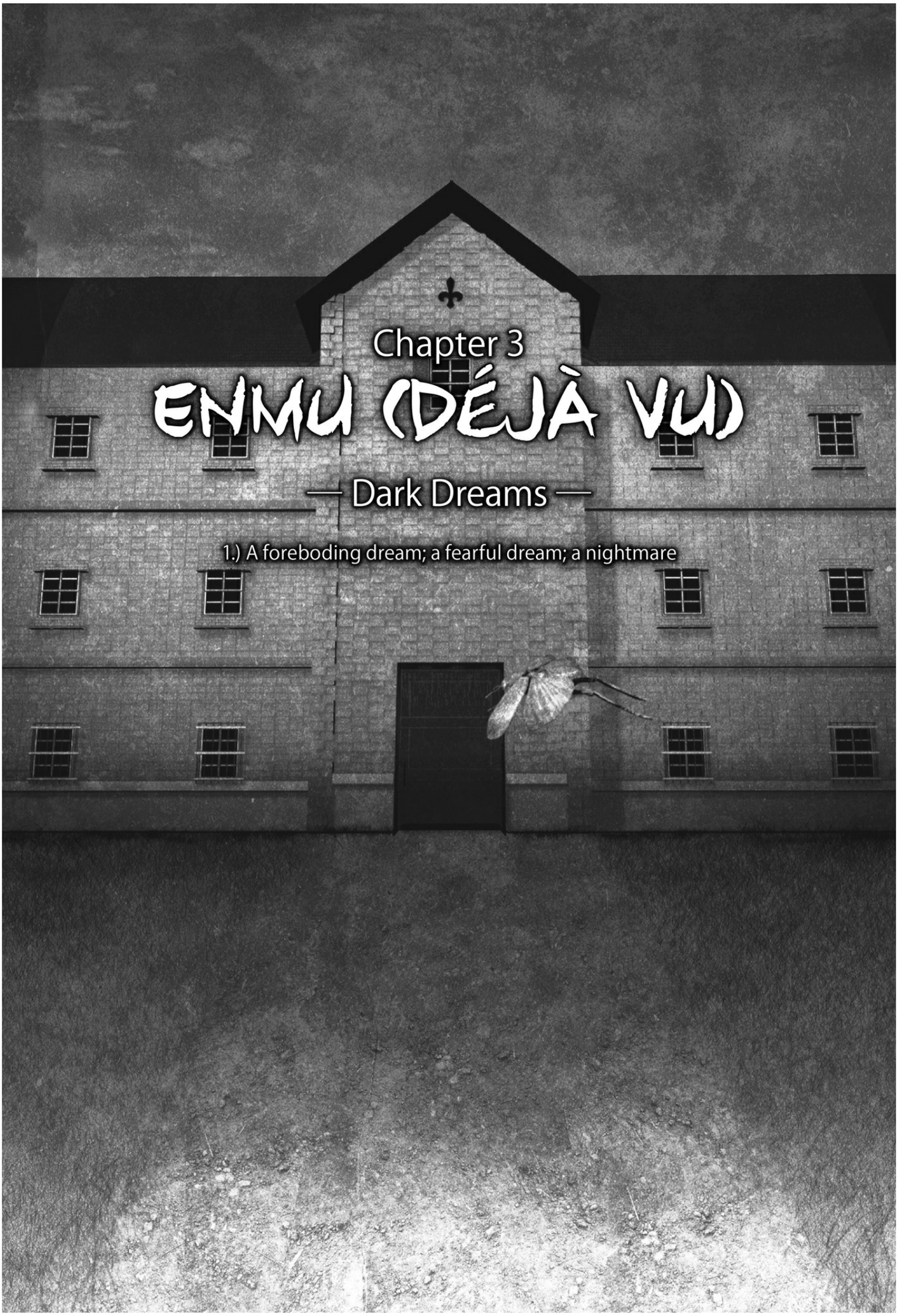
“It’s the same as with Shun. The real perpetrator was Takuro—”

Anna turned around to face Hiroshi, but then suddenly stopped talking. Her eyes went wide, clearly shocked by whatever was behind him. Hiroshi spun around. He couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary, but for some reason, goosebumps ran up his arms. A faint, unshakably creepy feeling came over him, and he took a step to the side.

Anna continued to stare at that singular point in the air, lips trembling. Her face was completely pale.

“...Are you okay?”

Hiroshi called to her out of concern, but she didn’t respond. She just continued to tremble.



Chapter 3

ENMU (DÉJÀ VU)

— Dark Dreams —

1.) A foreboding dream; a fearful dream; a nightmare

1

Takuro awoke to the sound of his own screams. It was cold enough that he could see his own breath, yet his entire body was drenched in sweat. He sighed in relief when he realized it had all been a bad dream, but at the same time, he was irritated that a mere dream could scare him so badly.

“What the hell was that?”

He grabbed the alarm clock by his bed and angrily threw it to the floor. Tiny electronic parts flew everywhere. It was broken beyond repair, but he didn’t care. The same dream had haunted him all week, waking him each day long before sunrise. He didn’t need the stupid alarm.

Takuro got up out of bed to open the curtains, which let in stray beams of moonlight. He stood in front of the full-length mirror and looked at himself in the faint light coming in from the window. He ran his fingertips softly across his neck. There was nothing indicating his head had been bitten off. His limbs were clear too. Of course, there wouldn’t be any marks since it was only a bad dream, but he had to check anyway. That was just how real and intense it had been.

In the dream, he ran and ran down a long, never-ending hallway. Behind him, a blue monster gave chase. No matter how far or how fast he ran, he couldn’t shake it. Sweat dripped from his brow. His dry throat burned. Every breath was a struggle. He nearly tripped time and time again, but he couldn’t afford to let it slow him down. He knew the monster would catch him if it did.

He cried for help over and over again, but no one extended their hand. His classmates lined the hallway, but they only stared at him. Nothing else.

Exhausted, he finally collapsed. The monster bellowed strangely before it bit off his head—and that’s where he’d always wake up.

Wiping his sweat-soaked cheeks, he brought his face closer to the mirror. His eyelids were puffy and swollen, and purple bags sagged underneath them. He hadn’t slept well in a week.

The clock on the wall said it was four in the morning. He’d only gotten two hours of sleep again. His exhaustion was at its peak, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep. The sandman wouldn’t come, and even if he did, Takuro would just have the same nightmare all over again.

Takuro walked away from the mirror, sat on the couch, and powered on his laptop. In the dim glow from the screen in front of him, he looked like a ghost.

Why am I having these dreams?

Takuro stared listlessly at the startup screen as he thought about it. He had an inkling as to the cause. The blue monster chasing him was inevitably the rumored Jailhouse monster, but he knew it wasn't anything more than gossip. There was no way anything like that was real.

Takuro's father had bought the Jailhouse property and was planning on turning it into a new location for his chain of hardware stores. Naturally, he'd been there before, but he'd never said anything about a monster there. In fact, Takuro remembered how he'd laughed and said it was just like any other old building.

Monsters don't even exist, so why am I so afraid of one in my dreams? Whatever. I'm not gonna waste my time thinking about something so stupid anymore.

Takuro shook his head vigorously as if to purge the thought from his mind.

It's already started to get to me.

After being woken up the night before, he'd spent the night looking up the Jailhouse monster on the internet. The search results had led him to a strange game about a blue monster that chased a middle school boy around a mansion as he searched for the exit.

Takuro knew the game. One of his classmates had showed it to him before. He didn't know who'd made it, but it was clearly inspired by the Jailhouse monster. Moreover, all the characters were named after kids from his class. Even Takuro himself was in the game. And there was no way it was a coincidence. Their appearances, personalities, and even speech mannerisms all matched up. It had to have been one of his classmates that made the game, but it seemed pretty clear that it was done with malicious intent. Each character named after someone in class died a horrible, gruesome death.

When he came across it at home, Takuro had given it a try himself, hoping it would hold some key to understanding his nightmares. Unfortunately, however, it only seemed to make them worse. That mouth, gaping from ear to ear; those sharp, pointed fangs; the drool, dripping in long strings; the foul stench of rotting garbage—he could recall it all vividly. His stomach growled like a strange dog as he imagined the bright red fountains of blood and the smell of rusty iron.

He suddenly felt sick.

Crap. I'm gonna hurl.

Covering his mouth with both hands, he headed straight for the bathroom. He buried his face in the toilet as he let loose the contents of his stomach. Looking down, he could see the convenience store chicken he'd eaten while playing the game last night floating there, undigested.

Damn it. Why is this happening to me?

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and cursed under his breath. Was throwing up a sign of weakness? The blue monster in his nightmares bore a striking resemblance to Naoki's dead body, covered in blue liquid...

Is this guilt over Naoki's death? No way.

The thought briefly crossed his mind, but he blew it off with a snort.

I didn't do anything wrong.

Sure, Takuro had told him to jump in front of the truck. But that was it. It wasn't like he'd pushed or threatened him. If telling somebody to kill themselves was enough to make someone guilty, then the whole world would be full of criminals. Naoki had run into the street of his own free will as far as Takuro was concerned. He had nothing to feel bad about.

Of course, he knew Naoki was at his wits' end. That too was Takuro's doing, after all. But he didn't feel guilty about that, either. The weak die, and the strong survive—that was the law of the jungle. It was true for animals and men alike. Eat or be eaten. It was only natural that the weak died off. If you wanted to survive, you just had to become strong. Takuro had learned that from his father.

His father was the president of the hardware store chain "Smile." He'd constructed over a hundred stores in less than 20 years, and he always boasted about how he'd built up the company by buying out smaller, weaker ones. Not all of his dealings had been completely aboveboard, but the company had him to thank for its success.

"Kindness and consideration are of no use to anyone. People are merely

pawns at your disposal."

Those were the words his father would always repeat when he got drunk. And Takuro, wanting to be like his father, studied and practiced sports twice as hard as everyone else. He was willing to do whatever it took to win. There were plenty of people who hated on him for that, but he just considered that the whining of losers. He had no reason to pay them any mind.

As his successes piled up, Takuro became the most popular kid in class. Hordes of his classmates flocked to him. Everyone praised him. Even the teachers trusted him. When they scolded the bad kids, they would always say things like, "You should learn from Takuro."

I'm surrounded by allies. There's absolutely no reason for me to feel uneasy.

Takuro got up, rinsed off his face at the sink, and then went back to his room. Sitting on the sofa, he started typing on his laptop. The hard disk spun with a soft scratching noise like a cat running its claws against a post as he launched the game he'd downloaded the night before.

Who made this thing?

He glared at the monitor as he mulled it over. The first thing that really came to mind was the face of the new kid who'd just moved to town. The game practically oozed hatred for Takuro at every turn. It was like a manifestation of a serious grudge, and he could think of no one other than the new kid who could possibly hate him that much.

That reminds me... There was last night, too.

At about 10:30 the previous evening, Takuro had gotten a call while he was in the middle of playing the game. He looked at his phone, but he didn't recognize the number on the screen.

Who's calling at this hour?

Continuing to play the game with his right hand, he picked up the phone with his left. Pressing a button, he curtly answered the call.

"Um... This is Takuro, right?" a faint, feeble voice on the other end asked. "It's me... Shun."

Takuro still had no clue who that was.

“Who the hell calls at this hour? Are you crazy?” he yelled.

“Sorry!” the timid voice immediately replied.

Then it clicked for Takuro. It was the new kid on the phone. He could tell because that’s always how he responded when Takuro yelled at him or hit him. That, along with the look of utter despair on his face, never failed to please him.

“H-Hey... I have an important favor to ask of you...” he said in his usual sheepish manner. “Please don’t ever go inside the Jailhouse.”

Takuro was baffled. What was with such a strange call at such a strange time?

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“Did I bully you too much? Have you completely lost it?” he almost said, but just barely managed to hold it in. He considered the possibility that the conversation was being recorded. And if that was the case, he couldn’t afford to slip up. He had to act like his normal, star student self.

“Sorry, but I’m kind of busy at the moment.”

The words “Game Over” flashed across his laptop screen. Talking with Shun had distracted him enough that he hadn’t realized the monster had shown up. He tried to restart from the save screen, but it wasn’t working for some reason. The game appeared to be completely frozen as a strange noise played from the speakers.

“Damn it. I was so far, too. It’s your fault I got a game over,” Takuro spat angrily at Shun and hung up the phone.

What the hell?

He forcefully shut down his laptop and got into bed. He remained awake for a while, but the phone didn’t ring again.

...What was that all about?

Shun had never called him before. It was quite out of the ordinary for Shun to make contact with him since he usually tried so hard to avoid him.

Thinking about it now, Takuro started to wonder if it had all been a dream.

Maybe it was even just part of his nightmare. Setting his phone beside him, he swiped to his call history. It hadn't been a dream after all.

He *had* gotten a call at roughly 10:30 last night. It had only lasted 34 seconds. Takuro could have sworn it had lasted longer than that.

As he stared at his phone, an error sound started buzzing from his laptop. Confused, he looked up at the monitor. The game's startup screen was showing, slightly obscured by bits of digital noise. He immediately tried moving his cursor, but there was no response. It seemed the whole computer was frozen. The buzzing continued like a ringing in his ears, and the obscuring noise spread across the entire screen. Staring at the erratic black and white pixels was like looking into a sandstorm.

"What the hell?"

He hit random keys, but there was no change in the screen. He then went to press the power button to force a shutdown, but a small blue dot appeared in the center of the screen.

"...Huh?"

The lone dot of color in the middle of the gray sandstorm started to grow. Takuro gulped. His heart was racing. He wanted to cut the power, but his body seemed to be as frozen as the computer. His eyes remained fixated on that blue dot, as if he were hypnotized.

As it grew, the dot became a blob before finally revealing its true form. It was the monster. The blue giant had come for him. As the terrifying sight filled the screen, the laptop suddenly shut off. The error sound finally ceased as silence fell over the room. All Takuro could hear was the sound of his own panicked breathing.

2

Takuro shouted when someone suddenly slapped his shoulder. He spun around to see Mika, her shapely eyebrows raised as she gave him a funny look.

“You idiot! Don’t startle me like that,” he snapped.

Mika said nothing, but nervously pointed over his shoulder. Takuro then heard someone impatiently clear their throat. He turned back around in his seat to see the language arts teacher, Mr. Eto, staring down at him while adjusting his signature round vintage glasses.

“Oh... Sorry.”

He bowed his head and lowered his gaze to the book on his desk. Likely because of his lack of sleep, the text on the page looked like one big blur to him.

“Well, what do we have here? It’s not like you to doze off in class.” Mr. Eto peered at Takuro through his circular glasses. “You don’t look well, either. Are you ill?”

“No... I’m fine.”

Takuro raised his head to find not only the teacher, but his entire class staring at him. He cursed under his breath, making sure no one could hear. Falling asleep in class was a huge mistake. He had to be perfect at all times. The strong ate the weak in this world. He couldn’t afford to show signs of weakness or else he would end up on the menu.

“Then would you mind reading from page 230?”

Takuro began reading as Mr. Eto requested. It was an essay about the life of Japanese folktale author Hirosuke Hamada. He, Joji Tsubota, and Mimei Ogawa were considered the three pillars of modern Japanese folklore. His most famous work was *The Red Ogre Who Cried*, which even Takuro had read as a child.

He read the passage aloud flawlessly as he scanned the room absentmindedly with his eyes. There were two empty desks in front of his. They were where Shinichi and Kota normally sat, but they still hadn’t come back to school yet.

Speaking of absences... he's not here either.

Takuro turned his head ever so slightly so that the teacher wouldn't notice and took a glance toward the back of the room. Specifically, the last seat in the row by the window. Printouts from math class were piling up on the new kid's desk.

It's been eight days since he stopped coming. Probably scared of me.

Eight days ago was when he'd stumbled upon the new kid in the hills behind school. The typical bullying ensued, but much to Takuro's surprise, the new kid put up some resistance for the first time. He would usually just sit there and take whatever Takuro threw at him with a look of utter despair on his face, but this time, he'd pushed Takuro off of him and run away. He was probably worried about retribution now.

And he should be. No one pushes me *around. I bet he's just too scared to come to school.*

Takuro doubted that the new kid would squeal to the teachers, but it wouldn't be an issue even if he did. Takuro was everyone's favorite student. There was no way the teachers would believe a kid who'd just moved to town over him. There was no way a star student like Takuro could do any wrong in their eyes, especially not something as horrible as bullying. His reputation protected him. Takuro was so confident in it that he had no intention of ever stopping his little "breathers" with the new kid.

Takuro finished reading the requested passage and looked to his teacher. Mr. Eto nodded, satisfied, and then began talking about Hirosuke Hamada's *The Red Ogre Who Cried.*

Once upon a time, there was a red ogre who longed to be loved by humans. His friend, the blue ogre, hatched a plan to help.

"I'll attack the villagers so you can come fight me off and save them. That way, the humans will see that you're really a kind ogre," the blue ogre said.

The plan was a success, and the red ogre made friends with the whole village. He lived his days in happiness after that, but he eventually became concerned

about his friend, the blue ogre. He hadn't seen him since the attack. Worried, the red ogre went to visit the blue ogre's house and found a letter addressed to him.

Red Ogre,

Live happily and in harmony with your human friends. You and I cannot be seen together anymore. If we continue to associate, the humans might begin to suspect you. They may even grow fearful, and that would ruin things. So, I've decided to take a trip. It may be a long, long journey, but I will never forget you. Perhaps we will meet again somewhere someday. Farewell. Take care of yourself.

Always your friend,

Blue Ogre

The red ogre read the letter over and over, but the tears didn't stop. That was the story of *The Red Ogre Who Cried.*

As he talked about it, Mr. Eto repeatedly used the word "touching" to describe the deep friendship between the red and blue ogres.

Touching? How?

On the surface, Takuro faked understanding of Eto's lecture. But deep down, it made no sense at all to him.

This is stupid. And boring.

Stifling a yawn, he patiently waited for the lecture to end. He was bored out of his mind. He overheard one of the girls saying she found herself crying at the end of the story.

"Now *that's* funny!" he loudly proclaimed with a laugh.

When he saw her actually wiping away tears, however, he was shocked to no end. It was like he lived in a different world from everyone else.

The blue ogre sacrificed his own happiness to grant the red ogre's wish. His actions were nothing more than foolishness in Takuro's opinion. He couldn't

relate.

If I were the blue ogre, I'd eat all the stupid villagers for judging the ogres based on appearance and thinking they were scary. Then I'd laugh at the red ogre for wanting to be friends with those idiots.

Friendship. Kindness. Love. The language arts teacher rattled off a list of clichéd words Takuro would have expected to hear out of a sappy daytime soap opera. At first it was just silly, but now it was starting to get irritating.

How long is he going to keep spewing this crap? And why are they all nodding so seriously after every word?

Suddenly, loud ringing filled his ears. A sharp pain shot through the backs of his eyes. The teacher's words, his classmates' faces, the stains on the floor—everything disgusted him. Takuro clenched his fist. He tried his hardest to suppress the darkness welling up within him, but he couldn't for some reason. This had never happened before.

Laughter echoed through the classroom. Eto had told a joke, apparently.

What's so funny? I'm at my limit.

Fighting the urge to scream with all his might, Takuro shot up out of his seat. The laughter ceased as all eyes focused on him.

"Yes, Takuro?" Eto asked curiously.

"Sorry, I feel sick. I need to go to the nurse's office," Takuro answered flatly and left the classroom, making sure not to meet anyone's gaze.

The class was silent until he left the room, but as soon as he stepped out, the clamor started up again. Were they talking about him? Had he kept up his normal perfect student facade? He walked briskly down the hall, taking deep breaths to try and calm his racing heart.

What is with me? I've always been able to control my anger. Is it because I'm tired? No, that's not the only reason...

Takuro bit his lower lip.

It's the new kid. Because he's not coming to school, I don't have any way to blow off this stress. That's why I've been having that stupid dream every night!

Takuro made his way down the stairs and to the art room that was unoccupied this time of day. Making sure no one was around, he kicked the wall as hard as he could.

At this rate, I'm really going to snap.

Numbness crept up his toes from the blow, which made him angry for some reason. He let out a deep sigh to calm himself.

"I need to drag my toy back to school. And fast," he said in a vicious whisper.

3

Kicking the wall seemed to cool Takuro off just enough. By the time he made it to the nurse's office, he was again able to put on his perfect student act without trouble. He told the nurse he hadn't slept much lately.

"Don't study too hard, now," the nurse said.

Takuro had predicted it down to the word. It made him snicker. He knew he didn't need to tell the truth. People around him, adults included, naturally made up excuses for him. He didn't have to justify himself to anyone.

The nurse recommended 20 minutes of bed rest. He laid down, and even though he couldn't sleep, he did feel better afterward. The ringing in his ears and the pain in his eyes were gone. When the bell rang to signal the end of class, Takuro got out of bed, thanked the nurse, and left the clinic. As soon as he got back to the classroom, everyone swarmed him.

"You looked so pale. We were worried. Are you okay?"

"Maybe you should skip practice today. I'll talk to the seniors for you."

"What's up? What happened, man?"

It was the same as always. Yet for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to smile. Not a single friendly response would leave his mouth.

"Look in a mirror, why don't you? You look horrible. Something nasty's haunting you."

"Just go home. Without you around, I might be able to become a starter."

"Is it Naoki's curse at work?"

He could hear what they were really thinking to themselves. It was all in his head, of course, but there was never any way to *really* know what was inside someone's heart. Take Takuro, for example.

The ringing he thought had subsided now began echoing obnoxiously in his ears again. The piercing pain in his eyes returned, too. It felt like someone was drilling into them.

Stop it!

While faking a smile, he screamed internally. Everything about the smiling people talking to him made him angry. It was all just so irritating. Even responding was a giant pain. All he wanted to do was flop on his desk and rest, but the people surrounding him just kept talking and bugging him.

“Hey, are you really okay?” Mika leaned over and whispered in his ear.

He’d been trying to hide it, but his acting couldn’t fool her—not when they spent so much time together.

“Oh, Takuro! I found that book you wanted to read in the library. I know you’ll love it. Come with me. I’ll show you where it is.”

Takuro was wondering how to respond, but she forcefully pulled on his arm. He couldn’t remember asking her about a book. She’d probably realized something was up and was trying to help him escape. That was just the kind of girl she was.

“Oh, sure.”

If I stay here, I might have another attack.

Takuro said some quick goodbyes to his classmates and then followed after her. He hadn’t told Mika about the nightmares. She would probably just make fun of him and call him a child if he did. But either way, he had no intention of telling her. He didn’t want her to see him as weak.

“Guess what my brother’s friend said?”

As Mika pulled Takuro out of the classroom, he overheard two of his classmates talking down the hall.

“He saw two students sneaking around the Jailhouse the day before yesterday about 8:00 P.M. One was really tall and the other was wearing a New York Yankees cap.”

“Huh? You don’t mean...”

“Yeah. It could have been Shinichi and Kota.”

“Hold on. What’s that mean? Didn’t they just go on another one of their

trips?”

“Nah, I’m thinking they snuck into the Jailhouse. Shinichi’s been talking big and saying he’s going to do it to prove the monster isn’t real.”

“This is bad news, right? Maybe they were attacked by the monster...”

Takuro shuddered at the mention of the Jailhouse monster. The image of the terrifying giant that crept into the back of his mind was all too vivid. Its big, blue figure. That green liquid dripping from its wide mouth. The sharp fangs that sank into Takuro’s throat every night.

Stop it!

Takuro nearly shouted, but he was too frozen to even speak. Realizing something was off, Mika gave him a worried look.

“...Takuro?”

Meanwhile, the two boys down the hall continued to talk.

“No way, man. A monster like that ain’t real. Or what, are you saying you actually believe in it?”

“Not really... But then why haven’t they come back yet?”

“Maybe they had an accident inside the Jailhouse. We could go search for them after school.”

Blood rushed to Takuro’s head. His body was moving before he could even think clearly. He heard Mika shriek and saw one of the boys fall to the floor. His right fist stung.

The boy on the ground held the left side of his face as he stared at Takuro in fear. Red liquid seeped between his fingers. His nose must have been bleeding. Adding it all up, Takuro finally registered that he’d punched the guy.

“Wh-What the hell was that for?” the other boy shouted at him. He had the same fear in his eyes.

But who would have expected the most popular guy in their peaceful class to suddenly punch another student out? Takuro looked around and realized everyone was staring at him. They all looked terrified.

Crap.

His fist throbbed with every beat of his heart. He covered it with his other hand, then collected himself and summoned his usual facade. He walked over to the boy he'd punched, who stiffened up like a nervous cat. It reminded him of Naoki and Shun.

"Sorry. I just lost it." He flashed his typical, sweet smile and extended his left hand. "The school rules forbid us from going onto the Jailhouse grounds. It's not a playground. Have you forgotten Naoki's accident? I couldn't bear it if another tragedy like that befell one of my classmates..."

Takuro thought he might be laying it on a bit thick, but the others were nodding in understanding. They'd bought it.

"I'm just really worried about Shinichi and Kota."

The boy he'd decked for no reason, however, still seemed unsatisfied. He wiped the blood from his nose and looked up at Takuro defiantly.

"It's just an abandoned house, right? No one owns it. Who cares if we sneak inside?"

"I never told anyone this, but my family owns that land. We're planning on building a new store there, so I can't let you do that."

Whispering broke out among the students who had gathered at the door to see what was going on. The mysterious owner of the Jailhouse had finally been revealed. Takuro's father had bought the allegedly haunted mansion a few months ago, but Takuro had kept it a secret. He could always imagine the creeped-out looks he'd get if the other students found out. It would damage the image he'd worked so painstakingly hard to create for himself. He only admitted it now because it seemed like the only way he could think of to get out of this situation. In the heat of the moment, he figured it would be all right if his classmates found out about it while he was playing the good student.

"Oh, you're opening a new store there, huh? Then isn't that all the more reason to settle this now?" The boy still must have been angry about the punch because despite his normally casual personality, he seemed to be growing more sour by the minute.

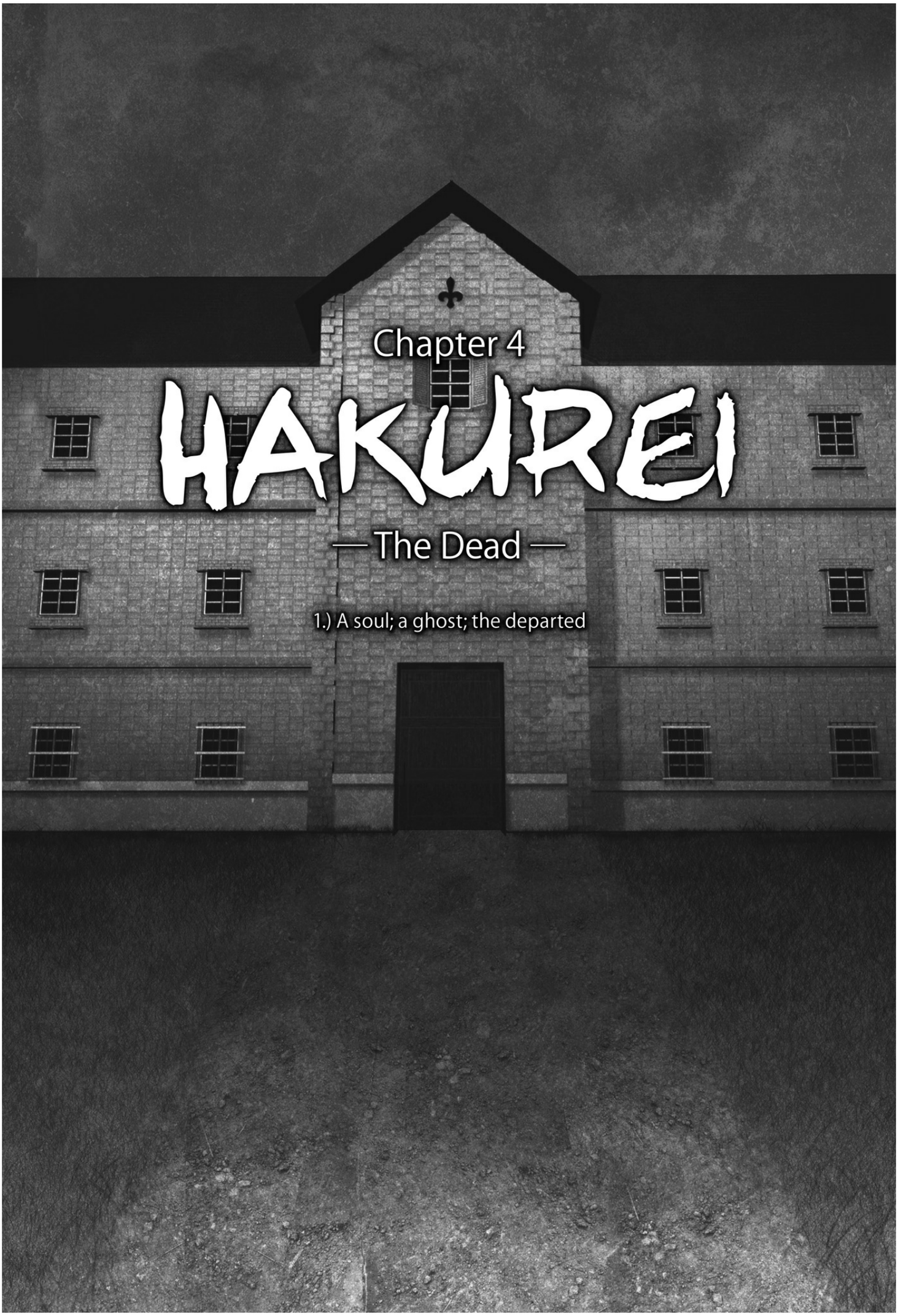
“Settle what?” Takuro asked.

“If people think the place is haunted, no one’s gonna shop at your store. This is your chance to prove them wrong.”

Now he’d done it. There was only one response to that.

“All right, fine. I’ll prove it to you. There’s no such thing as monsters.”

Either way, now that people knew Takuro’s father owned the Jailhouse, he needed to quash any bad rumors about it quickly. Maybe if he checked the place out and saw for himself that there was no monster, the nightmares would stop, too. And so Takuro made up his mind to visit the Jailhouse for himself.


Chapter 4
HAKUREI
— The Dead —
1.) A soul; a ghost; the departed

1

Anna liked the English language, but she didn't do so hot in English class. She stared lazily out the window as she listened to the English teacher drone on, reciting one elementary sentence after another. As the afternoon waned, a group of children would gather in the schoolyard every day like clockwork. There were boys and girls of every age. Some wore school uniforms, some were in pajamas, some were even half-naked. But they all had one thing in common: they clearly weren't of this world.

A boy, his right leg bent at an impossible angle, dangled from a steel pole in a gentle sway. Anna had heard a rumor that someone had fallen from there and died 20 years ago. It must have been him. To still be here now, he must have had regrets that kept him from moving on.

A girl in a floral dress was missing half her head. A victim of bullying, she'd killed herself some years ago when she couldn't take it anymore. She was always searching the ground with her bare hands, desperately looking for something. She would likely never stop until she found whatever it was she was searching for.

This wasn't anything normal people saw, of course. But to Anna, the strange sight had become part of her daily life.

The adaptability of humans is a truly remarkable thing...

Anna thought things over in a daze. She was amazed at how quickly people could change. She remembered waking up in a hospital bed two days after the accident. Unable to turn in her sleep, her back would hurt so badly that she wished for death just to end the suffering. Then two days later, she was totally used to it. It was just like the pain of her losing her parents. It hadn't even been a month since the accident, yet she'd already begun to recover. Her new life with her uncle was also slowly becoming less painful.

But the accident had affected her in more ways than one. She wasn't sure whether it was because she'd hit her head really hard or just because she'd had a near-death experience that blurred the line between this world and the next,

but ever since that tragic day, Anna had been able to see ghosts. Naturally, she was shocked at first. She worried she'd gone crazy. The ghosts were scary, but none of them had ever tried to harm her. She eventually came to accept them along with her power, and now it was just another part of her life. It hadn't ever been a problem. That is, until yesterday.

A small sigh slipped her lips.

Last evening after leaving Shun's place and finding herself at the site of the accident with Hiroshi, she'd seen the ghost of Naoki. He was completely blue and his guts were spilling out grotesquely where the truck had run him over. He'd stared straight at Anna.

"Death to you all!" he'd hissed in a whisper, a faint grin on his face.

Anna wasn't certain who "you all" was referring to, but she had something of a hunch. If it was what she thought it might be, then...

Shrugging off such dark thoughts, she concentrated again on the courtyard. A lone student was scaling the school gate. He then ran across the yard toward the building like he was coming straight for her. Anna's eyes went wide as she stared at him. She recognized that trademark spiky hair. It was Kota, one of the boys who'd gone missing two days ago. As he approached, Anna got a better look at him. Everything from the superhero T-shirt to the braided bracelet around his wrist said it was Kota. There was no doubt about it. But Anna let out a gasp of despair.

Kota's face was missing. Great, dark holes sat where his eyes once had, and the center of his face was nothing but red, as if his nose had been ripped off. The river of blood pouring from it made it impossible to tell if he had a mouth or not. When she looked, she could also see that his right thigh was split vertically. She could literally see through it. The sight was altogether ghastly, and Anna knew no one could be running in that condition. He had to be dead.

Kota came right up to the building. He placed his hands on the classroom window and brought his featureless face closer like he was trying to peer in. Was he looking at her? He rapped on the glass, as if trying to communicate something. The pane shook and rattled fiercely. Several students looked around for the cause of the noise, but none of them could see Kota.

Green liquid dripped from his eye sockets. It almost looked like tears. Kota continued to bang on the window for a few minutes before giving up and turning away. Moaning, he ran off.

Were you trying to tell us something? I'm sorry, Kota...

Anna looked down so that no one would see her biting her lip. Guilt pierced her chest like an arrow. None of her other classmates had seen him. She was the only one who could have done anything for him, yet she'd pretended not to notice him. It was just like with Shun. The intense self-hatred that bubbled up in Anna's heart felt like it would tear her in two.

Anna had known that Shun was the victim of terrible bullying at Takuro's hands. A ghost in the home ec room had kindly told her so. Yet she hadn't done anything. Despite knowing that Shun might meet the same fate as Naoki, she just didn't know what to do. And now...

What... could I have even done?

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. Anna lifted her head and looked out the window, but she didn't see Kota anywhere.

I must be really tired today. I should go home early and rest.

Suppressing the dark feelings that had welled up within her, Anna began packing up her bag to leave as class came to an end.

"Huh? Takuro, you're leaving? What about practice?" someone said at the front of the classroom.

"I'm taking off today. Not feeling so hot. Cover for me with the seniors, will ya?"

Anna lifted her head to see Takuro leaving the classroom before anyone else.

"Takuro. Wait, please." Hiroshi stepped in front of him as he hurried toward the door.

"What do you want?"

Oddly, there was a roughness to Takuro's voice. Today he'd been acting quite unsettled and was quick to anger. It was most unusual. Rather than his normally radiant, friendly aura, he seemed to be exuding panic from every fiber of his

being. What could have happened?

“Where are you going in such a rush?”

“The Jailhouse. These weird rumors are going to affect my dad’s business, so I’m going to put an end to them myself by proving there is no monster.”

“I advise that you refrain.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I can’t say, honestly. But would you consider not going today?”

Anna finally realized what was going on.

“If any of our classmates say they’re going, you have to stop them.”

Shun had given them a very specific warning just the day before, and Hiroshi was trying to keep his promise. Anna had thought Hiroshi didn’t care much for people since he was always either buried in a thick book or intensely studying bugs. He was the smartest kid in class, and he certainly behaved like a brainiac. But something was different about him when it came to Shun.

“Shut up. Out of my way.”

It was clear Takuro had no intention of listening. He forcefully pushed past Hiroshi and stormed out of the classroom. Mika and Takeshi, his girlfriend and lackey, followed him out. The three of them were practically always together.

“Takuro. Wait, please!” Hiroshi yelled, which took Anna by surprise. He then turned to her. “Anna, let Shun know immediately that Takuro’s headed to the Jailhouse. I’ll go after him.”

That’s right. This is no time to be spacing out. I’m done with doing nothing and regretting it later.

“R-Right. Got it.”

Anna nodded and dashed out the door.

2

Slipping past a girl missing her head as she left the school, Anna made her way toward Shun's place. She glanced up at the sky and saw dark clouds rolling in. The low rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance. Storms like that weren't common in winter. Was it a bad omen? Unease clawed at Anna's chest. Something similar had happened right before the accident. She had to hurry.

Veering right off the main road, she cut diagonally through the grounds of the abandoned chemical plant. It was the quickest way to Shun's, but on the other side of the plant lay the Jailhouse. Beneath the darkening clouds, it and its lofty, old stone walls looked creepier than usual.

Let's not spend any longer here than necessary. I'll run as fast as possible and cut right through.

Unfortunately, her heavy school bag was a hindrance. She tossed it aside for the time being and bent down to tighten up the laces on her shoes before making a run for it.

"You gonna leave your bag here? It's gonna rain soon, you know. Your stuff'll get soaked," said a familiar voice.

Anna looked up and saw a boy covered in blue liquid standing in the shadow of the plant.

"Naoki..." She was so shocked that his name left her lips in a raspy whisper.

His guts were dangling from his belly, just as they had been the day before. Swinging them with his left hand, a twisted smile crept across his lips. It was an expression Anna never could have imagined him making while he was alive.

"Oh? I didn't believe it when we met yesterday, but you really can see me, can't you? Wow, so people like that really do exist..."

Naoki stood right in front of Anna, his peculiar smile widening. Anna, however, was speechless. She stood there aghast. Naoki scratched his upper lip, troubled at the sight.

"Well, gee. You don't have to be so on guard. I'm not going to hurt you."

Naoki bent down to meet Anna's gaze directly. Still smiling, he continued, "But could you not get in my way?"

His expression was calm, yet the tone of his voice carried an intensity that told Anna that he wasn't exactly asking.

"...What are you going to do?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Nothing, really. Even in death, I'm powerless. I can't do anything, just like when I was alive." Naoki frowned bitterly. "It was all I could manage to lure Shinichi to the Jailhouse."

Naoki was quite talkative, a quality he hadn't shown in life. He hardly seemed to be the same person. Perhaps this was how death had transformed him.

"Is Shinichi in the Jailhouse?" Anna asked as she looked to the high walls on the other side of the road.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Is Kota with him?"

"Yup. They were together until two days ago, at least."

"What does that mean?" she asked, despite knowing what he meant. Anna had seen a ghastly version of Kota earlier that afternoon, speechless and missing his face. It was obvious he was no longer of this world. "...Are they both dead?"

"Yeah," Naoki answered as the corners of his mouth curled upward.

"How? Did you kill them?"

"Of course not. I just told you I'm not strong enough to do that. I simply led them to the Jailhouse. The rest I left up to the monsters."

"Monsters? There's no such thing as monsters."

"So you're talking to a ghost, yet you still disbelieve? Knowing what you do, why wouldn't you think there are monsters in the Jailhouse?"

"Because... Because they can't possibly exist. They just can't."

"That's an unexpectedly stupid answer, coming from you." Naoki giggled, his eyes glinting happily. "Well, whatever. If you don't believe in monsters, then

don’t interfere. I mean, if there aren’t any monsters, there’s no danger in Takuro and his friends going to the Jailhouse, right?”

Naoki’s eyes went wide. He looked to the sky, a satisfied smile creeping across his lips.

“All those who treated me like a bug should die. Takuro especially. I want him to piss his pants in fear.”

The dead needed no food, sleep, or rest. The only thing they had was their regrets, which grew greater by the day. Naoki, consumed by his desire for revenge, had completely lost any semblance of his living mind.

“Death... Death to them all... Death... Death... Death... Yes, die... Die... Die... Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die!” he chanted, a look of ecstasy on his face.

Anna tried to sneak away while he seemed distracted, but he snatched her wrist in the blink of an eye. His grip was too strong for her to break free.

“Let me tell you a secret: ghosts can’t be seen, but we can still touch people and objects. It’s basically like we’re still alive.”

“No! Let me go!”

A passerby gave Anna a strange look and quickly walked away. Any normal person could only see Anna standing there, so of course they were creeped out.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Naoki asked, still holding on to her right arm.

“I have to stop Takuro!”

“I don’t get you. I asked nicely for you to stay out of my way...”

Anna struggled, trying to find a way out of his grasp, but she froze for a moment when she saw Takuro approaching out of the corner of her eye. Mika and Takeshi were with him, but none of them could see Anna shrouded in the shadow of the chemical plant. They were diligently making their way toward the heavy iron gate of the Jailhouse with Takuro. To Anna’s surprise, Takuro took a key from his pocket and easily undid the padlock.

“Don’t go!” Anna tried to scream but couldn’t. Naoki was covering her mouth.

On Takuro's orders, Takeshi begrudgingly pushed on the gate. It was so heavy that he only managed to get it open a fraction of the way. The gap was just large enough for one of them to fit through at a time. Takuro went first, and it was almost like the others were sucked in after him.

A few seconds later, Hiroshi appeared. He was out of breath. He must have been running as fast as he could to catch up. There was a blue bruise on his temple where Takuro or maybe Takeshi had probably hit him. Seeing that the gate was open, Hiroshi slipped inside after his wayward classmates.

If Hiroshi's there, it should be fine.

Anna breathed a sigh of relief. She knew Hiroshi would be able to use reason to talk the others down.

"Are you thinking Hiroshi will be able to dissuade them?" Naoki whispered in Anna's ear. His moldy breath awoke a new fear inside her. "You're naive. He can't possibly stop Takuro."

Naoki's grip weakened for a moment, and Anna jerked her head out of his grasp.

"Takuro! Don't go inside the mansion!" she shouted as loud as she could.

"It's no use. Your voice will never reach him over these high walls. But even if he did hear you, do you really think he's the type of guy to listen?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. Hiroshi will be able to stop them," Anna said with a fierce glare at Naoki.

"Ghosts move unheard and unseen, so I've witnessed sides to each of you that no one else ever has. For example, I know that Takeshi's actually a huge coward and that you've tried to kill yourself several times since your parents died."

"..."

"Here's another secret: insects aren't the only thing Hiroshi obsesses over. His grandfather's Italian, so he's fascinated with anything European."

"So what?"

"The original owner of the Jailhouse was also a European culture buff, so the

place is filled with Western touches. There's no way Hiroshi won't notice. And when he sees something that interests him, he immediately loses sight of everything else around him. He might even be the first inside the mansion," Naoki said as he let go of Anna's arm. "If you don't believe me, why don't you go and see for yourself?"

He didn't have to tell her twice. Anna dashed away, cut across the road, and approached the iron gate. Trying to calm her racing heart, she darted through the tiny open gap and stepped onto the Jailhouse grounds. Before her was a vast, overgrown yard. It looked like it hadn't been touched in years. Despite it being the dead of winter, weeds as high as her waist sprouted from the ground.

Her eyes moved to the building looming on the opposite side of the yard. It was an ancient Western-style mansion like what you'd expect to see in a horror movie. Black clouds were rolling in from behind it, casting an ominous darkness over the whole scene.

The front door to the mansion was wide open, and Anna saw no sign of anyone around. The others must have already gone inside. So far, it seemed like Naoki was right. Hiroshi hadn't been able to stop them.

Naoki casually walked past Anna as she stood there reeling, and headed for the mansion. She quickly followed after him. Forging a path through the weeds, she cut across the overgrown yard. Once at the entrance, she peered into the mansion over Naoki's shoulder. She still couldn't see anyone. Even straining her ears, she couldn't hear a sound. She sucked in a deep breath and started to call out to Hiroshi.

"You're annoying. Move."

Naoki pushed her by the shoulder. Then, right in front of her eyes, his ghostly hand slammed the front door shut.

"Now everything's as it should be," he said with a satisfied smile as he leaned up against the door.

"Wait... What did you just do?"

She pushed him out of the way and stared up at the towering door. She tried turning the knob, but it only jiggled in place. The door wouldn't budge.

“What’s going on?” she asked sternly, glaring at Naoki.

“Hmm... I wonder what is going on right about now.” Naoki gave a small shrug, playing dumb... or maybe he really didn’t know. “Sorry for grabbing you and covering your mouth earlier. But don’t worry, I won’t interfere anymore. You were on your way to a guy named Shun, right? Why don’t you ask him for help if you’re that worried? Not that it’ll help now...”

Naoki gave her a crooked smile as he played jump rope with his own trailing innards.

3

Anna ran as fast as she could straight to Shun's place, practically flying. She rang the doorbell over and over, too anxious to even wait for a response. But Shun must have sensed her desperation. He came to the door almost immediately.

They went straight to his room. No one else seemed to be home. Anna had never been alone with a boy in his room before, but this was no time to be shy. She gulped down the tea Shun offered her then quickly told him about how Takuro and the others had gone to the Jailhouse. Of course, she omitted the part about meeting Naoki. That would only complicate things unnecessarily.

As soon as Anna finished her story, Shun reached out for the phone on his desk. After hitting a button on the speed dial, he held the receiver tightly against his ear.

"Who are you calling?"

"Takuro's house," he instantly replied. "We have to borrow the spare key to open the front door to the Jailhouse. They've probably realized that they've been locked inside the mansion and are freaking out by now."

"Huh? Even if it's an automated lock, they should still be able to open the door from the inside."

"The Jailhouse doors aren't normal doors. They won't open so easily. We have to get them out, and quickly... Shoot, no one's answering."

Shun irritatedly hung up the phone, then picked it back up and pressed the redial button. But there was no luck the second time, either. No one picked up on the other end. With a heavy sigh, Shun took the phone from his ear.

"Hey, why are you so scared? Is there really something inside the Jailhouse?" Anna asked when she saw the deeply troubled look on his face.

"I told you yesterday: a monster lives there. If we don't hurry, their lives could be in danger," Shun answered, his grip tightening on the receiver in his hand. His tone was dead serious. He didn't seem to be joking at all. "It's a long shot,

but I'm going to call Smile's main office and see if I can talk to Takuro's father directly."

Shun hit a different button on the speed dial and closed his eyes as if he were praying. He was bouncing his leg, indicating just how anxious he was.

Why does he conveniently have Takuro's home phone and Smile's office on speed dial?

Anna couldn't help but wonder what was really going on as she watched Shun from the side. Had he known this was going to happen? It seemed strange he knew about the door, too. Only someone who'd actually been in the Jailhouse could know that it wouldn't open from the inside.

"Oh, hello?" Shun spoke into the mouthpiece.

Unlike earlier, it seemed he'd gotten through to someone this time. But that wouldn't be the end of his problems.

"Um... I'm a classmate of the president's son. He's been in an accident... I need to speak with his father right away."

His voice was faltering, which actually sold the story more in Anna's opinion. She was hoping whoever was on the other end of the line would buy it too.

"Damn."

Shun sighed and hung up the phone. Takuro's father was apparently on a business trip and couldn't be reached until later in the evening.

"If we can't get the key, we'll just have to get in some other way."

"How?"

"Let's ask the teacher." Shun pressed another button and then handed the phone to Anna. "Sorry, but could you explain things to him? He's bound to listen to you over someone like me who's been skipping school."

"Oh... Okay, sure." She gave a quick nod and took the phone. "Don't get your hopes up, though."

Anna recalled the events of the past few months as she listened to the phone ringing. After accidentally witnessing Takuro bullying Naoki, she'd submitted an

anonymous letter about it to their homeroom teacher. But all he'd done was call the two boys into his office to talk to them. There was no way the truth would ever come to light like that. And in the end, nothing changed. Nothing until the accident on Christmas Eve.

The teacher's not going to be of any help this time either...

He eventually answered the phone, but his response was about what Anna had expected.

"How did they get into the building?" he asked.

His unconcerned tone told Anna that he wasn't taking this seriously, and that irritated her. But she couldn't really blame him. If she hadn't met Naoki, she never would have believed anything about a monster, either. Even now, she still wasn't sure she did. A man-eating giant just sounded too far-fetched to be real.

"They used a key to get in? Huh? So Takuro's father owns the place? Well, well. I didn't know that."

In contrast to their homeroom teacher's nonchalant tone, Anna's grew forceful.

"Sir, the Jailhouse is off-limits, is it not? We have to get them out of there."

"Yes, but if it belongs to Takuro's family and he's with them, I don't think there's any cause for alarm."

"But—"

"Besides, I doubt Takuro would be doing anything he shouldn't, so why don't we just leave them be?"

It was no use. He was useless. Deciding that talking to him anymore would be a waste of time, Anna hung up in the middle of a sentence.

"Sorry. It was no use. What do we do now?"

Anna was confused, but it was clear Takuro and the others were in some kind of danger. For so long, Anna had lived thinking violent, untimely deaths were the domain of newspapers, TV shows, and novels—the world of fiction, far removed from reality. But she'd learned the truth last Christmas Eve.

Misfortune was like a contagious disease. Tragic events would often strike one after the other. That was why, even in modern-day society, the practice of exorcism still lingered. People genuinely believed they could be haunted. There were always those seeking refuge in some religion or another. People like Anna, who felt like their very existences were the cause of misfortune around them. Tragedy actively sought them out, it seemed.

Anna stroked her arm and shivered. Shun's room should have been warm and cozy, but she felt horribly cold. She recalled Kota, wandering the school courtyard without a face. The goosebumps on her arm worsened. She knew better. Misfortune begets misfortune.

Who's going to die next? Am I doomed to just sit on the sidelines and watch it happen again?

"What do we do, Shun?"

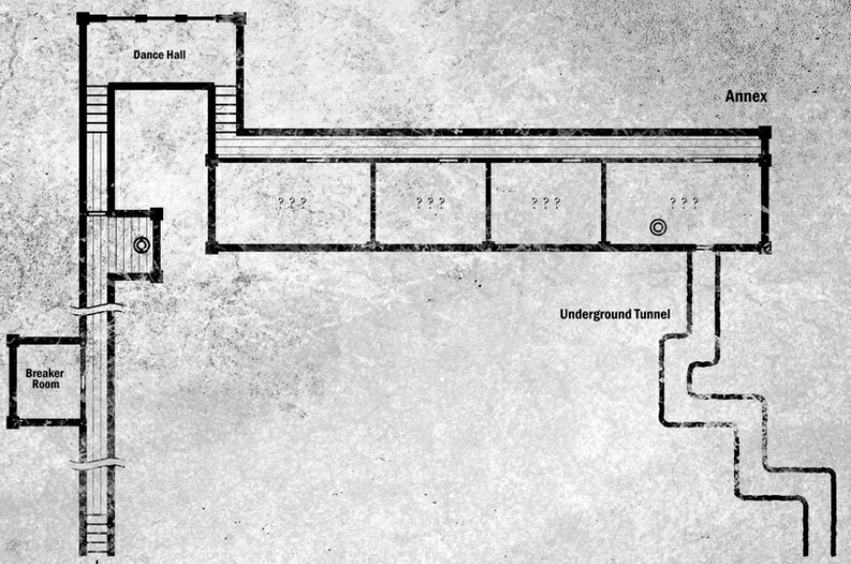
Anna didn't want to lose anyone else, but she didn't know how to stop it from happening.

"Well? What do we do?"

She unleashed her frustrations on Shun. He took the brunt of the blow head-on, and answered her without recoiling.

"All we can do now is figure out something ourselves."

Anna was shocked. Just a week ago, Shun had scarcely been able to even look someone in the eye. But now he was speaking calmly, totally collected and in control—the polar opposite of panicking Anna. People didn't just change like that overnight. What could have happened to him? Anna could only stare in disbelief at Shun's face.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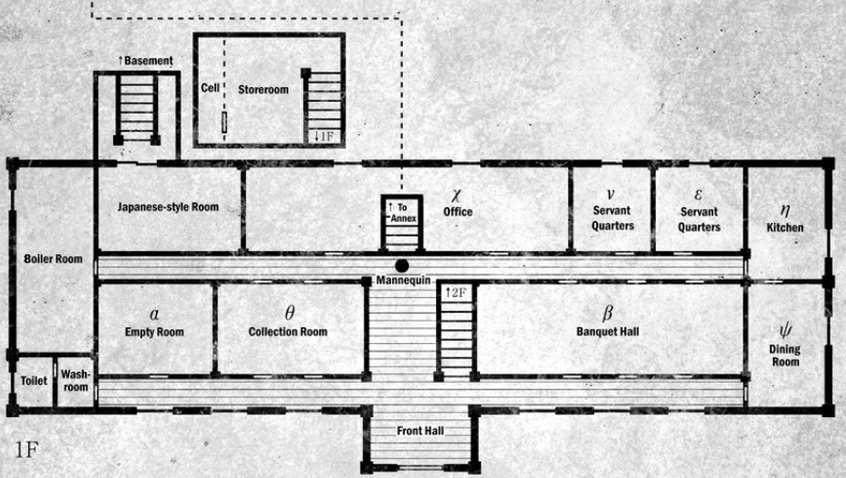
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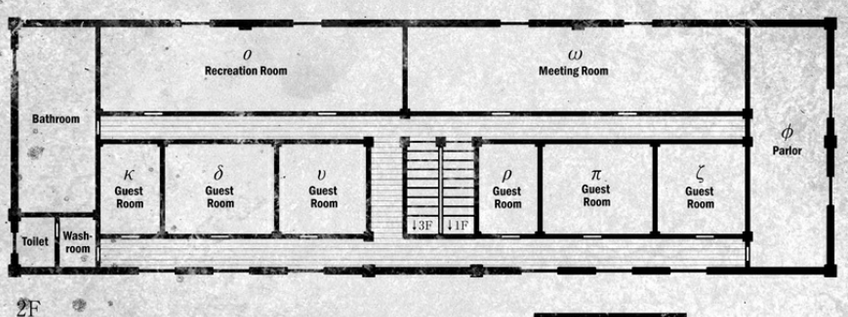
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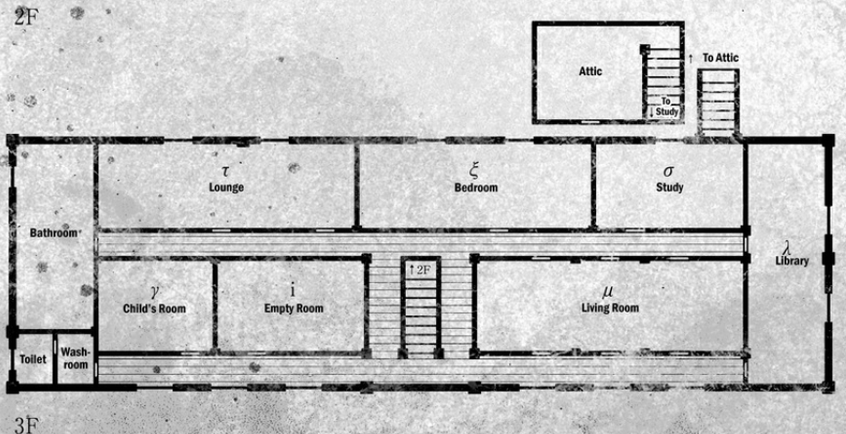
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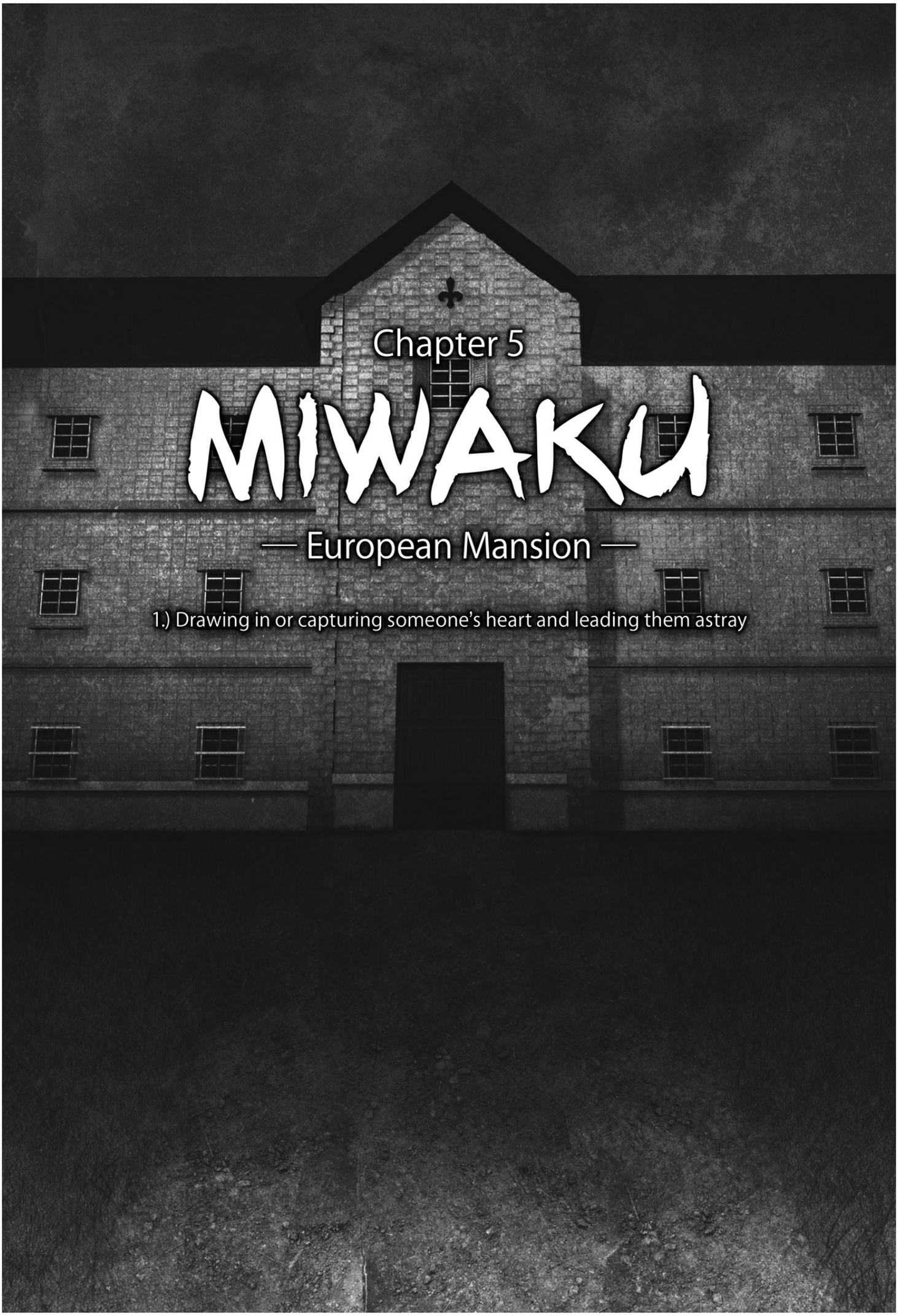
Chapter 5
MIWAKU
— European Mansion —
1.) Drawing in or capturing someone's heart and leading them astray

1

A stinging sensation on the right side of Shinichi's face woke him up. He instinctively reached for his cheek, and his fingertips were met with the sensation of something soft and warm.

"Screech!"

The rat by Shinichi's face let out a strange cry when he touched it. It immediately jumped back and bared its sharp front teeth in a threatening manner. It opened its mouth so wide that the thin strip of flesh it had been gnawing on fell to the floor.

Shinichi's cheek still stung. He touched it with his fingertips and discovered he was bleeding. The flesh the rat was eating was likely from his own face. It had probably taken a bite out of him while he was unconscious. But that wasn't enough to shock him anymore.

The rat's whole body was covered in blue fur, and its enormous eyes took up nearly half of its head in a most unsettling fashion. But compared to the monster, it was actually kind of cute.

Shinichi picked up the scrap of flesh and threw it across the room. The rat raised its tail and instantly gave chase. The room was now silent again, and the pain in his cheek was growing stronger.

"...Well. I'm not dead yet, huh?" he whispered hoarsely, hugging his knees.

Shinichi had hidden himself under the long table in the dining room. He had no idea how long he'd been there, but it was far too late to regret not picking up Kota's wristwatch. Thick iron bars and wooden planks covered the windows, making it impossible to even tell if it was day or night.

He hadn't eaten anything since coming into the mansion, and his mouth was so parched that his tongue felt like sandpaper. His lips were dry and cracked, while his throat burned all the way down. He might find some bottled water if he searched the mansion, but he had no intention of leaving the room. There was no telling where the monster could be hiding. He never wanted to see that fearsome creature ever again.

His limbs were weak. He also had a terrible headache like someone was pounding on his skull from the inside. His eyelids grew heavy, and he would slip in and out of consciousness. All signs pointed to dehydration. He remembered reading in a comic once that human beings could only survive three to five days without water. There was no way of telling how long he'd been trapped in the mansion now, but he couldn't be far from death. Burying his face in his knees, he closed his eyes. He could feel himself slowly slipping away.

Maybe this time I won't wake up. If I'm going to die, I'd rather just peacefully stop breathing. I definitely don't want to be torn apart the way Kota was. Just... quietly...

He silently prayed with all his heart for mercy, but he was startled out of this thoughts.

Wham!

A sudden noise echoed loudly from somewhere in the house. Lifting his head, he focused all of his energy on his eardrums.

Is it him?

An image of the blue giant crept into the back of his mind, but he quickly dismissed it.

No! Getting eaten by that thing is the last thing I want!

Turning to look at the door, he started to pick himself up off the ground. He was planning on using whatever strength he had left to bolt if the monster appeared.

"Whoa! The inside's cleaner than I thought."

But unexpectedly, he heard a voice coming from the other side of the door. A familiar voice.

"H-Hey. Don't you think we should go back?" said a second familiar, shrill voice.

"What? You scared, Takeshi?"

"No, Takuro. That's not it. You nabbed the key from your dad, right? I just don't want to get in trouble..."

It was Takeshi and Takuro. Shinichi froze when he heard their names.

My classmates! They must have come here looking for us! Takuro! I'm right here!

Shinichi tried to call to them, but only a puff of air escaped his throat. The dehydration must have been affecting his vocal cords. He couldn't speak a word. Shinichi crawled out from under the table and tried to stand, but his legs were weak. They were barely responsive. It almost felt like they didn't belong to him.

"Be honest, Takeshi. You're scared, aren't you? You're always pulling stupid pranks and getting yelled at by the teacher. There's no way you're worried about getting in a little trouble over me stealing a key from my old man."

Shinichi crawled across the floor as he listened to Takuro laughing. His joints were creaking after being huddled up under the table so long. Every movement sent pain shooting through his body, but this was no time to falter. If he missed this chance, all that awaited him was death and despair.

With herculean effort, Shinichi pressed on through the pain and finally managed to reach the door. He leaned against the wall to support himself and dug deep to find the strength to reach up and turn the doorknob. He opened it a crack and peered through it down the hall. The source of the voices was a group of four people standing in the foyer. It was Takuro, Takeshi, and Mika, accompanied by Hiroshi for some reason. They were all looking around at the mansion in fascination. They hadn't noticed Shinichi yet.

Everyone! I'm right here! Over here!

Still unable to speak, he lifted his right arm to bang on the floor, but it would be too late by the time the four of them noticed anything. Before Shinichi's fist could hit the floorboards, something snatched his legs and started to drag him off into the kitchen. He was sliding along the floor before he even knew what was happening, and he slammed right into the cupboard. A plate fell from the shelves, crashing to the floor in a loud clatter.

He could feel a warm liquid dripping down his cheek. He figured he must have cut his head when he struck the cupboard. His face twisted in pain, he looked up to see who or what was dragging him off. It was exactly what he hadn't

wanted to see: the blue monster that had attacked Kota.

Uwaaaaah!

He tried to scream, but couldn't. His dry throat was spent. The only thing that came to his mouth was the taste of blood. Shinichi watched in horror as the monster closed the door behind it, and then fixed its giant eyes on him.

"Wh-Wh-What was that sound, Takuro? No one's here, right? So what was that sound?"

He could still hear Takeshi's panicking voice from the front hall.

"I-I knew it! That blue-skinned monster *is* here!"

"Preposterous. You have to think about these things rationally. There's simply no way that such monsters actually exist," Hiroshi responded in his usual calm tone.

A bitter smile crept across Shinichi's dry lips at those words.

I guess even the smartest kid in class is wrong every now and then.

The monster slowly leaned over Shinichi. Strangely enough, he felt no fear. Perhaps more accurately, the fear he felt was so great that it tripped his emotional circuit breaker. He felt hardly anything as he closed his eyes to say his prayers. He begged for his consciousness to cut out before it attacked, but he wouldn't be that lucky.

There was the sound of snapping bones, and the next thing he knew, it felt like he was floating in the air. A foul-smelling liquid washed over him, running from his hips to his chest to his head.

What just happened?

He opened his eyes, unable to comprehend what was going on. Shinichi was hanging upside down in midair in what seemed to be the kitchen. Everything below his right knee was inside the monster's mouth, and the foul green liquid dripping down him was its saliva.

As he looked up, Shinichi's eyes met the monster's. The inhuman creature opened its left eye especially wide, clenched its jaw, and chomped through Shinichi's right leg. His consciousness was quickly fading.

Please. Just let me sleep now.

Shinichi continued to pray desperately.

2

Honestly... what am I doing?

Hiroshi cursed his weakness for European architecture as he hurried down the long hall.

I followed Takuro here in order to keep my promise with Shun.

He remembered Shun's words clearly: "If any of our classmates say they're going, you have to stop them." But it wasn't like Hiroshi believed all the gossip about a man-eating monster living in the Jailhouse. He knew good and well that such a thing couldn't possibly exist. Normally, he would have laughed it all off as stupidity, but the serious look on Shun's face when he'd said those words made him think twice.

Perhaps a living creature beyond human knowledge—something science couldn't explain—really did live here. Of course, he had no evidence of that. The afterlife, supernatural powers, even gods... Hiroshi believed in nothing of the sort, so why was he suddenly willing to entertain the idea of something as silly as the Abominable Snowman or the Loch Ness Monster? Even he couldn't say for certain.

If he had to guess, it was because he'd discovered that new species of grasshopper in front of the Jailhouse yesterday. Looking at it, he'd felt a strange sense of déjà vu. Hadn't he chased after a blue grasshopper in this area just recently? He tried desperately to remember, but a thick veil obscured his memories. All he could recall was a vague series of impressions, and somewhere among them was something about a blue monster.

I have to keep my promise to Shun.

Hiroshi had only followed Takuro in the first place because he was determined to keep his word. He'd managed to catch up with him and the others just as they opened the front door to the Jailhouse. *"Oh! How beautiful!"*

Hiroshi was awestruck when he saw the white, heavily textured walls inside the mansion. They were made with stucco, a traditional European plaster. And the work was in incredible condition. Someone must have been taking care of it.

From the outside, Hiroshi had thought the mansion resembled the Pisa Cathedral. He'd also noticed a beautiful chandelier hanging in the entrance hall, possibly Italian. Whoever built the mansion clearly had a taste for European styling. Thanks to the influence of his Italian grandfather, Hiroshi had a great interest in anything European himself. And the moment he'd laid eyes on the mansion's interior, he was smitten. It was like he was beguiled inside, forgetting all about his promise to Shun.

Ugh, I keep getting distracted.

Hiroshi vigorously shook his head to try and purge the beautiful walls from his mind. He cursed himself again and made his way toward the door at the end of the hall. He'd heard a sound coming from that room.

Takeshi had immediately started yelling about monsters, but Hiroshi found that highly unlikely. He was intent on investigating, and he had left the others at the entrance to go see what the noise really was. Was it to reassure Takeshi? No, that wasn't it. It was to satisfy his own curiosity. He'd taken the initiative because he needed to prove to himself that there wasn't really any monster.

Standing before the door, he turned the knob. The door creaked as it opened outward. Quite nervous, Hiroshi peered inside. He didn't see anyone. Focusing his ears, all he could hear was his own breathing. He opened the door further and stepped inside.

In the center of the room was a large, elaborately inlaid dining table. A bit beyond it was a classical cupboard. They were both Italian, most likely. The shelves of the cupboard were neatly lined with expensive-looking plates. Reflecting the soft light of the chandelier, each one shone like a pearl.

Hiroshi couldn't help sighing in admiration at the intricate beauty of the sight. Even though he'd just rebuked himself for such behavior, all thoughts of the monster completely left his mind as he walked over to the cupboard to take in its brilliance up close. As he approached, however, he spotted the remains of a shattered plate on the floor. He suspected it was the noise they'd heard. Something must have caused the cupboard door to open, and the plate came tumbling out.

The original owner of the mansion was clearly a methodical person. The

broken pieces of plate glimmered brightly, almost as if they'd just been polished. There wasn't a fingerprint to be seen on them. He could have stared at the mesmerizing sight for hours.

Hiroshi wanted to take one of them with him and keep it in his desk to admire while he took breaks from studying. Naturally, he couldn't just steal a plate, but surely no one would mind him taking a piece of the broken one. Unable to suppress the urge, he picked up a fragment of it. He felt a slight pain, and bright red blood dripped down his finger. The broken edges were sharper than he'd imagined.

After putting the fragment in his jacket pocket, Hiroshi licked the cut on his index finger and silently stood up. He turned around to return to the others when he spotted something else that caught his eye.

"Hmm?"

He'd been so entranced by the furniture that he hadn't paid much attention to anything else, but on the dining table sat something odd. It was something that seemed quite out of place in an abandoned mansion: a whole cake decorated with colorful candles. It appeared real at first glance, but the perfect sheen on the strawberries exposed it as a fake. Next to the cake stood a photo frame holding a replica portrait of a foreign man with great curly hair. It looked like something one might find hung in a classic music room or library.

Hiroshi leaned in to get a better look. The name "Jean de la Fontaine" was written under the portrait. He was a French fabulist from the 17th century. If Hiroshi recalled correctly, he was the man that the famous proverb "all roads lead to Rome" was frequently attributed to. But what was his portrait doing here? He cocked his head quizzically and looked around.

Wait. This place is supposed to be abandoned, is it not?

If it was, it was strange that so much furniture remained. And in good shape, no less. Had Takuro's father moved it all in? No, that couldn't be it. It seemed extremely unlikely that he'd bother to furnish the place before it was demolished to build a store.

According to rumor, it had been 20 years since the last owner disappeared. If no one had been in the mansion since, it should have been in a state of

disrepair and utter neglect. Yet the plates were polished to a shine and not a speck of dust could be seen anywhere on the floor. Someone had to be dutifully cleaning every inch of the place. Hiroshi gulped and looked up toward the ceiling.

Why is the chandelier even lit, anyway? Is someone in here besides us?

Sensing someone's eyes on him, Hiroshi whipped around. There was no one else in the room. Only the giant cupboard sat there in silence.

Actually... why is that plate broken?

A new question popped into his head as he stared at it. There had been no indication of an earthquake, and there was no sign of a draft coming from anywhere. They'd forced the front door open, but even if that had shaken anything, it shouldn't have reached this far.

"A man-eating monster lives there!"

Shun's words resurfaced in Hiroshi's mind, and he could feel a chill run down his spine. The room was cold, but he was sweating for some reason.

We should get out of here. And quickly.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. It was like an internal warning siren had gone off in his body.

From the moment animals first set foot on land four million years ago, insects had always prospered. It was Hiroshi's belief that the cockroach, hated and reviled by humans, would never go extinct because of its superior ability to sense danger. They used the sensors covering their bodies to accurately read things like temperature and humidity as well as the smells and sounds of the surrounding area. Insects were surprisingly sensitive to malice.

Though they weren't anywhere near the level of an insect's, humans also had such sensors. And while Hiroshi didn't believe in anything unscientific, he did put some stock in animal instincts.

This isn't good.

Hiroshi broke into a run and darted out of the dining hall.

"Something bad's about to happen. We need to leave—"

He ran as hard as he could to the entrance hall, but there was no one there. He looked around everywhere, but still found himself alone.

"...Guys?"

He called out to no one in particular, but no answer came. Thinking they'd gone outside, he tried the front door, but it was locked, and the knob wouldn't turn. He inspected the door, but could find no sort of device that would unlock it. There was just an empty keyhole under the doorknob.

Giving up on going outside, Hiroshi stepped back from the door and decided to look for another exit. The mansion's front hall stretched to the east and west. There were windows evenly spaced out along the southern wall, but each was covered in thick wooden planks. He inspected the closest one, but it was tightly affixed in place. There would be no way to get it off without some kind of tool. He then looked to the red carpeted staircase in the foyer that led up to the second floor. Beside it, right across from the entrance, was a mannequin.

In this mansion so exquisitely furnished and decorated in a European style, the expressionless, naked mannequin was strikingly bizarre. Its skin was faded in areas, and the hinges on the joints were all exposed. The blonde wig on its head was cheap, too, like something you'd find in a dollar store. He simply couldn't understand why someone would put such a tacky item right at the entrance where everyone would see it. There was something different about it. Perhaps it hid some secret. Hiroshi approached to take a better look.

"...Huh?" he uttered in surprise.

He could suddenly hear his heart pounding in his chest. He'd thought it was just a dirty mannequin, but upon closer inspection, the eyes alone were oddly realistic. Capillaries hung in the whites—the conjunctiva—and there were even pupils inside the corneas. They were so realistic that he thought they might move at any moment.

On the north side of the building stretched another hallway that mirrored the one in the south. The more he investigated, the more interesting the mansion became. But he couldn't afford to just wander the place aimlessly. His instincts were screaming of danger, telling him to run.

Hiroshi stepped back from the creepy mannequin and called out for Takuro.

He had the key to the front door. For now, finding Takuro came first.

Ktunk.

A soft thud came from upstairs, as if responding to his call.

Are they on the second floor? In that case, I should go meet up with them immediately.

Hiroshi dashed up the stairs to the second floor.

3

The second floor was fairly similar in construction to the first. Long halls stretched along the front and back of the building to the east and west. There were windows along the southern wall, but just like on the first floor, they were tightly covered and the planks wouldn't budge.

Across from those windows was a row of doors, and on each door was a plate engraved with a different Greek letter. Hiroshi walked past the closest door to the stairs—labeled ρ, or rho—and went into the neighboring one labeled π, or pi. For some reason, he had a feeling someone was in there.

Unlike the dining room, this room was quite dreary and contained nothing but a bed and a wardrobe. Seeing nothing of interest, he closed his eyes and tried listening.

Rattle, rattle, rattle....

He could hear something shaking rapidly. Opening his eyelids, he looked around the room again and noticed the wardrobe shaking slightly. Hiroshi held his breath as he approached, then yanked open the door. Inside was Takeshi, balled up and hugging his knees.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle....

Takeshi's whole body was trembling violently, as if he were being shaken by some unseen force. He had his arms wrapped around himself like he was trying to stop the shaking, but it clearly wasn't working.

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“Are you okay?”

Takeshi showed no response to Hiroshi’s question. He just stared into space and, like a broken toy, continued to tremble.

“What is it? Did something happen? Where are Takuro and Mika?”

Hiroshi asked question after question, but Takeshi offered no answers. Tears freely flowed from his eyes, which were open so wide that they looked like they might just fall out of their sockets.

Hiroshi realized there was no point in talking to him while he was in this state, so he gave up and started to poke around the wardrobe.

In the back of the wardrobe was a poster-sized map of the world. It had a singular red pin stuck into the upper-left section of the African continent, specifically in Morocco. Hiroshi stepped closer to get a better look at it, which made Takeshi jump. Hiroshi ignored him and leaned in toward the poster.

Stretching across Morocco was a mountain range called the Atlas Mountains that ran from Algeria to Tunisia. From north to south, it was further divided into the Middle Atlas, High Atlas, and Anti-Atlas regions. The pin was pressed into the Middle Atlas range. Hiroshi had to wonder why.

“You didn’t put this pin here, did you, Takeshi?”

Hiroshi tried to get an answer out of the quivering boy, but Takeshi wouldn’t even look at him. He turned back to the map with his head cocked to the side. Even with the wardrobe and wooden bed, the room was utterly dull. That was what made the map seem so peculiar. It was like with the cake and photo frame he’d seen in the dining room. It just didn’t fit. They stuck out so much that it was like they’d been put there on purpose for visitors to find, just like how you’d expect to come across key items in a video game.

Wait, a game...

A new sense of déjà vu overcame Hiroshi as he looked down at Takeshi, his unblinking eyes darting fearfully from left to right. Takeshi locking himself in a wardrobe... Hadn’t he just seen this same scene somewhere not too long ago? It only took a few moments’ thought to put it together. It was the PC game

Shun had made. In it were characters named and rather blatantly modeled after Takuro and Takeshi. In the beginning of the game, Takeshi hid himself in a wardrobe, just like he had now.

Hiroshi felt like was watching events from the game unfold right in front of him, and it wasn't just what Takeshi was doing, either. There was the broken plate in the dining hall, the layout of the mansion... Even the premise and setting were the same: four middle school students were trapped in a mansion where a man-eating monster was rumored to live. There was no way that much was just a coincidence.

Hiroshi's thoughts were cut off by the sound of a door slamming shut somewhere else in the mansion. Then the whole room shook violently, causing the chandelier on the ceiling to sway from left to right.

"...Was that an earthquake?"

Hiroshi could barely get a word in before Takeshi started screaming.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

His eyes and mouth were open splittingly wide, and he howled loud enough that Hiroshi thought his eardrums might burst.

"It's coming! It's coming! It's coming!"

He finally uttered intelligible words. Well, sort of intelligible.

"Everyone will be killed! Killed! Killed! I-It's gonna eat us! It's... It's... It's... It's... E-E-Eeeeek!"

Takeshi gasped for air as if convulsing. Tears and snot streamed down his face, making it a complete wet mess.

"You okay?"

Maybe he was just hyperventilating. Hiroshi put an arm around Takeshi's shoulders, thinking it might be a bad idea to just leave him alone.

"Uwaaaaah!"

But Takeshi was too beside himself to tell friend from foe.

"Stop! Stop iiiiit!"

Batting away Hiroshi's arm, he uncurled his legs and began flailing them like a child throwing a tantrum.

"I'm sorry! Sorry! Please don't kill me! Please! I don't want to die! I don't want to dieee!"

For some reason, watching Takeshi thrash around like that called a disturbing image to mind: Takeshi's head tumbling out of a wardrobe.

What is this?

The image was far too vivid to be a delusion. Hiroshi shook his head. This strong sense of déjà vu wasn't just because the situation was so similar to the game.

That much is clear. If that were the only reason for these visions, it wouldn't explain why I remembered that new species of grasshopper. Have I had this same experience in this mansion before? Granted, I have no memory of it. But what if something happened to make me forget all of that? Try to remember...

Turning his back on Takeshi's incessant screaming, Hiroshi searched his memories. Takuro running through the halls... A monster baring its fangs... The feeling of Shun's tear on his palm... Various fragments of images popped into his head like clips cut at random from a film. They were all too scattered and vague for him to make any sense out of them.

Thoom!

There was a heavy, low rumble like thunder through the mansion, shaking the room again.

"Stop iiiiit!"

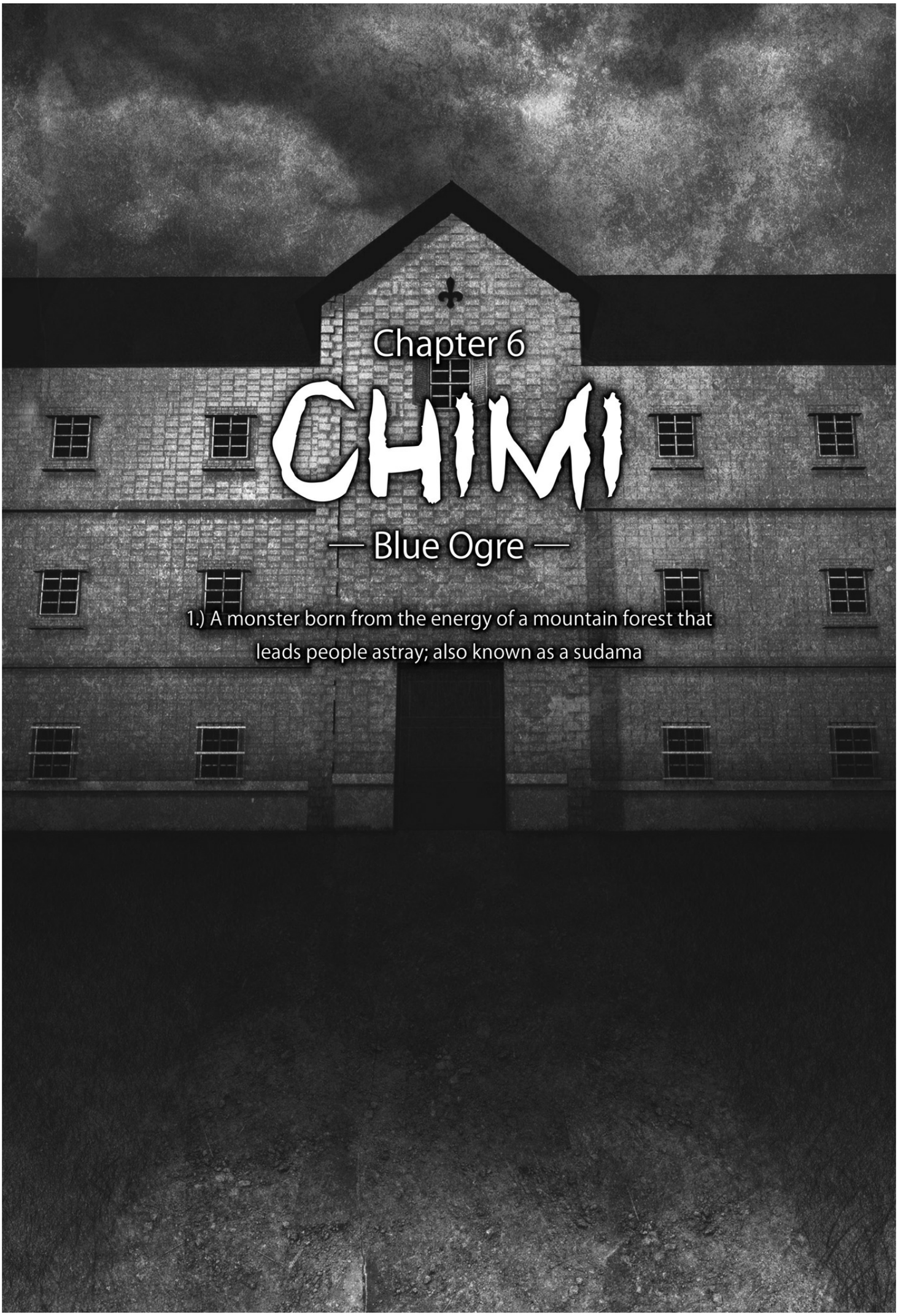
Sensing he was no longer capable of crying, Takeshi spewed spittle everywhere as he slammed the wardrobe door shut tight like a turtle retreating into its shell.

Thoom!

The room shook again. White specks of dust and aged paint fell from the ceiling onto Hiroshi's shoulder.

Thoom!

The shaking continued. Something was definitely happening upstairs. Hiroshi darted from the room and headed straight for the stairs to the third floor to find out what.


Chapter 6
CHIMI
— Blue Ogre —
1.) A monster born from the energy of a mountain forest that leads people astray; also known as a sudama

1

With every step Hiroshi took up the stairs, worry grew in him like an inflating balloon.

I have to hurry.

The moment he reached the highest floor, he set about systematically opening every door he saw. One after the other, however, they all seemed to be locked tight. The doorknobs wouldn't even turn. Hiroshi knocked and called out Takuro's name, but no one answered.

Thoom.

Another thunderous noise shook the whole building. The plaster on the walls fell off in flakes. The strange sound was much louder here than on the second floor. There was no doubt in Hiroshi's mind that he was getting closer to the source. The tremors even seemed to get stronger as he moved eastward. He could see larger and larger pieces of plaster flaking from the walls in a pattern radiating outward from down the hall.

Hiroshi looked toward the door at the far end of the hall, functionally the northeast corner of the building. On it was the Greek letter "λ," or lambda. Following the noise and the fractured pattern on the wall, it seemed to be the source of the violent shaking. Hiroshi leaned in and tried to listen to what was going on inside by putting his ear to the door, but he could scarcely hear anything over his own ragged breathing and racing heartbeat.

Stepping back, he looked at the door. For a moment, the letter λ reminded him of a creepy beast walking upright on two legs. He took a moment to catch his breath. It wasn't like him to be so shaken. He sighed quietly and patted his chest with his right hand.

Hiroshi was aware that, compared to others, he rarely showed emotion. Unlike his classmates, he'd never experienced things like getting pissed off about something, bursting into laughter, or crying his eyes out. Of course, it wasn't that he had no emotions. It made him happy to solve a difficult math problem that had been stumping him, and it made him sad when an insect he'd

been raising with care died. But that was about the extent of it.

Hiroshi hadn't the need for emotional signifiers like raising his voice, flailing his limbs, crying, or even laughing. Until very recently, he'd quite steadfastly believed that such acts were merely the conventional means of conveying emotions. Intentional, outward movements to express internal feelings. But that wasn't the whole truth. Sometimes emotions escaped naturally on their own. They could make profound changes in a person's face without them even realizing it. Shun had taught him that.

Shun always looked uneasy in class, but whenever he saw Hiroshi out in the hills behind school, he would smile broadly. Unused to being smiled at, Hiroshi had once told him that he didn't have to feign the gesture.

"You don't need to force yourself to smile in front of me," he'd said.

The pained mixture of loneliness and confusion on Shun's face after he said that was still burned into the back of Hiroshi's eyelids.

"Sorry if it bothers you. It's just so fun being here with you that I couldn't help myself..."

Seeing Shun lonely made Hiroshi's heart ache. But similarly, whenever he saw him smile, he found himself smiling too.

Hiroshi recalled being quite taken aback when he saw his own reflection in the blacked-out screen of Shun's laptop after playing his game. He'd never seen himself smile so happily before.

"I was so close to clearing it, too, but it got me in the end."

Hiroshi hung his head as the words "game over" popped up on the screen. Shun, sitting next to Hiroshi, stifled a laugh.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"You should have seen it. When the monster jumped out of the closet, you looked so surprised. I've never seen you like that before."

"I shouldn't have let that affect me. It compromised my ability to make the correct decisions, ultimately leading to my untimely demise. A proper scientific

approach to any situation requires a rational—and calm—mind."

He'd meant to sound serious, but Shun only laughed harder. His carefree smile made Hiroshi smile, too.

I have the same emotions as everyone else—Shun taught me that. But I have to suppress them right now. If I let my emotions take hold of me, I won't be able to stay rational in the heat of the moment. It'll be just like the time I got that game over because I panicked. And I have to survive this time. Calm down. Clear your mind. Calm down. Clear your mind.

Hiroshi chanted those words to himself like a mantra. He needed to survive and escape this place if he was ever going to see Shun smile again.

...Wait, survive? What am I saying? I'm not going to die here.

Whatever had scared Takeshi so badly, there was no way it was actually a man-eating monster. Telling himself that, Hiroshi took three deep breaths and gripped the doorknob. He turned his wrist lightly, and unlike the other doors on the floor, this one opened easily.

Holding his breath, he entered the room. The stench of mold assaulted him and almost made him sneeze. Hiroshi looked around, rubbing his nose. Tall bookshelves as high as the ceiling lined the entire room, their shelves tightly packed with antique leather-bound books. Many of them appeared to be specialized texts, and they had English titles Hiroshi couldn't understand.

The room was long, stretching all the way along the eastern side of the mansion. There was a second door in the room farther down from the one he'd come in, likely leading into the southern hallway.

The unique mixed smell of ink and aged paper made Hiroshi cough a little as he moved from shelf to shelf. As he studied them, however, he grew nervous. It wasn't the content of the shelves that struck him; it was their placement. They were arranged the exact same way as the ones in the library of Shun's game.

While it was improbable that the two mansions simply happened to have similar constructions and outward appearances, it was still conceivably possible that it *was* just a coincidence. Seeing details like these, however, Hiroshi was

quite convinced that wasn't the case. He couldn't fool himself any longer. Shun must have investigated this place from top to bottom before making his game. There could be no other explanation for the similarities.

No, wait...

But while that might account for the look and layout of the mansion, it didn't explain the other uncanny likenesses. The plate, for instance. Shun's game also included a broken plate in the dining room that the player could investigate. There had to be some reason such a minute detail appeared to be the same, too.

And that wasn't everything, either. After investigating the broken plate, Hiroshi had returned to the front hall only to find that his classmates had vanished. The scenario perfectly mirrored what happened in Shun's game. Were the others all working together to scare Hiroshi? It was the only rational explanation Hiroshi could come up with for such an irrational situation.

But why? Were there hidden cameras set up around the mansion so they could laugh at his panic and share it with their classmates? That would only seem possible if Shun were in on it, so Hiroshi quickly dismissed that hypothesis.

"If any of our classmates say they're going, you have to stop them."

Shun had been the very definition of serious when he'd told Hiroshi and Anna to keep their classmates away from the Jailhouse. It was impossible to think he'd be party to some sick prank after that. It was also hard to believe that Takeshi—trembling and sniveling inside a wardrobe—was faking it. It was a scene straight out of the game, but if it was all an act, he'd need to be nominated for an award.

But if this isn't some ruse created to try and scare me, then what is it?

Walking past the bookcase furthest in and turning left, a new hypothesis crossed Hiroshi's mind.

...No. That's preposterous.

Compared to his first hypothesis, this one was straight out of left field. If he had a doppelganger standing next to him, it would probably laugh and proclaim,

“How unscientific!” But the more he thought about it, the more convincing it became. It was the only rationalization he could come up with that would explain everything.

Have we somehow gotten lost in the game Shun made?

It was difficult to conceive such a thing could even happen, but there seemed to be evidence supporting it. The world map inside the wardrobe, for instance. Hiroshi had never encountered anything like it in his previous playthroughs, but he could swear he’d seen it in screenshots of the latest version Shun had shown him the previous day. The same went for the birthday cake and the photo frame on the dining table, as well.

The mansion was extremely similar to the one in the game Hiroshi had played, but they weren’t exactly the same. The house they were locked in now more closely resembled the setting of the updated version of the game, which Shun had only unveiled the day before. There was no way someone could have rearranged the furnishings of the house to match the game to the letter in only a day. And if they weren’t in the real Jailhouse, perhaps they’d found their way inside a virtual one.

Hiroshi continued walking and looking around the library. He could see that one of the evenly-spaced rows of bookshelves was broken up by a square table with a comfortable-looking leather chair in front of it. Several old books were left scattered on the table.

This is just like the game too.

Hiroshi approached the table and silently picked up one of the books decorated with a lengthy title designed in a geometric pattern on the cover.

“I knew it,” he muttered.

An aged brass key was hidden underneath where the book had been sitting. Attached to the key was a ring with a wooden tag engraved with “σ,” or the Greek letter sigma. That too was the same as in the game, and if the pattern continued, it should grant access to the servant’s quarters on the first floor. Setting the book back down on the corner of the table, Hiroshi looked pensively at the key. Maybe it was possible to escape the mansion if they just played out the game. He’d need this key in order to do that.

However...

He lifted his head and looked toward a particularly antiquated bookshelf by the table. If real life mirrored the game, the moment he picked up the key, a monster would pop out from the shadow of the shelves. A giant with blue skin and an enormous head. Abnormally swollen muscles on its long limbs. Great, bloodshot eyes. Lips that stretched from ear to ear. Fangs as sharp as knives. The grotesque image of it surfaced in Hiroshi's mind, making him grimace.

If such a monster actually exists...

The key on the table in front of him glinted dully in the light. It seemed to be urging him to pick it up.

I can't get cold feet now. This should tell me conclusively whether they're making fun of me or we're really inside the game.

Hiroshi tightly pursed his lips into a flat line and boldly snatched up the key.

2

Thoom.

The whole room shook violently as a giant figure emerged from the shadow of the bookcase. It had a large, misshapen head with massive eyes that took up more than half of its swollen face. Its blue skin reflected the light in the room, gleaming creepily. Droplets of a dark liquid dotted its arms and legs like it had been splashing in mud. Hiroshi froze at the sight of the horrific creature, forgetting even to breathe.

“I never imagined... such a thing actually existed.”

He was instantly taken by its strange form. What was its skeletal structure like? It was humanoid in its features, but the color of its skin and the size of its eyes made it very clear that it was no normal human. Could it be a mutant of some kind? Hiroshi grew more and more curious as he stared at the bizarre thing. He wanted to study it more closely.

What if...

Hiroshi’s mind was racing. Across the street from the Jailhouse was a chemical plant that had long been shut down. What if harmful chemicals had leaked from it and affected the DNA of local creatures? It wasn’t out of the question.

As Hiroshi continued to stare at the monster, its giant eyes slowly swiveled around to meet his gaze.

Oh no, I need to run.

A warning siren sounded in his brain. He was well aware he was in danger, but his desire to learn more about the monster was only growing stronger. Torn between the two conflicting emotions, he remained rooted to the spot.

Hiroshi was sure it would attack, but for some reason, it instead shifted its gaze, turned its body, and hunched over. It then pulled a wet rug out from the shadow of the bookshelf. It was small, a throw rug at best. It was also oddly shaped, like a tanned animal hide, but the front of it was so darkly stained that it was difficult to tell what kind of animal it had been.

A thick liquid like coal tar dripped from the rug. The monster pressed a finger into the stream of fluid, then slowly brought its finger to its mouth. Then, like a hungry baby, it sucked on that black liquid-covered finger and wouldn't let go.

Suddenly, a beeping alarm went off somewhere in the room. The monster looked around, finger still in its mouth. The source of the noise was soon obvious. It was coming from the rug. A watch with a digital display was wrapped around something long and thin dangling from the rug. The watch was incredibly dirty and coated in the black liquid, but it illuminated with the alarm, shedding a white light on its surroundings. Finally realizing what the rug really was, Hiroshi's eyes opened wide in horror.

"It can't be..."

The monster dropped the "rug," then leaped up into the air and came down hard upon it.

Thoom.

Hiroshi could feel the floor shake underneath him. It was strong enough that it knocked him off balance, and he fell backwards.

Black liquid squirted out of the "rug" from the force of the landing. Some of it had splattered on Hiroshi's face, and the smell of iron filled his nose. There was no doubt about it. It was blood.

What he'd thought was a rug was in truth a flattened-out corpse. And not a dog or cat's corpse, either. No animal would be wearing a wristwatch with an alarm. It must have been a tough watch, too, because the alarm wouldn't stop even though the monster had stomped on it.

The monster repeatedly stamped its feet in the pool of dark blood on the floor, almost like a child playing in a rain puddle. Its apparent playfulness made the act seem all the more cruel, and the sight of it finally triggered something in

Hiroshi. At this rate, he would end up being the next rug. And despite what he wanted, if he died, he'd never get to study the monster's biology.

I have to get away.

And so he ran. The monster was so engrossed with crushing the human remains that it didn't even seem to notice him leave. Hiroshi was careful not to make a sound as he made a break for it.

He headed for the second door in the room and quietly turned the knob. Fortunately, it was unlocked. He opened it slowly and peered out. It seemed to lead into a hall with a blue carpet. No, something wasn't right. The carpet was wriggling.

Sensing a presence, countless eyeballs appeared atop the carpet and looked up at Hiroshi. He let out a small yelp at the strange sight. He quickly covered his mouth, but it was too late. Turning around, he saw the monster had stopped splashing about and was now staring him down from across the room. The corners of its mouth curled up in a foul sneer as it stepped off of the corpse rug.

The monster roared loudly as it approached Hiroshi. Its bellow alone was enough to shake the floor. But then, as if harmonizing with it, the blue hall carpet let out a unified high-pitched squeal. That was then Hiroshi finally realized it was a horde of rats—hundreds, no, thousands strong. But they weren't just any rats. They each had eyes larger than their heads should allow, and they were all covered in blue fur. Hiroshi had never seen anything like it.

If not for the life-or-death circumstances, he would have been elated to run into such rare creatures. He could see himself dropping to the floor to get a better look and study their biology with adamant fervor, but he knew now was hardly the time for that. His priority was escaping the oncoming monster, and to that end, he dashed down the hall.

Squish, squish, squish...

The crushing of the rats underfoot made a repulsive sound. Even with shoes on, Hiroshi could distinctly feel the soft, warm sensation of their small bodies giving way underneath him. He recalled the mutilated corpse the monster had stomped flat. The same monster, in fact, that was chasing him now. He could tell it was coming after him without even looking. If it caught him, he'd end up

just like the rats. And that horrible future was something he desperately wanted to avoid.

As if sensing the crushing danger headed their way, the horde of rats started to disperse. They hurriedly scattered to the four winds, clearing a path for Hiroshi. As they fled, however, a wretched stench filled the air. The rat exodus had left behind a smattering of torn flesh across the floor. They'd been standing over all of it, probably even eating it. Hiroshi decided not to linger on what the pieces of flesh had once been. He had more important things to focus on, namely running from the monster.

Bounding down the hallway with all his might, Hiroshi chanced a glance behind him. The giant monster had struggled to get through the doorway, but it was quickly gaining on him now. Hiroshi had wondered how it might run with its giant body, but the floor wasn't shaking underfoot like it had been when it was jumping up and down. Its movements appeared extremely sluggish for its size, but it took massive, sweeping strides. Hiroshi couldn't shake it. The monster drew closer quickly but seemingly in slow motion, as if walking on a moving walkway.

Hiroshi turned left at the first chance he had and headed down the stairs. The monster was still following him. It was only a few meters away now. If it jumped, it could grab him easily. But it didn't. Instead, it opted to move along at a leisurely pace like it was enjoying a game of tag. It closely resembled a child gleefully chasing after ants.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Hiroshi dashed for the dining room. He passed through it and went into the kitchen. There, he went into the cupboard and tried to find something to use as a weapon. There was so much tableware in the dining room that he'd hoped there would be a knife or other cutlery in the kitchen, but all the drawers he opened were empty. All they had to offer was a stale, musty smell.

Seconds ticked by nervously, yet the kitchen door remained shut. Hiroshi froze and listened carefully, but there was no sign of anything nearby. Was it circling around? He put his ear to the door that led from the kitchen into the hall, but there was still nothing. Not the bestial sound of its panting breath, nor the stink of rank garbage that came with it. Did the monster even have the

brainpower to know to circle around to catch him? He knew from watching his classmates that the size of an animal's head wasn't directly proportionate to its IQ.

Hiroshi cracked open the door slightly, carefully checked to make sure the monster wasn't waiting for him in the hall, and then dashed out of the kitchen. The monster had definitely been chasing him, but it apparently wasn't willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. Maybe it gave up easily, or maybe it just wasn't that hungry. It was a trait shared by the monsters in Shun's game. They would pursue their targets, but tire eventually.

Hiroshi made sure the coast was really clear before retrieving the brass key from his pocket. If his hunch was right, it would open the door to one of the servant's quarters, and if his memory served him, they were the two rooms just outside the kitchen along the southern wall. Hiroshi hadn't planned this out, but luckily his goal was right in front of him.

However, when he looked up at the Greek letters engraved on the two doors, Hiroshi cocked his head to the side. The right door was marked "ε," or epsilon, and the one on the left was marked "ν," or nu, but the key Hiroshi had was labeled "σ," or sigma. They didn't match.

He tried both doors to be sure, but they were locked. Inserting the key produced no change either. Hiroshi diligently searched his memories for every last detail he could recall from the game. The letter on the key should have been "ε," not "σ," but apparently this was different from the game. Perhaps this was the result of the update, like the map in the wardrobe or the birthday cake in the dining hall. Maybe Shun had changed other things, too. But if that was the case, things were looking bad for Hiroshi.

He put a hand to his chin and sighed gloomily. It wouldn't have been very difficult to escape if things had lined up with the version of the game he'd played. He'd already beaten it, so he knew all the secrets. But how had the update changed things? It had taken fifteen game overs for Hiroshi to clear the game the first time around, and Shun had proudly declared that he'd upped the difficulty in the newer version. It stood to reason that it would take Hiroshi at least as many tries to beat it this time, if not more. In the game, he could just save and reload over and over. But what about in reality? Did saves and reloads

exist in this world?

3

Relying on his memory, Hiroshi made his way back to the third floor. The pieces of flesh that had littered the floor were gone, as if the rats had licked it clean, and the place was now silent. Had that hellish scene from before just been a delusion? He briefly considered the thought, but there was no denying the lingering smell of blood that hung in the air. Opening the door to the library, he peered inside. The corpse rug was still lying there, tossed carelessly aside by the square table.

Turning away from the library, Hiroshi shifted his gaze to the next door along the southern wall. It was engraved with the letter “σ,” just like he remembered. It seemed at least the room locations hadn’t changed from version to version.

He retrieved the key from his pocket and put it into the keyhole. Praying, he gave it a turn and heard the click of a lock coming undone. He cautiously opened the door and peeked inside. As he suspected, it was the study. In the center of the room was a low, Japanese-style desk. Against the wall was a bookshelf even more antique-looking than the ones in the library. Hiroshi looked everything over, but nothing in particular stuck out to him. It was just like the game version, but that wasn’t what was significant about the study.

Hiroshi cut past the desk and walked up to the bookshelf. He purposefully pulled a book from the tightly packed shelf and stuck his hand into the space it made. Then, putting his back into it, he began to slide the shelf to the right. Behind it was a square hole—a hidden passageway to the attic.

Stepping through the hole in the wall, Hiroshi discovered a stairway made of bare concrete leading all the way to the top of the house. He proceeded up without hesitation. The stairs were cold. It felt like he was getting a tiny bit closer to the outside world.

He came to a new door when he reached the top of the darkened stairway. Repressing his wandering feelings, he turned the knob. It wasn’t locked, and the door opened without resistance.

From the ceiling of the attic hung a naked lightbulb that cast an orange light

around the room. The only furniture in the square room was a simple bed, and there was a small window near the roof to let light in. This one wasn't covered by iron bars, but it would be just as impossible to escape through the square hole barely 20 centimeters across.

Closing the door behind him, Hiroshi looked around. On the wall were two large photos set with pins for mounting insects. He stepped closer to get a better look at the pictures, which both appeared to be Japanese temples. It was quite a strange thing to find in a mansion so dedicated to European flair. There had to be some meaning behind it.

Hiroshi removed the pins and took the photos off the wall. Flipping them over, he saw that one was scribbled with the words "Tairyū Temple" in felt-tip marker, and the other "Gōshō Temple." They sounded familiar. Both were sites along the famous Shikoku Pilgrimage.

It was said that traveling to each of the 88 temples on Shikoku Island would grant a wish. Even nowadays with religious piety at an all-time low, people were still faithfully making the pilgrimage. Of course, Hiroshi didn't believe in such superstitious nonsense, but he'd always enjoyed memorizing numbered lists of things. That was why he knew each of the temples that were part of the pilgrimage. The first was Ryōzen Temple, followed by Gokuraku Temple, Konsen Temple, Dainichi Temple, Jizō Temple, and so on. The two temples featured in the photos—Tairyū and Gōshō—were numbers 21 and 78 on the list respectively.

Slipping the photos into his pocket, Hiroshi pressed on further. Next to the bed was another door. It was only small enough that he'd have to bend over to get through it, and unlike all the other lavish and sturdy-looking doors around the house, this one was just a cheap board. The door knob was even held in place with two screws. It looked like a joke.

Bending over, Hiroshi gave the knob a tug, and the door opened easily. What he saw on the other side made him catch his breath. The door wasn't just a flimsy piece of wood hung on the wall. It actually opened to a whole new area—the outdoors. From where he was, Hiroshi could clearly see the lights from town. The endless line of bright red lights must have been the main road, and the flashing neon lights looked like the pachinko parlor by the train station. This

small door was definitely a way out of the mansion, but Hiroshi could proceed no further. There was nothing but air in front of him.

Getting down on his hands and knees, he stuck his head out the door. The cold wind brushed his cheek. It was too dark to really tell, but guessing from the scenery and the positioning of the attic, the Jailhouse's large lawn must lie below. He'd finally found an escape route, but this was the attic. It was at least a ten-meter drop to the ground. There was no way to safely fall from this height.

"Is anyone there?" Hiroshi shouted as loud as he could. "Please, help! Four middle school students are trapped in here!"

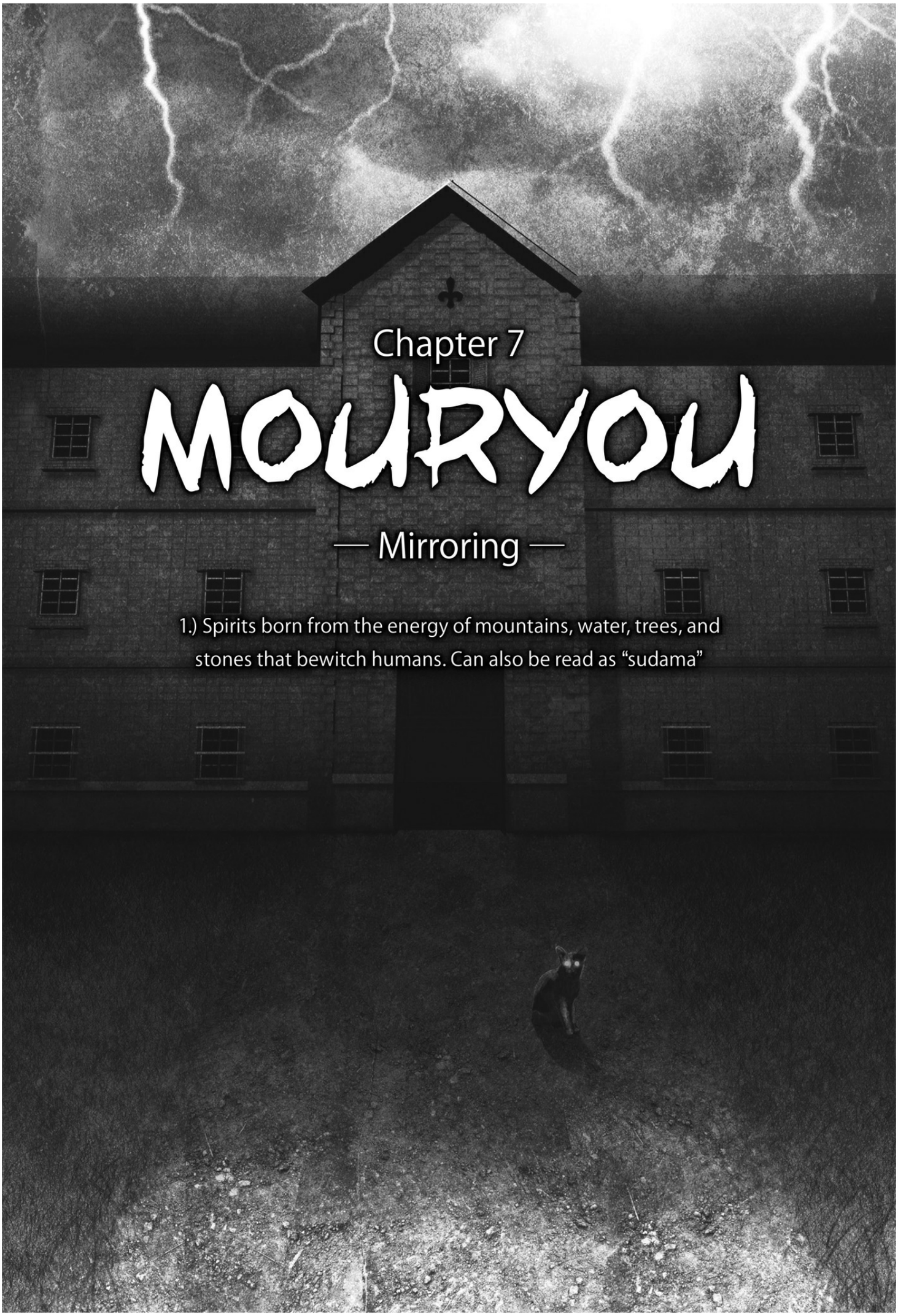
Deep down he'd hoped for an answer, but none came. The only other building nearby was the abandoned plant, and there wasn't a lot of foot traffic in this area. It was a spooky enough place as it was, and the rumors of monsters had taken their toll. The main road wasn't that far away, but nobody wanted to use the side road that went by the Jailhouse. There might be a few brave souls come daylight, but Hiroshi didn't think he could afford to sit around and wait on that chance. He closed the door and stood up.

There was no immediate escape, but this was still huge progress. If he could find some sturdy rope, he could tie it around the bed and get out. And the mansion was huge. There had to be something that could be used like a rope somewhere in the house.

The exhaustion Hiroshi had felt when first entering the attic was now completely gone.

It's okay. We can get out of here.

With hope in his heart, Hiroshi dashed back down the stairs toward the study.



Chapter 7

MOURYOU

— Mirroring —

1.) Spirits born from the energy of mountains, water, trees, and stones that bewitch humans. Can also be read as “sudama”

1

Anna sat across from Shun in his room. Their eyes met, and her heart began to race. Not that she was really hoping for anything, though. Certainly, Shun was on her mind a lot. She might even say she had special feelings for him, but this wasn't the time to let romance rule her heart.

In fact, hope wasn't the only thing that set her heart racing. It was the same feeling she got when she sensed oncoming tragedy.

"You might not believe me right away," Shun prefaced, finally opening his mouth amidst the silence. His small Adam's apple trembled, possibly from nerves. "But if we don't do anything, the Jailhouse monster will kill them all."

The Jailhouse monster? Is there really such a thing?

Anna couldn't help wondering, but she resisted the urge to ask. Judging from the look of dread on Shun's face, there wasn't a lot of time left to save Hiroshi and the others. As such, she kept her mouth shut so she wouldn't interrupt him.

"There's only one way to save them. We'll have to use the computer to access them."

Anna had no idea what he was talking about, and she could imagine the confusion that was written across her face. Shun turned the monitor on the desk to Anna and typed something on the keyboard.

An application opened with a start-up tone. It was the same 2D game he'd shown her the day before, stylized nostalgically with pixel art. Shun put his hand on the mouse and clicked something to start the game. Four characters appeared in a maze-like mansion.

"This is the game I made based on the stories about the Jailhouse. A monster relentlessly chases you as you solve hidden puzzles in order to escape. It's, well, like any old game you could download off the net..." Shun said embarrassedly.

He tried to play down what he'd created, but it seemed he was likely just being modest. Anna hadn't played it herself, but even an amateur like her could tell how much knowledge and skill it would take a single person to create a

game that polished.

“You can download it for free from my website, so anyone can play it. I did it that way so I could get lots of honest feedback. I even made a custom message board for it. People usually just post their thoughts and report bugs, but I came across a strange comment the other day,” Shun said all in one breath, then tabbed to his browser. “This is the message board... Would you take a look?”

It was a simple page with a white gothic font on a black background. Shun was pointing to a post from a user named “Game King.”

[00231] A Hidden Mode?

Poster: Game King

Post Date: 02/XX/20XX 20:31:32

I was really excited to play the new version, but the player’s name is locked as Shinichi and can’t be changed. What’s going on? I don’t see any of the characters from the last version, either. There’s only someone named Kota. What is this? Are these changes intentional?

“...Shinichi and Kota?” Anna asked warily as she shifted her gaze from the monitor to Shun.

“I didn’t program Shinichi and Kota into the game. I had no idea why something like this might happen, so I emailed the poster to get more information. Based on what they said, the appearances, personalities, and even speech patterns of the characters in the game match Shinichi and Kota to a T.”

“How could that happen? You said you didn’t set it that way, right?”

“Right.” Shun nodded. “This poster, Game King, noticed this phenomenon around 8:00 P.M. two days ago. Do you realize what that means?”

Anna instantly understood what Shun was getting at. Around 8:00 P.M. two days ago was when Shinichi and Kota snuck into the Jailhouse. According to rumor, they’d scaled the towering walls of the property and made their way

into the mansion. That also seemed to be the same scenario Game King had witnessed in game.

“I’m about to say something crazy, okay? But can you just hear me out?” Shun said, then paused. “I think there’s some kind of supernatural connection between my game and the Jailhouse. It seems like when someone sneaks into the Jailhouse, if someone starts up the game, whatever’s going on inside the Jailhouse is mirrored in their game. So it’s happening both in reality and in the game in real time. Actually, maybe it’s the opposite. The player can freely control the main character, so maybe whoever’s inside the Jailhouse is moving according to their will. Granted, they probably have no idea they’re being controlled.”

Anna blinked repeatedly as if in a daze. Seeing that, Shun looked concerned.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” he asked, peering at her face.

“Well, yes, I do,” she quickly responded.

But the truth was that she had no idea what to think. She understood what Shun was saying, but she couldn’t understand why he was saying it.

She knew there were plenty of people who dreamed about how wonderful it would be to really drive the cars they raced in video games. Long ago, when Anna herself was in love with RPGs about journeys through worlds of swords and sorcery, the line between fantasy and reality had become a little fuzzy for her, too. Video games were addictive and compelling enough that they could have that kind of power over people.

But things happening inside the Jailhouse being directly connected to the game? There was no way a player using a controller could manipulate a real human’s actions or decisions. After being locked up in his room for so long, Shun must have been starting to lose his grip on reality. Right now, what he needed to do wasn’t to save Takuro and the others, it was to take a break and get some help. When her father was alive, he had gone to see a therapist when he’d fallen into a bought of depression. She could probably look up their name...

“Anna, don’t worry. I assure you, I’m quite in my right mind when I say all this,” Shun said with a shrug and a smile, as if reading her mind.

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking...”

“I know what I’m saying sounds crazy. It’s only natural that you’d have some doubts.”

Shun looked quite exhausted, but not insane.

“I’m not saying that I don’t believe you, but this is a lot to take in. Couldn’t someone have messed with the game so that Shinichi and Kota were in it?”

“I checked every line of the uploaded program data, and there’s nothing about this in there.”

“Maybe someone just messed with Game King’s game?”

“Game King lives in New York. They’re a 54-year-old second-generation Japanese-American working as a dental technician. Probably zero connection to Shinichi or Kota. Do you think someone illegally accessed their computer just to rewrite the game data? For what? I can’t see a motive for doing that, much less how someone would do it.”

“But that’s the only logical explanation, right? Actually... can you even trust what this Game King person is saying? You’ve only corresponded via email, right? That stuff about being a dental technician living in America could all be a lie. It’s suspicious that Shinichi and Kota are even in the game in the first place.”

Anna said what she was thinking as it came to mind, but she was convincing herself as she said it. It would make much more sense that one of their other classmates was pulling some kind of prank.

“And come on. The game and reality are linked? What are you, a fiction writer?”

“I’ve experienced it once before,” Shun responded perfectly calmly and without hesitation. “Eight days ago—the last day I went to school. After class, Hiroshi and I were playing this game in the hills behind school.”

Anna nodded silently. She recalled Hiroshi saying something similar.

“I make a lot of things other than games. I’m currently developing a mouse that will automatically run around at a specified time,” Shun blurted out.

But Anna didn’t miss a beat.

“A mouse that runs around? What purpose could that serve?”

“Imagine an alarm that won’t stop unless you grab the mouse and hit a button. That’d make a pretty effective alarm clock, wouldn’t it?”

It made sense. That could be interesting.

“I had messed with my laptop’s internal clock to see if I could get the alarm mouse to move at a specific time. So when Hiroshi played my game, the displayed time on the computer was actually six hours ahead.” Shun looked up at Anna. “So you see, when Hiroshi was playing the game, it was connected to the Jailhouse six hours into the future.”

Anna was at a loss for words. She had no idea how to take this. Whether aware of her confusion or not, Shun pursed his lips and continued.

“That evening, when we snuck into the Jailhouse, a creepy monster attacked us. There were six of us. The four currently inside the mansion, plus me and you.”

“...Huh?”

Shun drew closer as Anna’s confusion escalated.

“Anna, you were there too.”

2

Anna shook her head in adamant denial of Shun's statement.

"What are you saying? I've never snuck into the Jailhouse before."

"You've just forgotten that you did." Shun looked a little sad as he said those words. "Hiroshi was the only one to survive to the end. He succeeded in escaping safely, but when he did, the world went back in time six hours. Maybe it's because I returned the clock to the proper time while Hiroshi was playing. I guess because it was actually six hours earlier when Hiroshi escaped the mansion, reality changed to accommodate that."

Shun's explanation had gone past far-fetched and straight into delusional territory. Upon escaping the Jailhouse, Hiroshi went back in time six hours. However, that would have meant that he existed in the same reality as his past self, creating a time paradox. Such a thing would be catastrophic, so whatever powers that were in charge of keeping balance in the universe, in order to prevent the paradox, simply moved time itself back six hours, functionally undoing what had happened during that time. That was Shun's whole explanation.

Anna didn't know what to say. Even for a delusion, this was far too fantastical. Time travel was pure science fiction. She might have been able to buy into it as part of a fantasy, but unfortunately, she knew this was real life. She simply couldn't believe what he was saying.

"...Sorry, I don't understand," she said, trying her best not to hurt his feelings.

"I don't understand it either. I'm not even sure I've really pinned this down the right way, but if nothing else, I know one thing for sure. It's the truth that we went back in time," he insisted.

Anna just couldn't swallow it. She started to shake her head, but that was when something even more incredible came out of Shun's mouth.

"Something so fanciful seems impossible to you, doesn't it? But think about it, Anna. You've already had literally out-of-this-world experiences."

“...What?”

“You can see the dead, can’t you?”

Anna could hardly believe her own ears. Her eyes went wide as she stared straight at Shun. How could he know that? She’d never told anyone about her sixth sense before. No one would believe her even if she did. They’d just pity her, thinking she’d gone crazy from the shock of losing her parents.

“What are you talking about? I have no interest in the occult—”

“You don’t have to hide it. I know everything. You told me when we snuck into the Jailhouse. You’ve just forgotten about that, too.” Shun continued with a sad expression on his face, “I don’t know why I’m the only one who remembers what happened. But you have to believe me. I’m not lying or crazy, either. The Jailhouse monster, the events inside the mansion mirroring the game I made... It’s all true.”

“...”

“But there’s a limit to what I can do alone. I need your help to save everyone. You have to trust me.”

Shun bowed his head low, then looked up at Anna with a serious look in his eyes.

“...What did you think?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“When I told you I could see dead people, what did you think?”

“I was happy,” he replied without a second thought. “You shared a secret with me that you’d kept locked in your heart for so long. Of course I was happy.”

Shun then looked away with a bashful smile. She’d loved that shy expression of his ever since he first transferred into class. Looking at that pure smile, free of pretension and ulterior motives, she felt like her own heart became lighter.

“And you believed my ridiculous story?”

Shun nodded fiercely.

“Why? I mean, we’re talking about ghosts. It’s unreal. And isn’t it normal to

think someone who can see ghosts is dangerous and should be avoided?”

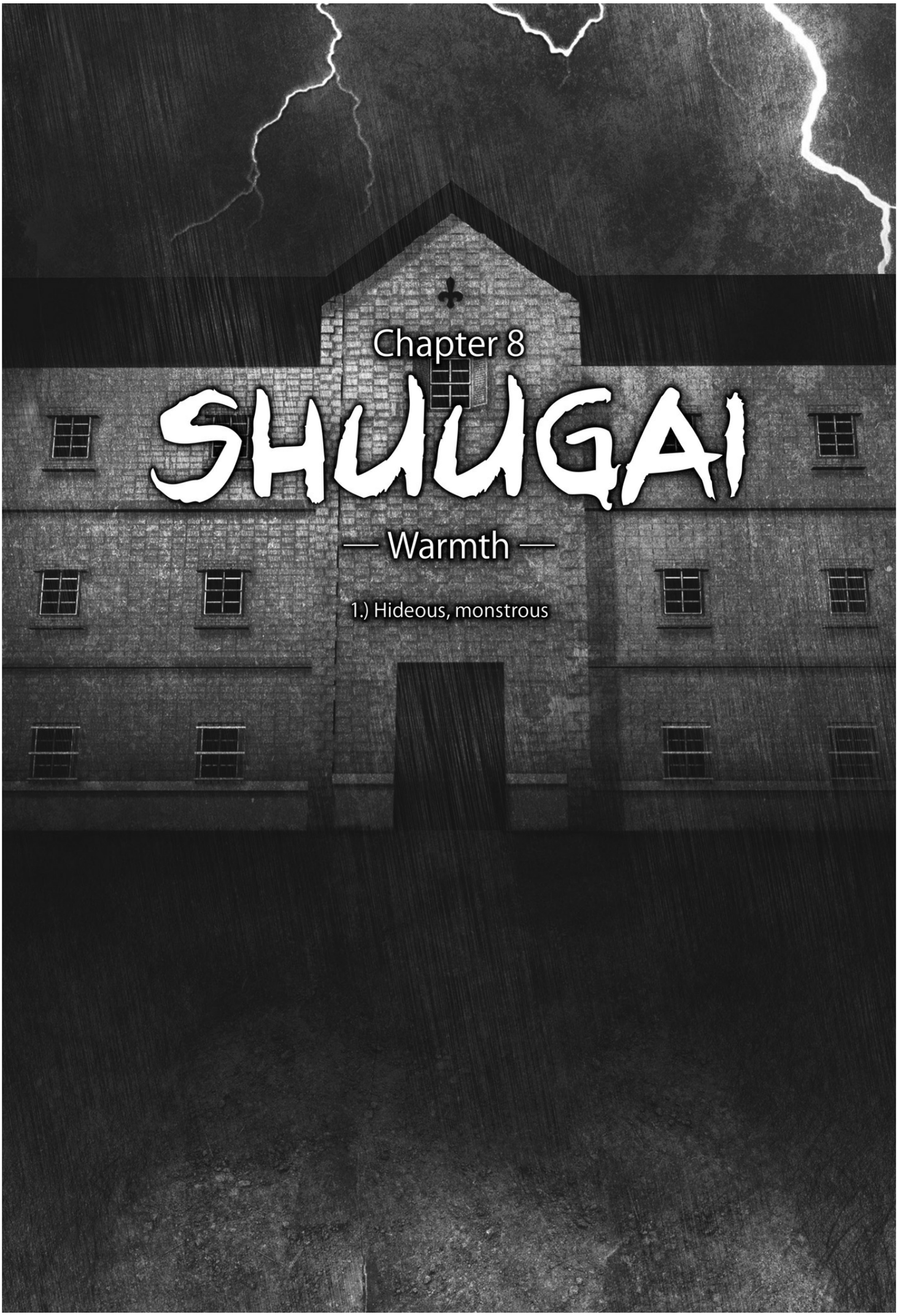
“Yeah, maybe,” Shun answered quite bluntly.

“What the heck?” Anna said in a pout.

“If someone else had said it, I might have been worried. But I think I believed you because it was you, Anna.” Rubbing the tip of his nose, Shun continued, “Sorry, but could we leave it at that? I can’t really explain it myself.”

“...All right. Then I’ll believe you, too,” she replied.

Shun flashed Anna’s favorite smile again.


Chapter 8
SHUUGAI
— Warmth —
1.) Hideous, monstrous

1

I'm hungry.

The same thought repeated over and over in Mika's mind as she stared at Takuro's back.

And cold.

She rubbed her arms and shivered in her light jacket. It had been warm during the day, and she'd certainly never expected to end up in a situation like this, so she hadn't thought anything of leaving her duffel coat at school.

I want something to eat. I'm hungry. And cold. I want my coat. Or at least a blanket.

Those five sentences kept racing through her mind, but she never said a word of it out loud. If she did, Takuro would just yell at her and tell her to quit whining.

Takuro had only grown more and more virulent since they'd seen the blueberry-colored monster. He was cursing, punching walls, and kicking furniture. Unlike the act he put on at school, Takuro was actually quite short-tempered. Mika figured it was only natural that his true colors started to show through after a scare like that.

But what *was* that monster? Keeping one eye on Takuro's hissy fit, Mika recalled what had happened only a few minutes ago.

The monster, blue from head to toe, had appeared right after Hiroshi had left to investigate the noise from down the hall.

"I just remembered. My mom asked me to help with the restaurant today. Sorry, but can I go now?" Takeshi asked, scratching the tip of his nose.

That gesture, however, gave away that he was lying. It was his tell, and Takuro knew it, although Takeshi was completely unaware of it himself.

"Huh? Isn't your place closed today?" Takuro asked with a leering, bullying

grin on his face.

“Maybe... But we have a lot of reservations for lunch tomorrow, so if we don’t start preparing today, we’ll never make it in time,” Takeshi answered, roughly rubbing the tip of his nose with his right thumb. The more he piled on the transparent lies, the more pathetic he sounded and looked.

“Just be honest. You’re scared, aren’t you?”

“Scared? What’re you talking about? Of course I’m not scared. I want to check out this place out too. But if I skip out on my chores, I’ll never hear the end of it from my mom.”

Takeshi’s nose was now bright red from all the rubbing. Still looking at Takuro and Mika as he talked, Takeshi reached behind him and put his hand on the knob of the front door.

“Well, that’s just how it is. So I better get going... H-Huh?” Takeshi’s thick eyebrows arched, a pitiful expression on his face.

“What? You so scared you pee yourself?”

“No. Did you lock this? The door won’t open,” he said as he turned around and tried it with both hands.

“Idiot. What’re you panicking for?”

Takuro pushed Takeshi aside and stood before the door.

“Weird.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. He tried for himself and jiggled the knob roughly, but the door showed no signs of opening. That was when Mika, who’d been half-listening to their conversation, first started to feel uneasy.

“Hold on. What’s the meaning of this?”

Apprehensively, she looked at the door over Takuro’s shoulder. There was only an ancient knob and an empty, traditionally-shaped keyhole. She couldn’t even see any sort of unlocking mechanism.

“Don’t worry. I have the key right here,” Takuro said as pulled the same key he’d just used to open the door out from his pants pocket.

It looked as though the unexpected situation had rattled even his nerves. His hand was quivering slightly. He quickly put the key in the hole, but it didn't make a difference. The door was still locked tight, and that realization settled grimly over the three of them.

"Does... that mean we're trapped in here?" Takeshi asked fearfully.

"Are you stupid? Who would do something like that? This is my house. It's just so old that the door's all decrepit and finicky," Takura said aggressively, but rather unconvincingly. "But if the door's a bust, there's no point wasting time sitting around here. Just forget about going home, and let's explore—"

As he was talking, Takuro turned around and froze mid-sentence. He was staring at something over Mika's shoulder.

"...What is that?"

His lips were going purple. His dilated pupils were fixated on whatever was behind her the same way a small mammal would look up at an apex predator. She'd never seen him like that before. She couldn't help shuddering as she slowly turned around.

In the back of the entrance hall, next to the creepy mannequin, something big and blue was blocking off the back hallway. Mika was sure it hadn't been there before, but what was it? Just as Mika cocked her head in confusion at the sight, part of the blue object rippled, and the top of it began to turn. She could hear a low growl coming from somewhere. As she gazed at the object in a befuddled daze, a great eyeball larger than the mannequin's head suddenly appeared on the blue mass.

"Uwaaaaaaaah!" Takeshi screamed so loudly that Mika thought it might rupture her eardrums.

The thing looking at them from across the hall appeared to be an unearthly creature of some kind. It had a massive head and a horribly misshapen body. It stood on two legs, but it was no human. Was blood even pumping beneath that blue skin? And then there was its expressionless face... It struck Mika as more of a golem than anything.

"No! Save me! Save me, someone!" Takeshi clung to the front door. He

yanked at the knob, trying to get outside, but it wouldn't budge.

"Call the police!" Mika cried, stepping over to Takuro.

"...Huh?"

"You're the only one here with a cellphone, right? Hurry up and call for help!"

"R-Right."

For once, he listened to her and whipped out his phone—the latest model of smartphone. But the sudden appearance of the monster must have shaken him even more than he let on. His chest was heaving and his shaking fingers could barely hit the buttons on the touchscreen. The phone let out an electronic blip, and the monster's eyebrow twitched at the sound. Its back hunched and its arms lazily dangling in front of its body, the mysterious creature began slowly making its way toward them. A stench like raw garbage assaulted their nostrils, making each of them sick to their stomachs. There was no doubt it was coming from the approaching monstrosity.

"Stay away! Open up! Stay away! Open up! Stay away!" Takeshi pulled on the door then glanced over his shoulder at the creature over and over, repeating the same words to himself. "Open up! Open up! Open up! Open up!"

He jiggled the knob frantically with increasing frustration, but the door still wouldn't give. And the monster was only getting closer. They were in danger. Mika pulled on Takuro's arm, but he was still messing with his phone.

"It's no use. I can't even get a signal. What's the deal? I should have full bars."

"Takuro, forget that. We need to run—" Mika was interrupted by Takeshi's screams.

"Uwaaaaah! Stay awaaaaay!"

The accumulating fear must have reached a breaking point. Takeshi bolted from the door, screaming like a madman as he fled up the stairs. The monster, whose eyes had been fixated on the entrance, shifted its attention to Takeshi as he scampered up the stairs. Perhaps, like Mika's Persian cat, it was naturally drawn toward moving objects or fearful prey. But whatever the case, this was their chance.

Pulling Takuro along by the arm, Mika ran past the distracted monster and proceeded further into the mansion. The awful stench of it was enough to singe her nose and make her feel ill. If she let her resolve waver for even a moment, she'd probably pass out.

Turning left at the hall in front of the mannequin, Mika and Takuro escaped down the hall. Fortunately, the monster wasn't chasing them.

Sitting on a child's bed, she sighed deeply. After they'd fled the monster in the entrance hall, she and Takuro had explored the second and third floors, finally discovering a door that wasn't locked. A quick glance had told them it was a typical child's bedroom, but there were no windows or means of escape. Takuro was searching the place, practically ransacking it as he violently pulled out desk drawers and upended toy boxes in search of anything that might help them. His only rewards, however, were used stationary and old toys. Nothing like a key that would open the front door.

"Damn it! What the hell do we do?" Takuro shouted, unable to suppress his anger as he shoved textbooks and notebooks off the study desk.

One of the notebooks, inscribed with the word "arithmetic" across the front, fell at Mika's feet. She picked it up and lifted open the cover. On the first page was a mysterious formula.

DCBA=4(ABCD)

Mika hated math. Just looking at a formula that mixed numbers and letters made her head hurt. She flipped through some more pages, but there was nothing written in the notebook other than the formula at the beginning. Cocking her head quizzically, she quietly closed it.

"Hey, Mika!"

Takuro's sudden shout made her jump.

"Quit spacing out and help, why don't you?" he yelled, rubbing the back of his head. Considering how concerned he ordinarily was about his hair, it was a

rather unusual gesture. He must have been so irritated that he'd stopped caring about things like that.

"Help with what?"

"You sure are dense. Think of a way to get out of this damn mansion!" Takuro spat venomously, slamming his right fist into the desk.

His normal star student routine and radiant smile were nowhere to be seen, but Mika didn't mind the honestly prideful and selfish Takuro. In fact, she felt a strong attraction to him at times like these.

He only shows his true self to me. His weaker side. It must mean he trusts me.

That made her happier than anything else. But something was different about Takuro today. He always had perfect control over both sides of his personality, and that control seemed to be rapidly slipping from his grasp. She'd thought something was up at school earlier, but ever since coming here and encountering the blue monster, he was coming apart at the seams.

"Useless!" Apparently the continued insults weren't enough. Takuro spat on the floor.

"...Sorry," Mika apologized and got up from the bed.

There was no telling what he'd do if she talked back to him. Not long ago she'd told him something was his fault, and his immediate reaction was to strike her across the left cheek. The blow had cut the inside of her mouth, and she could still taste blood. Her ears were still ringing, too, like her eardrum was damaged. She'd never been hit before. Not even spanked as a child. Her parents had never resorted to violence, and she'd never been in a relationship with anyone who had that kind of temper before.

If we stay together, he might do something even worse next time.

But despite the fear, Mika couldn't bring herself to leave Takuro. He was a terrible guy, but he was the only one left she could trust at this point. That coward Takeshi was out of the question, and no matter how smart Hiroshi was, she could never really tell what he was actually thinking. Besides, of the three of them, Takuro was the strongest. She didn't exactly have a buffet of choices.

Bending down, she picked up the notebooks Takuro had thrown to the floor. Language arts, cooking, social studies—the covers were all labeled with different subjects, but unlike the arithmetic notebook, these were completely blank otherwise. Not a word was written inside.

Still crouched down from picking them up, Mika raised her head as she went to stand back up. When she did, she noticed what looked like a long, thin ballpoint pen lying underneath the study desk. Stacking the notebooks in a neat pile on the floor, Mika got down on her knees and crawled under the desk. The object turned out to be a screwdriver with a tip in the shape of a plus sign.

“Takuro, look.” She poked her head out from under the desk and showed him her discovery.

“Huh? A screwdriver? What the hell are we gonna do with that?” Takuro asked haughtily as he casually leaned against the wall.

“Maybe we could pry open the front door...”

“Are you stupid? It won’t be that easy,” Takuro spat.

“Okay, maybe not the front door, but surely there’s another use for this. Just think. Maybe we could pry the panels off the windows with it.”

“Those things are practically welded on there. There’s no way some flimsy screwdriver is gonna pry them off. Maybe we should use it to tighten the screw you’ve got loose, idiot.”

She’d put up with a lot, but this made her mad.

Whose fault do you think all this is in the first place, Takuro? You forced us to come here. But have you even apologized? No! And now you want to call me an idiot? Who do you think you are?

Of course, she wouldn’t dare say any of that out loud. She knew better than anyone how terrible his temper was. If she intentionally provoked him, she wouldn’t get off with just a slap in the face this time. But even though she didn’t say a word, the resentment was clearly written across her face.

“What’s with that look?” Takuro’s expression instantly grew sharp. “You got a problem? Then say so.”

Mika knew things were bad, but once the dam of her suppressed emotions had begun to leak, it was no simple task to keep back the flood. She continued to glare at him in silence, knowing what it might cost her.

“I didn’t think so, you idiot,” he said as he tauntingly shoved her right shoulder.

Mika lost her balance and stumbled backward, hitting the back of her head on the corner of the desk. It didn’t hurt that much, but she held her head like it was splitting and curled up on the floor.

“I only pushed you a little. Quit faking it.”

She thought Takuro might show a little concern, but he was unfazed. Despair overcame her as she looked up at him. She then reached out to pickup the screwdriver, which she’d dropped and let roll under the desk when she fell. As she fished for it with her right hand, she noticed the words scribbled on the wall under and behind the desk.

Help

I’m sorry

Nao

The red words were faded in parts. The third line in particular faded into nothingness after the first three letters, like the pen had run out of ink while someone was writing it.

“...What is this?” Mika muttered. But then...

“Hey, what the hell is this?” she heard Takuro say.

Poking her head out from under the desk, she looked over to Takuro, who was staring at his hands with a puzzled expression. He was holding a New York Yankees cap, complete with a metal badge pinned to the side. It looked just like the hat Shinichi always wore.

“Where did you find that?”

“Under the bed. Here, look at this. There’s blood all over it.”

Just as he said, on the inside of the cap was a bloody, dark red stain. Mika's eyes went wide. She turned back to the wall under the desk. The words written on it were the same color as the stain on the cap.

...Was that written in blood?

She gulped. The image of Shinichi curled up under the desk and shivering in fear filled her imagination. She knew Shinichi and Kota had gone missing two days ago. Had they really snuck into the Jailhouse? If they'd been attacked by the monster, it wasn't impossible to think one of them had taken refuge in this room, too.

Help

Was the bloody message a desperate cry for help from Shinichi? Maybe it was God he was pleading with. But what did the next part mean? Who was Shinichi apologizing to? Rereading the last line, Mika gasped.

Nao? Nao... ki? Naoki?

She recalled the face of their poor classmate who'd died in an accident at the end of last year. No, it wasn't an accident. Mika knew that it was Takuro who'd coerced him into running into traffic. Takuro had tried to cover it up, but judging from his and Takeshi's actions, she had a gut feeling about what had really happened.

But Takuro wasn't the only one who'd been bullying Naoki in secret. Shinichi was also guilty. Kota had played a hand in it, too, but he was mostly just following Shinichi's lead.

The image of the monster they'd seen popped up in the back of Mika's mind. That unique blueberry color... Wasn't it exactly the same as the color of the chemical that had leaked from the truck and doused Naoki's corpse?

Shinichi, Kota, Takuro... They were all connected by the same thing. Did that mean the monster was Naoki? Was he out for vengeance against the other boys for treating him like dirt while he was alive?

"Hey, Takuro, I think..." Mika crawled out from under the desk and turned to

Takuro as she dusted off her knees, but she swallowed her words before she got the rest out.

There was no point in saying it out loud. He'd just call her an idiot again. Takuro wouldn't feel bad no matter what she said, and it was unlikely the monster would forgive them if he apologized for what happened to Naoki anyway.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Mika shook her head, walked over to Takuro, and wrapped her hand around his manly arm. She could feel him shaking. He was scared, too; he was just putting on a brave front. She felt the urge to hug him tightly and stop his shivering.

"What do we do now?" Takuro asked, still leaning against the wall.

"We should probably find Hiroshi first," Mika said after a little thought.

Hiroshi was a mystery, but the one thing everybody knew about him was that he was smart. He might know a way to escape. Mika thought Takuro might yell at her again, but...

"Good idea." The corners of Takuro's mouth curled upward and he reluctantly nodded. "That monster came out of nowhere, so I was hoping to get out of here before he came back... But you're right. Hiroshi might have some crazy idea. Let's go look for him."

Takuro's mood seemed to have improved a tiny bit. Mika followed him across the room as he headed for the door. But when he opened it, there stood the monster.

2

Most people are afraid of something. For example, Mika hated worms, snakes—really, anything long, thin, and wriggling. Just looking at one gave her goosebumps and made her feel sick. There was no specific reason for her hatred, either. They weren't harmful like mosquitoes and bees, or dangerous like tigers and bears. She just couldn't stand them. They simply repulsed her. That was the best explanation she could offer.

Even Takuro, who on the surface appeared to fear nothing, had one phobia that Mika knew of. And she was probably the only one. She suspected he'd never even told his parents, but Takuro hated cockroaches. He said their dark and shiny bodies evoked an indescribable feeling of disgust in him. Mika didn't like cockroaches either, but she wasn't exactly afraid of them. She had no idea why he hated them so much, either. Like Mika and worms, there probably wasn't a particular reason.

But the fear that came over her when she'd laid eyes on the monster was ten times worse than that of any snake or worm she'd ever seen. It was neither thin nor wriggling, but she felt ill all the same. Takuro had looked disgusted, too. The monster's hideous appearance seemed to have that effect on people.

And even though she'd really only caught a glimpse of it, whenever she closed her eyes, its fearsome figure seemed to loom in the darkness. Just the thought of it produced a profoundly unpleasant sensation. She was worried she might just faint if she ever saw it again, but her worst fear manifested in front of her. She was going to get to find out.

For just on the other side of the door Takuro had opened stood the blue monster. Its head was like a massive, twisted boulder, and Takuro and Mika's reflections glinted in its equally massive pupils.

LICK
ペロッ

The thick, wrought bar of a brow, its twitching hook of a nose, the cheekbones that jutted out like tumors—down to even the features of its face, everything about the monster was disturbing. From its dark and filthy mouth protruded a tongue that was an even deeper blue than its skin.

As fate would have it, meeting the monster a second time was just as harrowing as the first. Every hair on Mika's body stood on end. She couldn't stop shaking, and she could feel her body temperature plummeting as her blood ran cold. Just as she'd feared, it felt like it would only be a matter of seconds before she lost consciousness.

No. Get it together.

Still, she desperately tried to rally.

"...What is that?" she finally uttered.

"What is that?" she repeated, but Takuro didn't answer.

The monster let out a low growl. Its eyes, so large they seemed ready to fall out of their sockets at any moment, fixated on Mika and Takuro. Terror like nothing she'd ever known swept over her. She squeezed Takuro's arm tightly and tried her best to fight off the fear.

"Mika," he whispered in her ear. "Don't hate me for this."

...Huh?

Before she could connect the dots, he violently shoved her away. She lost her balance and fell down on the spot. It would take her a few seconds yet to process what had just happened.

But the monster locked its gaze on her. And, as if he'd been waiting for just that moment, Takuro swiftly slipped past it and dashed out of the room.

"Takuro!" she called after him, but he didn't so much as look back. The sound of his footsteps quickly disappeared down the hall. Within a few seconds, he was long gone.

Did he... just abandon me to save himself?

Sitting on the ground in a stupor, she stared into space blankly. It wasn't

bitterness over the betrayal that came first. Instead, she laughed. She wasn't all that surprised. That was just the kind of guy Takuro was. He always put himself first. The people around him were just pawns in a game, nothing more. And she'd known that, yet she couldn't leave his side. Because she was lonely.

Mika had plenty of classmates that she called friends, but she really only hung out with them because being alone was for losers. They talked to each other during breaks at school. That was the extent of their so-called friendship. They would smile at each other and make small talk, but none of them really knew each other or had any idea what they were thinking behind those smiles.

And that included Mika. What if they talked trash about her behind her back? Doubts like that kept her from truly trusting them—from truly making friends. She spent her time alone at home, too. Her parents worked late, so her nights were often spent with only the company of her cat, a Persian named Heart.

She was lonely, and she hated it.

But when she was with Takuro, she could forget that crushing loneliness. It made her happy to get special treatment from Takuro. He only revealed his true self around her, and she took comfort in that because it helped ease her heartache. She was glad to be special to Takuro, even if that merely meant being a rook instead of a pawn. She knew she was still just a tool to him, but she was okay with that. So when Takuro abandoned her, she wasn't particularly angry. She was just extremely lonely—that was all.

The monster bent down and contorted itself to squeeze into the room. Mika dragged herself across the floor, unable to gather enough strength in her legs to stand. She could see the blood-stained baseball cap on the floor out of the corner of her eye. Shinichi probably wasn't alive anymore. Was she going to die here too? Just like that?

No. I don't want to die.

She shook her head adamantly.

If she died, it would all be over. Even the crippling loneliness might disappear. But the last thing she wanted was to end up as food for a monster in some creepy mansion. Crawling along the floor, Mika's hand brushed against something hard. It was the screwdriver she'd found earlier. She quickly

snatched it up, turned over, and pointed it defiantly at the monster.

“Stay away!” she shouted with all her might. “Come any closer and I’ll stab you!”

The monster looked at her blankly. It was unclear whether it understood her or not. Still glaring at it, Mika slowly stood up. She hated the idea of looking at its terrible form for even a second longer, but she knew it would attack the instant she looked away.

Keeping the screwdriver pointed at the monster, Mika began to cross the room. It turned, following her movements. Just beyond the monster was the door, still wide open. It was the only way out of the room. The only path to salvation.

She’d hoped that moving around some would draw the monster away from the door, but the blueberry-colored nightmare simply rotated its body, never changing its position. It still stood between her and freedom, and with her path blocked, Mika stopped her approach. She was only a few meters from the door now. She just had to figure out a way to get through the monster. She knew it would be far too reckless to try and make a break for it without a plan.

Now what?

Suppressing the fear and despair bubbling up inside her without end, Mika put her brain to full throttle. But even operating at 100 percent capacity, no brilliant ideas came to her. The monster, as if bored of their staring contest, picked up on her hesitation and finally stepped forward. She reflexively readied herself. If it leaped at her, she likely wouldn’t stand a chance against it.

This is the end...

But just as Mika was saying her prayers, the monster lost its balance. It had apparently slipped on the pile of notebooks Mika had set up earlier. And it wasn’t a particularly serious slip. A normal person would have been able to recover their equilibrium easily, but the giant’s massive head caused it to lean further and further, eventually sending it crashing into the floor.

Mika knew this would be her best chance to escape the room, but she couldn’t move a single step. The monster soon righted itself and stood up.

Seeing its face, a shiver ran through Mika's entire body. Its impassive expression from earlier was gone. Its eyes now narrowed into a glare, almost like it was angry Mika had seen it fall, and thick veins protruded from its temple.

Oh no... I'm dead.

With little other option, Mika kicked a toy box at it. It landed on its side, spilling a great number of balls across the floor. The monster slipped on them as it ran toward her, and it fell over for a second time.

Now!

A starting pistol fired inside her head. Mika took off, using a pillow that had fallen from the bed as a makeshift starting block.

I've got this. No one's faster than I am.

"Don't underestimate an ex-track and field runner!" she shouted, managing to dash into the hall—no, sorry. Something grabbed her left leg with monstrous strength before she could make it, and she fell forward. Her chest hit the floor hard, knocking the wind out of her. She clawed at the carpet to try and get away, but it was no use. The monster dragged her back to the center of the room. She twisted her torso to look toward her feet and saw the monster sitting cross-legged. With Mika's left ankle in its iron grip, it smiled menacingly.

"Let me go!"

She sat up using her stomach muscles and stabbed the screwdriver into the back of the monster's hand. Its skin was thick like an elephant's hide, and the puncture seemed more like a pinprick to the giant creature, but the sudden resistance must have shocked it because it loosened its grip. Mika quickly yanked her left leg free and got to her feet, facing off against the sitting monster. Perhaps she should have just run. But a strange urge came over her as she watched the creature inspect its injured hand.

Can I beat this thing?

Was it the adrenaline that had instantly filled her body when she sensed danger? If she'd thought about it calmly, she would have realized such a feat was impossible. But nothing about this situation was calm.

Mika trying to take on the monster would be like a five-year-old challenging a heavyweight professional wrestler. She had no hope of winning. But even so, she felt a growing desire to defeat it.

If I beat this thing, I'll be free from my fear. And Takuro will definitely be overjoyed. That's right... If I beat this monster, I'll be Takuro's savior.

"Haaaaah!"

Mika let out a battle cry, summoned all of her strength, and swung the screwdriver in her right hand down toward the monster's left eye socket. Suddenly, however, it appeared to vanish. Then she inexplicably felt herself floating, as if midair. Before she could even ponder what was going on, she felt a sharp pain at the end of her right arm.

She looked up. The monster was holding her fingers in its thin, grinning lips. It must have deftly dodged the screwdriver and chomped down on her hand as it drew near. Bright red liquid was now running down her wrist to her elbow and shoulder.

"No... Stop it," she whispered hoarsely, hanging in the air by her arm. "Please... Help me."

The monster released her hand from its mouth, as if heeding her plea. She fell to the floor with a thud. She looked at her right hand and let out a voiceless scream. Her index and ring fingers were gone from the second knuckle down. Blood gushed from where the bone was exposed, creating a bright red pool at her feet. The monster hadn't spared her. It had simply dropped the snack it had been nibbling on. Suppressing the pain, she looked up. The monster was happily chewing away on something.

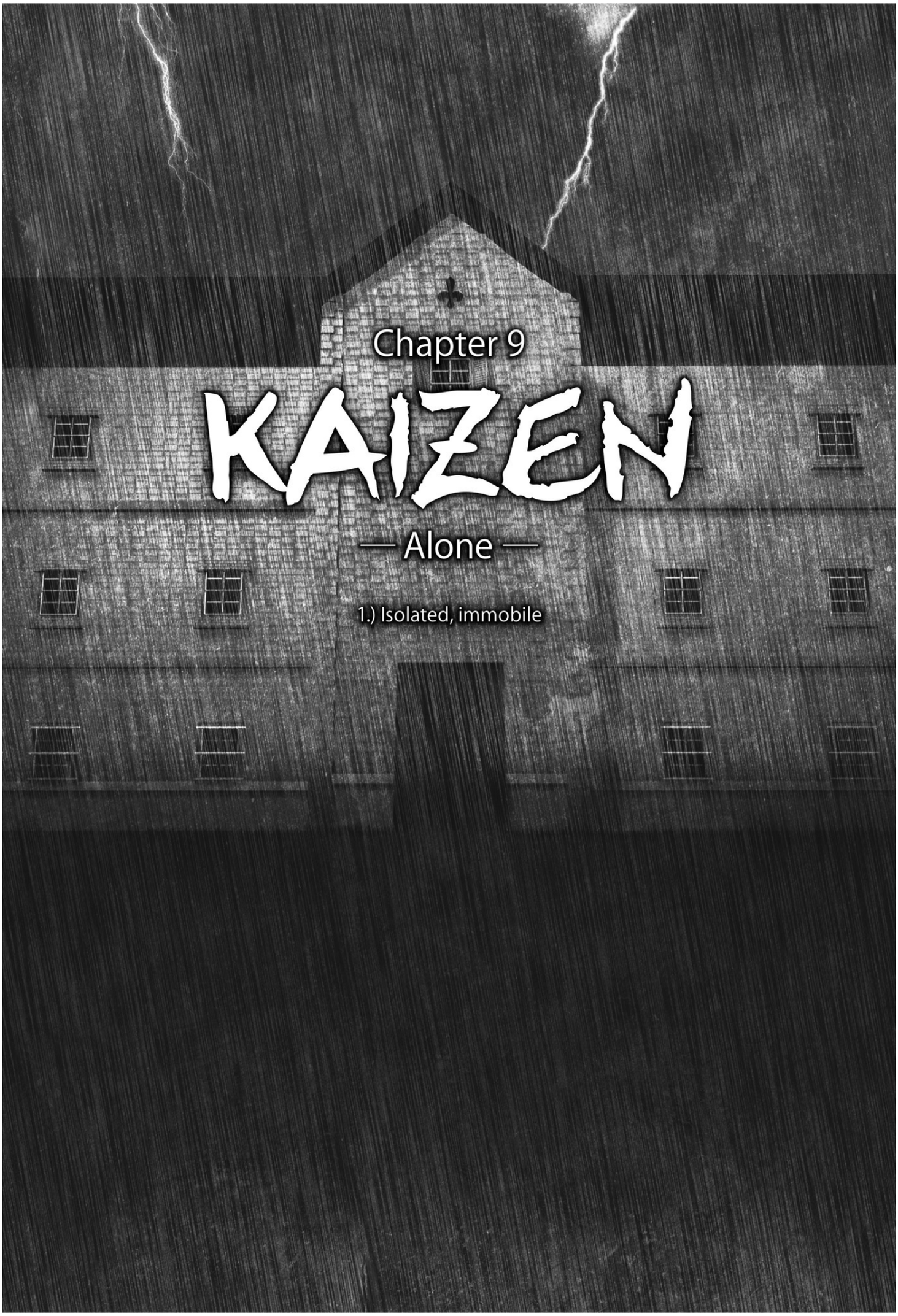
"Give them back... Give my fingers back."

The monster stopped, almost as if it understood her words. Its thin lips pursed before spitting out the screwdriver. It grazed Mika's ear as it flew past, burying itself into the wall.

It's no use... I'm no match for this monster.

Mika stood up, turned, and fled the room, her mind a complete blank. She simply ran down the hall, trying to bear the pain in her hand. Her fingers must

have been quite delicious, however, because the monster didn’t bother coming after her.


Chapter 9
KAIZEN
— Alone —
1.) Isolated, immobile

1

The only sound in the room was the rattling clack of fingers striking keys.

Anna had lost count of how many times she'd had to use the eye drops to soothe her eyes, dry and strained from furiously following line after line of text on the monitor. She'd done as Shun had instructed and had found a community site for talking about free games, and from there she began checking threads one by one.

If Shun was to be believed, then right now someone was playing a version of his game synced to the real-world Jailhouse with Takuro, Hiroshi, Mika, and Takeshi inside. Their first order of business was finding whoever that was. If the characters representing their classmates died in game, the same fate would befall them in real life, which is exactly what they were trying to prevent.

That was how Shun had explained it to Anna as he typed away at his keyboard with incredible speed. Fortunately, there was apparently a possible happy ending in the latest version of his game where all the characters survived. If they could find whoever was playing the synced version of the game fast enough, they could help the player get through the game and avoid the bad endings. To that end, Shun was scouring the internet for every freeware game forum he could find and repeatedly created posts with the title "Emergency Alert!" Something like this:

Emergency Alert!

No. 2002739 by noprops 02/XX/20XX 19:04

Game Dev Here!

If anyone out there is playing and has had their characters renamed by the computer to Hiroshi, Takuro, Takeshi, and Mika, please pause your game and contact me immediately.

This is an emergency. If you continue to play, a fatal error could occur.

Shun's expression remained unchanged as he tapped away at the keyboard. No one must have responded yet.

This is impossible.

Anna was beginning to lose hope. This was nothing like searching for hidden Christmas presents. Judging from the IP addresses of the handful of people who had downloaded the latest version already, the majority of them were locals who would know about the Jailhouse. But there was no telling if they'd shared it with anyone or uploaded the game to other sites. Trying to find the people who could be playing the game right now was like trying to track down specific fish in the ocean. It was also unlikely that anyone who was currently playing the game was browsing the forums at the same time. But...

"Huh?"

Anna stumbled across a lead when she began scanning through a popular forum that wasn't known for being a particularly pleasant place.

"No way..."

It was then that Anna learned never to underestimate the interconnectivity of the internet. Shun looked over when he heard her mumbling.

"Look at this," she said, turning the monitor to him.

The moment he saw what was on the screen, his eyes focused in on it.

801: Anon Gamer : 02/XX/20XX (Fri) 19:06:21.03

There's a game with characters named Hiroshi, Takeshi, Takuro, and Mika streaming on WakuWaku right now. Enough with this knockoff shit. Are you that desperate to shill your game?

"WakuWaku" most likely referred to the streaming site WakuWaku Movie. It was a service skyrocketing in popularity where anyone with a camera could easily set up a live video feed and stream content. Shun turned back to his desk and set to purposefully typing at his keyboard like a master pianist playing a

concerto. In seconds, the front page of WakuWaku Movie was up on his monitor. He quickly filtered through the currently streaming videos and clicked on one in particular.

A familiar game popped up on screen. It was the one Shun had made. In it, a thin, bespectacled boy was wandering through a maze-like mansion. The player name “Hiroshi” was displayed in a corner of the screen, and the good-looking boy standing behind him was labeled “Takuro.”

“This is it,” Shun whispered.

They’d finally found what they were looking for, but Shun didn’t look happy at all. If anything, the look on his face only grew more intense.

“...Shun?”

Anna followed his gaze and looked back to the game screen. Hiroshi and Takuro were standing at the top of a staircase looking down at the entrance hall. Limbs were strewn about it, and there was a blue monster devouring a corpse in the middle of it. Anna clasped her hand over her mouth. The pixel art wasn’t exactly realistic, but even then, it had no trouble conveying the horror of the scene.

“...We were too late.”

Shun’s face twisted up in anguish. He slammed his hands on the keyboard and tightly closed his eyes. It was an odd sight, considering Shun usually kept his emotions bottled up inside. But seeing his reaction, Anna realized immediately what must have happened.

“Who... is that?” she hesitantly asked, putting a hand on his quivering back.

Shun didn’t respond, but judging from the hair on the head of the corpse the monster was munching on, the answer was obvious enough.

2

Where had she run through in order to get here? Coming to her senses, Mika looked around.

The room was desolate except for a bed and a wardrobe. Mika was huddled up in the small space between the bed and the wall, hugging her knees and shivering. With her head down, she was completely hidden by the shadow of the bed and couldn't be seen at all from the door.

I'll stay here until help comes...

The sheet from the bed had been ripped up and wrapped around her right arm. Her memory was fuzzy, but she figured she must have done it to stop the bleeding. The emergency first aid she'd learned in health class during their third trimester had come in handy after all. The tip of her mummified right arm was dyed red, but didn't seem to be bleeding much anymore. The pain had dulled quite a bit, as well.

Resting her forehead on her knees, her mind wandered toward happier times. When was it she got that giant plush bear for Christmas from her mom? Fourth grade? That was back when she still believed in Santa Claus. She'd wanted to thank Santa in person and did her best to stay up, but in the end, she couldn't win against the sandman. When she woke up, she discovered the bear stretched out on the ground as if trying to crawl to her. Its face looked like her dad's when he yawned, and seeing it always made her giggle. If she closed her eyes and tried to remember it better, she might even now. But she didn't dare. She was terrified that something else might appear.

Krrk...

Her reminiscing was interrupted by an odd noise coming from somewhere in the room. She lifted her head and looked around. No one had come in.

She heard the noise again—like something scraping against the ground. It was coming from under the bed. There was no way the giant monster could be hiding in such a narrow space. That's what she told herself as she carefully peered beneath the bed.

There sat a curled-up kitten about the size of her fist. Was it a Persian? It looked just like Heart as a kitten. Its closed eyes were just thin lines, like it was still a newborn. The kitten, seemingly noticing her presence, turned its face to her and mewed cutely. A smile found its way across her lips. It was the first time she'd smiled at all since coming to the mansion.

"Here, kitty, kitty..."

Mika softly called to the kitten, making sure no one outside the room would be able to hear her. However, the kitten just shivered and remained where it was.

Is it scared of the monster, too? I want to comfort it... If I could just hold it, I'm sure it would feel better.

She was sure it would make her feel better, too. If she got on her stomach and stretched out her arm as far as she could, she thought she might be able to reach the kitten where it was. Mika got up to reposition herself. Instantly she felt dizzy. It was as if something was pressing in on her world from both sides, shrinking her field of vision. Mika stuck her hand out and steadied herself against the wall while she waited for the dizzy spell to pass.

It must have been low blood pressure from standing up too quickly. She'd often hear her friends talk about stuff like that, but she'd never experienced it herself before. Maybe she was low on blood. A chill ran up her spine. What would happen if help never came?

Mika knew that blood accounted for about one thirteenth of the mass of a human body. And since she weighed 43 kilograms, that meant there should be 3.3 liters or so of blood flowing through her. She'd also heard that losing as little as a third of your blood would kill you, which meant that she only had about a liter to spare. Just one liter—that was the same as two bottles of the cola she normally drank. As things stood, her arm was wrapped up tightly, but the bleeding still hadn't completely stopped. Even now, fractions of her life were flowing right of her body bit by bit. And at the end, death awaited.

Once she felt stable again, Mika looked at her sheet-wrapped right hand. A morbid thought crossed her mind, but she couldn't help wondering...

Wouldn't dying like this be better?

Her right arm was numb. She could hardly feel any pain. Ending up as food for that monster was the last thing she wanted, but if she were to just fall asleep—to die peacefully—that wouldn't be so bad. Even if she were saved now, what awaited her in the world outside? People would always be staring at her right hand, now short two fingers.

I don't think I could bear those looks.

Her mind filled with thoughts of death, she forgot to pay attention to her surroundings. When the door to the room suddenly opened, Mika's heart nearly leaped out of her chest. If it had been the monster that appeared in the doorway, she really would have fainted this time.

Fortunately, it was only Hiroshi that stepped into the bedroom. She hadn't seen him since they'd split up at the entrance hall. They hardly ever talked in class. Takeshi always called him a brainiac, and as the nickname suggested, he was indeed exceptionally intelligent. His keen brain was always working behind his stoic eyes, but Mika could never tell exactly what he was thinking. However, seeing any familiar face right now was an immeasurable relief. She couldn't help the tears welling up in her eyes.

"You're okay, then?" Hiroshi said calmly, not looking particularly relieved to see her. "Where is everyone else?"

"...I don't know. We got separated."

I wonder where Takuro went after he abandoned me.

"I see. Then we should work together," Hiroshi said and approached her.

Mika quickly hid her sheet-bandaged right arm behind her back.

No. I don't want anyone to see me like this.

"...Mika?" Hiroshi looked at her suspiciously as she shied away from him.

"Hell no! I'm not walking around this mansion with that monster around!" Mika declared, desperately trying to put up a brave front as she hid her right arm.

"You ran into that monster, too? Well, I understand that you just want to stay hidden. I do too, honestly, but we'll never escape that way."

“That’s fine.”

“I found a door that leads outside. If we can just get some sturdy rope, we can escape.”

“I’m not going.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t trust you.” She turned her face away and continued, “People only care about themselves. Takuro... Even you. When things get hairy, you’ll just abandon me too.”

“There’s no real need to trust me. It’s not like I trust you, either,” Hiroshi said without a hint of intonation or emotion. “If we run into trouble, you can run and leave me behind. Since we both know we don’t trust each other, there’s nothing to lose. We only have something to gain, don’t you think?”

She knew he was right, but she still couldn’t leave the room.

“Sorry, but I’m staying here.”

“I don’t understand. Do you want to die?”

“...”

Mika couldn’t find the words to express how she felt. Only the truly blessed—those who didn’t know suffering—thought that living was always the ideal choice. But some people simply shouldered more misfortune the longer they lived.

For some reason, it felt as if Mika’s nonexistent fingers were hot. She and Hiroshi continued to stare each other down for a while. Only the sound of their breathing filled the room.

“...Very well.”

Hiroshi was the first one to avert his gaze.

“Then please don’t move from this spot until I can call for help,” he said as he turned his back to her.

Was this really okay? Unease suddenly overcame Mika.

“Wait!” she shouted after him.

Hiroshi turned back around and raised an eyebrow. Even Mika had no idea why she’d stopped him.

“Uh... Um... Here.”

Remembering the screwdriver in her shorts pocket, she handed it over to him.

“I found it in the child’s room. I thought it might be helpful.”

Suspicion flashed across Hiroshi’s face when he observed the stained tip of the screwdriver, but he quickly reverted to his default stony expression.

“Thank you very much.”

He bowed, then turned and exited the bedroom. The door shut behind him with a click.

Was that really for the best?

Mika repeatedly asked herself that as she listened to his footsteps fading into the distance.

3

Pain in her fingertips woke Mika up. Gazing at the blood dripping from her right hand, she realized she must have fallen asleep while hiding in the room. She glanced around as she lifted her head, but nothing seemed to have changed. How long had it been since Hiroshi left? A few minutes? Or was it morning now? The flow of time was a mystery to her.

Her fingertips were throbbing in sync with her heartbeat. A pain ran through her entire body, starting square at the top of her head. She groaned silently to herself. She'd hardly felt anything earlier. Why was it so bad now? Mika began unwrapping the sheets from her right arm so she could take a look at her injured hand.

When she loosened a particularly tight stretch of the wrap, her whole arm grew hot, and an unbelievable amount of blood splattered to the floor. At the same time, the pain decrescendoed gently. Mika slumped over in the pool of her own blood and let out a sigh of relief. Slowly, her consciousness began to fade. She could feel death approaching, but she felt no fear.

The blood still dripping from her right hand flowed along the floor and ran under the bed. The kitten, which hadn't budged despite all her calling earlier, now dashed out from under the bed in apparent surprise.

"Sorry, kitty. Did I scare you?"

She softly stroked the kitten's head as it snuggled against her. One thing she hadn't noticed while it was hiding under the bed was that it was covered in blue fur. She could faintly recall seeing another animal the same color once before.

"That's an odd coat color you have."

The kitten started purring and licked at the pool of Mika's blood spreading out on the floor.

"Oh! No, kitty. That's dirty," she said.

The kitten continued lapping up the blood.

"Hey! I said no!"

The kitten paid no heed to her scolding.

“You’ll get a stomachache.”

The moment she wrapped a hand around its abdomen to pick it up off the floor, the kitten bared its fangs and finally opened its eyes. A small scream bubbled out of her throat at the sight. The kitten’s eyes were huge, taking up over half of its face. Its fangs were also sharper than any cat’s.

“Nooooo!”

She jumped up, and the cat—rather, the feline monster—bit into her thigh. Mika batted it away with her left hand and, mustering the last of her strength, fled the room.

“Someone! Someone, help!” she shouted loudly, but no one came.

She regretted not going with Hiroshi now, but it was too late for that.

“No! Why is this happening to me? Please, help me! Someone!”

Her legs buckled underneath her. As she was descending the stairs to the first floor, she missed a step and went tumbling all the way down to the entrance hall. Sensing a terrible presence, she looked up. A monster—the big one—was peering out of a slowly opening door at the end of the hall. It must have heard the commotion of her grand fall and come to inspect for prey.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

Mika’s mind went blank. Was that her voice she was hearing? A bizarre sound streamed endlessly from the depths of her throat.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

She couldn’t stop it. It was as if a second Mika inside her was struggling desperately to get out. The monster was at least four times her size, yet it was surprisingly nimble.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

She was running out of breath. She clutched at her throat to try and take in some oxygen, but she just couldn’t stop screaming. The monster was drawing nearer. She had to run.

Mika got on her knees to try and stand, but fell down again immediately. She looked down at her feet and saw that her right leg was bent at an impossible angle at the knee. She must have broken it in the fall.

A foul stench washed over her suddenly. She grimaced. She slowly lifted her head, and there in front of her stood the monster. It stared down at her, grinning from ear to ear.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

Blood sprayed from her mouth. Her throat must have cracked. Even so, she continued to scream.

I’m completely broken...

She could feel every single capillary in her body popping loudly. Her vision ran red.

“Ahhhhh—”

She almost blacked out before the screaming finally stopped.

“Help me, Takuro...”

Do I still really expect him to save me after everything that’s happened?

A wry grin crept across her face. Then she felt an intense blow to her temple. The last thing Mika saw was a vast, deep darkness.

4

Having nothing to show for searching every inch of every room on the third floor, Hiroshi was feeling rather defeated. But he had no time to feel sorry for himself. That was when he heard Mika's screams.

He rushed down to the second floor and turned to descend the stairs to the entrance hall, but then stopped cold. The unimaginable scene before him caused his brain to short circuit.

War. The atomic bomb. Earthquakes. Tsunamis. This was more horrible than any depiction of hell he'd ever seen. He'd heard that people sometimes laughed when they were at an utter loss, but had never experienced it for himself until now.

Mika looked up at him sadly. Her limbs were torn cruelly from her body and scattered about the hall like a child had forgotten to put away its toys. In the middle of it all sat the monster, covered in blood and rummaging through her guts like it was looking for something.

"What, it's just you? Don't scare me like that. Hiroshi?"

Takuro emerged from one of the rooms on the second floor.

"I heard footsteps, so I was worried that thing was back, you idiot." He shrugged and smiled stiffly as he walked over to Hiroshi. "Hey, this mansion is seriously crazy. We gotta get outta—"

He stepped past Hiroshi to go down the stairs, but his face paled and his expression stiffened when he saw what waited at the bottom.

"What the hell?!" he shouted, spittle flying.

The monster, who had been wolfing down the innards it had ripped from Mika's torso, turned to look at them.

"Not good. It sees us. Let's run."

This wasn't something they could fight. Hiroshi grabbed Takuro by the arm and dragged him up to the third floor. They ran into the study and locked the

door from the inside. Just to be sure, they pushed the desk in front of the door and barricaded themselves inside. The monster seemed like it was strong enough to bust through with ease, but the obstacle would at least slow it down a little.

“What the hell? Damn it! What the hell is that thing?”

Unable to find an outlet for his anger, Takuro kicked the wall repeatedly. Hiroshi had never seen him so unsettled.

“Hiroshi, I bet you know. What *is* that monster?” Takuro ranted, glaring at him.

“Unfortunately, I have no idea,” Hiroshi answered honestly.

“Damn it! This is my house! Who does that thing think it is? The next time I see it, I swear I’m gonna kill it!”

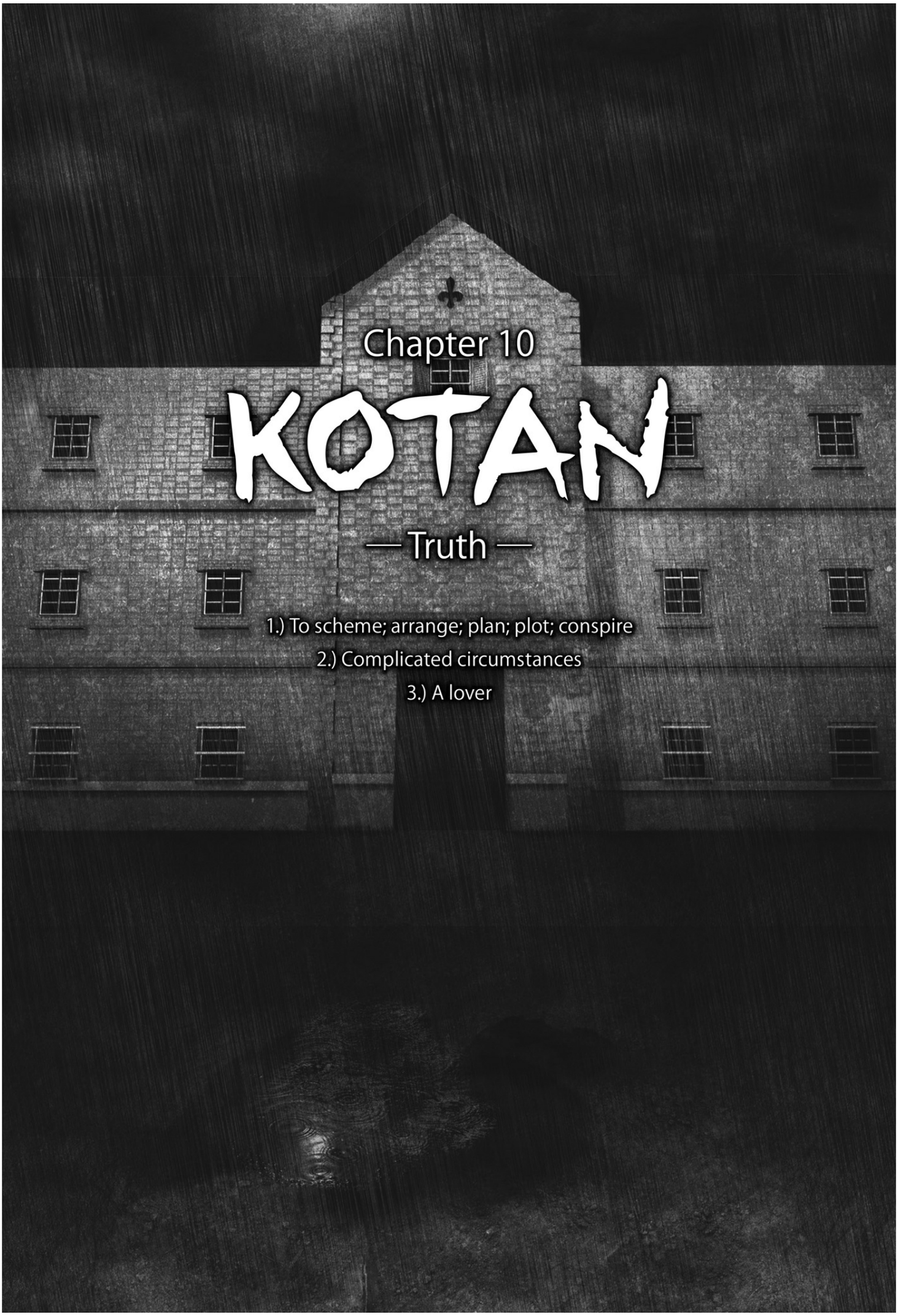
“If you’re thinking about avenging Mika, I’d advise against it. I don’t believe it can be beaten.”

“Avenge Mika? Who cares about that?” Takuro stopped kicking the wall and snorted. “I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about her.”

Hiroshi cocked his head. The creatures known as human beings really were confusing to him. Takuro and Mika were always together. By all appearances, they seemed quite close.

“You didn’t even hesitate to say that. Weren’t you dating?”

“We were. But so what? I can always find another girlfriend now that she’s gone. It’s as simple as that,” Takuro spat. But deep in his eyes, Hiroshi sensed sadness.


Chapter 10
KOTAN
— Truth —
1.) To scheme; arrange; plan; plot; conspire
2.) Complicated circumstances
3.) A lover

1

Sprawled out on top of the desk, Takuro scanned the room. He'd already read the spine of every book on the crowded shelves and counted all the bulbs in the chandelier. Unable to find anything else to do, he just waited for time to pass.

"What do we do now?" Takuro asked Hiroshi, who had been pacing the room nervously for a long time. But there was no answer.

Takuro sat up and looked around, but Hiroshi seemed to have disappeared. He could have sworn Hiroshi had been investigating the bookshelf only a minute ago. Where could he have gone? The only way in or out of the room was blocked by the desk Takuro was sitting on. There was no way anyone could have gotten past him.

Takuro found Hiroshi's endless, incomprehensible lecturing to be irritating, but now that he'd suddenly disappeared, he felt a little uneasy. He looked around the room again and realized the bookshelf had slid to the side, revealing a square hole in the wall.

A hidden path?

Takuro was curious, but Hiroshi reappeared through the hole just about the time he jumped off the desk to go investigate for himself.

"It's no use. I checked the attic as well, but couldn't find anything that would do. I give up," Hiroshi said, his shoulders drooping.

"You can get to the attic from here?"

"Yes. Would you like to see for yourself?"

Ignoring the question, Takuro looked around the room again. How had he not noticed it before? The authentic Japanese desk. The sliding bookshelf. Now the hidden path to the attic. He remembered seeing a room exactly like this in the game he'd played the night before.

The similarities didn't end there, either. The entrance hall they'd first stepped into, the child's room where the monster suddenly attacked him and Mika, the recreation room where he'd been hiding until he heard Hiroshi... It was all just

like it was in the game.

“Could it be...?”

Takuro pulled open the desk drawer. Just as he’d expected, it contained a portable safe with an LCD panel embedded in the upper section of the lid. Underneath that was a panel with buttons that would make letters appear on the panel when pressed.

“It seems we can open the electronic lock by typing in four letters, but, unfortunately, I don’t know the password. There’s likely a hint hidden somewhere in the mansion.” Hiroshi pushed up his glasses and shrugged a little. “I checked all the unlocked rooms, but found nothing in them that would lead to the password. The hint must be somewhere else.”

Takuro ignored Hiroshi’s babbling and tapped four of the buttons with purpose. The lock gave a short electronic chirp, and the lid popped open. Inside was a piece of paper folded up small.

“How did you know the password?”

Hiroshi rarely showed emotion, but Takuro saw clear surprise on his face for the first time. Cracking the code was easy. He’d just input the same password from the game. Ordinarily, one would have to go into the recreation room and wipe a bloodstain off of the piano in order to get a hint from the numbers written on the keys underneath. Hiroshi easily would have been able to figure it out, but Takuro had locked the recreation room from the inside while he was hiding in it, preventing him from getting in and finding the clue he needed.

Takuro was naturally good at just about everything, but he could never beat Hiroshi in terms of grades no matter how hard he studied. It felt good to see him stumped for once. Takuro would have loved to gloat, but he decided to keep the truth to himself. It would be a pain to explain. Instead, he took out the piece of paper from the safe and unfolded it. On it was a rough sketch of the floor plan of the mansion, just like the map that could be found in the game. It even showed the route to the attic. There was also apparently a second hidden path they hadn’t discovered yet. Takuro opened his mouth to proudly tell Hiroshi what he’d realized, but...

“There’s a second hidden path,” Hiroshi announced. He’d found it before

Takuro could even put it into words.

I hate this guy.

Takuro softly clicked his tongue so as not to be heard. If everything was just like in the game, the mansion should have an annex. The path to it should be behind the creepy mannequin in the back of the entrance hall—the map confirmed that much. They'd need to head there in order to escape.

"We don't have time to loiter. Let's go right now," Hiroshi said excitedly and began pushing the desk out from in front of the door.

Seeing that the monster wasn't outside, the two boys departed the study. Takuro followed Hiroshi to the first floor, being careful not to make a sound. The fact that the monster could pop out from anywhere didn't seem to phase Hiroshi.

I can respect guts like that.

Takuro couldn't help admiring him at least a little as he forged further into the mansion. But that wasn't the only thing on Takuro's mind. He wasn't all that shaken up by Mika's death, despite seeing the gruesome way she'd been slaughtered. He wondered why.

He figured it must be because everything seemed so far removed from reality here. Realizing that it mirrored the video game he'd played the night before only made it feel more unreal. What if this was just a game, too? Or even a continuation of his nightmares? If the monster killed him, would he just wake up? Questions like that kept pulsing through Takuro's mind.

But despite those thoughts, he was a mess of nerves descending from the second floor to the first. No matter how fictional it all seemed, the horrible scene at the bottom of the stairs was too much. He'd rather not have to see it again if it could be helped. He steeled himself before heading to the entrance hall, but there was no trace left of Mika's body. Still, there was no denying what had happened. The red splashes staining the white walls told the story.

Takuro and Hiroshi stepped off the last stair and into the entrance hall proper. It almost felt as if Mika's warmth still lingered. Takuro's whole body shivered. They turned around coming off the staircase and headed to the back of the

entrance hall—a large white wall across from the front door. Pushing the creepily smiling mannequin to the side, Hiroshi began feeling the wall with his palm.

“At first glance, I see nothing of significance, but this is the only part covered with wallpaper made to look like stucco rather than the real thing,” he muttered as he pulled something small from his pocket. “This is a fragment of a broken plate from the dining hall. I picked it up, but I never expected it to be useful in this way.”

Hiroshi pierced the wallpaper with the sharp tip of the shard and sliced open a wide swath of it in one swift cut. This too was just like in the game, but Hiroshi was through the hole in the wall before Takuro could even offer a word of advice.

Beyond the hole in the wall was a door. It was small, just barely big enough to let a person through. There was no doorknob, so it seemed like there had to be some trick to getting it open. Takuro was about to say something, but yet again...

“I see. So that’s how it works.” Hiroshi took out a screwdriver from his pocket. “There was a similar door in the attic. The knob was secured by two screws that looked like they would be easy to remove. By extension, I think we should try collecting that knob and attaching it here.”

He really is smart.

It pained Takuro to admit it, but it was true. He’d agonized over the solution to this for ages before giving up and looking the answer up in an online guide, but Hiroshi had figured it out within seconds.

“I’ll go back to the study and retrieve the knob from the attic. While I’m doing that, could you go to the guest room on the second floor and bring Takeshi here? I’m sure it’ll encourage him a little if you tell him we’ve found an escape route.”

Takuro hated being ordered around, but he wasn’t foolish enough to let that dictate his actions now. Realizing that he would be able to escape the mansion if he left things to Hiroshi, he decided to play along without resistance. He needed to get maximum value out of every pawn available to him.

2

“Well, see you back here soon.”

“Yeah. Watch out for the monster.”

When Takuro and Hiroshi parted ways, Takuro headed for the guest room where Takeshi was hiding. He couldn’t smell the horrible stench of the blue monster anywhere nearby, so he proceeded inside. He discovered Takeshi upon opening the wardrobe, quaking in his boots just like he’d predicted.

“C’mon. We’re going.”

Takuro didn’t care how Takeshi felt. Grabbing him by the scruff of his neck, he dragged him out of the wardrobe. He rolled out onto the carpet, balled up like a pill bug.

“Get up, Takeshi.”

Takuro kicked him in the back, but he just continued to shake. He looked like he had no intention of going anywhere.

“We found a way out. If you’re not gonna get up, I’m leaving you here.”

Honestly, Takuro couldn’t care less what happened to Takeshi. He wasn’t particularly smart or brave like Hiroshi. He was just useless baggage. But he would still make a good human shield if he tagged along.

“Get up already. Don’t piss me off.”

“...ved?” Takeshi whispered hoarsely, still balled up in the fetal position.

“Huh? What’d you say?”

“...Are we really saved? I doubt we can escape that monster.”

“Hey, this is *my* house. I’m not gonna let that thing have its run of the place.”

“...”

“It’s fine. I told you we could escape now. What’s your problem? Do you not trust me?”

“...No.” One of Takeshi’s eyes peered out from the crook of his arm.

“What?”

“I don’t. I can’t trust a single thing you say.”

Takuro was sure he must be hearing things. Takeshi had always followed him like a puppy and obeyed his orders blindly. This rebellion was surprising, to say the least.

“Where do you get off—”

“How could I believe you? I’ve never trusted you.”

The fear must have broken him. It must be the fear talking. That’s what Takuro assumed, but he was soon proven wrong.

“I was just putting up with it because I didn’t want to get on your bad side. I didn’t want to end up like Naoki and Shun. All I had to do was say what you wanted me to and I could copy your homework, enjoy delicious food on your dime, and have fun with the masses of girls that flocked to you.” He continued angrily, as if all of his pent-up frustration had finally come to a boiling point. “And it’s not just me. Everyone feels the same. Some people know what you’re really like, and they just grudgingly follow you around because they’re afraid of you. Others just want to use your and your father’s power. No one actually likes you. Honestly, I... I hate people like you!”

Who the hell does he think he is?

A flash of heat ran through Takuro’s body as his rage ignited.

“Shut up, you piece of trash!” Takuro shouted and kicked Takeshi in the stomach as hard as he could. “I listen to you for once and this is the thanks I get?! Who are you to lecture me?! Get off your high horse!”

Unlike a soccer ball that would fly off satisfyingly when he kicked it, Takeshi just laid there on the floor like a sack of potatoes. That made Takuro even angrier. He continued to kick Takeshi in the stomach, and Takeshi coughed up brown goop after a few blows. Getting vomit on his favorite sneakers really sent Takuro over the edge.

He knew why he was so angry. If it were just baseless slander, he could have laughed it off easily. But the fact that Takeshi’s words rang true pissed him off.

Takuro was always surrounded by friends. But did he have anyone he could spill his heart to? Even his favorite thing, soccer, had started to bore him recently. Everyone was too afraid to go toe to toe with him while playing. It was like they let him win, and there wasn't any fun in that.

I'm not the most popular guy in class. Everyone just thinks there's something to gain from being close to me.

A wry grin crept across his lips.

Would anyone even mourn my death? The new kid would probably be overjoyed.

His toes began to sting from kicking Takeshi so hard. He knew he couldn't afford to waste his energy on this, so he finally relented.

"...Are you satisfied now?" Takeshi, curled up on the floor, asked between ragged breaths.

"Can you just hurry up and leave? I don't want to get caught up in your mess." He paused to wipe the mucus from his mouth. "That monster's actually Naoki. He's out for vengeance."

"Naoki? Now I know you've really lost it." Takuro put his foot on Takeshi's head and snorted. "Naoki's dead. There's no way he can get 'vengeance' or whatever."

"He's come back as that monster. Maybe he can't pass on until he kills you."

"Do you even hear yourself?"

It's no use. He's gone completely mad.

Takuro lifted his right foot off Takeshi's head, squatted down, and peered at his face.

"I'll ask you one last time. Are you staying here?"

Takeshi nodded.

"All right. Then have fun," he spat and stood up.

There was no use saying anything more. Giving up on Takeshi, Takuro left the room. As he closed the door behind him, the door to the room just on the other

side of the stairs burst open.

A familiar, horrifying creature appeared through the doorway. It was licking a white, crooked pole of some kind like it was a popsicle. Green saliva spattered in every direction. Takuro decided not to linger on what exactly it was. But the monster stopped, seeming to notice him. It stared in his direction, its long tongue wrapped around the white rod in its hand.

“That monster’s actually Naoki.”

Takeshi’s proclamation flashed through Takuro’s mind. And certainly, its sluggish mannerisms remind him a bit of Naoki.

“Are you... Naoki?” Takuro doubted it could understand him, but he had to ask. “Are you doing this because you’ve got some sort of grudge against me?”

Naturally, the monster didn’t respond. It just continued to lick the pole with an indifferent look on its face.

“That’s Mika’s bone, isn’t it?”

Takuro’s right arm, which she’d held tightly until he’d pushed her away, still felt a little warm for some reason.

“No one actually likes you.”

Was that true even for Mika? Had she... Had she been the only one to truly care for him from the bottom of her heart? Takuro felt lost. Sadness over her loss suddenly threatened to drown him like a massive wave.

“Why did you kill Mika?” Takuro demanded, his voice trembling. “Mika had nothing to do with us.”

Sadness and intense anger filled him.

“It’s me you hate, right?”

Before he realized it, he was clenching his fists.

“If you want to kill someone, kill me.”

He began walking toward the monster.

“Go on! Kill me!”

The monster shoved the entire bone into its mouth and crushed it one bite. It then let out a sickening belch.

“Rahhhhhhhhhh!” Takuro screamed and charged forward.

Kicking off the floor with his left leg as he approached, he hammered his right shin into the monster’s belly. The sudden attack must have taken it by surprise because it toppled over backward.

“Give Mika back! Give Mika back! Give Mika back!”

Takuro jumped on its chest and began slamming his fists into its face. Right, left, and right again. None of his punches seemed to bother it, but he continued to wail on it nonetheless.

“Damn you! Die! Die! Die—”

Suddenly the monster sat up. Takuro slid down its slimy belly and tumbled to the floor. Scratching its cheek, the monster slowly stood up. Apparently Takuro’s assault was nothing more offensive than a mosquito bite. Once standing, the blue giant grabbed the open door with both hands and ripped it off its hinges. It then took aim at Takuro.

He quickly twisted his body to avoid the massive projectile. The door hit the floor and shattered into splinters that flew in all directions. The force behind it boggled the mind. If it had actually hit Takuro, he was sure it would have crushed him to death. Looking up, he saw the monster stepping backward. But rather than retreating, it was reaching for another door.

It doesn’t want to eat me... It’s just enjoying killing me.

That made him shudder. He knew he had to run, but unfortunately his arms and legs were covered in a thick liquid from grappling with the monster. It was so slippery that he couldn’t gain any traction on the floor. Every time he tried to stand up, he’d slip and end up right back where he started.

“Takuro, hurry!”

As the monster raised the second door high above its head, Hiroshi came sprinting down from upstairs. He charged full speed toward Takuro, scooped him up, and continued on to the first floor. Where did he hide such strength in

his wiry body? Takuro was utterly baffled as Hiroshi carried him into the entrance hall.

“Where’s Takeshi?” Hiroshi asked as he ran.

“I couldn’t find him,” Takuro lied.

“We’ll have to leave him, then. Right now we need to prioritize losing the monster.”

He glanced back to see the monster practically sliding down the stairs, fangs bared.

“Now! Hurry!”

Putting Takuro down, Hiroshi dashed toward the secret door. He quickly attached the knob from the attic and twisted it to the right.

“I just hope this works...”

And, as if answering Hiroshi’s prayer, the door opened up into a new area behind the wall.

“Let’s go.”

Hiroshi slipped through the door first, and Takuro followed right after. It was too dark to see anything, but they couldn’t falter now.

“Takuro, careful!” Hiroshi shouted.

Takuro could feel the monster’s right hand racing for his neck. He nimbly dodged by jumping forward and away from the door. With his momentum, he crashed into Hiroshi and they both tumbled together into the dark passageway.

The monster’s roar echoed down the hall after them. They looked back toward the door and could see the monster’s giant eyeballs peering at them through the frame. The doorway was small—just large enough for a single person. The monster was trying to shove its massive head through, but appeared to be stuck.

“Are we safe?” he whispered hoarsely.

As if in reply, the monster began headbutting the wall. The entire building shook as the wall started to crumble. It would be only a matter of time before it

broke through.

“Apparently not. Let’s go.”

Hiroshi pushing at his back, Takuro ran through the narrow, tunnel-like passageway with the faint light shining in from the door as his only guide.

3

How far had they run? A kilometer? No, perhaps it was only a few meters. Takuro's stamina was reaching its limits, though, and things were only getting darker as they moved further along. He could barely tell if he was walking in a straight line anymore. He'd lost all sense of direction.

"This mansion gets more confusing the more we learn about it," Hiroshi said, breaking the silence as he walked behind him.

His breathing wasn't as ragged as Takuro's. For a delicate-looking guy, Hiroshi was apparently quite strong. Takuro couldn't deny it after he'd carried him out of danger like that.

"Confusing? What do you mean?" Takuro asked as he felt along the wall. The bare concrete was cool and had a slightly calming effect on him.

"I believe we're walking underground now. However, judging from the distance we've gone, we must be far outside the Jailhouse grounds by now. Where could this possibly lead?"

How am I supposed to know?

"No point wasting your brainpower on it. This mansion is full of mysteries. You have any idea what that monster was?"

"There is a chemical plant across from the mansion. At first I thought hazardous materials were leaking from the site. Perhaps even something strong enough to cause genetic mutations. However, if that were true, we wouldn't just be seeing the effects in here. The whole area would be affected," Hiroshi replied evenly, as if reading from a script.

"Okay, but that thing wasn't human. If it was just big, I might buy that theory. I mean, lots of people are over two meters tall."

"The current world record holder is a Turkish man measuring at just over 251 centimeters, or about eight feet and three inches, apparently."

That was a brainiac for you. His head was filled with useless facts.

“But no one’s ever had blue freaking skin before. Come on. It must be an alien. I bet they’re building a base here and plotting world domination or something.”

Of course, Takuro didn’t really believe that. But he was willing to humor any theory over it being Naoki’s ghost.

“Oh, no. Blue-skinned humans do exist.”

He’d said it so nonchalantly that Takuro did a double take.

“What?”

“It’s a condition called argyria. The chronic intake of silver leads to an accumulation of it in the body, particularly in the skin. It’s ordinarily colorless, but when exposed to sunlight, those deposits turn blue. The exact shade of blue that monster is, I believe.”

“If it’s some kind of condition, isn’t there a treatment for it? Why does it have to live here in secret?”

“There’s no known treatment for argyria. Short of peeling the skin off, the condition is permanent. However, avoiding sunlight minimizes the effects.”

“Oh. You mean—”

“Yes. Perhaps that is the reason for the window coverings throughout the mansion.”

Takuro found what Hiroshi was suggesting to be strangely compelling. At the very least, it was more convincing than alien conspiracies or ghosts.

“But why the person living in this mansion ingested so much silver—that I don’t know. People have long believed silver and gold to have health benefits, so perhaps they drank a lot of supplements containing those metals. Or perhaps somehow silver got mixed into the water supply—”

Hiroshi cut off there. His eyes squinted as he peered into the dim light in front of them.

“Is that the exit?” he asked.

Takuro wasn’t so sure. If they were still following the game, their goal was a

ways off yet.

A fluorescent bulb giving off a bluish-white light hung from the low ceiling. Under it was a small door just like the one they'd come through. But unlike that door, this one already had a knob. It shone with a cold brilliance as Hiroshi gripped it. He turned his wrist, but it wouldn't budge. The door was locked.

"We've come this far only to find a dead end? No, this looks suspicious..."

Hiroshi was looking at a glass-enclosed space about the size of a phone booth next to the small door. No one was inside, however. What looked like a small camera was suspended from the ceiling. Other than that, it was empty.

Hiroshi opened the glass door and walked inside without a hint of hesitation. He must have tripped a sensor doing so, because the camera turned to him with a high-pitched whirr. A computerized female voice echoed from a speaker hidden in the support pole. It wasn't in Japanese, so Takuro had no idea what it was saying. Surprisingly, however, Hiroshi nodded slightly.

"Hey, did you understand that?" Takuro rapped on the glass door and asked.

"I'm not very good at French so my comprehension is a bit shaky, but I believe it said, 'Facial scan complete. Please enter the four digit passcode into the panel below.'"

His confident expression belied his modesty. Takuro could only stand in awe of Hiroshi's talent. He hadn't even been able to tell what language it was.

"I don't see a panel, though..."

As if responding to his muttering, a section of the glass lit up and displayed the numbers zero through nine in neat rows. Takuro stared at the high-tech device, the likes of which he'd only seen in science fiction movies and cartoons. If there had been a mirror nearby, he would have been able to see the silly gawking expression on his own face.

"...What is this?" he uttered in astonishment, still staring agape at the device.

There'd been a similar event in the game he'd played the night before, but it was much easier to believe in a fictional world. Facial recognition systems and optical keyboards really did exist, but they weren't exactly household items.

And they certainly didn't belong in this decrepit mansion that had supposedly been abandoned for over 20 years. Cutting-edge technology in a place like this was pure madness.

In the game, inputting the right passcode here would open the entrance to the annex. The code to unlock the safe in the study had been the same as it was in the game, so Takuro figured it was safe to assume that this code would be the same, too. But he couldn't remember the right four numbers for the life of him.

He did, however, remember the arithmetic notebook in the child's bedroom. In it was the hint to the puzzle: the equation DCBA=4(ABCD). But Takuro was stuck past that. He was drawing a complete blank on how to solve it. He'd cheated by using a guide to clear the puzzle when he came across it the night before. The safe had used an actual word for a password, which made it easier to remember. But there was no way he could recall four random numbers he'd only glanced at.

That meant they'd have to do it the honest way. They'd actually have to solve it in order to get into the annex. Takuro closed his eyes and pictured the equation in his mind.

It was logical to think that A, B, C, and D were representative of four different integers. Multiplying them would yield the inverse order of said integers—D, C, B, then A.

$$\begin{array}{r} A\,B\,C\,D \\ \times \qquad\quad 4 \\ \hline D\,C\,B\,A \end{array}$$

Maybe it would be easier to work out on a piece of paper. But it was

somewhere to start. Even though the number the letters represented was multiplied by four, the total number of digits remained the some in the product. That meant A had to be either 1 or 2. Knowing D would be multiplied by four, however, meant that the first integer of the solution had to be even. Thusly, A had to be 2.

All right, I can do this.

A times four would yield D, so did that mean D was 8? No, the hundreds place might get carried over and end up making it 9. Wracking his brain, Takuro continued working it out in his head until...

“I see. So that’s how it works.”

Takuro could hear Hiroshi’s voice echoing from inside the box. He looked over and saw him confidently reaching out for the panel.

First, he pressed “2.” Takuro had come to the same conclusion on that one. Then he tapped its neighbor, the “1” button.

“Hey. Are you sure that’s right?” he asked worriedly.

Hiroshi pushed up the frames of his glasses.

“I’m quite sure,” he answered flatly.

Then he pressed the “7” button.

“Did you find the arithmetic notebook in the child’s room, too?”

“Arithmetic notebook? Oh, you’re right. I hadn’t realized it, but that was supposed to be a hint as well, wasn’t it?”

“You mean there was another one?”

“Yes. Objects that struck me as out of place led me to these numbers. First, the birthday cake and portrait of Jean de la Fontaine that I found in the dining room. Fontaine was born in 1621, and his birthday is the eighth of July—the seventh month of the year. Then there was the world map in the wardrobe of the guest room. There was a pin stuck in part of the Atlas mountain range in Morocco. The highest mountain pass through that area is Tizi n’Tichka, which is 2,178 meters above sea level.. Lastly, there were pictures of temples from the Shikoku Pilgrimage hanging in the attic. If memory serves, Tairyū Temple is the

21st stop and Gōshō Temple is the 78th. Do you see now? All these oddities have the numbers 2, 1, 7, and 8 in common..”

Hiroshi quickly finished his explanation and tapped the last number, the “8” button. There was then an audible click as the door unlocked, but the fluorescent bulb hanging from the ceiling suddenly went out when it did.

“What happened?”

Hiroshi jumped out of the box and the illuminated panel on the glass disappeared, leaving the room in complete darkness.

“Hold on. I can light the way with the flashlight I found in the great room—”

Hiroshi was interrupted by the soft sound of something scratching against concrete echoing from elsewhere in the passageway. Takuro gulped. He knew what was about to happen. He remembered it from the game last night.

“We gotta run! It’s coming!” Takuro shouted.

“...Huh?” Hiroshi asked, still fumbling in the dark for a light.

Once he got his hands on it, Hiroshi flipped on the flashlight. It illuminated the monster’s face, smack in the middle of the rest of the darkness. It was standing idly across from them like it had been there watching them the whole time.

“Let’s go!”

Takuro pulled Hiroshi by the arm and dashed off as fast as he could down the passageway again. Relying on the light from Hiroshi’s flashlight, they scrambled back through the cramped space. They couldn’t even spare the time to look behind them, but even then, they could tell the monster was right on their heels. The giant had to crouch down in order to follow them through the two-meter-high tunnel, but it was keeping up with them just fine.

“Why are we turning back?” Hiroshi shouted as he ran. “That door I just unlocked was about the same size as the one at the beginning of this secret passage. If we’d gone through it, the monster would’ve at least been stalled.”

“It was pitch black on the other side. No way we were gonna get anywhere in that. The monster would have just gobbled us up while we were getting our bearings. We gotta flip the breaker first.”

“Do you know where the breaker is?”

“There’s an iron door in this underground passage. That’s the breaker room.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ll explain later. Just hurry! If that monster catches you, it’s all over!” Takuro shouted, continuing to run as fast as his legs would carry him.

4

Run! Hurry!

Anxiety gripped Anna as she watched Hiroshi and Takuro run through the underground passage. It so consumed her that she could think of nothing else.

The person streaming the game, a user by the name of “T,” apparently wasn’t used to action games. Their control of the characters was jerky and sloppy. There was lots of wasted movement, allowing the monster to close the distance little by little. At this rate, it was only a matter of time until a game over. They had to do something before the worst possible ending.

Shun was desperately typing away at his keyboard in an attempt to notify the player of the real danger involved with what they were doing. The WakuWaku Movie site allowed real-time comments to be sent to its streamers.

This is an emergency!

Press the pause button!

Please pause the game.

Shun’s comments flooded the box.

If the player paused the game, it would effectively stop time in the game world. That would give them a chance to explain what was going on to the player.

I’m the game’s developer.

I’ve found a critical bug.

This is dangerous.

Please pause the game before you get a game over.

But it seemed the player was too engrossed in the gameplay to be reading the

comments. Shun was trying to get their attention in the comments section, but he was also worried that commenting too much might distract them and result in a premature game over. He was between a rock and hard place.

I have to do something too!

Anna, unable to just sit there any longer, stepped away from Shun's desk and went back to the laptop he'd let her borrow. Praying for Hiroshi and Takuro's safety, she navigated to the WakuWaku Movie site herself. Her idea was to gather as much information as she could on this T person. First, she checked their profile section.

Shun had said that the majority of the game's downloads had been to computers in town. They figured locals were coming across the game while searching for information or gossip on the Jailhouse monster. Chances were that T also lived somewhere nearby. Anna was hoping that by combing through their profile, she might be able to figure out who it really was.

She checked their activity history, which indicated they were frequently on the site. Soccer broadcasts, local festival reports, new product reviews, karaoke skill boasting—their viewing history was all over the place. She couldn't determine a pattern. This was their first time streaming a game too, apparently.

Past videos of their live streams were all archived on the site so that viewers could catch them after the fact. There were over 20 of them on T's account. Anna clicked on one in particular. The title was "Trying to Play That Famous Song." They'd arranged a famous song everyone knew into a piano solo and played it live. It was a common type of video for the site.

But Anna hadn't chosen this one at random. It wasn't the piano that interested her. No, it was the date of the stream that had caught her eye: it was originally broadcast three weeks ago. That was the night Takuro had forced Shun to jump out of the classroom window.

Her fingers shaking, she pressed play. Before a grand piano sat a boy in a tuxedo. She couldn't see his face, but something about him seemed familiar. His thin, delicate fingers swept over the ivory keys. The familiar melody tickled Anna's ears. He was actually pretty good. Anna had also played back in elementary school, so she had a decent appreciation for his talent. When he

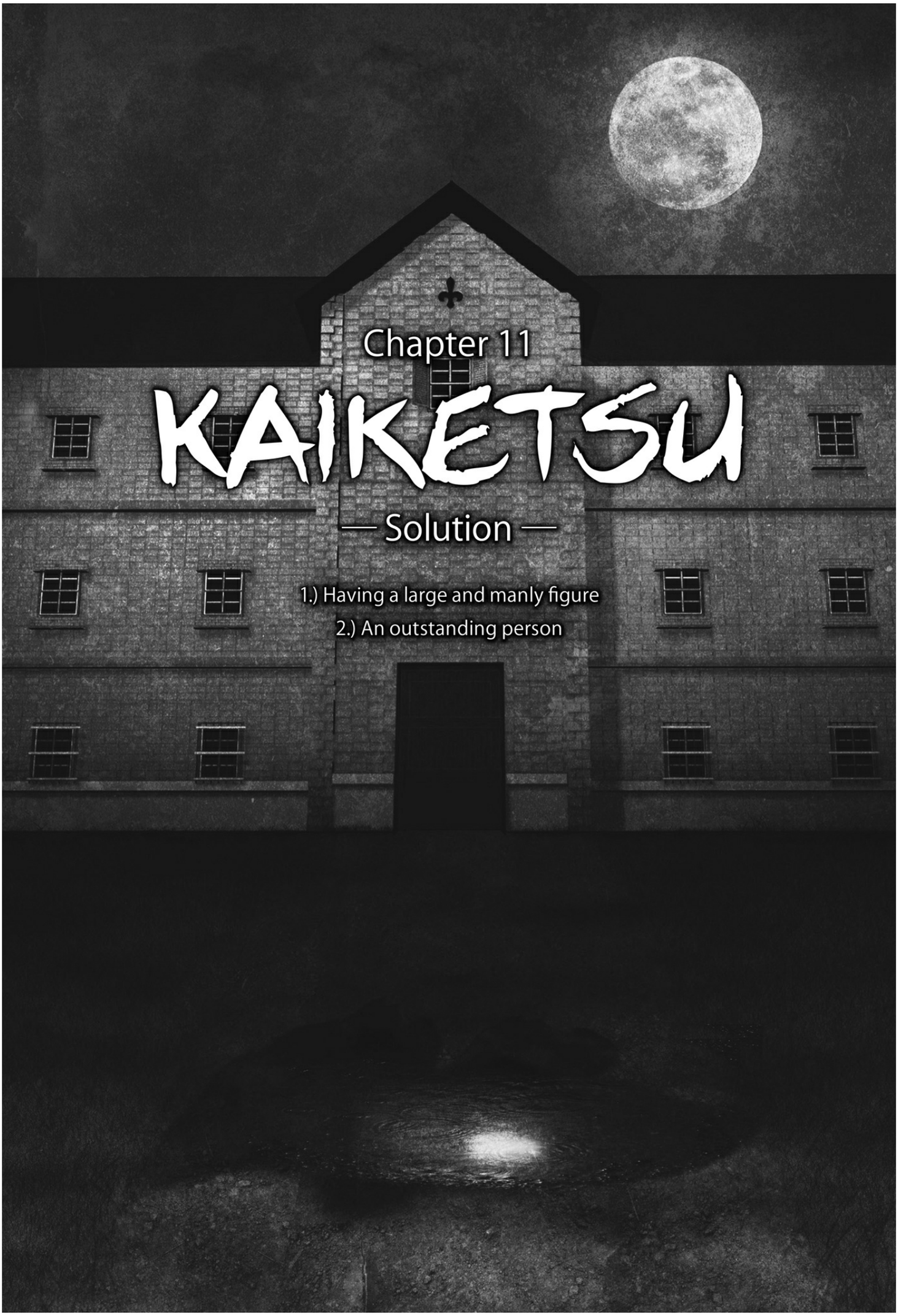
entered the climax of the song, the boy began to move in rhythm with the music. For a brief moment, his face was visible.

“Oh!” Anna gasped.

She clicked back on the time bar and replayed the section. Pausing on the part where she could see the performer’s face, she realized she recognized him.

“...How?”

It didn’t make sense. This was T? The person streaming the game? The one who held the lives of their classmates in his hands? This was really him? Shun turned around, picking up on Anna’s distress. When he looked at the monitor, his jaw dropped. But of course it did. The owner of those delicate fingers dancing atop the piano was none other than Takuro.


Chapter 11
KAIKETSU
— Solution —
1.) Having a large and manly figure
2.) An outstanding person

1

After several close calls with the monster, Hiroshi and Takuro finally managed to reach the breaker room. They dashed inside, slamming the door behind them and pressing their backs against it to hold it closed. They looked for a way to lock it, but there didn't appear to be any mechanism for that. The monster's freakish strength would have been enough to break through easily, but it seemed to have given up for now. Perhaps because it could no longer see them. Takuro pressed his ear to the door and listened for any movement outside. All was still.

"...We're safe."

Sighing with relief, Takuro sank to the ground. With the adrenaline dying down, all the pent up stress drained out of him. His lungs burned from the intense running. His right calf was also spasming slightly, which he hadn't noticed before. But standing just across from him was Hiroshi, who was as composed as ever despite not training in soccer practice every day like Takuro did.

"I've found it. This must be it."

He calmly approached a panel on the wall and flipped the breaker.

"There's no telling when the monster will attack again. This place is dangerous. I suggest we press on," Hiroshi said, scanning the other walls with his flashlight. "Takuro. Can you walk?"

"Of course."

He slapped away Hiroshi's extended hand and stood up. In truth he would have preferred to rest a little longer, but he wasn't about to let Hiroshi show him up. Making sure the monster wasn't waiting to ambush them outside, they left the breaker room. With the lights on now, the place appeared completely different. Bigger, even. Every step caused Takuro's exhausted muscles to cry out in pain, but he was determined to hide it and pretended to be just fine as they hurried along.

"Thank you very much for earlier," Hiroshi suddenly said from behind Takuro.

“What’re you talking about?” Takuro asked curtly, half taken aback.

“When the lights went out, I lost my head. I couldn’t move. If you hadn’t pulled my arm, I would have been instantly killed by that monster.” He paused for a bit, then continued. “But why did you save me? It doesn’t seem like something you would do.”

Hiroshi’s frank words made Takuro smile wryly.

Has he seen through my act in only a few hours? Or did he know all along, and I was the fool for thinking otherwise?

It didn’t matter one way or the other. He wasn’t about to pretend to be a good boy at this point. Takuro’s lips curled into a crooked grin, and he spoke truthfully for the first time.

“I would have left you if you were Takeshi. But you’re different. I need your brains in order to escape this place.”

“That’s good.” Hiroshi looked relieved. “I was worried you were about to say you didn’t want to lose a precious classmate. I can’t understand such emotion.”

Takuro was confused. Hiroshi hardly ever talked to anyone at school, preferring to study insects all day. He’d assumed their personalities couldn’t be more opposite, but surprisingly, it seemed they might have something in common after all.

Eventually, the two boys arrived at the door to the annex. Light from the other side leaked through the cracks in the door.

“And I can’t do without your physical strength. Let’s continue to assist each other,” Hiroshi said, sticking out his right hand.

“Yeah, all right,” Takuro answered, taking Hiroshi’s hand and shaking it.

The most important thing is my safety. Hiroshi is just a pawn for my protection.

Takuro’s selfish personality hadn’t changed one bit since coming to the mansion. And yet, something was different.

“Now, let’s go.” Hiroshi opened the door and proceeded through.

“Yeah.” Takuro followed suit.

They were still trapped in the monster’s mansion. Nothing had really changed. Yet in spite of that, Takuro felt refreshed, as if a stubborn boil had suddenly fallen off.

2

As they ascended the long stone staircase, the sound of static like an out-of-tune radio grew louder. It was only once they reached the dance hall that Takuro realized it was rain.

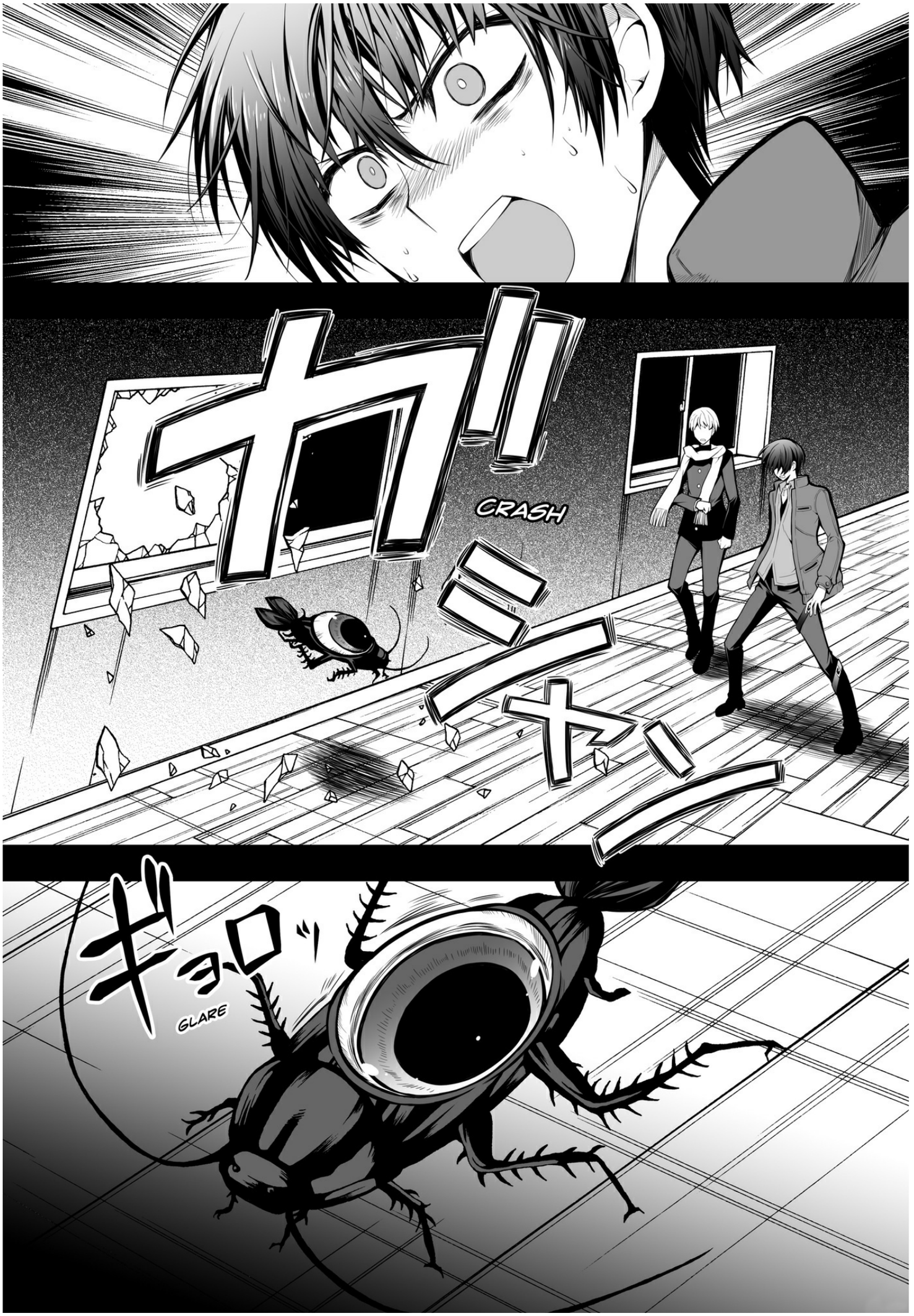
For a dance hall, the place was rather small—more like it was meant for hosting pretend wrestling matches. Opposite the stairs where they emerged was a large window. There were no boards or iron bars blocking it off to them. Great droplets of rain continually bombarded the glass. There were a round wooden table and chair visible just through it, suggesting there was a deck on the other side.

“Do you think we can escape from here?” Hiroshi began to walk over to the window.

“Wait. Don’t move,” Takuro quickly warned.

“What is it?”

Hiroshi turned around, and the glass of the window suddenly shattered. A blue sphere the size of a softball flew in from the balcony. It was the same color as the monster, but it had long, insect-like antennae, six legs, and a shrimp-like tail. On its back was a creepy pattern that looked like a human eye, which seemed to be watching Takuro and Hiroshi.


ガシャン
CRASH
ギョロッ
GLARE

The instant Takuro saw it, fear like nothing he'd ever experienced before engulfed him. His whole body went weak as he sank to his knees.

Idiot. What are you doing?

He quickly tried to stand, but his legs were shaking like a newborn deer's. They just didn't want to listen to him.

Skritchskritchskritch...

The blue bug scuttled across the floor, moving its antennae and legs.

"Uwaaaaaah!" he screamed pitifully.

Takuro finally understood why his body was failing him. The way it looked, the way it moved, the disgusting sound it made when it did... It all reminded him of the singular thing he hated most. The monster in front of him resembled a bizarre, mutated cockroach.

"Takuro. Are you okay?" Hiroshi, who had been staring at the cockroach with deep interest, turned to Takuro.

"It's nothing."

I don't want to look like a wuss in front of him.

Despite pretending to be fine, Takuro's legs still refused to work. It was as if they were simply rejecting the signals from his brain. For some reason, an image of Takeshi surfaced in the back of his mind.

"Just give me a second. I'll be better soon."

He knew they couldn't afford to waste time here. The clock was counting down to the moment the monster would smash in the door to the annex. Takuro shut his eyes. He thought being unable to see the cockroach would help, but it just made things worse.

Skritchskritchskritchskritchskritch...

The revolting sound of it scuttling along only intensified, and Takuro could still see it vividly in the darkness of his mind. Fat beads of sweat poured down his brow. His skin was clammy and warm, yet his insides were frozen solid. The shaking in his legs grew worse. He was on the verge of losing all control.

“Hold your breath for a second,” Hiroshi said out of nowhere.

Confused, Takuro went to open his eyes. But before he even could, a sharp pain shot through his right thigh. He looked down to see a screwdriver sticking out of his leg.

“Wh-What the hell did you do?!”

Takuro instinctively pushed Hiroshi away and pulled out the screwdriver. A dark red stain began to spread out from where it had been.

“Are you crazy? What are you trying to pull?”

He grabbed Hiroshi’s collar, furious. However, Hiroshi merely pushed up his glasses with his pointer finger, unperturbed. He spoke calmly.

“Look. You’re standing now.”

“Huh...? Oh.”

He looked down at his feet. It was just as Hiroshi had said. At some point, he’d gotten up off the floor.

“Pain is the best radar an organism has for danger. Without pain, we’d be unable to detect abnormalities in our bodies. We would have died off as a race long ago,” Hiroshi explained, cool as a cucumber as he picked the screwdriver up off the floor. “When you feel pain, your brain naturally perceives an emergency situation. By stabbing your thigh, it seems I managed to reconnect your stymied mental circuity.”

What was his brain made of? Takuro was beyond impressed and now just speechless. He could only stare blankly at Hiroshi. But as he did, the smell of something burning filled his nose. He looked around and spotted a black stain on the floor. Faint wisps of white smoke rose from it.

“It seems to excrete a strong acid.”

The horrifying creature crawled around at the edge of Hiroshi’s sight. A seared, black line in the carpet trailed behind it, just like the spot where it had landed.

“Let’s be careful. If we accidentally touch that cockroach, I can only imagine it will be bad.”

I wouldn't touch that thing even if you paid me a million yen!

Cursing the situation internally, Takuro heard a strange sound.

Vvvt... Vvvt... Vvvt...

He was hearing a vibrating cellphone over the sound of the pouring rain. Struck by hope, he reached his hand into his pocket to grab his, but he still had no signal.

No... It sounds like it's coming from outside.

Takuro looked to the balcony and froze. He stifled a near scream.

A swarm of cockroaches was clinging to the window. What he'd heard was the sound of their wings buzzing together. Maybe they were just innocently hiding from the rain under the roof. But the eyes on their backs made Takuro think they were keeping watch to make sure he and Takeshi didn't escape.

"If I'd actually gone over to the window, I would have been dissolved, it seems. You've saved me again, Takuro. Thank you very much," Hiroshi said as he gazed at the window from afar. Even a sucker for rare bugs like him wasn't about to rush over to a mass of cockroaches that produced strong acid. "But how did you know approaching the window would be dangerous? And not only that... The safe password, the breaker room—Takuro, you know way more about this mansion than anyone else. You said this was your first time coming here. Was that a lie?"

"It wasn't. If I'd known a monster lived here, I never would have come in the first place," he spat, averting his eyes from the window.

The giant cockroach scuttling across the floor suddenly stopped moving, as if to better eavesdrop on them.

"Then how is it that you know what you do?"

"Because this place is just like the game I played last night."

He regretted saying it as soon as the words left his mouth. There was no way Hiroshi would ever believe that. Takuro doubted it himself, and Hiroshi was an extreme realist. Takuro was sure that Hiroshi would just tell him not to let his imagination run away with him, but what he actually said next shocked him.

“I suspected as much.” Hiroshi put a hand to his chin and nodded, then continued as he kept an eye on the unmoving cockroach. “I’ve been wondering that for a while now.”

“Wait. You actually believe that crap?”

“Scientifically speaking, it’s basically impossible. But so is our entire mysterious adventure here. There’s no point in dismissing empirical evidence just because we’re predisposed to think it’s invalid. All progress in science stops when we ignore the truth just because we don’t understand it. We just have to keep thinking about it until we *do* understand it. So for the moment, yes, I’m willing to field your hypothesis.” Hiroshi took a breath after his speech, then continued. “Takuro, you know what to do after this as well, don’t you?”

“Y-Yeah, pretty much.”

“Then I shall follow your orders. Things will only get more difficult if the monster shows up again, so let’s hurry.”

He didn’t need to say that twice. This cockroach nest was nothing short of hell for Takuro. Takuro wanted out yesterday. He followed Hiroshi quickly out of the dance hall. They headed for the stairs, Takuro carefully watching the cockroach behind them as they went. It was still sitting there on the floor, not moving. Only the eye on its back appeared to be following them.

“Hey, Hiroshi,” Takuro said, looking away from the cockroach.

“What is it?” Hiroshi asked, glancing back at Takuro over his shoulder.

“...No, never mind.” He shook his head and shut up.

Takuro couldn’t bring himself to convey the important message Hiroshi so desperately needed to hear.

3

Hiroshi and Takuro carefully edged out of the dance hall, eyeing the cockroach in the center.

“Come on! The cockroach won’t attack as long as it’s not provoked, so they don’t have to be so careful,” Shun said, clearly on edge.

But for all his desperation, it wasn’t like Hiroshi, Takuro, or the streamer could hear his advice.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Anna asked as she peered over his shoulder at the monitor. Something had been nagging at her “...Is this really being controlled by Takuro?”

“Yeah. Without a doubt,” Shun replied, biting his lip in frustration. “I should have realized it earlier. There must be something wrong with me. T is even talking while streaming the game.”

Anna didn’t blame him. There was no way they could have predicted the streamer was someone so close to them.

“But Takuro’s inside the Jailhouse right now, right? That doesn’t make sense.”

As Anna was talking, the sound of a fire engine’s siren wailed over her.

“Anna, sorry, but could you be quiet for a second?”

Anna tightly closed her mouth. Rather than from outside, the siren was coming from the computer speakers.

“...You said there was a fire near your house last night, didn’t you?”

Shun turned around and intently leaned in closer to Anna.

“Uh, yeah.”

He got so close to her so suddenly that her heart began pounding as she nodded in response to his question.

“What time was that?”

“I heard the engine pass by our house around the time my aunt’s favorite

show was starting, so it must have been just after 10:00.”

“Is your place close to Takuro’s?”

“It’s not that far, actually. How come?”

“I see... That’s what’s going on.” Shun pointed at the monitor and quickly explained. “This video isn’t a live stream.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a recording. I think it’s being shown as if he’s playing now, but it was actually recorded last night.”

“But the clock at the bottom right of the screen is showing today’s date.”

“That’s easy enough to change if you mess with the computer’s settings. You couldn’t prerecord a soccer game or a local festival or something like that, but if you’re just playing a game in the confines of your own home, you could record it as far in advance as you wanted to.”

“Then shouldn’t he just say it’s a recording? Why lie and pretend like it’s live?”

“To create an alibi.”

“...An alibi?”

“Take this one, for example.” Shun pulled up the list of previous streams again and pointed to the piano one. “Look at the date. That’s the night I jumped from the classroom window and twisted my ankle, right?”

Anna nodded slightly. She’d noticed that too.

“But what if he’d recorded this video earlier and streamed it to make it *look* like he was playing it in real time?”

“Still, why would he do that?”

“You were there in the classroom that night. I know, Anna. You might have forgotten, but you told me so in the Jailhouse.”

“...”

“Takuro told me that he had the perfect alibi. That no one would ever suspect

him.”

“Oh. You don’t mean—”

Anna finally realized what Shun was suggesting. The video Takuro had prepared was a cover-up. If anyone ever caught on to what he’d really been doing that night, he could use it to defend himself. It even included comments coming in as he played the game, but that would have been easy to fake from a smartphone.

“He must have planned something for today, as well. I think that’s why he prerecorded this and set it up to stream tonight. That way, if anyone suspected him, he could say he was at home.”

Anna continued to read through T’s video list as Shun explained all this. One video in particular entitled “Top Fashionable Christmas Presents” stuck out to her. It was broadcast on the afternoon of Christmas Eve—right around the time of the accident that took her parents.

“Hey, Shun...” Still facing the monitor, Anna’s lips moved slowly. “Do we... really need to save him?”

That was what she honestly wanted to know the most.

“I mean... Isn’t it too late for us to help? The game’s already over by now. Everyone’s fate has been sealed, right?”

Shun paled. Unease wavered in his eyes.

“Shun?”

“I just remembered...” he said, lips trembling. “Late last night, I called Takuro. Now that I think about it, it was a premonition. I had a feeling something bad was going to happen. I got so worried that I called him to warn him not to go near the Jailhouse.”

But of course, Takuro was in no mood to listen. Why would he be? To Takuro, who’d only ever treated Shun like an insect, his excited rambling probably sounded like nothing more than the annoying buzz of a fly.

“‘Damn it. I was so far, too. It’s your fault I got a game over.’ That’s what he said to me.”

A shudder ran through Anna's body.

"That means my phone call is the reason the game ends, right?"

They looked at the video stream. Hiroshi and Takuro were working in tandem to tear a board from the wall to use as makeshift bridge to get over a hole in the floor.

"When did you call Takuro?" Anna asked Shun.

"Around 10:30..." Shun answered, his quiet voice threatening to fade into nothing.

"We just heard the siren go by, which means we still have half an hour before the game ends."

"It's no use. We can't do anything now," Shun said, his face filled with despair.

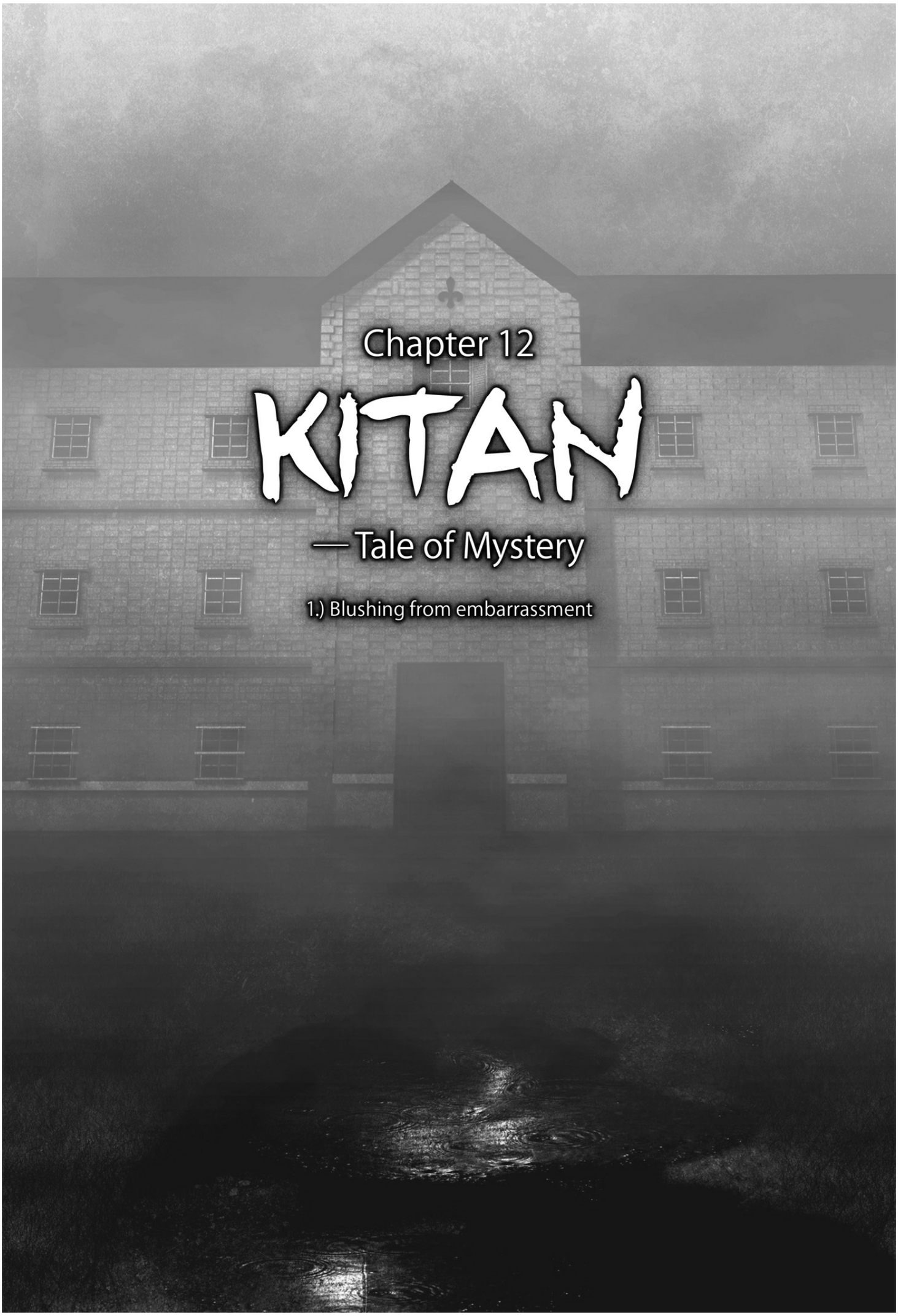
Anna couldn't care less about Takuro. But she couldn't bear seeing Shun so tortured.

Please... Save him.

Anna hadn't prayed since the accident on Christmas Eve. God hadn't even listened to her then, so she hadn't bothered since.

I'm sorry. I'll never hate anyone again. I'll never consider taking my own life again. I swear to keep living. So please, God... Heed my prayer this time.

Anna shut her eyes and thought she saw her parents smiling at her.


Chapter 12
KITAN
—Tale of Mystery
1.) Blushing from embarrassment

1

If God appeared before him one day and offered to grant any one wish, Takuro knew that he'd ask for the power to predict the future. He could already buy anything he wanted with money, and was able to dominate sports and academics on his own merits. And he was popular. People were always willing to help him with his problems. The one thing he couldn't do anything about was his luck.

His father was successful in business thanks to his talents, but there was no denying that luck also had something to do with it. No matter how skilled you are or how hard you work, if you're unlucky, that's all it takes to ruin you.

Takuro had learned that much through soccer. His team had several good players, and their teamwork wasn't bad. They should have been competing to be the best in Japan, but they always lost at the district preliminaries. Sometimes the opponent just happened to be where the ball flew. Other times a strong wind would blow, changing the course of the ball just enough to make a difference. Sometimes things would be going perfectly, but then he would just so happen to slip on the grass. The god of competition was a fickle being. Winning took some incomprehensible combination of skill and luck.

And that was exactly why Takuro wanted to be able to predict the future. If he knew what was going to happen, he'd never lose again. He'd give anything for a power like that. And now he finally had it. Things had been going exactly according to the game since the moment they stepped into the mansion.

So when the floor before them gave out and their path forward was gone, he didn't hesitate. He pried a plank from the wall and used it to make a bridge across the fallen floor, just like he'd done the night before. Armed with such knowledge, there was no need to fear the monster attacking. If memory served, it never appeared in the annex.

Takuro and Hiroshi cleared puzzle after puzzle together until they finally arrived at the last stage. Entering the new room, they could tell it was strange. The floor, walls, ceiling—everything was red. The atmosphere was quite creepy. In the center of the room was a round, white table with a pile of jigsaw puzzle

pieces on it. There were more than 500 of them, each either colored black or white.

Further in was a pole stand. From the top of it hung a single coat hanger. On the other side of the stand was another door. It was red too, just like the walls and ceiling, but it was ornately engraved. It was clearly special. If they were to trust the rough map they'd found in another room of the annex, this door led to a cavern that connected to the outside world.

Takuro tried the knob, but it was unsurprisingly locked. Next to the door was a booth made of glass on all sides. Just like the one before the entrance to the annex, the only thing inside was a camera hanging from the ceiling.

"I see. I understand most of what's going on here." Hiroshi was so intuitive that he didn't need Takuro to explain. He instantly knew what he would have to do. "This jigsaw puzzle contains the password to unlock the door, doesn't it?"

"Sorry. I only remember that it was a four-digit code. I've completely forgotten everything else. You think you can do it?"

"The pieces are simply colored black and white. There's no illustration printed on them, so it will be quite a task. That being said, I somewhat enjoy puzzles of this nature. I'll get started."

And so Hiroshi immediately began sorting the pieces. Takuro knew there had to be some sort of logic to what he was doing, but he couldn't see it.

"I'm sorry to ask this, but could you keep watch outside in case the monster attacks?" Hiroshi asked, his hands never stopping.

"Don't worry. I removed the board we used to cross the gap. The monster shouldn't be able to make it here."

"Is that so? What a relief."

Hiroshi refocused on the puzzle, seemingly trusting him. Watching him, a terrible sense of dread began to fill Takuro. Hiroshi would undoubtedly solve the puzzle within a few minutes. Then he'd jump into the box in order to input the password. The problem, however, came after that.

Knowing the future would be an enticing power to anyone. That is, assuming

the power to know what happens in the future also meant the power to change it. But what if the future were set in stone? Knowing what happens would then be a great burden. You'd be forced to play out matches you knew you were going to lose, further driving home just how powerless you really were. Takuro recalled last night's gaming session. This was where he'd gotten a game over.

The moment he'd entered the box, a section of the floor came loose, releasing a flood of those cockroaches. The box wouldn't open back up until a few seconds later. The avatar he was playing in the game—Hiroshi—had successfully activated the panel and opened the last door, but had died in agony as the cockroaches swarmed him.

And standing here knowing that now probably wouldn't change anything. Hiroshi would be attacked by the cockroaches and die again, just like he had the night before. That would give Takuro a chance to escape safely on his own.

But is that really okay?

Takuro had to wonder. Hiroshi had saved him more than once today. Could he honestly trick him into doing this now without feeling guilty? It was just like with soccer. It wasn't fun to win by cheating. It would probably leave an unpleasant taste in his mouth for the rest of his life.

Think. There must be a way for us both to escape.

"You seem to be thinking about something."

Takuro stiffened. Hiroshi's eyes were still locked on the table, yet still he'd keenly picked up on the subtleties of Takuro's heart.

"...This is where I got a game over."

He was too smart. Takuro decided to reveal what he knew was going to happen next.

"I see. So this isn't as straightforward as it seems."

By the time Hiroshi said that, numbers were already starting to take shape on the table in front of him. It hadn't even been a minute since he'd started putting the puzzle together. Takuro seriously wished he could take a glimpse inside Hiroshi's head.

“Now then, shall we use a dummy to test this?” Hiroshi asked next.

“A dummy?”

“That box activates when it detects a human face. If we use a fake, perhaps we can get it to malfunction.” He continued, not bothering to wipe the sweat dripping down his brow. “I have to observe what will actually happen inside that box before I can develop a proper plan. If you recall, there was a rather realistic mannequin in the main building of the mansion.”

Takuro thought back to the one in the entrance hall.

“I see. If we shove that thing inside the box...”

“I don’t know if it will actually work, but it’s worth a try.”

It was like a lone ray of light shining through the darkness. Takuro nodded vigorously and drew nearer to Hiroshi.

“All right. You stay here and finish the puzzle. I’ll go back to the mansion and get the mannequin.”

If my actions can change the future...

“What about your leg?” Hiroshi asked.

He was probably asking about the puncture wound from the screwdriver. Takuro looked down at himself. The dark stain had spread across the leg of his pants, but it wasn’t especially bothering him.

“Don’t worry. Leave it to me.”

He beat his chest and dashed from the room.

2

Takuro flew back down the path they'd taken to get to the annex without stopping. Ever since he'd left Hiroshi's side, an intense fear weighed on him. The game he'd played last night was from Hiroshi's point of view, so as long as Takuro stayed near him now, he could predict what was going to happen next. But now that they'd split up, he was at a loss. The monster could attack at any moment. He turned right at the end of the dark hall and was about to descend the stairs, but stopped short.

Takuro gulped.

He nearly fainted at the nightmarish sight in front of him. Shards of broken glass covered the dance hall floor as rain blew in sideways through the broken windows. And over top of the glass, a swarm of blue cockroaches roiled on the floor.

"You gotta be kidding me..." he barely managed to squeak out, he was so afraid.

The eyes on their backs all focused in on him. Takuro froze like he'd come face-to-face with his own Medusa. His legs trembled and his teeth chattered like castanets.

No... No more.

A few beads of liquid hit the floor in front of his sneaker. He was shocked to realize it wasn't sweat, but his own tears. How many years had it been since he'd last cried? He was astonished that he even still had emotions like these.

カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
SKRITCH
カサ
QUIVER
カサ
QUIVER
カサ
QUIVER

Get it together, Takuro.

He wiped away the tears on his cheeks and clenched his fists. He couldn't let anyone see him being so pathetic. He was no different from snot-nosed Takeshi like this, quivering like a vibrating cellphone.

I'm not just some average loser. I'm gonna do something big one day and be a hero! I don't even wanna think about what Dad would call me if he saw me get so scared over something like this.

He rallied his thoughts, but it didn't stop the shaking in his legs. His teeth refused to stop chattering, too. He couldn't manage to summon any real strength.

Damn it!

Takuro burned with irritation at his own worthlessness. What would Hiroshi do?

"Pain is the best radar an organism has for danger."

He suddenly recalled Hiroshi's words from earlier, and he had his answer. His eyes dropped to his thigh. In the center of the dark stain on his pants was the wound from the screwdriver. With shaking fingers, he pinched the fabric and pulled. It ripped vertically along the seam, revealing the wound underneath. The screwdriver had pierced much deeper than he'd thought. Dark red muscle peeked out from within the hole.

Does he not know how to hold back?

Takuro gritted his teeth, then jabbed his right index finger into the wound.

"Guh!" he groaned.

Pain like he'd never known before shot through him from his brain to his toes. He took a deep breath, then plunged his finger even deeper into his own flesh with a sickening gushing sound. Every movement of his finger caused a new wave of pain to assault his nerves.

"Rahhhhhhh!"

Unable to bear it, Takuro fell to the floor writhing. He could feel his limbs

spasming with every beat of his heart. His breath was heavy and labored. His mind went white, and he wasn't sure for how long.

Takuro then slowly stood up and looked down the stairs again. Harsh pain still stung his thigh, but he could handle it. The pain was what had brought him back to his senses, after all. He'd even stopped shaking. Dragging his wounded right leg, he descended the stairs. The cockroaches, which had been scuttling about, all froze at the sound of his footsteps.

They're just bugs. Compared to that monster, they're not scary at all.

Takuro encouraged himself internally as he eyed the path with the fewest cockroaches to cut across the dance hall. Fortunately, as long as he didn't disturb them, they wouldn't attack.

After descending the second set of stairs on the other side of the dance hall, Takuro finally found himself back at the door leading to the main part of the mansion. It appeared the monster hadn't broken through it, which meant it wasn't in the annex for now. In that case, Hiroshi should be safe for the moment.

Opening the door, Takuro left the annex. The chill air of the underground passage heightened his nerves. The monster wasn't in the annex. In other words, it had to be where Takuro was heading. He slipped through the dark tunnel quickly and arrived at the front entrance hall. What had been a door before was now completely destroyed. It was just a gaping hole in the wall that the monster could easily fit through. He stepped out and looked around for the mannequin, but he didn't see it anywhere.

"Damn. Where'd it go?"

He cursed to himself over and over as he looked around the entrance hall. The longer he took, the higher his chances were of running into the monster. Panic raced through him. And then...

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Takuro could hear Takeshi screaming from somewhere nearby. His heart was instantly set racing, and the pain in his thigh increased accordingly.

"Takeshi! Where are you?"

Takuro dashed toward the sound.

What's wrong with me?

He couldn't help wondering as he ran.

Am I trying to save Takeshi?

He could understand risking everything to save Hiroshi. He needed his brilliance to get out of the mansion alive. There were no two ways about that. But what about Takeshi? All he did was scream and cry. He was hardly useful. Saving him would just make getting out harder for the rest of them.

I don't care what happens to him.

Yet Takuro was speeding toward him even now.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Reaching the front door, Takuro spotted Takeshi to the left down the front hall. He was hysterically crying, spit and snot flying everywhere. The monster was nowhere to be seen. It was just Takeshi and the mannequin. He was holding it by the legs and swinging it over and over, smashing the head against one of the front windows.

"Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out right nooooow!"

Half-crazed, he relentlessly attacked the window, but the plastic mannequin was no match for the plating over it. Pieces of flesh-colored plastic flew everywhere as it shattered a little with each blow.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Takuro jumped at Takeshi from the front, punching him as hard as he could in the cheek. Takeshi hit the wall behind him and fell quiet. Tears began to drip from his eyes.

"I can't... I just can't take it. Get me out of here. Get me out. Get me out of here. Get me out..."

He mumbled the same phrases over and over. His eyes were wide open and unfocused. It was impossible to tell where he was looking.

"Get it together, man."

Takuro grabbed his shoulders and shook him, but it produced no change.

“Get me out... Get me out... Get me out... Get me out... Get me out...”

Takeshi had totally lost it. He probably didn’t even realize it was Takuro standing in front of him. Takuro stepped away from him and looked at the destroyed mannequin. The head was in pieces. It didn’t even look human anymore. It would never trick a facial scan.

“All you ever do is make things difficult for me...” he turned back to Takeshi and muttered.

Yet strangely, he wasn’t mad. He knew getting pissed off now wouldn’t help anything. It would just be a waste of energy.

“Let’s go. Hiroshi’s waiting in the annex.”

He extended a hand to Takeshi, feeling surprisingly calm. Takeshi turned to him, looking as though his sanity had finally returned.

“Takuro...”

That would be the last thing he ever said.

Suddenly the wall crumbled behind him, revealing the monster. It grabbed Takeshi with both hands and crushed him instantly. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Pop!

The sound of a balloon popping echoed through the long hall. Bits of Takeshi’s body flew in all directions like he’d exploded. Blood and bodily fluids rained down on Takuro in a viscous brown mixture. The force he’d been crushed with was so great that it had ejected Takeshi’s head off of his body. It shot up toward the ceiling and then landed at Takuro’s feet. Perhaps it was just his muscles going slack, or perhaps it was because his brain hadn’t registered his death yet, but Takeshi looked sadly up at Takuro and frowned.

No... I don’t want to die!

Takuro shook his head violently at the sight of Takeshi’s remains. His brain was a cocktail of emotions, nearly overflowing into a panic. But if he lost his cool for even a second, it could prove deadly.

I have to live.

That singular thought brought him back to reality. He bent down and scooped up Takeshi's head. Thick, still-warm liquid ran down his arms and dripped onto the floor, but this was no time to be grossed out. The mannequin may have been broken, but he now had a replacement. With Takeshi's head, they would surely be able to activate the facial scanner.

Takuro took a great breath and then shouted, "Takeshi, I'm counting on you!"

The monster's head slowly rotated toward him. With Takeshi's head in his arms, Takuro took off.

Running into the underground path, he headed as fast as he could for the annex. He tripped and almost fell multiple times, but pressed on without stopping. In his hands rested the head of a former classmate. He must have looked insane.

Punching, kicking, anything—Takuro had always loved to watch people break down as he inflicted pain on them. Watching Naoki and Shun scream and cry made his body tremble with pleasure. But this was different. He now understood just how foolish those actions had been. Reality wasn't like a horror movie. There was no joy to be had in seeing innards hanging from a torso or brain matter spilling from a skull. That was all movie smoke and mirrors—cheating. Real death was quicker, crueler, and sadder.

Just win.

That was what he'd thought for so long. But surely there were things even losers were good for. It had taken coming to this mansion and being broken down himself to realize that.

3

Escaping the monster's grasping clutches, Takuro raced toward Hiroshi. He'd already finished the jigsaw puzzle and had his ear pressed to the red door for signs of life from the world outside.

"I can hear the wind," Hiroshi whispered as if sensing Takuro's approach, his back still turned to the entrance. "When I put my hand against the crack in the door, I can feel a draft. The exit must be near."

"Sorry, Hiroshi. The mannequin was broken. I couldn't bring it."

Takuro set Takeshi's head down next to the completed puzzle. Hiroshi turned around with one eyebrow slightly raised. Takuro had expected him to be a little more shocked than that, but it was all the emotion that showed on his face.

"So Takeshi was killed as well, I see..." he solemnly whispered.

"Can we use him for the face scanner?"

"Let's give it a try."

Hiroshi pulled the stand with the hanger over from the door. He then took Takeshi's head and rammed the end of the pole stand into the base of the skull without even flinching. The hanger fell to the ground, and an orb dripping in reddish-brown liquid fell on top of it. Neither boy lingered on what it might be.

"You're amazing, you know that?" Takuro said, holding his nose due to the stench.

He wasn't being sarcastic in the slightest. Takuro knew all too well that in this mansion, a second's hesitation could lead to death. Being scared or sheepish wasn't going to keep anyone alive. Sometimes you needed guts to do what was necessary.

The stand Takeshi's head was piked upon was surprisingly heavy and unbalanced. It nearly toppled over, but working together, the two boys carried it into the box. Takeshi had always been short, but now he looked down on them both. His usual stupid smile was gone; his lips were a thin, straight line. His half-closed eyes stared vacantly at the two boys in a glare. In a strange way,

it was almost like he was enjoying this reversal of positions.

Please, Takeshi. This'll be the last thing I ask you to do, and the most important.

Once the stand was in position, the boys shut the door. The camera activated, and the facial recognition program began running. A holographic panel appeared on the glass, just like it had at the door to the annex. Simultaneously, a section of the floor slid aside, and cockroaches overflowed from underground. Their numbers were staggering. "Hundreds" didn't even begin to cover it. Where had they all been hiding? The creepy creatures with eyeball patterns on their backs emerged one after the other and quickly filled the box. There were so many of the mutant insects that they tightly packed the inside of the glass case, each and every one of them squirming. It was Takuro's idea of a nightmare.

The supports creaked as even more packed into it, despite it already being at capacity. Small cracks began to form in the glass. At this rate, the box was going to break. Takuro moved his right foot back, ready to run, when something changed in the cockroaches' movements.

They began to disappear, sucked away into the hole in the floor. The nearly unrecognizable stand was now mostly melted from their acid. The floor was burned black and dotted with small holes. Takuro and Hiroshi peered inside the box, but there was no trace left of Takeshi's head. It had either been completely dissolved or completely consumed.

"Okay, it should be safe now. Let's hurry."

Takuro grabbed the handle of the door to the booth and opened it. The panel was still illuminated on the glass inside. They still had time.

"No, hold on," Hiroshi said, grabbing Takuro's shoulder before he could step inside.

"What? We already know the password. All we have to do is input it now, right?"

"Look closer. There are still a few cockroaches on the floor. It's too dangerous to enter."

“But we gotta hurry with the password.”

“These creatures secrete strong acid. There’s no telling when they might attack again.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Takuro growled in frustration.

“I’ll go,” Hiroshi replied calmly.

“...Huh?”

“Someone has to do it, or the door will never open. There’s no other way.”

“But why you?”

“It’s an issue of probability. I’m almost certain the next door is the last.” He patted Takuro’s shoulder repeatedly, as if to reassure him. “Which means brawn, not brains, will be required ahead. Between the two of us, your chances of survival are much higher. Don’t you agree?”

“But...”

“Arguing with me is futile.” The corners of Hiroshi’s mouth curled up into the closest thing to a smile Takuro had ever seen on his face. “I’ll be honest. I really just can’t resist the urge to study these giant cockroaches up close.”

And with that, he stepped into the box, still smiling.

“I’m not gonna let you steal all the glory!” Takuro jumped into the box after him. “I’ll kill the cockroaches. There ain’t that many of them left. While I’m doing that, you input the password.”

He picked up the hanger from the ground and swiftly smashed one that was approaching Hiroshi’s foot.

“How am I supposed to explain all this if I’m the only one to survive? I’m not gonna just sit by and let you become a martyr. *I’m* the hero here. So you better tell everyone just how cool I was when I died. Don’t leave out any of the details.”

“I will do nothing of the sort,” Hiroshi said as he approached the panel. “Because I’m not letting you die.”

Takuro used the excellent reflexes he’d honed by playing soccer to kill every

cockroach that attacked. Acid spurted from each one as he crushed them, visibly eating away at the floor. The smell of burning plastic filled the air. White smoke rose from Takuro's sneakers. Some of the acid must have gotten on his shoes. Intense pain seared the sole of his right foot, but he couldn't let that stop him.

"Aren't you done yet, Hiroshi?"

"I just finished inputting it. Now, let's hurry!"

Hiroshi grabbed Takuro and dragged him out of the box. The sole of his right shoe was completely gone now, and the bottom of his foot was seriously burned. But the click of a disengaging lock echoed through the room. Hiroshi went immediately to the red door and turned the knob. It slowly opened outward, and what felt like their first breath of fresh air in forever flowed in from the other side. Hiroshi was right. Their goal couldn't be far now.

"We did it..."

Takuro pumped his fist and stood up. The pain in his right foot grew worse, but this was no time to rest. Hiroshi, who should have died horribly in that glass box, was still alive. They'd escaped fate. It was possible to change the future after all.

"All right. Now just straight to—"

Takuro stopped there. His eyes went wide as he stared ahead.

A giant blue figure appeared on the other side of the open door. Baring its sharp fangs, it leaped at Hiroshi. He must have seen Takuro's expression and registered the danger, because he barely managed to dodge to the attack. In one smooth motion, he dove head-first out of the door and to the side. The monster's giant, mismatched, twisting eyeballs then fixed on Takuro, still inside the room.

Crap. I'm gonna die.

Takuro turned away from the monster and tried to run, but his right foot kept him from moving quickly. The skin melted by the acid had adhered to the floor, and it came ripping off with a sickening sound when he forced it up. Pain struck Takuro like lightning. He nearly passed out on the spot. The monster's horrible

visage drew closer. He didn’t even have the strength to run anymore.

I hate to admit it, but this is the end...

Takuro steeled himself for certain death.

“Takuro, run!”

Out of nowhere, Hiroshi jumped between him and the monster. He planted both hands on Takuro’s chest and shoved, sending him flying into a corner of the room.

“The rest is up to you,” he said, smiling over his shoulder.

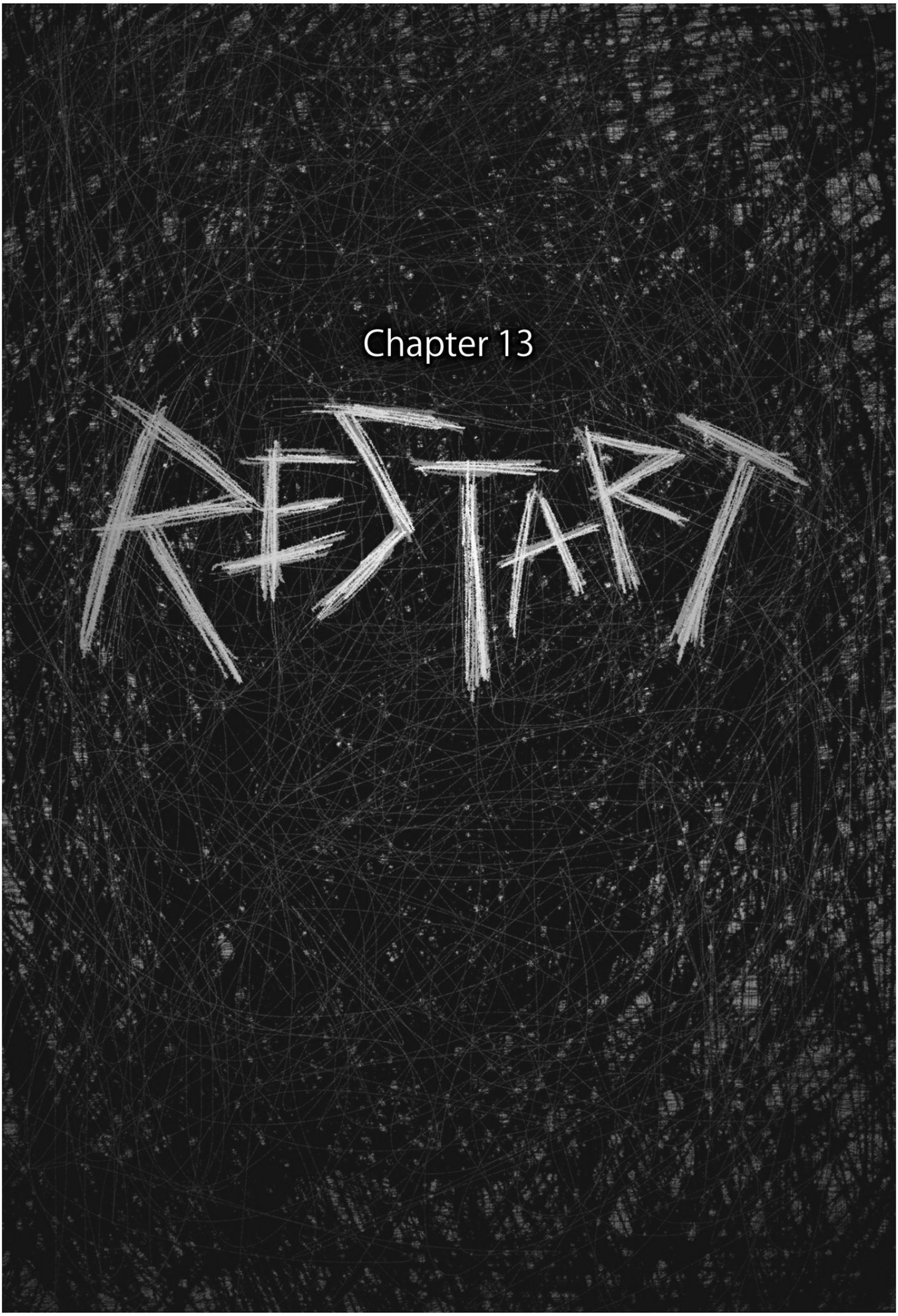
The next instant, the monster’s fangs pierced his temples.

Takuro could hear the crack of a splitting skull. Blood gushed everywhere. And Hiroshi’s body disappeared inside the monster’s mouth.

“No... way...”

Takuro could only stare in disbelief.

Chapter 13



1

Buried alive by the blue cockroaches, Hiroshi's game avatar died. Bleak background music played as the words "game over" appeared on the monitor.

"..."

Anna could only watch the screen and the blood red light emanating from it in a daze. Shun's tightly clenched fists shook violently. He was probably blaming himself for knowing this was coming, yet being unable to do anything.

"Why... Why..."

He slammed his trembling fists into his keyboard over and over, tears streaming from his eyes. His hands immediately began to swell and redden.

"Stop it, Shun."

Anna rushed to place her palms over his fists. If she hadn't, he probably would have kept going until he'd broken bones.

"...Is there nothing else to be done?" she asked hesitantly.

But she already knew the answer. Real life wasn't like a game. There was no reset button. It was painfully clear they were powerless.

"Tch, it's over," said Takuro's voice from the speakers. The stream was still apparently still going. "What the hell was that? I input the password, but still died. What's the point? How do you avoid those cockroaches?"

He was quite pissed, unable to hide his true nature. His tone was rough. Then in the comments section, someone asked if he'd input the wrong code. It seemed Shun and Anna weren't the only ones watching.

"Huh? I don't think it was wrong. I used the numbers I got from the jigsaw puzzle."

This was supposed to be a prerecorded video, but he seemed to be having a conversation with a viewer in real time. Takuro must have typed the comment himself, and set it up to automatically post at a specific time.

"Oh. Maybe the puzzle password is a fake and you have to put the password

from the annex door in a second time. Uh... What was it again? I know I wrote it down. Oh, there we go. It's 2178. Should I try that? No, it can't be that easy. What if the numbers represent letters? If 1 is A, 2 is B, 3 is C, and so on... then 2178 is BAGH."

The slight twitch in Shun's temple didn't escape Anna's notice.

"How do you read that? Is that even a word? BAGH... BAGH... Oh, maybe it's supposed to be BAGHDAD? Maybe there's a clue on the map in the wardrobe if you look at Baghdad. I should give that a try."

Takuro opened the save screen and reloaded the game, but his save data was inexplicably erased.

"What the hell? Man, what a pain in the ass! I quit! I'm out! That's it for tonight's stream. See you next time!"

Takuro's irritated expression flashed across the screen before the stream cut out abruptly.

"Anna, let's go."

Shun stood up equally abruptly. His fists were still clenched, but the aura of utter despair that had overcome him before seemed to be gone. The light had returned to his eyes.

"Go where?"

"Where else? The Jailhouse. We might still make it. Come on! We have to hurry!"

Shun dashed out into the cold night without even bothering to grab a coat.

"W-Wait! Aren't you going to lock the door?"

Anna chased after him, still unsure of what was really going on. It was the dead of winter, yet a warm wind blew against their faces. Great droplets of rain pummeled them without mercy. But Shun paid no heed to any of it as he raced down the street dotted with the glow of streetlights. For some reason, he seemed to be standing a little taller to Anna.

It's going to be okay.

Brushing her wet bangs out of her eyes, a comforting thought crossed Anna's mind.

Everyone's going to be okay.

2

Slipping past the monster as it greedily dug into Hiroshi, Takuro managed to escape through the red door. He had hardly any feeling in his right foot. It was like even the nerves were dead. But that was good for him. If that earth-shattering pain struck him again, he was sure he'd faint.

The air outside the room was cool. The floor and walls of the pathway were nothing but raw earth and exposed stone. It was a tunnel reminiscent of a mineshaft. The passage itself was quite large, easily large enough for the monster to fit through, and seemed to continue forever. Yet it was almost claustrophobic. The earthen walls looked ready to crumble at any moment; the atmosphere was suffocating. Rainwater from the surface was seeping through, creating puddles here and there along the ground. Relying only on the light from a string of naked bulbs spaced a few meters apart on the ceiling, Takuro hurried forward.

The moment he'd rejoiced that they'd changed the future by opening the door without being killed by the cockroaches, the monster had appeared and instantly killed Hiroshi. It reminded him of a horror movie he'd seen long ago, *Final Destination.* In it, a group of high schoolers who narrowly avoided death in an airplane crash were slowly killed off one by one at the hands of a supernatural force trying to correct fate. And Takuro was no different. He couldn't change the future. Mika, Takeshi, Hiroshi... everyone was dead. Next would be his turn. The nightmare that had kept him up groaning night after night was playing in the back of his mind.

It must have been a premonition. There's no other way it could have been so realistic. I'm going to be killed here by that monster. There's no fighting fate.

Still, Takuro persisted. He clung to the faintest of hopes and pressed on. His limp made it awkward to walk, and he slipped and fell in the mud repeatedly. His elbows were worn out, the palms of his hands all torn up. Every nail he had on his fingers was broken. But he never stopped.

Further into the tunnel, the sound of the rain grew louder. The puddles on the ground increased in frequency and size, and eventually it looked like the whole

place was covered in standing water. His consciousness starting to fade in and out, Takuro finally came to a hole that led up and out of the tunnel. Rain poured down on him. Practically panting now, he looked up. He could see dark clouds whipping by in the wind.

“The outside...” a cracked voice slipped from his throat.

A rope was dangling from the hole above.

Can I get out if I climb this?

He reached out and grabbed the rope. It must have been anchored tightly, because it didn’t budge even when he yanked hard on it. His right leg now refused to move, so Takuro took the rope in both hands and began climbing with upper body strength alone. How many meters were left? He looked up at the sky, but couldn’t tell for the life of him how far away it was. It only looked like a few meters, but it felt like kilometers.

The flesh on his hands started to peel and bleed. He slipped and fell repeatedly, but managed to hang on every time thanks to his reflexes. How long had he been climbing now? It only seemed like a few seconds, but it felt like hours. He was so close to the surface that he started to think he might actually make it when the rope began to sway. Takuro looked down and saw the monster standing below. It was holding on to the end of the rope and shaking it violently.

I’m not gonna let you throw me off!

Takuro clung to the rope for dear life. He wasn’t going to let go even if it killed him, but the rope snapped above him and gravity sent him plummeting downward. All his efforts were in vain.

His back hit the ground hard. Luckily the wet ground was somewhat spongy and helped break his fall. The lip of the hole overhead crumbled, sending fist-sized rocks raining down on him. Takuro could hardly breathe, but he knew he’d die if he just lay there writhing in pain. He quickly rolled over and crawled behind a rock. Even the monster seemed to be afraid of the falling debris. It batted away the rocks with its hands and then ran back down the tunnel in a hurry.

Amid the falling rocks, Takuro sighed in relief that the greatest threat had disappeared. He leaned back against the rock he was hiding behind, looked up, and let the muddy water falling in through the hole wash over his face. It was closer to pure mud, but still it felt amazing.

“What... is this?” he muttered angrily to himself, spitting up a mixture of saliva and blood. “Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve it?”

He smiled wryly at his own questions.

“There are so many reasons... I don’t even know which one it is.”

When the rockfall finally stopped, the uninterrupted sound of the pounding rain echoed through the tunnel once more. At his feet lay the rope. Takuro grabbed it and reeled in the muddy mess. Even moving just a finger caused his solar plexus to sting terribly. He must have broken a rib in the fall. His right leg was still numb from the thigh down, and his palms were shredded and bloody. It was a miracle he was still alive.

“Ugh... This is worthless now, isn’t it?”

Takuro bit his lip as he stared at the snapped end of the rope.

“I was so close, too.”

Sucking up the pain, he slowly got to his feet. His left leg still worked. He could walk a little longer.

“I get it, Naoki. I’ll grant your wish and go ahead and die. Will that satisfy you?”

Bracing himself against the rock wall, Takuro began to hobble along the path back to the annex. In his left hand was the severed skein of rope. It was no good for climbing anymore, but it would make a fine noose.

Takuro wandered the estate, looking for a place to die. He thought it would be quick and easy to hang himself, but reality defied his expectations. He couldn’t find anything decent to tie the rope to. The pain in his solar plexus kept increasing. He was only up and walking through sheer will at this point. Avoiding the cockroaches crawling along the floor, he kept going.

What am I doing?

He had to wonder. His vision was starting to go blurry. If he wanted to die, he could just lie down on the ground. The cockroaches would melt him to nothing. That would be the easiest way.

And yet here I am, still walking... But why? I guess I haven't really given up yet. I must be clinging to some faint hope. What if he had survived and not me?

His mind wandered to Hiroshi. He never would have given up. He would have thought of a way to survive, no matter what.

Takuro hobbled his way through the annex and arrived back at the mansion proper. He'd hoped the front door would open, but he wasn't surprised that no such miracle was waiting for him.

Think.

Leaning against the front door, Takuro reprimanded himself as he looked around.

You don't want to die yet, do you? Then think of a way to survive.

The broken mannequin. The crumbled wall. The shattered door. The smashed staircase railing. The entrance hall was a mess compared to when they'd first arrived. If this was what they'd seen first thing, Takuro never would have come in. And if they'd turned back then, no one would have died. Takuro knew there was no point in thinking about it now, but he was sorry for the peaceful future he'd denied himself by making the wrong choice.

Mika and Takeshi had been killed in this very spot, yet their corpses were nowhere to be found. The only traces left of them were the red stains on the walls. Did the monster find humans that tasty? It had probably even licked their bones clean. That thought only made the monster's motivations more confusing.

Did it just want to eat them? Or was it after vengeance? What was it really? Was it the ghost of the sick little girl that was rumored to have lived here? Was it some sort of mutant that had been exposed to chemicals from the plant across the street? Was it someone suffering from argyria, like Hiroshi had suggested? Or was it truly the ghost of Naoki? If that was really the case, Takuro's death just might appease it. But what if that didn't work? The

community would undoubtedly be in an uproar over four kids going missing. A horde of people would storm the mansion, meaning more people would die here.

No. I have to live. I have to escape this place and tell everyone just how dangerous it is here. Think, Takuro. Think. How do I get out?

Still looking around the room, Takuro spotted the knob lying by the broken door and gasped.

"...Aha!"

A single ray of light had pierced the thick darkness Takuro found himself in. How had he not realized it sooner? He picked up the doorknob and began climbing the stairs. There was still a way out.

He could hear the monster growling from underground as he ascended. Surely it was coming for him. He had to be quick, or it would catch up. There wasn't much time left.

He dragged his body, heavy as lead, to the third floor. The only way out left was the door in the attic. It was a ten meter drop to the ground. He could never jump that safely, but he did have a rope.

His pace was as slow as a turtle's, but he eventually made it to the study. The instant he grabbed the knob, he spotted the monster out of the corner of his eye. He quickly got inside and shut the door behind him. The monster was close now. It would catch up to him in a matter of seconds. Summoning the last of his strength, he pushed the desk in front of the door. It was truly a do or die moment.

Something pounded at the door and the whole room shook. Takuro headed straight for the attic. Cutting across the room, he stood before the door painted totally white. He inserted the knob he'd picked up in the entrance hall and forced it open.

"Whoa!"

The blue creature that burst into the room along with the driving rain made him shout. It was one of the evil cockroaches he'd seen in the annex. It stuck to the wall and froze, the eye on its back facing Takuro. It was almost like it was

watching him.

It's okay. As long as I don't approach it, it won't attack me.

Takuro ignored the cockroach and got to work. He looped one end of the rope around a bedpost, then the other around his waist. He was irritated at the clumsiness of his own fingers in the heat of the moment, but if he lost his cool now, it would all be over. Takuro took a few deep breaths to steady himself and finally managed to finish affixing his lifeline. He then heard a loud noise from downstairs. The monster must have finally broken through his barricade. He had to move.

Now.

He checked to make sure the rope was securely tied, then headed for the open door to the outside. Takuro poised himself to jump out, but then heard a revolting buzzing sound from behind him. He turned around to see what it was. The cockroach, which had been content to just sit and watch until now, had flown over to the middle of the rope connecting Takuro to the bed. He shook the rope to try and scare it off, but it was too late. The rope was already dissolving, and it snapped in two when he shook it.

Takuro bent down and tried to tie the two pieces together again, but the monster burst through from the door to the study. Licking its lips, it slowly approached from there. The room was small—less than three meters across. There was nowhere to run. In no time flat, Takuro was trapped right in front of the exit.

So this is it, huh?

He looked at the darkness below. Takuro decided that he'd rather fall to his death than be eaten by the monster. But he just couldn't move his legs.

No! I don't want to die!

Part of his heart cried out in desperation, still intent on survival.

I'm such a coward...

But he laughed at himself internally.

In the end, I'm scared of dying. I'm just like Takeshi, quaking in my boots and

unable to do anything at all.

“Pull yourself together, Takuro!” he shouted, trying to rally himself. “Naoki and the new kid did it. Why can’t you? Dying will make it all easier. Go on. Die. Don’t be a wuss. There’s nothing to be scared of. Hurry up!”

“Hurry and jump!” a different voice reached Takuro’s ears.

A soft light was now shining in the darkness of the yard far below, and someone was calling to him. It was Shun with a flashlight.

“Hurry! Or else the monster will kill you!” he shouted.

His normal timidity was nowhere to be seen. His ordinarily hollow eyes stared right into Takuro’s with a fire burning in them. There was no time to contemplate what he was doing there. The monster was getting closer with each passing second.

“It’s okay! You’re not going to die! You have to jump to survive! Please trust me! Now hurry!”

Shun extended his arms to Takuro.

Are you a freaking idiot?

Takuro cursed to himself.

How many times did I hurt you? You hate me enough to kill me, right? No way I’d trust you—

An image of Hiroshi, who’d died to save him, flashed through Takuro’s mind. He still didn’t trust Shun. But the next moment, he flung open the door and jumped out into the rainy night air.

*

*

*

Instantly, the scenery changed. Takuro now found himself looking at the

entrance hall to the Jailhouse. The mansion was quiet. The door and stairs were in perfect repair, and the white walls were stainless and pristine.

“H-Hey, don’t you think we should go back?” a familiar voice asked.

Turning around, he saw a frightened Takeshi. Beside him were Mika and Hiroshi, as well.

“How’re you guys...”

He was so shocked that he couldn’t even finish the thought. All he could do was flap his mouth like a suffocating goldfish. Mika looked at him quizzically.

“Thank goodness! You’re all okay!”

Shun and Anna came running over to the group of them.

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

Takuro stormed over to Shun and grabbed him by the collar with his usual arrogance.

“Hey, stop that. You owe him your life, you know.” Anna stepped between them. She clearly wasn’t happy.

But Shun’s smile never faltered under Takuro’s glare.

“I doubt you’d understand even if I explained, but there was a bug. I remembered that if you jumped from the attic door, it would freeze and restart the game. It was a real gamble, but... Oh, thank goodness. I’m so relieved. Thank you, Takuro. For trusting me.”

Even more confusing than what Shun was saying were his tears.

“But you couldn’t have been sure. What if he’d really fallen instead of disappearing halfway?” Anna asked Shun, a displeased look still on her face.

“If that happened, I was planning on becoming a cushion.”

“Don’t be silly. That would have killed you.”

“Oh, well... Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Shun smiled as he wiped away his tears. An inexplicable emotion rose up in Takuro as he watched that smile. The spot between his eyes started to sting,

and his vision began to blur.

You idiot. You're going to pay for making me look this pathetic.

Takuro looked to the sky and said curtly, "Quit talking nonsense. Explain it so I can actually understand you, idiot."

"It may be a long, long journey, but I will never forget you."

For some reason, that passage from *The Red Ogre Who Cried* bubbled up to the surface of Takuro's mind.

"Farewell. Take care of yourself. Always your friend, Blue Ogre."

"I told you to explain, you idiot!"

His attitude was as terrible as ever, but something had certainly changed inside Takuro.

3

The light of the full moon streamed in diagonally through the gap in the curtains. Naoki frowned and angrily shut them. He hated the moon. Its bluish-white beams made his chest ache uncontrollably. He didn't know why, but it made him painfully aware of just how otherworldly he was.

Turning his back to the window, he kneeled down on the tatami floor. In front of him was Takeshi, muttering in his sleep.

"Help... Help..."

He scratched at his neck, a pained look on his face. His breathing was rapid.

"Suffer more," Naoki leaned in and whispered into Takeshi's ear.

I've suffered far more than you. You're not getting off the hook with a slap on the wrist.

In truth, he wanted to curse everyone to death like the ghosts in horror movies did. But that was all fiction. People didn't really know anything about ghosts. Naoki was still powerless, even in death.

The only thing he could do was give people nightmares. When he'd realized it, Naoki swore to have his vengeance on those who had bullied him. Plagued by the same nightmare for days, anyone would be dying to know the cause. They'd naturally try and seek it out, especially if they could visit the place they'd been seeing in their dreams.

It had worked well in Shinichi's case. And his plan to lure Takuro into the Jailhouse had gone perfectly, too. So why? He ground his teeth. He could feel the black mud of a grudge welling up inside himself. Takuro was still alive without a care in the world. Today, Naoki had even heard him look up at the sky from the school roof and utter the absolutely unbelievable words: "I think we dreamed the whole thing."

He'll pay. I'll make him pay if it's the last thing I do.

Naoki unconsciously clenched his fists. He'd failed once, but he wasn't about to give up. He'd continue doing the same thing until Takuro was dead.

“No... Stay away... Stay away!” Takeshi shook his head roughly from side to side.

He’d been having the same nightmare for a whole week since returning from the Jailhouse. He hadn’t been able to stomach food the past few days either, and was looking rather gaunt. His parents were awfully worried. He had to be at his limit. Surely he would soon realize that he would never escape these nightmares unless he went to the Jailhouse and conquered his fears. But a coward like him would never go alone. He’d go to Takuro for salvation.

Naoki’s lips twisted into a grin as he chuckled. He was sure his plan would work this time.

This is a dream! A dream! A dream!

Takeshi hugged his knees and shivered inside the musty wardrobe.

Blue monsters don’t really exist. I’m dreaming. I’m definitely dreaming. Wake up now, or it’ll get you!

He pinched his cheek over and over, but the scenery never changed. In this midst of his panic, he heard the door to the room open.

It’s coming!

Takeshi shut his eyes and mouth, doing everything he could to pretend he wasn’t there. His whole body was covered in goosebumps. If the monster discovered him, he’d be brutally murdered. Even the marrow would be sucked from his bones before the monster devoured those, too. There’d be nothing left of him.

A horrid stench reached his nose. Was it the monster? It was so wretched that he gagged.

Oh no!

He covered his mouth, but it was too late. The wardrobe door slowly opened.

“Ah... Ahhh...”

Takeshi gasped at the sight before him.

ああああああああああっ！
AHHHHHHHH!

Takeshi shrieked. Looking down from above, Naoki nodded with satisfaction.

“Are the dreams I give you thrilling? I hope so, but it’s not over yet. I’ve still got lots and lots of entertainment left for you.”

Enjoying Takeshi’s unending screams, his heart raced at the thought of what was to come. The real game was just beginning.

Afterword

In the afterword of the last volume, I wrote, “If I have the opportunity, I’d like to write new adventures with Shun, Hiroshi, and the rest of the gang.” I never expected I would get that chance so soon! This is all thanks to those of you who read the previous volume, so you have my heartfelt thanks.

The idea of this novelization being something that doesn’t spoil the game, but instead takes from it and builds off of it hasn’t changed since the first volume. Now that we’ve revealed more to the mansion, I think that there’s something exciting about moving between the areas even for people who have played all the way through the game. My intention was to unfold a story that wasn’t told in the game while bringing out the flavor of the characters, setting, and events of the original work. I hope that those of you who are fans of the game snicker here and there when you read certain scenes or lines.

I watched hours of gameplay videos in order to write this book, and I really came to appreciate noprops’s player-oriented approach in keeping things new and entertaining. I’m also grateful to Karin Suzuragi, who’s illustrated this volume, as well. The opening comic pages she’s done are more impactful than anything I’ve written in this book. It’s really reassuring to get to work with such talented people.

This second venture in the series, subtitled ”Vengeance,” is based on patch 5.2. This is the only game version where all the classmates can escape alive, but what about the novel version? Well, you’ll have to read it to find out. With patches 3.0 and 5.2 out of the way, I’d like to do the next one on the latest patch, 6.23. Those of you who’ve already played the game know what’s coming, and who’s going to get it. I really want to try bringing those events to you in novel form.

So, here’s to hoping that we meet again.

Kenji Kuroda

Takeshi's actions were so human and relatable that sometimes they cushioned the scariness of it all... But in the end, the scariness still won out.
And then there's our novel-original protagonist Shun, whose inner strength shone through when it mattered most. Not to mention Anna's girlish emotions, which really got me into her character as I was drawing her.
The next part of the story to explore would be patch 6.23, the newest version where some truly surprising things happen. I hope with all my heart that we get to see it novelized. I'd love to get to draw it.

I had to play *Ao Oni* covering the screen with both my hands. And while it was still scary, watching a play-through with a voiceover made it a little easier. Now, many years later, I'm blessed to be involved with *Ao Oni* again as an illustrator. I had a lot of fun drawing this as Mr. Kuroda's story, especially seeing it overlap with patch 5.2. The world of *Ao Oni* is a scary one. But if I had infinite lives, I'd love to jump in and try to escape too! No, don't try and tempt me! I would surely be screaming my head off the whole time.
This time around I found myself comically grinning while Hiroshi and Anna had their awkward conversation together, and was totally enraptured by how cool Hiroshi was in the second half.
I also found myself starting to understand Takuro, and was a little touched by his emotions and the change he undergoes.
And of course, I swooned over Mika's bravery. Her sweetness is even more overwhelming than in the first volume.

To noprops, the creative mastermind who gave birth to *Ao Oni*; Mr. Kenji Kuroda, who's given the world of *Ao Oni* so much character and emotion; Natsuki Miyagawa, who kindly supported me even over the smallest troubles; my staff Tomoka Furuta and Y. Nayu; and all you readers: my sincere appreciation. Thank you so much for sticking with me. I hope to see you all in another volume!

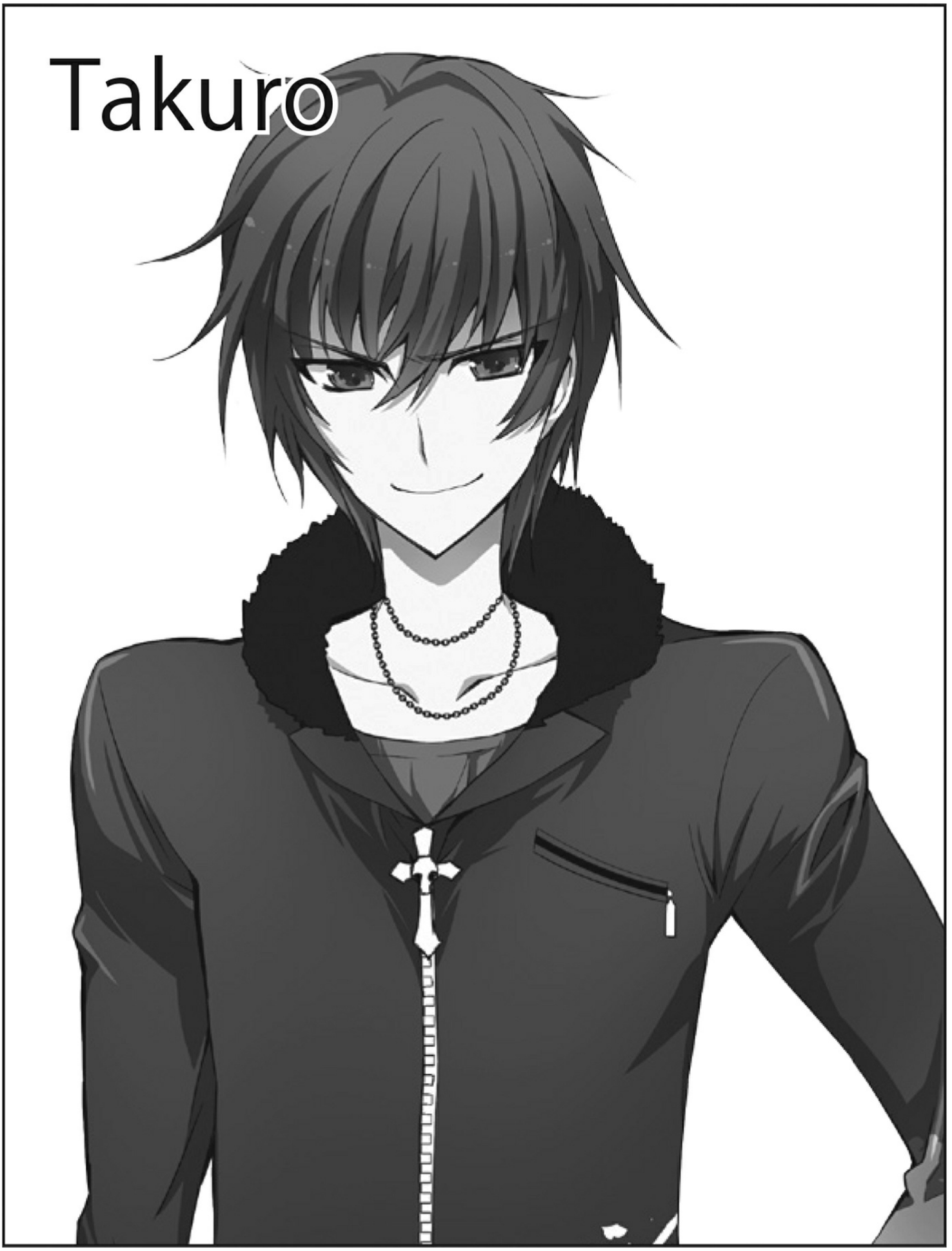
KARIN SUZURAGI

Ao Oni: Vengeance

Character Guide

Shun

In volume one the protagonist was a victim of bullying so I drew him meek and delicate. In this volume he showed much strength of the heart, so I'm excited to see his growth in future volumes. Good luck fixing those bugs! That's a world I'm totally ignorant of as I don't even dabble in CGI.


Takuro

His personality is extremely bad, even though there is a reason for it, so I felt a lot of pressure to make his greatest asset, his face, super hot! But I enjoyed the challenge. I also had to be careful not to stray too far from the original art.

Takeshi

He’s the one in the game who presents all kinds of shock to the player. I always look forward to the differences in his movements with each new work. I also personally like characters who don’t hide their emotions. I paid a lot of attention to his design and expressions so as to draw him more comically.

Hiroshi

The quick-witted, intellectual, cool protagonist who never falters. The novel adds a lot of detail to his background and I fell even more in love with him. I tried my best to draw him with a Hiroshi-like coolness, while also showing a hidden humanity to him.

Mika

In the game she has this impression of being joined to Takuro at the hip, but in the novels we get a glimpse of Mika's own situation. Her courage really struck a chord with me. Like Takuro, I endeavored to make her super attractive. Shorts and knee socks are too cute.

Anna

The serious, smart, comforting-type heroine. In the second volume when she visits Shun’s place, we learn more about her daily life and inner thoughts, which melted my heart. The more I draw her, the more I fall in love. I’m cheering for her and Shun to clear the terrible future that awaits them.

The Ao Onis

Horrifying creatures. Yet their eyes are so round and cute that I feel oddly charmed by them. When I saw the Blue Ogre Training School (?) a strange laugh came out of me. I will do my best to portray the fear, charm, and shock they instill as honestly as possible.

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Ao Oni: Vengeance

by Kenji Kuroda

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