



# 付喪の 骨董店 6

不思議取り扱います

御堂彰彦  
イラスト ◆ タケシマサトシ

# ***Table of Contents***

[Illustration](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Envy](#)

[Chapter 2: Sound](#)

[Chapter 3: Future](#)

[Chapter 4: Past](#)

[Intermission](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Credits](#)

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不思議、謙取り扱います

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付喪堂骨董店

骨董店



第一章

嫉妬  
11

第二章

音  
100

第三章

未来  
169

第四章

過去  
262

contents

Designed by Toru Suzuki (TEAM1802)











# *Prologue*

There are certain objects in the world known as “Relics”.

No, not like articles of fine art or antiques. They’re magic tools created by powerful magicians and mighty ancients, or objects that gained power after long exposure to their owner’s grudges and natural spiritual power—many “cursed items’ were often times, in fact, Relics.

They appear in old stories, anecdotes, or legends as “objects of power”.

For example: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you’ll look in the future, or a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Most everyone has heard of stories like that.

People often consider Relics to be mere fantasies because they’ve never come across any. Even if a relic were right before their eyes, they’d fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they’d just dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some simply don’t care, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

But Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.



## ***Chapter 1: Envy***

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Even if that's not actually true, what it means is that other peoples' possessions look better than your own.

But what would you do if the grass on the other side really *was* greener?

Perhaps you could learn by example and try to imitate your neighbor's success.

Or maybe you could give up and try to find satisfaction with what you have.

But what if, despite all that, another person's possessions continued to look better than your own?

What would you do then?

Is it not obvious?

Rob them.

Seize what they have and take it for yourself.

And like that,

Conflict between people never ends.



Canaria.

That was the name of the unit I, Kagoshima Maria, had formed with my sister, Asuka.



We belonged to the same record label that promoted our mom, who had at one point aimed to be a singer. With our appeal as middle school sisters and strict lessons from her, coupled with the singing talent we inherited, our popularity skyrocketed in no time.

TV shows and magazines couldn't get enough of my sister and me, and before long, we found ourselves not even having enough time to go to school.

But that fame didn't last long. Public interest shifted incredibly quickly, and as the stage became more and more distant...

"I'd like Asuka to make her solo debut."

I heard my manager say to my mom and older sister.

The manager had called them in earlier saying he wanted to talk to just the two of them. I was told to wait in the dressing room. Still, I also wanted to know what this was about, so I snuck out and was now trying hard to listen to what was going on inside the meeting room.

This job, which was to sing a song presented by famous composer, was like a lifeline to bring us back from our waning popularity.

But the condition it came with was that Asuka alone was going to be allowed to sing.

It was a shock to me, but I also kind of saw it coming.

We had inherited the same qualities from the same mother, learned under the same instruction and practiced the same techniques.

But we were not the same.



I knew it myself—that Asuka was a better singer than me, and that the rest of the world thought the same.

That's why I had a feeling something like this would happen someday.

But it was too early.

Way too early.

I still wanted us to sing together.

“What do you think?”

*Decline*, I prayed from the other side of the door.

“We'll do it.”

My mom answered.

My sister didn't decline.

Everyone agreed, and I was the only one left behind.

I was sure Asuka would go on without me after her solo debut.

Like her name, she was leaving me behind in a cage, and spreading her wings alone.

And so, one month later...

After finishing her solo debut, standing there on the stage was—me, Kagoshima Maria.

You might call it divine justice.

My sister Asuka hurt her throat and lost her voice.

I had been recuperating at my mom's instruction, and took my sister's place in the solo debut.

That's what I seized.

The song that my sister was supposed to sing.

The position that she was supposed to have.

And also...



"How did things end up like this?" I asked myself as I walked to our meeting place under the clocktower in front of the station

Sunday. I'd usually be going to my part time job around now.

I had taken the day off.

... And was getting the feeling that I had been having similar thoughts last week.

Still, I was the one who made the invitation this time, so it wasn't like there was anything for me to complain about.

I checked the two tickets I had in my pocket just in case and kept muttering to myself.

These concert tickets originally belonged to my classmate Shinjou, but he gave them to me for free since his soccer club was playing a game at the same time.

It was incredibly generous of him, but there was a catch...which was that he got to choose who went with me.

Maybe he meant it as an apology for the trouble he caused during the shopping trip last week, but I wasn't allowed to choose who I went with this time.



That's why I definitely wasn't looking forward to this.

I got to the meeting spot still making excuses for myself, and saw that she was already there.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"I just got here.", replied Saki.

The fact that she looked proud of herself must have been my imagination.

Then, Saki's eyes widened just a little bit. Her emotions rarely ever showed on her face, so she must have been really surprised.

And well, you could say that's what I was going for.

The outfit I was wearing now was the one Saki chose and bought for me last week.

"You wore that?"

"Well yeah, figured I might as well."

"It looks good on you."

"Now you're just showing off."

I definitely wasn't ironically pointing out that Saki was complementing the clothes she chose for me because I was embarrassed.

"Same to you though. You look good." I figured complementing her clothes was the polite thing to do.

"Now *you're* just showing off."

You were the one who looked like you wanted the outfit in the first place though.

“I suppose I am.”

Just like me, Saki was wearing the clothes I bought for her last week. But the only reason I got her that dress because she looked like she wanted it, so you couldn't really say I was showing off.

“Still...thanks.”

“...Yeah.”

I was pretending to be calm, but wearing clothes we picked out for each other and exchanging complements was making me feel really uncomfortable.

“A-anyway, let's go.”

“Yeah.”

We cut off the uneasy conversation there and began walking to the concert hall.

Until, for some reason, Saki latched onto my arm.

“Wha!?”

“What's wrong?” Saki looked up at me, puzzled.





What was she trying to do? Don't tell me—was she enjoying herself that much even in this date-like atmosphere? I was shocked. But then I happened to see a book inside the leather handbag she was holding.

*With This, Even You Can Make a High Society Debut!*

Come to think of it, she did mention something about that yesterday; she said it was her first time going out to a social event at a concert.

She was really misunderstanding something.

The concert we were going to was a small one held at the community center. There were going to be various singing groups and musical performances, but it really wasn't like a classical concert or opera for rich ladies and gentlemen to attend wearing fancy clothes. It had absolutely nothing to do with high society.

Of course, the book she had only doubled her misunderstanding that the concert hall was a place for social events.

But I wasn't such a nice guy that I'd point it out to her.

That's why I didn't bother correcting her mistake.

... It definitely wasn't because she was in a good mood.

And absolutely not because she seemed really happy for some reason.



"Are you ready?" Mom asked me.

I nodded.

"The room is a little dry though. How does your throat feel?"



“I’m fine. Same as always.”

“They can’t even get air conditioning right around here. I can’t believe you have to sing in a place like this. It’s why I hate taking these jobs” Mom sighed unhappily.

She was saying that as the person who chose to accept the job. I understood why she did though; she had told me countless times before.

“If you pull this off, you’ll get a chance to make a television appearance, okay? That’s why I want you to endure performing at this tiny concert hall.”

Mom was actually the one who had to endure though. I personally didn’t hate jobs like this. I was happy as long I as I had the chance to sing in front of an audience. True, there was a time where I wanted to sing for huge crowds at big venues. Just like my mom, there was a time where I saw no point in singing at a small place like this.

But things were different now.

Even this small community center was a precious place where I could sing. No matter how small the place, and no matter how shabby the event, it was much better than not having any place to sing at all.

“You go back to the dressing room and get changed. I already asked to have a humidifier ready for you, so make sure to stay inside. I’d rather you not hurt your throat in a place like this.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to greet the organizer.”

Mom was keeping an eye on the clock, and was going to meet with the organizer. That was to say, she was going to meet the person who could get me on TV.

I heard the other participants whispering among each other after she left.

“She asked them to bring a humidifier here?”

“What’s up with the special treatment?”

“It’s because she was on TV before, you know.”

“Ah, is that what it is?”

“Why is she singing in a place like this, then?”

“I guess that’s why they were talking about humidifiers and TV.”

“She used to be famous?”

“Wanna ask for an autograph?”

“Nah, why would I want one from her?”

“Why is she alone though??”

“Yeah, there used to be two of them, right?”

“Hmm, I think she’s the younger sister.”

“I’m not really sure which one she is...”

I couldn’t stand the painfully loud whispers anymore and escaped back to the dressing room.



There were all sorts of variety acts at the concert, from a housewife chorus group, to music class performances and acoustic guitar players.

We were taking a break right now, but the second part was going to begin soon.



“Looks like a student saxophone performance is next.”

“Yeah, and there’s a children’s choir after that, followed by flute and shamisen players. They’ve got everything here.”

“I think it’s great. Having so much variety makes it fun.” Saki said with her usual lack of expression.

It didn’t look like she was having a lot of fun, but if she said she was, then I supposed I’d take her word for it. Other people might not understand, but I was used to being next to Saki and looking at her facial expressions that didn’t match what she said.

True, the skill level here wasn’t exactly high, but it wasn’t boring either.

The most important thing was that Saki was enjoying the concert, and that made the trip well worth it.

“Last is Canaria...? Oh, *that* Canaria, huh. There’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.”

“Canaria?”

“Yeah, they’re a duo of sisters I used to see sing on TV a long time ago. You can read about them here.”

I showed Saki the notes on the pamphlet.

The twin middle school sisters were really popular on TV back in the day. I really only knew their name though, since I didn’t watch much TV.

But now that I thought about it, I hadn’t heard anything about them for a while. Were they singing in these kinds places now?

“Really? So they’re famous. I’m looking forward to seeing them.”

“It’s kind of weird though. There’s only one person on the pamphlet.”

It had been a few years since I saw Canaria on TV, so the person in the picture had quite a different atmosphere from what I remembered.

“Oh well. I suppose we’ll know when they get on stage.”

The break was almost over.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom.”

I stood up and faced the door, but then a girl standing near the entrance caught my eye. I stopped and stared at her for a moment.

“What’s wrong?”, Saki asked, sounding confused. She looked over to where I was staring.

“Is there something with that girl?”

“It’s just...it feels like I’ve seen her somewhere before...”

“You aren’t going to tell me she’s someone you came here with before again, are you?”

“No, not that. And wait, what do you mean by *again*?”

“Nothing.” With a hmph, Saki turned away from the entrance and back to the stage, but then...

“Wait.” She stopped me. “Isn’t that the girl from last time?”

“Last time?”

“You know. The two that showed up after us at Toujou-san’s school.”

Just the other day, Saki and I had gotten caught up in an incident involving a bangle that brought good luck. The glass ceiling in the



gym tragically shattered during that incident and seriously injured many people.

The girl just now looked just like the one who was with the other boy at that time. If my eyes weren't mistaken, then she was not only exact same person, but also the one I suspected shattered the glass..

If you were to ask me if a girl like that had the power to shatter a reinforced glass ceiling, I'd have to say yes.

Because that was an incident involving Relics.

But before I could get a better look, the girl exited the hall.

"I'll be out for a bit." I left my seat and followed after her.



"Asuka...?"

I couldn't believe my eyes when I got back to the dressing room.

My older sister, Asuka, was there for some reason.

It had been at least a week, maybe even longer, since I last saw her. I had no idea where she had gone, and I doubted Mom did either. She did say she hired a detective to look for Asuka though...I guess that was true after all.

"Where were you this whole time?" I asked to fill in the silence.

Asuka typed something on her phone and then showed me the screen.

She had to use a cellphone or computer like this to communicate since she couldn't talk anymore.

*(I was with a friend.)*

Not that I was one to talk, but I didn't expect Asuka to have friends. The two of us had been kept busy since we were kids and never had a chance to make any. I still didn't have any friends since I didn't go to school. Asuka wasn't working anymore, but she didn't seem to be going to school either, so I was a little curious about where she found a friend.

"What kind of friend?"

*(A really kind one.)*

Her vague reply told me she didn't want to say anymore.

"Anyway, Mom was worried about you."

That was a lie. She hadn't said anything about Asuka in a while.

*(The detective brought me back)*

"Oh, okay."

I honestly didn't think there was actually a detective out there searching for Asuka. Mom was always busy looking for new jobs for me and didn't have any time to search for her. I guess she was worried for Asuka in her own way.

"So do you want to talk to Mom?"

But Asuka didn't answer, and instead took out a pendant with a triangular jewel out from her pocket.

"Uhh...?"

Asuka held the pendant up by its chain. As I stood there wondering what she was trying to do, the pendant suddenly started spinning.

The strange thing was that Asuka wasn't moving her hand at all.

"... What are you doing?"

I asked her what was going on, but she just ignored me and kept staring at the pendant.

...Honestly, it was a little creepy. She was my sister, but I still had no idea what she wanted.

“If you don’t have anything else, then please leave. I need to be on stage soon.”

But Asuka ignored me.

“Asuka, are you listening!?”

*(Yeah, I got it already. I already learned what I wanted to find out anyway.)*

Asuka put the pendant back in her pocket with a satisfied look on her face.

“What did you come here to do?”

I hadn’t seen her in so long, but none of this was making sense.

But Asuka did not answer. She just quietly fixed her gaze on me.

“Didn’t you come here to see Mom?”

I was trying to talk my way through this discomfort.

“... Or did you come here to get in my way?”

She didn’t break her silence, but finally Asuka shook her head, and showed me her phone screen.

*(I came to take back what was stolen from me.)*



I watched from around the corner as the girl from before entered a room reserved for people in the concert.



Maybe she was one of the performers.

Then, a short while later another girl entered the room from the opposite direction. Maybe it wasn't an individual room, but a group dressing room.

Should I go in and pretend to have gotten the wrong room, or would it be better to just try knocking instead...

But just as I was about to make up my mind, I heard a conversation coming from the dressing room.

What was going on? I couldn't tell who it was, but I could glean that someone sounded surprised.

I pressed my ear to the door.

They seemed to be speaking softly, so I had a hard time hearing what they were saying. It must have been a conversation they really didn't want anyone else to hear.

The second girl was likely acquainted with the one I was following since they were in the same dressing room. It was safe to assume she knew about relics too.

... Regardless, I had no intention of standing around to watch.

My thoughts went back to the incident at Toujou-san's school. Why did she do such a thing? What did she do with the lucky bangle Relics she stole? And finally, what was their goal...why were they collecting Relics?

Just as I was about to knock on the dressing room door to find out—  
“What are you doing!?”, someone shouted behind me.

I backed away from the door in a panic and saw a young woman standing there.

The emotion in her voice was also present on her face. My eyebrows were up in surprise as she stared out me.

“Who are you!? There’s someone suspicious here!”

“Hey, wait a minute. Just because I was standing in front of the door...”

To be honest, I really didn’t have any credibility seeing as I had my ear to the door a moment ago.

Some concert staff who heard her voice came over, grabbed me, and dragged me over to the security office with her.



The door to the room opened, and someone suddenly grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

It was Mom.

Asuka had already left. She had just missed her.

“Mom!”

“Maria, are you alright?” She asked me, looking worried as she smoothed over my frazzled hair. “Did that man do something to you?”

“That man?”

“That’s right. There was a strange person in front of your door. The door was locked, and you didn’t come out when I knocked, so I was thinking maybe you went to the restroom...”

I hadn’t noticed anyone knocking or turning the doorknob.

“It’s alright. I don’t know any guys anyway. Nothing happened.”

“I see...thank goodness then.”

Mom let out a sigh of relief, and then frowned.

“And it’s just before your performance too. Unbelievable. This is why I hate small concerts. They don’t have any kind of security, and didn’t even bring you a humidifier. Ugh I wouldn’t have even looked at this place if I didn’t have to for your next job!”

“Who cares about that, Mom. Listen to me! Asuka was here!”

“Asuka?”

“Yeah!”

“That’s nice. Never mind that though, are you ready? I told you to get changed, didn’t I? Come on, let’s get your hair sorted out.”

“But Asuka...”

“You told me about Asuka, but let’s focus on work now. You’ll be getting bigger jobs after this is over, so keep it together, alright?”

“....Alright.”

“I’m going to ask them to get us a different dressing room, so you finish getting ready. Keep the door locked.” Mom said, left the room.

She wasn’t listening to me.

Neither Asuka nor I mattered.

The only thing that did matter was singing...no, the only thing that drove her was the dream she couldn’t to fulfill.





After I was taken to the security room, the security guard wrote down my name, address, and school.

The lady from before was apparently the person in the dressing room's mother. Her aside, I was able to convince the staff and security people that I had an acquaintance there, so things didn't get too bad.

"You know Canaria used to be pretty popular at one point. I'm sure you can understand why her mother would be that worried.

That's how I found out who the room belonged to.

"That was Canaria's room?"

"Yeah. That was Kagoshima Maria from Canaria's dressing room."

Now that he mentioned it, the second girl actually did resemble the one on the pamphlet.

"They used to be famous, so I'd bet they've had all sorts of incidents in the past."

Her mom's reaction felt like it made sense now.

"She caused quite a stir, you know, asking us about the security system and making us reserve a dressing room for her daughter alone. It's not like this is a TV show..."

The security guard smiled wryly.

"The point is, they used to be a big deal. My buddies at the security company tell me that sort of thing was normal for them, so I suppose it makes sense."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep, but they're nowhere near as popular now."

Even I could guess they weren't as popular anymore. Otherwise they wouldn't have bothered appearing at a small concert like this.

"The older sister retired right as people were starting to get tired of them."

"You said she retired?"

"Yep. Seems she hurt her throat and lost her voice. The younger sister actually had throat problems first, and was resting while the older one was doing solo performances. The older sister didn't take any breaks from TV during that time, so I guess she ended up pushing herself too far."

Now I knew why there was only one person listed for Canaria in the pamphlet.

"Alright, questioning is now over. Don't go hanging around there again. The second half of the concert is about to start."

"Sorry for all the trouble." I bowed and left the security room.

Now then.

There was some interference, but where did that girl go, I wonder. Was she still in the dressing room? All I knew was that the face that she went into dressing room meant she was affiliated with Canaria.

I might be able to talk to her if I went back to there. The mom from before might pose a problem, but whatever. This was an emergency. I'd just say I had come to apologize or something if she caught me again.

I went back to Canaria's dressing room and knocked on the door.

"Yes?", came the reply from inside.

"Excuse me, do you have a moment?"

“Who is it? It’s a little early for me to take the stage...” The voice belonged to a girl. Her mom didn’t seem to be there.

That said, I could sense the caution in her voice. Her mom must have warned her about me.

There was no way I would just open my door and force my way in though.

“Are you Kagoshima Maria from Canaria?”

“...I am, but what of it?”

“Sorry to bother you. I had some business with the girl who went into your room earlier.”

I felt a jolt through the door.

“...There’s no one in here except me though.”

“I saw her go in before you did. Is she not there anymore?”

“What business do you have with her?”

Maria’s tone was sharp. Something must have happened that they didn’t want anyone else to know. In other words, it might have been about Relics.

“Do you know her?”

“What exactly do you want?”

“—Relics” I said suddenly. I didn’t try to hide anything.

I could hear Maria gulp.

That was bait to see if she knew about Relics, and as I thought, she did.

“That’s what I’m here to talk about. Can you let me in?”

“ .....

There was no reply.

I might have inadvertently caused her to put up her guard even more. But now there was enough to pique my interest. I couldn’t ignore things after this.

“ .....

There was no reply.

Was she was trying to pull something off from inside the room? Now I was the one who put up my guard. I took a stance and took a short step away from the door.

There was no way I was just going to walk away though.

Finally, after a lot of hesitation, Maria opened the door just a little bit.

“What are you here for, exactly?”

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

“ .....

“It’s about the girl who was here earlier. You know her, right?”

“My sister’s not here.”

“Sister?”

The person I was talking to was the second girl to enter the dressing room, Kagoshima Maria. If the girl I was following was Maria’s older sister...then she must have been the other member of Canaria, the one that retired.



I was remembering correctly, her name was...Asuka.

“Do you still want to talk anyway?”

“Yeah.”

“...Come in.”, Maria invited me in.

Just as she had said, there was no one else in there besides her.

“Where did your sister go?”

“She left earlier. I think she’s still somewhere in the building though.”

“Is there any way you can contact her?”

“No, it looks like she changed both her phone number and her mail address...”

“I see..”

She may have been trying to hiding it, or maybe she really didn’t know.

“Do you mind if I ask you something now?”

“Huh? Sure.”

“What kind of relationship do you have with my sister?”

She wanted to know how I knew Asuka, but I wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Are you friends?”

“No, we’ve only met once or twice...”

I was uncertain on how much to reveal, but ultimately decided to talk about Relics to see how she would respond.

That said, it wasn't often I talked to anyone about Relics, so I didn't even know where to begin. I settled on starting from the lucky bangle incident from the other day.

I didn't reveal Toujou-san's name or school, but emphasized that Asuka appeared to have a Relic of some kind that she likely used to shatter the glass in the gym.

"I wasn't..."

"...told anything about it?"

"Yeah. It had been a long time since I saw my sister."

"Did she tell you anything?"

"Anything?"

"Yes. Anything at all." I asked, hoping to at least hear about what her goals were.

"...Just that she wanted to take back what as stolen from her."

"Huh?"

"Asuka told me she returned to take back what was stolen from her."

"Something stolen from her?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know what that was?"

"... I don't, but if I had to guess, it would be my current position."

"Huh?"

"Did you know my sister retired after hurting her throat?"

"Yeah."

“After that happened, I was the one who made my solo debut and was given the chance to perform a song by a famous composer. If it weren’t for that, the honor would have belonged to my sister.”

“That’s what she wants to take back? Is that even something she can do at this point?”

Kagoshima Maria shook her head.

“My sister can’t sing anymore. That’s why she came to steal something from me to take back her position.”

Maria’s eyes narrowed. and lowered her voice down to a whisper.

“...She came to steal my voice.”

All I could do was repeat her unexpected revelation.

“...Your voice?”

“That’s right. Asuka was trying to steal my voice.”

Maria, hugged herself, as if to suppress her own fear.

“Is something like that even...”

“It’s possible with a Relic, isn’t it?”

She was absolutely right.

Then, Maria stood up, and brought something over from the back of the room, a pair of wooden dolls.

They were creepy looking unpainted dolls with no faces and no clothes, so I could see the details on the wood. Perhaps as a result of the way they were made, the wood grain was clearly visible. The two dolls weren’t all that different, but one had a horizontal grain, and the other had a vertical one.

They didn't seem like the type of dolls a girl would normally have.

"What are these?"

"They're called Switching Dolls."

"Are these perhaps...Relics?"

"They are. Asuka brought them with her. I told you before that she left, but really what happened is that we had a fight and I kicked her out, and that's when she dropped these. She wanted to use these dolls steal my voice since she couldn't sing anymore after she hurt her throat."

This was an unexpected development, but it was one I couldn't afford to ignore.

"Could you tell me more?"

—

According to Maria, you could take parts off the Switching Dolls, and exchange them with each other. Once a body part was switched, any abilities associated with that body part were also switched.

What Asuka, who could no longer use her throat, wanted to do was to use the Switching Dolls to steal Maria's voice.

Apparently Maria was afraid of Asuka's suspicious behavior and tried to call security over using the phone in the room, but that turned into a fight. Asuka, thinking that security would be there soon, fled and left the dolls behind.

"Where did you learn about Relics?"

"I only learned about them earlier. To be honest, I didn't believe that something like this could even exist."



“Yeah, I can’t blame you there...”

Then, the door to the dressing room opened, and the mom from before entered the room.

“Mari.....*you!*” She turned to me and glared.

“Wait! I know him!”

“You...do?”

Maria quickly explained how she knew me and cleared up the misunderstanding with her mom. Her mom still seemed suspicious, but since she couldn’t find anyway to catch Maria on her lie, reluctantly accepted it.

Her suspicion was probably more because I wasn’t able to keep up with Maria’s acting skills as I contributed to her story here and there. Either way, it wasn’t a *total* lie now that we were actually acquainted.

“Is that so? Sorry about earlier.”

“No it’s quite alright. I’m sorry for not clearing up the misunderstanding before.”

“However, my daughter will be going on stage soon. May I ask you to take your leave?”

“Wait, we’re still not done yet.” Maria cut her mom off. “We’ll be done soon, so you go on ahead.”

“But...”

“Please.”

“Fine, but don’t be late.” Perhaps she was pushed back by her daughter’s insistence, but her mom agreed and reluctantly left the room.

“You helped me out me there. Thanks.”

After I said my bit, Maria began to explain what she wanted.

“I need you to do me a favor.”



There was no guarantee that Asuka wouldn’t show up again.

If she were going to make a move, it would probably be while I was up on stage.

I couldn’t just take the Switching Dolls up with me, but at the same time, leaving them in the dressing room was also dangerous. Mom did tell me that security here was lax.

The staff would probably have no problem letting Asuka into the room if they knew she was my sister, and there wasn’t any time left to warn them. I wasn’t sure how, but she did somehow get into my room before. She might have already had a key.

I considered leaving the doll with Mom, but there really was no chance of that either.

Mom considered the stage sacred. That was true even at the tiny concerts she ridiculed like this one.

That’s why she wouldn’t permit taking anything unnecessary up to the stage. That applied not only to me, but to her as well, despite the fact that she wouldn’t even be up there with me. That’s why I couldn’t ask her to hold on to the dolls.

Given the circumstances, he was the only one I could rely on.

His appearance today was a lifeline for me, who had no idea what to do with the Switching Dolls. The fact that he also knew about Relics was also very convenient.

There was a huge difference between trusting someone who knew the value of Relics and someone who thought they were some normal item.

Also, the fact that he knew Asuka and went through a bad experience because of her meant that I could even consider him an ally.

Not to say I wasn't uneasy, but he was the only person I could rely on right now.



For the time being, I decided to go back to my seat after getting the Switching Dolls from Maria.

I had ended up leaving Saki alone for quite a long time, so she might have gotten worried. Explaining what was going on to her was probably going to be a good idea.

But Maria's mom saw me first before I could get back to my seat.

"Is she still in the dressing room?"

"Yes, but I think she'll be out soon."

"Alright."

It must have almost been time for Maria to get on stage. Her mom looked restless and was about to go back to the dressing room when I stopped her.

"Umm, do you mind if I ask you something real quick?" I figured I could try asking since we were already here.

“What is it?”

“It’s about Asuka.”

“Are you an acquaintance of hers?”

“I wouldn’t call myself an acquaintance, exactly...”

“Do you know how she’s been doing lately?”

“Huh?” I frowned, not expecting to be asked the very thing I wanted to ask her.

“The detective told me she was staying with a friend. Could it be that you’re that friend?”

*Detective?* That sounded concerning. So she hired someone to look for her daughter? The first thing I had to do was clear up that misunderstanding.

“No, I’m not.”

“I see. Well, if you do see her, tell her not to do anything that could cause a scandal and hurt Maria.”

A scandal? What she was saying now worried me even more. *That’s* what she was worried about? She wasn’t concerned about her daughter’s safety?

I remembered what Maria told me earlier, that she hadn’t seen her sister in a while. Sure her mom was asking me stuff, but she probably wasn’t going to make any effort to search for herself.

“... I believe she’s still here somewhere. Instead of asking me how she’s doing, don’t you think you should ask her yourself?”

I was pretty sure Asuka was staying with that other boy from before, but I wasn’t going to say that.



“You think so? ... Now that you mention it, Maria said something about that too. I’ll look for her if I have time later.”

“If you have time?”

“Maria’s going to be on stage soon, you know. And after that I’ve got to get things ready for her next performance. This is an important pivotal point for her after all. ...Oh just how long does that girl want to make me wait!?”

Maria’s mom checked her watch in annoyance and ran to the dressing room.

I could feel just a little sympathy for Asuka.

It was like her mom completely lost interest in her after she hurt her throat and lost her voice. If that’s how her own parent was treating her, then her treatment from the public must have been even worse. A Canaria member that could not sing probably had no place in the world.

Maybe the reason Asuka was collecting Relics with that boy was to find a way to get back her voice. There was no other way to make the impossible, possible.

If that’s what her motivation was, then I could understand her wanting to steal her younger sister’s voice. But even if I did understand, that didn’t mean I was going to ignore what she was doing.

Saki had left her seat and was waiting for me in the lobby when I got back.

“Sorry. Did I make you wait?”

“I just got here.” She replied with the exact same line as earlier.

Except this time, she didn't look proud at all. In fact, she even looked upset. She must have been waiting for a long while.

"So? What were you doing?"

Saki's eyes were focused on the bag I was holding. Maria gave it to me to keep the Switching Dolls in. It clearly looked like a girl's item.

"You're not going to tell me you hit it off with her so well that she gave you a present, are you?"

"No, no I'm not."

Saki's scathing comment made me panic and show her what was in the bag. I then told her what the Switching Dolls did, and that Maria told me to prevent her sister Asuka from taking them back.

... I was told not to open the bag since she had some personal stuff in there, but it was a bit too late for that now. There was hardly anything else in there beside the Switching dolls, so I guess it was alright.

"And these are the Switching Dolls?"

"Yeah."

Saki picked up the dolls and began to inspect them.

"Strange..." Saki seemed to have noticed something and frowned.

"What is it?"

"Look at this." She pointed to the throats on the dolls.

At first I didn't see what was so weird about them, but upon closer inspection, I noticed that the wood grain was different.

The wood grain on its throat didn't match the rest of the doll.

... Once the body parts on the Switching Dolls were swapped, the associated abilities for that body part were also swapped.

“This is...”

“They’ve already been switched?”

No one else had touched the dolls in between the time Maria had them and when she gave them to me. When on earth could they have possibly been switched?

Then, announcement rang out through the hall.

It was time for Canaria to take the stage.



What was going on?

My throat felt weird.

At first I thought it was just because of the dry air.

Mom was saying something about that too, the air here was too dry. They never did get us that humidifier either.

That’s what I thought was causing this irritation in my throat.

I’d know if I tried to say something. If the problem was just dryness, I’d know if I tried to clear my throat.

But whenever I tried to use my voice, I felt a suffocating tightness; I couldn’t make a sound.

No, it wasn’t that I *couldn’t* make a sound, it was that I was too afraid to.

Because I had an idea of what this irritation could mean.

I was anxious.

Anxious, wondering if it was true. I couldn't even find the courage to test my voice.

It wasn't normal, was it? For my throat to feel strange at a time like this.

What if Asuka actually did steal the Switching Dolls?

No, what if I shouldn't have trusted that boy in the first place? What if he was working with Asuka this entire time, and came to me with a believable story in order to steal the dolls?

What if he and Asuka were laughing at me right now.

Once these thoughts started, they brought forth an avalanche of unpleasant feelings that only got worse.

Was I in any condition to use my voice right now?

There was no way I could sing feeling like this.



Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head.

*A girl, standing on the stage. Maria.*

*Her solo is over. The audience applauds.*

*Maria's mother comes on stage.*

*She looks proud, as if this was her own achievement.*

*Then.*

*The lights on the stage all go out at once.*

*This is not an act.*

*This is not a power outage.*

*The emergency lighting shines over the stage like a spotlight*

*And on the stage.*

*A heavy looking stage light has fallen, crushing the people below*

—But this wasn't real.

My Relic, Vision, could show me images of the future. I had a fake right eye, and Vision had been implanted where once my real one used to be.

It could show me the immediate future, but not all of it. I couldn't foresee the winning lottery number, the winner of a sports match, or even the weather. I couldn't see any future events at will either.

But there was one type of future that I never failed to see.

That was when I or someone I knew was in danger. At those times, it showed me the moment of their death.

When that happened, a pain would run through my head, much like static TV noise, followed by a cut-in of the future. That's when I would take action to try and prevent the tragedy I saw.

"Tokiya?"

"What was..."

"Did you see something?" Saki quickly realized that I had seen something with Vision and asked for details.

"A stage light is going to fall and crush Maria."



The question was if it were simple an accident, or if there were other elements at play here.

Just like that day when the glass ceiling shattered in the gym.

There was no time to think.

The stage light was going to fall after Maria's performance while the audience was still applauding.

I had to do something before then.

"When will it happen? Were there people?"

"Yeah. Right after Maria's performance."

I opened the door to the venue.

The announcement had been made, but Maria still hadn't taken the stage.

There was still time.

Was shouting out a warning to everyone my best bet here? Oh maybe making it to the stage first would be faster...

But Saki suddenly began running in the opposite direction of the stage.

I looked to where she was running, and realized what she was aiming for.

Without even a moment's hesitation she pulled the fire alarm.

The alarm began to ring throughout the venue.

The staff didn't know what had triggered it, but their reaction speed was a lot faster than I would have expected.

First, the people in the lobby were guided outside. Had this been a more commercial event, maybe they would have waited to ascertain the cause of the alarm, but safety came first since this event was run by the city.

The people in the lobby were bewildered, but began evacuating.

The people inside the hall were guided outside next. I thought Asuka was going to do something before the evacuation began, but no stage light had fallen on the now empty stage.

We had beaten her to the punch

Not to say that this evacuation wasn't a big deal, but it looked like things had ended peacefully.

Staff members guided Saki and me out of the building, and we found ourselves a part of the crowd that was starting to form outside the building. Some people were starting to go back home without waiting to see Canaria perform.

It really didn't look like the concert would be restarting after this. I felt a little bad for Maria.

But her safety was priority number one.

There was no guarantee that Asuka would just give up.

If she did try to take back the Switching Dolls here, then the people surrounding us would get wrapped up in the chaos.

I took Saki with me and moved to a less crowded area.

"This turned into quite the commotion."

“Nothing we could do about that. You made the right decision.”

Pulling the fire alarm took courage. Even more so when Vision was the reason she did it. Saki would have no way to justify herself if she were asked to explain her actions.

In fact, I wanted to praise her for not hesitating to pull the alarm. Fortunately, it seemed no one saw her, so there weren't any staff members coming to question her.

“Do you think she's given up?”

“Who knows.”

I looked around at the crowd, but Asuka was nowhere to be seen. But if her goal was to steal back the Switching Dolls, then she wasn't limited to coming at us from a direction we'd expect. There was a chance she would attack us in some other way instead.

I didn't know what kind of power her Relic had, but if she used some kind of direct attack to shatter the glass in the gym, then the very least we were safe here, with only the sky above us.

“I wonder what her goal is. Why is she trying to collect Relics?”

“That's what I'd like to know. Though I guess this time at least, it seems she's trying to get her voice back.”

“Her voice?”

“Yeah.”

I never did explain the details to Saki, so this time I told her everything.

Asuka and Maria: two sisters who formed an idol unit. Except Asuka hurt her throat, and retired after losing the ability to sing. Her younger sister, Maria, was still actively performing.

I didn't know the particulars, but somehow Asuka learned about relics and got her hands on the Switching Dolls. She planned to steal her sister's voice with the Relics, but was discovered by Maria, and subsequently had the dolls taken from her.

Now Asuka's goal was to take the Switching Dolls back, and use them to steal Maria's voice.

"But the throats on the dolls have already been swapped."

"Yeah."

According to the explanation Maria said she got from Asuka, swapping parts on the Switching Dolls let you exchange the abilities associated with those body parts with someone.

But the two dolls already had their throats swapped, meaning Asuka had already done that part. The fact that nothing actually changed meant that...

"...There has to be some other condition that needs to be met for it to work."

Maria herself probably wasn't told what the other requirements were.

Now that I thought about it, if the Switching Dolls worked just by switching parts, then there would have been no reason for Asuka to go out of her way to bring them here. Maybe she dropped them on purpose for Maria to pick up, or maybe there was some other reason.

But what were the requirements, exactly?

It had to be related to the future Vision showed me, where Maria was crushed by the stage light.

Was the requirement perhaps...to take the target's life?

"We really can't afford to take this one easy, can we?"

I took out my cellphone and called Tsukumodo Antique Shop where I worked. The phone rang a few times before Towako-san, who was watching the store alone today, picked up.

"Hey, it's me."

"Oh, Tokiya. What's up? You want to tell me you're not coming back today?"

"Stop making stupid jokes and listen to me please. There's a bit of a situation here." I sidestepped Towako-san's joke and put business first.

She urged me to continue, perhaps sensing something in my voice. I told her everything we knew about Asuka and the Switching Dolls.

"Do you know anything about this Relic?"

"I do. It's used to swap abilities."

"That makes things a lot easier. What I want to know is, what conditions are needed for the Relic to work? It's not just about swapping parts on the dolls right?"

"Yeah. Nothing's going to happen if you don't actually set a target. Do you have the dolls on you now?"

"I do."

"You see how there's a little compartment on the back?"

I turned Saki, who nodded.



“There should be something from the target’s body in that compartment.”

“Something from their body? You mean like blood or something?”

“That would work. It doesn’t need to be anything so morbid though. It could be a fingernail, or hair, or anything else, really. Once that part’s done, you can switch parts on the dolls and the ability exchange will work.”

In other words, the reason Asuka snuck into Maria’s room was to get her hands on something from her body. Maybe the reason she tried to do it at the concert was because she couldn’t go back home.

But why would she cause the stage light to fall and crush Maria? There was no need to go that far if all she needed was something from Maria’s body. Maybe it was because she had to resort to drastic measures since the Switching Dolls themselves were stolen.

“To return things back to normal, all you have to do is take out whatever’s in the compartment and move the doll parts back to where they belong.

“Got it. I’ll call you again later.”

“Be careful.”

I hung up and began to reconsider Asuka’s goals.

But before I could, Saki said there was something about Switching Dolls that she wanted to show me.

“Tokiya, look at this.”

What Saki wanted me to look at were the compartments on the Switching Dolls that Towako-san told me about.

“...What the hell is this?”

The compartments in both the dolls already hairs in them.

A single straight hair in the doll with the vertical grain.

A hair tied in a knot, probably as a mark, inside the doll with the horizontal grain.

These may have been Asuka and Maria's hairs.

Or they may have belonged to different people altogether.

But if they really were Asuka and Maria's then that would mean the ability swap really was already in effect.

But that didn't make any logical sense.

None of this made sense. Just what was going on here?



The fire alarm blared throughout the venue.

"Kyaa!", I shrieked in surprise.

My voice...worked.

I sighed in relief.

Thank goodness. I might have just been imagining the weird feeling in my throat. Maybe it was because of how nervous I was.

"What's happening? What's this about?" Mom was pressing a staff member for an answer. The staff member was verifying something on his phone, but it seemed he didn't know the details either.

Did someone hit the alarm on accident? Was there a malfunction? Or maybe something had actually happened...

“They’re saying people in the lobby are evacuating...guess the rest of the concert’s canceled?” The people who performed before me sounded like they were checking with their friends.

Mom reacted strongly to the word “canceled.”

“You stay here. Follow instructions from the staff if you go out to perform. I’m going to talk to whoever’s responsible for this.”

Mom left me with that, and walked away from the stage. She was going to check if the concert was going to continue...no, she was going to see what was going to happen to my next TV job.

A fire alarm was blaring, and she was leaving her daughter alone.

But this time, I was actually grateful for her cold heartedness.

This was my chance.

I ignored the staff members shouting to stop me, and ran out of the lobby. It was a relief to know my voice still worked, but that didn’t mean I was any happier about leaving the Switching Dolls with someone else.

I didn’t really care that much about the stage this time.

Leaving this one stage behind was preferable to not being able to sing at all.

If I didn’t get the Switching Dolls back soon...



We saw Maria running out of the venue in our direction. The terrible look in her eyes told me her concert really must have been canceled.

“The Switching Dolls!”, was the first thing out of her mouth the moment she got to us.

“The dolls are fine. I have them right here.”

“...Thank goodness.” The look on her face completely changed. She let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Did something happen?”

Going by the look on her face a moment ago, it seemed something terrible had occurred.

“No, nothing happened. I was just uneasy.”

“Oh, alright then. There was something I wanted I wanted to ask you by the way. You told me that swapping parts on the Switching Dolls let you swap abilities with other people, right?”

“Yeah. That’s what I was told.”

“Then this is pretty bad. The dolls have already had their throats swapped.”

“What?”

“The wood grain on the throats don’t match everything else.”

“...You looked inside my bag?”

“Yes. I’m not proud of it, but thanks to that we were able to notice that the throats on the dolls had already been swapped. Did you notice anything weird happen to you?”

“Come to think of it, just earlier, my throat...” Maria touched her throat and cleared it.

“I knew it. Asuka must have already finished the ability exchange. It might just take some time to take effect. If the effect isn’t reversed soon...”

“Ah, but maybe I was just imagining things. The air in the venue was pretty dry after all.”

“No way. It’s definitely a sign that the ability exchange is active. Let’s get this back to normal.”

“Wait!” Maria yelled sharply to stop me just as I was about to pull out the throat section from the doll.





“What’s wrong? Asuka might steal your voice like this, you know.”

“Well...”

“You’re fine with not singing ever again?”

“Of course I’m not! It’s just...is alright to mess with them? When I think about how much Asuka wanted the dolls...”

“No need to worry about that. I know all about how this Relic works.”

“What?”

“The way it works is that you put something from the target’s bodies in the compartment in the back, and then swap parts on the dolls to exchange abilities.”

“Is...that how it works?”

“The doll with the vertical grain had a hair tied into a knot in it, and the one with the horizontal grain had a straight hair.”

“Huh?”

“What is it?”

“Could you say that one more time?”

“I said the one with the vertical grain had a hair tied into a knot, and horizontal gain one had a straight hair in it.”

“Let me see them for a second.”

“I think we should move the throats back to where they belong before anything else.”

“Just let me see them already!”

“I’ll show you later. Lets get this back to normal first.”

“I’ll do that myself, so please give me the dolls.”

“There’s no time to los...”

“I said I’d do it myself, didn’t I!? Give them to me!” Maria shouted, and tried to snatch the Switching Dolls from me.

But I dodged, and didn’t let her have them.

She stumbled and glared at me.

“I think I’ve got a good idea of what happened now.”

Maria’s attitude showed me what I needed to know.

Her behavior told the whole story.

That what she said to me before was a lie.

The story was that Asuka tried to use the Switching Dolls to steal Maria’s voice, but Maria somehow drove her away, and obtained the dolls after her sister dropped them.

But was nothing more than Maria’s side of the story. A side of the story that contradicted reality.

The Switching Dolls already had someone’s hair in their compartments, and their throats had already been swapped. In other words, the ability exchange was already complete.

But despite that, Maria was still talking normally.

The part about the effect taking time to manifest was also a lie. Nobody ever told me that.

And as for the hairs inside the doll. The truth was that the doll with the vertical grain was the one with the straight hair. The horizontal one was the one with the knotted hair.

I had lied.

So that anyone who already knew about the hairs in the dolls would find it strange.

So that anyone who knew their significance would panic.

The security guard told me earlier.

While Maria was out resting her injured throat, Asuka, who had been performing solo during that time hurt *her* throat and retired. Almost as if they switched places, Maria recovered and then went on to make her solo debut.

What did that indicate?

That's right. Asuka wasn't the one stealing voices.

"You were the one who stole Asuka's voice, weren't you?"

Maria glared at me.

This wasn't a look of a girl who was afraid of losing her voice.

Her eyes told the whole story.

That what I pointed out was correct.

"So what if I did? It's Asuka's fault anyway. She was the one who betrayed me! She revealed that my throat wasn't doing well to

everyone, and tried to make a solo debut on her own! She was the one who tried to make it so that I couldn't sing! That's why I..."

"I don't know what your circumstances are, but there's no excuse for using a Relic to steal someone's voice."

"Shut up! What would you know!?!"

Maria lunged at me and tried to snatch the Switching Dolls.

I stepped out of the way and called her out.

"You're not going to return it yourself are you?"

"Give it back!"

"You're the one who's going to give it back."

I took the throat off the first doll.

"...Stop it"

Time to get things back to normal. I put the doll throats back where they belonged—



That day.

That day, when I first heard the conversation about Asuka making her solo debut.

I ran outside of the record company office, and wandered around town.

I didn't know where I ended up going.

I was in a place I didn't recognize before I knew it.

People passing by began to notice me.

“That girl over there...she’s the one in Canaria, right? Wasn’t she on TV?”

“Huh? Where? Ah, you’re right. But it looks like that’s the younger one. I like the older one more.”

“Me too. The older one really is...”

I ran into an alley to escape the thoughtless conversations around me.

Soon I found myself before a small, old looking shop.

I ran inside to get away from the conversations from before which still rang in my ears.

Just like the outside of the shop, the inside felt old and narrow. Various things like dolls, half broken clocks, and different pieces of ceramic tableware dotted the shelves. They must have been lovelier and more extravagant long ago. My presence in the store felt painfully ironic.

“Welcome.”

A woman called out to me from behind the counter. She stood out in the dim environment, almost like there was a spotlight shining on her. At the same time, the atmosphere around her felt strange, as if there was a mist surrounding her.

“What are you looking for?”

What *was* I looking for?

If I had to choose, I’d have loved to purchase something like my sister’s singing voice.

“Is that your wish?”

“...Huh?”

I didn't say anything, but the way she asked made it sound like she heard the voice in my heart.

“If so, please take a look at these.”

She pointed to two rough, and creepy looking dolls on the shelf. They were unclothed, unpainted, and sported a very obvious wooden texture.

As far as unique characteristics went, the only thing they had were the detachable parts and the conspicuous wood grain. The only difference between the two dolls was that one had a vertical grain and the other had a horizontal one.

I took them into my hands.

...and after putting just a little strength into my grip, one of the arms detached and fell to the floor.

“Ah.”

“Don't worry. It's built like that so you can exchange parts between the dolls.”

The shop lady picked up the arm that had fallen on the floor, and then pulled the arm off the second doll. Then she swapped the arms between the two. They fit perfectly, almost as if that's how they were supposed to be from the beginning.

There was only one thing that felt off, the mismatched wood grain.

“There's nothing in them so nothing will change.”

The shop lady turned one of the dolls around and showed me a small compartment in the back. It looked like the compartment was there to hold something.

“If you put something from your body and something from your target’s body into these compartments and swap the body parts on the dolls, the abilities associated with those parts will be swapped as well.”

I was startled. My heart leaped.

I had my doubts something like that was even possible, but also had the same level of hope.

The doubt was understandable. There was no way I could just believe this stuff was true.

But why was I feeling hopeful?”

“These are Relics known as Switching Dolls”

“Relics?”

“Note that by ‘Relics’ I don’t mean antiques or works of art. ‘Relics’ are tools with special capabilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owner’s grudge or natural spiritual powers.

“You’ve probably heard of them before: things like a stone that brings bad luck, or a cursed voodoo doll or a three sided mirror that shows how you are going to die.”

I had in fact heard of similar things before.

But those were pure superstition. It wasn’t like they actually existed.

But before I knew it I had the dolls in my hands.

And one month after I obtained the dolls.

After finishing her solo debut, standing there on the stage was— me, Kagoshima Maria.



You might call it divine justice.

My older sister Asuka hurt her throat, lost her voice, and retired.

I had been recuperating at my mom's instruction, and took my sister's place in the solo debut.

That's what I seized.

The song that my sister was supposed to sing.

The position that she was supposed to have.

And also...

The lovely voice that she used to have

—I watched him take the throats off the Switching Dolls.

I begging him to stop, but he didn't seem to care.

And the moment the switch was complete, I lost...

... my voice

The lovely singing voice that I had stolen from Asuka.

At first I did want to return it.

My goal was to have Asuka's voice and sing together for longer.

I had absolutely no plans to hog the limelight for myself like Asuka did.

I wanted to return her voice once I got back my original position back.

...Until Asuka destroyed my voice that had been swapped with her.

Asuka, lost her voice.

She lost *my* voice.

That's why things couldn't go back to normal.

I knew that what I did was wrong.

But Asuka was also at fault.

She was the one who lost my voice.

Because the solo performances were too much of a burden.

She was the one who made that choice herself.

If Asuka hadn't gone solo and lost my voice, everything would have gone back to normal.

Despite that.

He was saying I was the only one at fault.

I couldn't accept that.

I wasn't the only one wrong.

Why couldn't he understand?

*Stop. I'm begging you.*

*Don't steal my voice.*

*Don't steal my song from me.*

But my prayers did not reach him.

“Stop.”

Even if I begged him out loud, it did not reach him.

And so, the throats on the Switching Dolls were swapped, and things returned to how they used to be—

“STOOOOOOOOOPPP!!!!” My scream rang out.



“What...is going on?”

I could not immediately process what was happening.

The Switching Dolls worked by taking something from your target’s body, putting it into the compartments, and switching parts on the dolls to swap abilities.

The exchange was supposed to be undone when the parts were switched back. That’s what Towako-san told me.

But the girl who used the Switching Dolls to steal her sister’s voice, had screamed.

It wasn’t that she became unable to use her voice.

It wasn’t that her voice was ruined.

Maria screamed, using the very same voice she used to perform as Canaria.

“.....”

Maria herself seemed just as confused as any of us.

Did this mean that an ability couldn’t be returned once it was exchanged? No, that couldn’t be it. Towako-san told me it was good enough to empty the compartment and swap the parts back.

In which case, how was this possible?

Why could Maria still use her original voice even after the exchange was undone?

It seemed there was still something I still didn't know.

The Switching Dolls.

In order to use them, you had to place something from the target's body into the compartment in the back, and then switch the doll's body parts around. Once that was done, the abilities associated with those parts would be switched with each other.

Maria put her and Asuka's hair in the dolls, and swapped the throats.

That's how she was able to obtain Asuka's sublime singing ability.

In exchange, Asuka hurt the already injured throat she got from Maria, and lost her voice.

Under normal circumstances, this was a fate that was originally supposed to befall Maria.

But was that really true?

The conversation I had with the security guard came back to me

*"Yep. Seemed she hurt her throat and lost her voice. The younger sister actually had throat problems first, and was resting while the older one was doing solo performances. The older sister didn't take any breaks from TV during that time, so I guess she ended up pushing herself too far."*

Then, the conversation with Maria.

*“It’s Asuka’s fault anyway. She was the one who betrayed me! She revealed that my throat wasn’t doing well to everyone, and tried to make a solo debut on her own! She was the one who tried to make it so that I couldn’t sing! That’s why I...”*

Weren’t they saying different things?

I was under the impression that Maria simply stole Asuka’s voice.

Maria’s hurt her throat, so she switched voices with Asuka. The condition of Asuka’s throat then worsened, and she became unable to sing.

—She had lost her voice.

But what if Maria had simply recovered her voice by resting her damaged throat?

Conversely, what if Asuka had been putting too much pressure on herself, which worsened the condition of her throat and led to her losing her voice?

But the reality of it was that Maria did use the Switching dolls to exchange abilities.

In which case, what exactly did they exchange?

What kind of ability—

“...That’s it. I got it.”

Saki turned to me when she heard me mutter.

“Did you figure something out?”

“Saki, give me one of your hairs.” I asked.

I took the hair she pulled out for me and put it into one of the Switching Dolls. Then I took one of my own hairs and put it in the other doll.

After that, I swapped the throats on the dolls.

With that, the ability exchange was complete.

And then—

“Saki.” I heard my own voice.

My regular, unchanged voice.

“Hm? ...What’s going on?” The voice that came out of Saki’s mouth was indeed her own.

Maria also looked confused when she heard Saki’s voice.

This didn’t necessarily mean that the Relic was broken, or that it had been used incorrectly.

The actions I had just performed were supposed to be all that was necessary for an ability exchange.

More than likely things would be clear if I tried to sing.

In other words, that was how the Relic worked.

A voice was not an ability—

My entire premise had been wrong.

The ability switching dolls. A girl who lost her voice, couple with a girl who had her position stolen.

This setup led me to believe that what they had exchanged were their *voices*.

But that was wrong.

Voices were not an ability. They were a physical effect produced by vocal chords.

Things that were not abilities, for example, body parts like arms and eyes, could not physically be exchanged with the Switching Dolls.

In other words, the Switching Dolls did not swap their voices.

It exchanged the ability associated with the throat—their singing ability.

“I...didn’t steal Asuka’s voice?” Mara whispered, dumbfounded.

She was the one who had believed it more than anyone else.

There was no doubt about that, because stealing Asuka’s voice was her plan all along.

“Tokiya, do you think this Asuka girl is trying to steal the Relic without knowing the truth?”

“That question should be directed to someone else.” I turned Maria.

“I want to confirm one more time. What did Asuka tell you she came here to do?”

“... She said she came to take back what was stolen from her.”

“She said she was going to take it back, right? Is there anything else you stole from her?”

“There isn’t. I didn’t want anything else from her.”



That made things simple then.

It would be hard to tell Asuka, who was trying to get her voice back without knowing anything, that she could not restore her voice with the Switching Dolls. This case would be over if we could make her understand that.

However, was that really true?

Did she really operating without knowing—while misunderstanding the Relics power?

Moreover, what did the scene that Vision showed me indicate?

“Do you think she didn’t know?”

“Huh?”

“Do you think Asuka was unaware of what the Switching Doll were capable of? Or was there something else that she wished for?”

“That’s...”

Then, the security guard who had questioned me earlier came running to us.

“Ah, so this is where you were. Thank goodness. I was thinking you were still inside.”

It seemed he was confirming that all the concert goers and participants had evacuated. We hadn’t noticed at all since we were in a separate place from everyone else.

“Oh? Where’s your mother?” The security guard asked Maria.

“Huh? She said she was going to talk to the person in charge after the fire alarm went off...”

“Strange. She wasn’t outside either. Maybe she’s still looking for you...?”

The security guard said those ominous words and turned his gaze towards the venue.

“Your sister was looking for your mother, but...”

“Asuka was?” Maria frowned.

I also had the same doubts. Why was Asuka concerned about her mother’s whereabouts? Given the current situation, Maria was the one Asuka was supposed to be looking for, so what business did she have with her mom? Was she simply worried, or did she think that Maria was with her mom...?

“...There was something.” Maria muttered, sounding like she had just remembered.

“There was what?”

“There was one more thing that I stole from Asuka.”

Before I could ask what it was, Maria muttered.

“... Mom.”



I understood. It was finally clear to me.

We only had one goal when we were kids.

There was only one thing we wished for.

It wasn’t to become performers and sing in front of people.

It wasn’t to become better at singing than anyone else.

The only thing we wanted...

...Was for Mom to praise us.

The hard work we put into making it in the entertainment industry, the desperate effort we put into singing. All of it was for that purpose.

Mom did not praise us even when we did our best in school or helped with dinner.

She only praised us when we sang well, and became famous.

That's why Asuka was treasured more than me, who couldn't sing as well as she did.

That's why I was now treasured more than Asuka, who couldn't sing anymore.

You might think she was a cruel mother.

You might think we were wrong to love her.

But even still, she was our mom.

We wanted her to love us.

Everyone had those kinds of feelings

Those were natural feelings for me, and also for Asuka.

That's why, Asuka's goal was not my voice, then I had to assume what she wanted to take back was Mom.

She wanted to take back Mom, who no longer saw anyone except me.

Mom wasn't here.

Neither was Asuka.

There was no doubt the two of them were together right now.

I had to go to where they were.



Maria began running towards the venue.

“Wait!”

But Maria didn’t listen to me trying to stop her, and kept running.

“It’s dangerous! Come back!”

The scene I saw with Vision came back to me.

I originally saw Maria standing on stage after her solo ended, but it was possible that it could come true if she returned to the hall.

We had to stop her from going there. Saki and I followed after her.

“Tokiya, why did she mention her mother?”

“She was probably thinking about how her mom’s love moved from Asuka to just her.”

In my mind, I could see their mom’s attitude from the time I talked to her about Asuka.

Her excessive love for Maria.

The lack of love towards Asuka.

It hadn’t always been like that. Long ago—when Asuka could still sing.

Asuka’s mother loved where while she could still sing.

And the moment she lost her voice, it was lost.

Her mother's love, and even her interest.

That's why I could understand Asuka's wish.

To use the Switching Dolls to take back her voice, to take back her song, and to take back her mother's love.

She came back to take her voice back and show her mother that she could sing.

But how did that explain the destruction I saw with Vision—?

"Could I ask you to wait a moment?"

"!"

Saki and I had already shaken off the security guard were running to the concert hall when someone called out to stop us.

That voice, no, the owner of that voice, kept us from reaching the building. Saki couldn't stop fast enough and crashed into me from behind.

Standing in the path was the young man that was with Asuka on that day in the gym. And behind him, almost as if she were trying to hide, was Asuka.

"You..."

"I heard from Asuka. Seems there were some people around here sticking their noses in our business."

Just like he had put Asuka behind him, I protected Saki behind me.

The boy, who looked to be the same age, or perhaps a little younger than me, gave off the impression of being timid and weak, but the alarm bells inside me were telling me he was dangerous.

“Could you not get in Asuka’s way?”

“Get in her way? Are you talking about using the Switching Dolls to get her voice back? If you are, then there’s no point.”

“No point? What do you mean by that?”

I turned my sight to Asuka.

“There’s something I want you to hear.”

I tried to choose my words carefully at first, but then quickly realized it was better to simply present her with the harsh truth.

“You can’t back your voice with the Switching Dolls.”

Asuka did not react to what I said. She quietly listened.

“The Switching Dolls are used to swap abilities, but a voice is not an ability. What Maria stole from you wasn’t your voice. That’s why you can’t swap voices with her. You won’t be able to sing ever again.”

I hit her with the cruel truth.

“Maria told me, you know. That you came to take back what was stolen from you. Was it your voice? Your mother’s affection...or perhaps, both? If you were trying to take back your mother’s affection with singing, then I suggest you give up.”

Her plan was to use the Switching Dolls to take back her voice, to take back her song, and to take back her mother’s affection.

But she would not be able to do that.

She would not be able to take back her voice with the Switching Dolls.

Asuka would never sing again, and would not be able to win back her mother’s love.

Despite that, she still believed.

That's what she was doing all these things.

But I had no choice but to reject that.

"I'll say it one more time. You cannot recover your voice with the Switching Dolls."

"But", I continued. "You maybe be able to take back your mother's love, even if you don't use the Switching Dolls to get your voice back. There has to be some way to do it. That's why I'd like you to stop what you've been..."

"Hahaha." The boy's laughing interrupted my lecturing. "I see. That's what you were thinking when you came here."

The boy laughed for a good time, then turned to Asuka and shrugged.

"There's no time left. You go on ahead. The fact that these two are here probably means your sister's inside the hall."

Asuka nodded, and ran towards the building.

"Hey, wait!"

"Your words won't stop her. Especially when you were so wrong."

"What?"

"Asuka knew she couldn't take back her voice with the Switching Dolls. They're used to swap abilities and can't do anything else besides that."

"Why...?"

There was no point in asking why she knew that. It was obviously because they were working together.



“Then why did she go after the Switching Dolls?”

“The goal wasn’t really to steal the Switching Dolls, though we did plan on taking them either way.”

Their goal wasn’t the Switching Dolls?”

Then why did she show herself in front of Maria?”

Suddenly the scene I saw with Vision resurfaced in the back of my head.

The stage light falling; Maria crushed underneath.

“Was it to get revenge on Maria?” Saki, who knew what I had seen with Vision, took a guess.

The boy smiled meaningfully.

... It seemed the reason wasn’t revenge. That smile was practically him denying it.

“If she knew that she couldn’t get her voice back with the Switching Dolls, then she must have already known that she didn’t lose her voice because of them either. Therefore Asuka has no reason to get revenge against Maria.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. It *was* actually Maria’s fault that Asuka lost her voice.”

“Huh?”

“Asuka lost the ability to sing like she used to when Maria stole her singing ability. She then pushed herself too far, ruined her throat, and lost her voice. If you were to ask me who’s fault it was, I’d say it was Maria’s. If you were to ask what cause it though, I’d say it was the Relic.”

So that's what it was.

Asuka really did resent Maria.

"That said, what Asuka is after isn't revenge. She doesn't actually care all that much about Maria. She also knows her voice won't come back, and doesn't really want her mother's love anymore."

So she didn't come here thinking she could get her voice back with the Switching Dolls.

She didn't come here thinking she could get back her singing and get her mother's love back.

And it wasn't revenge against Maria who was the cause of her losing her voice in the first place.

Then what was Asuka's goal?

"She's already begun walking a new path."

Even if she didn't hold a grudge against Maria, there was no denying that somebody got hurt in the scene Vision showed me.

And then—

"What did she come to take back, then?"

"What Asuka is trying to take back is..."

The boy smiled a little, and told us the truth.

"The path she was finally able to obtain for herself."



I found Mom and Asuka in front of the stage when I ran into the venue.

Asuka was holding her cellphone in her hand. She was definitely having a conversation about something.

Mom's face was pale.

She must have something said to her.

She must have something done to her.

Asuka must have said something to Mom, who knew nothing at all about Relics.

She turned her phone towards Mom.

Mom let out a shriek and flung the phone.

The phone bounced until it fell at my feet, just as I reached the stage.

I froze when I saw the words on the display.

I had misunderstood.

Asuka wasn't trying to get back Mom's love at all.

Maybe that would have been true if this were Asuka from long ago.

Back when she and I had nothing but our songs.

But things were different now.

Asuka had already found a new path.

To the point that she didn't feel any longing for the days when she could still sing.

To the point that she had no interest in Mom.

And to the point that she loathed Mom because she used a detective to intrude on her life.

*(I won't forgive anyone who gets in the way. Even you.)*

Her final words flashed across the screen.



Saki and I ran into the venue and saw—

A girl, standing alone on the stage. Maria—but she isn't singing.

There is no audience.

Maria's mother, desperately trying to run from the stage—but she looks frantic

Praying that I make it, I begin to run to the stage.

I hear Saki call my name from far behind me.

The power in the venue goes out.

This is not an act.

This is not a power outage.

The emergency lighting shines over the stage like a spotlight

And in that spotlight...

I'm running.

I throw myself towards the stage.

Maria and her mother. I reach out and try to push them out of the way—

*Crack*, an impact runs through my head.

For a moment, it feels like the world has been dyed red.

Asuka is looking at me.

As if to tell me not to interfere.

I don't know what she did, it but sounds like something heavy has fallen.

My head is spinning.

The world is spinning.

My body lurches violently

My hand slips away from where Maria and her mother are.

I collapse in a mess on the stage.

But I can clearly see the scene in front of me.

Almost as if it were pulled right out of the future Vision showed me...

A heavy looking stage light has fallen, crushing the Maria and her mother underneath.



I couldn't move my arms.

I couldn't move my legs.

I couldn't see with my eyes.

That's why I couldn't tell where I was.

I was probably in the hospital, hear was that unique sterile odor and the smell of medicine.

I tried to say something and call someone.

...Thank goodness. My voice worked. I didn't lose my voice.

Hearing my voice also meant my ears were fine.

Knowing this, I felt calm return to my heart.

Even in this uneasy set of circumstances.

I really was my mother's daughter, wasn't I, thinking like this.

"Seems you're awake." Said an unfamiliar voice from next to me.

It was a boy's voice, but not the one I met in the dressing room.

This one was a little higher, and somehow more sarcastic.

"I'm Asuka's friend. I'll be interpreting for her since you can't see."

I could tell from their presence.

He and Asuka were the only two people here.

I heard the sound of a cellphone being used. Asuka was probably showing it to him.

"I learned recently that you stole my singing ability...I was the one who told her. Ah, when I say *I*, those are my words. I'm speaking about myself."

He added his own words in a mocking tone. This could hardly be called interpretation.

But I silently continued to listen.

"I have no intention of taking back the ability you stole from me. I don't need it now that I can't use my voice anymore."

I heard Asuka place something next to my pillow. It was probably the pair Switching Dolls I had used to exchange singing abilities with her.

“Feel free to use them if you ever want to sing again...that’s all she wanted to say. Good for you. You have her permission now.”

Asuka must have decided to leave the room, because I could hear her footsteps getting farther away.

Then, just before he also left, the boy whispered in my ear.

“You’re quite lucky, you know. You got a hold of Asuka’s sublime, one in a million singing talent so easily.

—That’s why you have only yourself to blame for losing everything else in exchange.”

He left it at that and followed Asuka out of the room.

“Huh?”

There was no chance for me to ask him anything.

Losing something in exchange?

What could he be talking about? What had I lost?

I became afraid, and tried to sing.

My voice came out.

I could still sing.

Didn’t that mean everything was fine?

Even if I couldn’t move my arms.

Even if I couldn’t move my legs.

Even if I couldn’t use my eyes.

If the caged Canaria could sing, then that was good enough.

Hey, that's right, isn't it, Mom?



I found myself in the infirmary when I came to.

I had no external injuries. It seemed I had gotten a bad concussion and lost consciousness, but there not a single drop of blood stained the bandage around my head

What I got I got in exchange for these injuries...were words of appreciation.

I wasn't able to save anyone in the end.

The accident turned into big news in the newspapers the next day.

As just an unfortunate accident.

Nobody talked about the truth.

Relics weren't mentioned, of course, but neither was the discord between that mother and her daughter.

The one who knew was me.

I knew.

But despite that, I wasn't able to do anything.

What could I have done to stop...no, was this incident even one that could have been prevented?

Would it have happened if Maria hadn't used the Switching Dolls to steal Asuka's voice?

Would it have happened if Asuka's mother had showered her in love after she lost her voice?



Would it have happened if the two never came into contact with Relics?

Thinking about it would get me nowhere.

I knew that.

But the truth remained that I wasn't able to do anything.

Asuka and that boy were apparently nowhere in sight when concert staff came running.

The Switching Dolls that I had with me were also gone. Perhaps they were the ones who took them.

It seemed Saki, who had been my side after I lost consciousness, had no idea where they had gone either.

However.

I had a feeling that we'd see those two again.

And in the worst possible way.

## ***Chapter 2: Sound***

Some part of me believed these uneventful days would last forever.

*I hope something interesting happens today.*

*I hope today's going to be different from yesterday.*

*Will tomorrow be another repeat of today?*

*Ah, my normal life is so boring.*

...Those were the carefree things I used to say.

Some part of me believed these uneventful days would last forever.

*Believed.*

But our everyday lives are built atop a precarious balance.

If I could go back, I would, every single time.

I hope today is going to be the same as yesterday.

I hope tomorrow will be a repeat of today.

Ah, my normal life was happiness.

Things were so happy yesterday....



I loved singing when I was a little girl.

My mom aspired to be a singer at one point and my sister and I were lucky enough to get special lessons from her.

Even as kids, we sang in front of huge crowds and got lots of applause.

I didn't really know how amazing that was, because what made *me* happy was seeing Mom overjoyed.

I loved when she patted our heads after our performances.

We started showing up on TV and in magazines.

And before we knew it, my sister and I were called Canaria.

But I knew the truth.

That I was better at singing than my little sister.

That people had a better opinion of me than my little sister.

And more than anything, that Mom acknowledged me more.

When the topic of my solo performances came up, she told me to do my best.

That's why I decided to do it.

The number of solo opportunities increased dramatically for me.

And it was just at that time that I stopped singing like I wanted to.

The songwriter who chose me said he didn't want me to do his solo anymore.

Mom pushed me to practice even more than usual.

I continued to sing.

There were times my throat hurt.

But still, I continued to sing.

My voice became a little raspy.

But still, I continued to sing.

I stopped hitting the high notes.

But still, I continued to sing.

The pain in my throat worsened.

But still, I continued to sing.

I began to cough up blood.

But still, I continued to sing.

I became mute.

But still, I continued to sing.

Though I lost my voice, I continued to sing.

But not something that could be called a song anymore.

I could no longer continue.

And in my place, my little sister sang.

She settle right where I used to be, with a voice that resembled mine and a similar level of talent.

Almost like I didn't exist anymore.

Almost like no one needed me anymore.

Mom took a lesson from my failure, and treated my little sister dearly.

The amount of love increased for her until there was nothing at all left for me.

After I lost my voice, I lost where I belonged.

There was no place for me in Canaria after I lost my song.

It was the day before my little sister's concert.

It was also my birthday.

We were late in getting to the hotel due to a traffic delay. Mom was worried about my sister's condition and was focused entirely on her.

It was almost like my birthday didn't exist at all.

Maybe she forgot, or maybe she never remembered in the first place—the clock ticked on without anyone even hinting at it.

Until it struck twelve.

I ran out from the hotel the moment my birthday ended.

Maybe it was childish indignation.

Maybe I was just lonely.

Or maybe I wanted someone to find me.

I ran around town without a destination in mind.

There were some people who asked me what was wrong.

But they seemed scary, so I ran away from them too.

Even though I was running terrified, I went deeper into town.

Until I found myself in front of small, cozy little shop.

I didn't quite know where I was, since I was so focused on running.

But scared as I was, I wasn't the least bit afraid for some reason when I dashed into the shop.

It was a strange little place.

There were things I had never seen before lined up on the shelves, but they didn't scare me... because there were musical instruments there too.

My eyes were drawn to the instruments that sat alongside old paintings and expensive looking tableware. I saw violins, flutes, and all sorts other instruments.

I couldn't turn my eyes away.

"Welcome."

I heard a voice and turned around.

The shopkeeper that appeared wasn't scary either. She felt mysterious, but not scary... I don't really remember her face anymore, but get the feeling she was very beautiful too.

"Are you interested in musical instruments?" The beautiful shopkeeper asked, but I didn't answer.

Because I had already lost my voice.

"....."

She crouched to meet me at eye level, and stared at my face.

"I see. So you can't speak."

I wondered how she knew.

Maybe she guessed because I wasn't saying anything.

But had a feeling it was something different.

Somehow I got the feeling she knew everything.

I took out my cellphone from my pocket. I couldn't speak, but there were still ways for me to hold a conversation. I always used my cellphone to communicate and used it to type if I needed to.

That's when I noticed that a message had come from Mom.

It was from just earlier, and read "Where are you? Come back quickly."

Mom had noticed that I wasn't there. She was actually worried about me. The message didn't say anything about my birthday, but the horrible feelings I had when I ran out of the hotel were all gone now.

I tried to reply, but this shop was out of signal range.

The pretty shopkeeper told me to wait, and a moment later I had 3 bars. I thought it was strange, but didn't think much about it before replying to Mom's message.

"I don't know where I am. Come pick me up."

Mom replied a little later. She told me to ask a police officer or taxi driver to take me back to the hotel.

She wasn't going to come for me herself.

"Why?", I asked.

Mom replied saying didn't want to leave my little sister alone.

I thought so.

She was more worried about my little sister at the hotel than her daughter who was in some unknown location.

It was true; Mom was worried about me.

But only after my sister.

I turned off my phone.

I wasn't sad.

I wasn't crying either.

I guess I was just bitter.

I didn't know who I was bitter against.

Was it Mom? My littler sister? Or did I just resent myself?

I was just bitter.

I wanted to break something

I wanted to break everything. Break everything, just like my voice.

"Is that your wish?" The woman asked me.

I quickly realized she was asking about the feelings in my heart.

She understood me.

My wish had been to sing again one day.

Until just a moment ago.

That had been my dream this entire time—ever since I lost my voice.

But that dream had been overwritten.

It was written over for me.

"I see." The woman said, and handed me an instrument.

It was unlike anything I had seen before. The closest thing I could compare it to was a flute, just big enough for me to hold in my small hands. Parts of it looked rough, and it didn't look nice at all.

I thought it was a perfect for me.



“Its sound will grant your wishes”, the shopkeeper had told me then.

And it was true, this flute—*Otodama*— had granted my wishes.

It allowed me to meet *him*.

And allowed me to find a new path after I lost my voice.

However—

I could only think that way now.

What if on that day, I hadn’t seen the message Mom sent me?

What if she had come to pick me up?

I might have gotten a different Relic instead.

I might not have had to hurt her.

— —

“Looks like my theory was correct. Don’t you agree, Asuka?”

Shun’s question brought me back to reality.

We were in a room in his apartment.

Displayed on his computer screen was an article about the falling stage light at the concert the other day. It was about whether the incident would become a problem for the building managers.

“[What theory?]” I typed into the open text editor.

“Weren’t you paying attention?” Shun lightly shrugged and started from the beginning again. “I was talking about those two.”

That brought me back to the conversation we had about them three weeks ago.

It was the day after that incident in the high school gym, and Shun was concerned about the boy and girl we met there, even more than the Relics we obtained that summoned luck.

“Look at this.”

Shun put the two *Fortune* bangles on the table. Then he undid the chain wrapped around his wrist, and used it to hold the attached triangular jewel up high.

Dowsing, it was a Relic that showed a response if there was a certain something nearby. That certain something, being of course, Relics.

We were using it to search for a specific one.

Dowsing span and drew a gentle circle in the air, proving that that the bangles were relics.

“[What about it?]”

“The reaction is different from when we obtained this last week.”

Shun pointed to my *Otodama*, and told me to put it on the table. When I did, Dowsing began to spin in an even bigger arc.



Dowsing was a Relic that reacted more depending on the number of Relics present; Shun had already told me that.

“Its reaction last week was even bigger than this.”

Back then we also had the two *Fortune* bangles along with our own relics. But he was saying Dowsing wasn’t reacting as much now compared to then.

Meaning—

“[There were other Relics?]”

“That’s right.”

Shun put Dowsing away and stood up from his chair.

“I was careless. I didn’t think there would be so many.”

“[Shun, does this mean you think those two have Relics?]”

“You remember when you shattered the glass in the gym right?”

“[Yes.]”

“The only ones who escaped unharmed were us, the sisters with the *Fortune* bangles, and those two, who just happened to be there. We were fine because we had a Relic, so it’s not a stretch to assume they had one too, right?”

And then there was yesterday.

I went to the concert for my own reasons, and ended up running into those two by complete accident. Shun came with me out of curiosity, or maybe a sense of protectiveness, but in the end I was glad he did.

That was exactly why.

“Looks like my theory was correct. Don’t you agree, Asuka?”

He asked me that question.

“They evaded all the shattered glass in the gym and also pulled the fire alarm before the stage light fell. You can’t help but think they have a Relic, right?”

Shun’s guess was that those two had Relics with them.

“[But in that case, shouldn’t we have questioned them at the concert hall?]”

We didn’t know who they were, or where they came from.

But Shun took out two pieces of paper from his pocket and fluttered them open. I took them and read the contents.

They were the ticket redemption forms they used at the entrance to the concert. On them were written the full names and addresses of the boy and girl.

I didn’t know what Shun did to get his hands on these, but it was clever.

He must have been just that certain about those two.

“[What kind of Relic do you think they have?]”

There might have been no point in asking that question.

If Shun was interested in them, then it was already clear. He believed they had the Relic he was looking for.

And almost as if to confirm, Shun smiled.

“A Relic that can predict the future—”



“You’re saying there were people there collecting Relics?”

I had only explained the situation over the phone yesterday before going home. As expected, Towako-san was making a sour face while I gave her the full report today.

I told her about our run in with the pair during the lucky bangle incident before, but back then she just told me there were some people out there like that and ended the conversation.

I hadn’t been too worried about them back then.

It was true that there weren’t many people who knew about Relics, and it wasn’t even unusual for people who did know to be ignorant of what Relics truly were or what they were called. In fact, there were some that didn’t even know the objects they had were Relics in the first place.

But that didn’t mean everyone was like that, with us and Towako-san being good examples.

That’s why, while it was rare for people to have known what Relics were and actively want to collect them, it was by no means unheard of.

That said, we had run into them twice now.

The same two people had caused two Relic related incidents.

Incidents that involved us.

We couldn’t afford to ignore them now.

“So they used a Relic to make the stage light at the concert fall?”

“There was also the thing with the glass shattering in the gym.”

The image of the glass shattering and falling on us floated back into my mind.

There they were, smiling as they avoided the glass shards raining around them. It wasn't unreasonable to think they used Relic to do that. In fact, there couldn't have been any other way.

"I guess...dismissing it as coincidence would be too optimistic."

"Yeah."

But what was their goal?

Were those two simply collecting Relics? Or were they trying to use them to accomplish some objective?

If they were charmed by the power of Relics and were using them recklessly, then that made them a danger to themselves. But on the other hand if they were using the Relics for their own interests, then that made them a danger to others too.

Up until this point, we had encountered a number of Relics, along with with people whose lives were tossed around by them.

Judging from what we saw in the gym, the two we met weren't just being reckless; it looked like they had mastered using their Relics.

"We should probably be a little more vigilant. There's a chance they could be going after yours too."

"Huh?"

"Just as you have become aware of them, it's possible that they have become aware of you."

True, I couldn't deny that.

Saki and I did escape from those falling glass shards unscathed. Adding that to the incident at the concert hall, and there was a chance they would chalk it up to just coincidence or luck on our part.

Not to mention the fact that we did actually past those dangers with Vision. All the more reason for them to believe it wasn't luck or coincidence.

At the very least they had to know that we had some connection to Relics.

I was the one who said they were collecting relics.

They might not have noticed before, but if they by any chance realized that I had a Relic too, who knew what could happen.

“Vigilance...huh.”

They shouldn't have had any information about who we were or where we came from. I wasn't wearing a school uniform or anything that day, so they wouldn't be able to narrow down what school I went to.

The only thing that worried me was that they saw our faces and talked to us.

Then, I suddenly realized.

Why was I afraid of meeting them?

It was true, I was hoping I'd never meet them again.

Up until this point, I had wanted to help people when I saw them about to destroy themselves with Relics.

But this time it was different.



To put it simply, it was because the pair we met weren't just brandishing relics, they were actively using them.

I was finding myself with an ominous feeling about the future; the same feeling I got when I used Vision.

"Alright, see you later."

Saki passed by in front of Towako-san in the middle of our serious discussion.

"Oh, take care... hey, wait a minute!"

When I called out to stop her, Saki turned around with her usual blank expression.

"What?"

"Not 'what'. Where are you going!?"

"Getting groceries, of course."

"Why!?"

"Cause we ran out of eggs."

"That's not what I mean!"

"Did I tell you we also ran out of milk?"

"That's not it either. I'm asking why are you getting groceries *now* of all times?"

"Because there's a limited time sale."

"What does that have to do with anything!?"

"Are you telling me to go when there's not a sale? Just how much money do you think I have?"

“I’m saying that’s not the point! What I’m saying is that it’s dangerous.”

“Indeed, limited time sales are a battlefield for housewives. I know full well how dangerous it is. But I’ve fought my way through countless sales myself, you know. I won’t lose so easily.”

I really couldn’t imagine Saki going at it with housewives over 40 yen egg cartons, but this wasn’t the time for that.

“I’m not talking about the sale. Like I said a million times now, why are you going out of your way to get groceries so soon after yesterday’s events? We could still be in danger.”

“Like I told *you* a million times now, there’s a limited time sale and we ran out of milk and eggs.”

“... Fine whatever.” I was the idiot here for expecting Saki to have any sense of danger. “Give me a minute.”

I went back inside and took out my wallet and phone from my bag.

“I’m going with you.”

— —

... I-it really was an incredible battlefield. Limited time sales were no joke.

Most terrifying of all was Saki, who ended up snagging two cartons of eggs while keeping up her usual expressionless face.

She stood among of all the housewives pushing and shoving as they reached for the store employee distributing the eggs, and without changing her expression, or even saying anything, let out a uniquely overpowering aura. The employee must have felt compelled to hand the eggs over.

“I-is it always like this?”

“Yes. I told you, didn’t I? This is war.”

Saki got her hands on eggs along with few other things she wanted from the limited time sale and seemed a little triumphant as she left the store.

“You’re going to be a great wife one day.”

In one of her rare moments, Saki looked at me shocked.

“What’s the matter?”

“...Nothing.”

For some reason took out the receipt and began double checking the total even though it was way too late.

Uhh, maybe I was overthinking it, but did that exaggerated reaction mean she thought...

“There really wasn’t any deeper meaning to that, you know.”

“Deeper meaning to what?”

“No, it’s just...it didn’t mean what you probably thought it did...”

“I wasn’t thinking anything.”

Saki shook her head like she didn’t care, but sure enough the receipt she was looking at was upside down.

“.....”

“.....”

The atmosphere turned kind of awkward, and the both of us fell silent.

Then, I heard a clinking sound as we quietly walked down the road. It sounding like a rolling can.

“Hm?”

There was strange feeling under my foot, and the next thing I knew, I was on my back looking up at the sky.

I had completely slipped on the can and toppled over.

“Ow....”

I managed to soften the blow somehow with my hand, but still ended up hitting my lower back really hard. I groaned.

“Are you alright?”

“The eggs sure are.” I was pretty proud of myself for keeping the them safe the instant I fell.

“Shit, who did that?”

I looked around to see what kind of jerk threw away a can, but there wasn’t anyone there.

Maybe the wind blow it towards me...today really wasn’t my day.

Now that I thought about it, I had a really bad time at the supermarket too. First I heard the sound of something collapsing, and the next thing I knew a bunch of canned food fell on my head. Then I heard a banging sound, and someone carrying a mop inside the store flipped over a bucket and soaked my shoes. After that, I heard a snipping sound, and a sales banner fell on top of me.

Maybe it was retribution for buying eggs on sale. I did protect them, despite everything, but man did I hate these eggs right now.

“You know I’m not talking about the eggs.”

Saki offered her hand.

I used my free left hand and stood up with her help. Saki then loosened her grip to let me go. I did the same and we separated...or at least that's what was supposed to happen.

"....."

But I didn't let go of her hand.

"Huh?"

I felt Saki looking at me questioningly from my peripheral vision, but I didn't look at her and pretended not to notice as I began walking.

Like it was the natural thing to do.

It was like we were walking side by side holding hands.

—Not "like", that's exactly what was happening.

This wasn't something I'd normally do.

But if you were to ask me why I did it, the only thing I could say is that there was no reason. There was no deeper meaning; I didn't think hard about it didn't work up the resolve either. There really was no reason.

It just felt like the natural thing to do...or maybe it was that letting go of her hand was too hard.

Towako-san would probably say something went wrong with my head after I hurt it at the concert hall if she saw us now.

And also, Saki wasn't complaining at all as she walked with me.

I stole a glance at her from the side.

She had her usual expressionless face.

Except.

Her head was down just a little more than usual.

Her ears were just a little more red than usual.

...Though that might have just been my imagination.



I tried testing him four different times now.

The first time I collapsed a mountain of canned food and made them fall on his head.

The second time I flipped over a bucket and spilled water on him.

The third time I cut a cord, and caused a hanging banner to fall on him.

The fourth time I made a can roll caused him to slip.

He had utterly fallen for each and every one.

It was far too easy; it didn't seemed like he had absolutely not idea what was going to happen.

Back then the two of them avoided the rain of falling glass in the gym.

And the second time, I didn't know if they know about our plan to drop the stage light or not, but they did set off the fire alarm before it happened.

Considering they manage to get away from two seemingly unavoidable events, Shun's theory was that they had some way of seeing the future.

But that theory wasn't looking too promising right now.

Maybe what they did was just a coincidence.

Maybe we were just overthinking it.

However, it was a fact that they had a Relic. There was no doubt that Dowsing reacted to them.

But there was a chance that the Relic they had wasn't the one we were looking for.

The Relic that foresaw the future.

If I didn't get the result I was looking for after one more test, I was going to return to Shin for now. We could always go back and steal their Relic later.

The two of them went out to a bigger road and walked side by side.

I looked up at the building a little in front of them. There was a worker there, replacing the glass on the three story building.

Perfect. I could recreate the incident in the gym.

There was a chance they could get injured but they probably wouldn't die if I broke the glass into small pieces.

I distanced myself a little, and got Otodama ready.

I pressed my finger to the hole, raised the mouthpiece and blew.

*Crack*

The sound of splintering glass rang out, and shards started to rain down on their heads.



Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*It feels like something is glittering above me.*

*I look up.*

*Countless sparkles come into view—glass shards*

*A much larger piece of three sided glass is also falling.*

*It's like a sharpened blade, edge pointed downward as it falls.*

*Its target, Saki, still hasn't noticed.*

*With almost calculated precision, the glass pierces the nape Saki's  
pure white neck and—*

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the air.

“Saki!”

I snapped back to Reality after Vision showed me that image death. I didn't didn't even look up and pulled Saki towards me without a moment's hesitation.

Saki pressed her self into my arms as if she were embracing me.

I held her like that and threw myself backwards.

*Crash*

With a sharp crack, the large piece of glass shattered and scattered in all directions. Immediately after, the rest of the glass shards hit the ground.

“Are you alright!?”

A guy who looked like worker called from up in the building in a panic.

I looked at Saki who was in my arms.

“Are you okay?”



“Yeah.”

That was dangerous. If we had not already been holding hands, I might not have made it.

Is this what they called a premonition?

At any rate, I had to say I was pretty proud of myself for not letting her go.



Now I was convinced.

He had some Relic that allowed him to see the future.

He moved the moment the glass broke—before the shards entered his line of sight.

More than that, he didn’t even see the glass. He immediately jumped back without even looking up.

Of course, it was possible that he heard the sound first.

But this was someone we were already suspicious of.

It was enough to change my suspicion to certainty.

All that was to find proof.

Of whether or not he had a Relic that let him see the future.

The least I could say now was that he couldn’t see the entire future.

Perhaps it depended on the level of danger.

Or maybe it only worked occasionally.

I needed to know everything about this Relic, including the specifics.

There was still lots of ways for me to test him.

The thought of getting my hands on a Relic that saw the future made me shake with joy.

... No, what really made me shake from joy was imagining Shun's happiness when he got the Relic.

I was here for his sake.

He needed me.

He was the only one there for me after I lost my song.

That's why I was also living for his sake. That was my wish.

He gave me a new place to belong and protected me even after I abandoned my sister and killed my mother.

There was no other place for me.

That's right, nowhere else but by Shun's side.

Wait for me Shun.

I'll be sure to come back with the Relic.

I'll do everything I can to show you the future.



That falling glass would have if I had taken a single step forward.

I looked around. There wasn't anyone I recognized nearby.

Even so, it was probably too optimistic to dismiss what just happened as a coincidence.

I knew we were being targeted. More than anything, I was glad I want along with Saki.

“Tokiya?”

“Let’s go.”

I pulled Saki’s hand and got ready to hurry back. But was it really a good idea to go straight back to Tsukumodo if we being followed?

We’d have no place to run to if they found out about the shop.

There was also a chance that they had already located it.

But even if I chose to face them here, at the very least I had to get Saki back...

Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*We run into a commuter as we’re climbing up the stairs to the pedestrian bridge.*

*I stumble two, three times. My back hits the bridge handrail.*

*Suddenly I lose my balance and find there’s nothing there to support me*

*The part of the handail that I bumped into must have been rusted or something, because it makes a dull sound and snaps.*

*My upper body sways, and just like that, I’m in the air—*

I came back to my senses as we were climbing up the stairs to the pedestrian bridge.

“Tokiya?”

Saki notices I’ve stopped since we were still holding hands. She pulls me forward.

Having come back to reality, I immediately look around, but don’t see any commuters on the bridge.

I grab the handrail and shake it a little just in case, but it feels pretty solid. Maybe it was some other bridge that Vision was showing me. But then again, I had never used another bridge to get to Tsukumodo before...

It really felt like Vision showed me something, but now I was starting to think maybe I was just seeing things.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

I was a little concerned, but I went onto the bridge anyway.

Saki and I crossed it moved walked to the road on the other side.

Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*The moment I look up, I see a giant concrete chunk falling towards me.*

*Part of the wall of the four story building to the side has fallen off.*

*I instantly kick my front foot on the ground and leap back.*

*But I don’t make it.*

*The chunk of concrete falls on my head and—*

I looked up the instant I snapped back to reality.

But all I see above me is the sky; there is no falling concrete. I was sure that if the concrete I saw with Vision made a direct hit, it wasn’t going to end well for anyone.

The building next to us stood there with nothing obviously wrong with it. It didn’t look like any chunks were about to fall off the wall at all.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I was just think we have such nice weather today.”

“Huh?”

What was that Vision just now?

Given the the circumstances and timing, I couldn’t help but see it as an attack from the boy and girl before.

But the future with the broken handrail and the broken building wall never came to pass.

Did that mean that what Vision showed me didn’t absolutely have to match with reality? Or did it mean that event would happen at a similar place but with different timing?

“Tokiya.” Saki said my name.

She was trying to point out the bike coming at us from down the road. I put my thoughts on hold, and started to move to the side when—

...for some reason, I met eyes with the twin tailed high school girl riding the bike.

“What are you looking at?”

Saki made a dubious face and pulled on my sleeve when she saw I was following the approaching girl with my eyes.

“Huh? Oh, it just felt like I’ve seen her somewhere before.”

At the lie that instantly came out of my mouth, I realized it myself.

Did I actually meet her somewhere?

Now that the words came out of my mouth and I thought about it, it really did feel like I had met her before...

But contrary to what I was thinking, the girl took no notice of me and kept riding on.

Must have been my imagination.

“Does she go to your school?”

“No, I don’t think so...”

“Oh? It seems you have a lot of girl acquaintances at school, don’t you?”

Saki let go of my sleeve and kept walking without me.

“Hm?”

I didn’t know why, but it looked like Saki was in a bad mood. Weird, I wonder what happened.

“Hey, wait!” I started to follow after her.

Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*A truck, tilted and driving on set of wheels is barreling straight towards us.*

*It flips completely over and slides until it hits the guardrail.*

*The impact cause the back of the truck to open.*

*An unidentifiable red substance burst out like an avalanche and swallows me up.*

Pop! I heard the sound of something bursting nearby, and came back to my senses.

A moment later, I heard the squeal of breaks behind me.

This time it was real

I looked at where the sound was coming from, and saw a station wagon with half its tires blown out leaning dangerously on its side as it charged towards us.

But there wasn't nearly enough time to react; Vision didn't warn me early enough.

Saki and I couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and found ourselves in the path of the out-of-control station wagon.



I was deciding on my next target.

What should I make happen next?

There was no point in shattering glass again.

Repeating an attack I used before would be half meaningless.

There was no point in anything my target could predict. There was no point in anything he could guard against.

What I wanted to see wasn't his ability to predict the future, it was his ability to see it.

And the best way to determine that was to set up a situation that no one could possibly predict.

Going by what had happened so far, it looked like his ability most likely triggered when there was a big threat to his safety.

It would probably be best to cause something really dangerous to happen with this next test.

I looked around.

This was a sidewalk right next a major road. There were lots of things I'd be able to use.

Then I noticed the large station wagon headed in my direction going way over the speed limit.

Exactly what I was looking for.

I raised Otodama to my lips.

...and the next moment,

With a loud 'pop', the station wagon's tires burst.



... That was dangerous.

If the station wagon hadn't veered out of the way at the last second, it would have run Saki and I over.

It did end up crashing into a store, but fortunately neither the driver nor anyone inside the store were hurt.

—Station wagon?

I realized something was different.

The vehicle I saw with Vision was a truck, right?

And while a truck and a station wagon were certainly different, I couldn't deny that the future Vision showed me did in fact happen.

It was precisely because Vision warned me that I was able to react to the accident before my eyes.

That said, there were still things that didn't make sense.

There was the pedestrian bridge, and also the building.



I couldn't claim that the things I saw with Vision were going to be one hundred percent accurate.

But differences usually occurred when I did something to prevent certain futures from happening.

What did it mean then when the Vision future showed me never happened—or happened differently from what I saw?

I was pretty sure I had never experienced anything like this before.

So what did this abnormality indicate?

Vision was behaving so strangely that I couldn't even hide my confusion.

"Are you alright?" Saki came running over and held out her hand. I replied with 'I'm fine' and stood up—

Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*In front of me, a truck crashed into the shop.*

*A large number of red flowers are spilling out onto the road from the back of the truck.*

*There's a group of boys and girls sitting on the ground.*

*And there's me, holding onto Saki's hand as I stand up.*

*And,*

*In a fraction of a second...no, even less time that, the atmosphere changes.*

*An explosion.*

*Bits and pieces from the small explosion from the truck fly towards us and piece—*

“Ah!”

Saki was right in front of me. I pushed her down and covered her.

“Get away! It’s going to explode!” I shouted.

———.....

But the station wagon did not explode. The only sound was the empty spinning of its wheels in the air.

“Tokiya...”

“A, Ah, sorry.”

I stood up and let Saki go.

Vision showed me there was going to be an explosion, but it didn’t look like there was going to be one.

Of course it would be great if nothing exploded.

But this time I couldn’t afford to relax.

The risk was still there.

I took Saki with me was trying to encourage people in the area to get away, until I saw there was one girl who got caught up in the accident.

I walked over towards the fallen girl.

“Are you alrig...?”

Right in the middle of my sentence, I found myself at a loss for words.

I had seen this girl before. She seemed to have realized it too, and while she didn't say anything, the surprise was clear on her face.

She was one of the two we met before who were looking for Relics.

"Asuka, right?"

I grabbed her arm to stop her from escaping.

"Did you cause this?"

It didn't seem likely that Asuka was going to answer, but I wasn't going to let her use her inability to speak as an excuse for anything.

"Come with me."

Curious onlookers were starting to gather because of the accident, so I tried to get Asuka to stand up.

But then she raised her uninjured hand to her mouth.

In her hand was a strange flute-like object.

She blew.

There was a sudden crackle of electricity, and pain ran like a current through the hand I was holding Asuka with.

I let go of her on reflex.

Asuka didn't waste the chance and used that moment to run away.

I tried to chase after her, but she was already diving into the crowd. I quickly lost sight of her.

I glanced at my right hand which was still hurting from her attack.

There were no visible injuries. She attack me with what felt like an electric current, but there weren't any burn marks either. My hand was a little red, but that was it.

But she did attack me, that much I knew for sure.

Thinking back now, she also used that flute back in the gym at Toujou-san's school. More than likely that flute was a Relic and her weapon.

All the things that happened today like the broken glass and the ruptured tire were probably related—it was safe to assume she caused those incidents with her flute.

I clicked my tongue at the fact that she got away, and returned to meet Saki who was looking at me with a worried expression.

I pulled her away from the crowd and explained the situation.”

“Saki, you need to go back to the shop for now.”

“Huh?”

“I'm thinking everything that's happened so far today was that girl's fault.”

“So far...you mean the thing just now?”

“Yeah, and the other accidents too.”

I assured her saying I was able to foresee the accidents to an extent, but this was probably my limit.

“This is just a guess, but I think she has a Relic that uses concussive sound waves or something to attack.”

Assuming I was right, then that would explain the breaking glass, the exploding tire, and the pain that ran through hand earlier.

It could also possibly explain the falling stage light at the concert venue and the shattered glass ceiling in the gym.

“Tokiya, what are you going to do?”

“I know what direction she ran off to. I’m going to follow her.”

That was a lie. My plan was to lure her out.

Asuka and that other boy were targeting Relics, so I was sure she’d come after me again even if she got away this time. Given that, it was dangerous for Saki to stay with me.

Not to mention the fact that I couldn’t just go to Tsukumodo with her right now since it was basically a warehouse for Relics.

“It’s dangerous.”, Saki tried to stop me, perhaps knowing what I was really planning.

“It’ll be even more dangerous if I let her do whatever she wants, you know.”

“But...”

“I won’t follow her too far. It’ll be fine, so go back to the shop.”

I forced Saki to stay behind and left her to chase after Asuka.



That was outside of expectations.

To think the station wagon would come in my direction after I popped its tires...

And on top of that he found me. Now that my target knew I was here, he was probably going to be even more on guard.

But there was no way I could give up here. .

For Shun's sake, there was no way I could let it end here.

I couldn't really tail them anymore now that I had been found, but I could at least figure out where their base was.

Looking at them now, it seemed they decided to split up and go separate ways.

Both of them moved away from me, putting them out of Dowsing's detection range. I wasn't sure who to follow, but decided to go after the boy.

Going by his behavior so far, I was sure he was the one with the Relic that could see the future.

All I had to do was steal it from him.

It looked like he wasn't too keen on letting this end either. Right now he was going towards a nearby construction site where an unfinished building was.

Obviously he was trying to lure me out

You could also call it a trap.

But even still, I wasn't planning to lose.

I had my Otodama.

And I was certain he had no idea what it was really capable of.



I went towards the direction Asuka ran to, and set my eyes on a certain place while keeping an eye on the surroundings.

It was a construction site for an unfinished building.

As if to prove the building was still unfinished, the first floor had not outer wall, and the floors about were covered in protective netting. It looked like it would be about eight floors once it was completed, and judging by how complete the walls were, it was only going to be a few more months till it was fully built.

...Assuming nothing happened here today.

Suddenly, a painful noise rushed through the back of my head—

*Above my head a number of steel beams are falling quickly, gathering speed as they go.*

*I dodge to the right to avoid the first one. It sticks into the ground.*

*Then I leap back to avoid the second one. This one doesn't get stuck in the ground and bounces towards me instead.*

*I cover my head and duck to avoid it. The beam scrapes just over my head and lands behind me.*

*Then another beam crashes into some concrete right in front of where I'm crouching and sends pieces everywhere.*

*Those fragments become projectiles and hit me.*

*My head, my arms, my legs are cut to pieces.*

*I lose my strength and fall backwards.*

*Then I notice there's something that looks like an "H" right in front of my eyes.*

*By the time I realize it's the end of a steel beam, my head has already been crushed.*

———!

I looked above my head.

However...

...there were no visible steel beams on the roof anymore. All I saw when I looked up was protective netting and the scaffolding along the outside walls.

What was that Vision I saw just now?

I didn't see how it would be possible for steel beams to crush me at a construction site that didn't even have any.

Strange. This was the same as before; it was happening again.

The futures I saw with the pedestrian bridge and crumbling wall never happened, and the truck I saw in the accident actually turned out to be a station wagon.

What was going on?

Could it be...

... That the futures Vision was showing me were off?

A moment later I heard the sound of something crumbling above me.

Almost as if there had been an explosion in the building, the wall had collapsed and huge chunks of it were raining down on me.

"Shit!"

I quickly ran into the lobby of the unfinished building's to get away from this event that Vision didn't warn me about. I heard the concrete chunks crash where I had been standing just seconds



earlier. If I hadn't gotten out of the way in time I would have been done for.

Shivers ran down my spine.

The only thing I could do to fight against an enemy with a Relic was to use Vision to avoid certain death.

If Vision wasn't reliable right now, then I was at a clear disadvantage.

Why were its predictions missing?

I had never experienced something like this before...

Was it because Asuka was using a Relic to mess with it, or something else?

It certainly was possible that she had multiple Relics. Maybe she also had another Relic that made her opponents Relics malfunction in addition to the flute she used to attack.

...Calm down

I suppressed my feelings of panic.

There was no problem even if I couldn't see the future with Vision; it wouldn't be the first time. Maybe Vision just didn't show me anything this time because it was easily escapable, or maybe because it wouldn't have ended with a fatal injury.

There was no need for me to panic even if there was something wrong with Vision. Even in the one in a million chance that something was actually happening, my opponent's attack was a direct attack with the flute.

She was able to destroy things outside of the building, but none of her attacks had piercing power..

First I could put some cover between me and Asuka.

After that I would close the distance between us and steal that flute.

There was nothing to hide behind in the lobby right now, so I was at a disadvantage.

I looked around for the entrance to the emergency staircase, and ran towards the second floor where there would be lots of things to hide behind.

“Don’t crap out on me now...” I prayed and put my hand over my right eye.

After everything, there was still some part of me that relied on Vision.

I went up the stairs to the second floor, and tried to open the emergency door.

But it was locked tight.

*Rattle, rattle*, I turned the knob, but the lock was firm and the door stayed shut

Dammit. This wasn’t part of the plan.

Then I heard the door open down the stairs.

“She’s following me.”

I couldn’t see her yet, but Asuka had just gotten onto the emergency stairs.

Not good. I wouldn’t be able to avoid her attacks while I was still on the stairs.

I gave up on the second floor, and ran up to the third., and tried to open the door.

But it was the same.

Same as the second floor, the door here was locked. There was no way to get onto the third floor.

“Shit.”

I gave up on the third floor too and headed towards the fourth.

But to no surprise, I got the same result.

Fifth floor, sixth floor, seventh,... I went higher and higher, and met with the same result every time.

I could hear footsteps coming from below.

I still didn't see her.

But I was getting the feeling that her echoing footsteps were getting closer and closer.

I had no idea what would happen to me if I took on the same type of attack that destroyed a wall.

I didn't even need Vision for this; just the thought made me run cold. I ran up the stairs to shake the feeling off.

The roof was all that was left now.

One more floor and then I'd have nowhere to run.

I reached out to the door with a prayer in my heart.

The result was the same.

The door was locked—but it seemed God or fate, or whatever had not yet abandoned me.

There was a bundle of keys hanging on the wall. Someone must have forgotten it, or maybe there was some policy to leave them here.

I took the keys off the wall and tried them on the door leading to the roof.

But it didn't work.

The key wouldn't turn; the door didn't open.

"I guess this isn't it."

I tried putting another key into the keyhole, but the lock didn't open.

"Next."

The footsteps were getting closer.

The lock wouldn't open.

"Next."

The footsteps were getting faster

The lock wouldn't open.

"Next."

She was almost here.

The lock wouldn't open.

"Next."

I wouldn't survive taking an attack from behind.

The lock wouldn't open

"Next."

Was there even a key here that worked?

The lock wouldn't open

"Next."

If this wouldn't work, maybe I could give up and try to fight back.

The lock...

"...Opened.

With a clicking sound, the lock opened.

I quickly pulled the key out, pushed open the heavy door, and went out to the roof.

The wind was blowing.

With it, a sense of freedom that blew away my apprehension.

I ran out to the roof, and quickly locked the door behind me.

*Bang!*

"—Wha-!

I heard something hit the door hard a second after I locked it.

My heart rate started to rise.

There was no questioning it; Asuka was attacking.

But it looked like her attack wasn't strong enough to pass through the door.

I wondered what would have happened to me if I had been even a second later. Feeling a sense of relief for the time being, I began to formulate a counter plan.

*Calm down.*

What I need to calm wasn't my heart after running up eight flights of stairs, but heat that was starting to get to my head.

I was on the roof. There was no place for me to run, but Asuka couldn't come in here either. But how long would it take for the door to fall if she kept attacking it like that?

That's when victory or defeat would be decided.

If my opponent was going with destructive methods, then I was going to hide in her blind spot and wait till she got onto the roof to steal the flute.

The blind spot would be...the side of the door, or maybe above the door to the roof.

It was a bit of a gamble, but I didn't have any other choice. The problem was whether or not she'd be cautious enough to avoid me.

There was lots of construction material lying around on the roof. Maybe I could take a nut and throw it in random direction to distract her. Or maybe I could trick her by hiding some of my clothes in the shadows and purposely making some of it visible.

The method didn't matter; if I could get her to drop her guard for even a moment...

*Click*

"....Huh?"

The lock made a sound that shouldn't have been possible, and opened.

Shortly after, the iron door slowly opened with a creak.

“Why....how?”

The door had been locked.

Did the door become unlocked from the impact of Asuka's repeated attacks?

That's not what it felt like.

It felt much simpler, like the door opened the way it was supposed to.

Then did that mean she had a key?

That shouldn't have been possible.

And if it were, what did that make the key I had in my hand right now?

Did she have a master key then?

That was also impossible

Because...

... As Asuka slowly came into a view, I saw that she wasn't holding anything at all.

Meaning she couldn't have possibly unlocked the door.

But it *was* unlocked.

I realized I must have misunderstood something somewhere.

Her flute wasn't for making shockwaves through sound.

But what do it exactly?

What exactly was that flute's power?

It shattered glass, punctured tires, and dented the door in. If that invisible power wasn't a concussive soundwave, then what on earth was it?

Was I deceived by the Relic's shape, and somehow convinced myself it used sound to attack?

Was it some kind of other invisible attack?

No, none that mattered now.

Because there was no explanation for how she undid the lock just now.

My sense of panic was getting worse.

But time would not wait.

My opponent also, would not wait.

Asuka smiled—the same thin smile as her partner, that boy, and put the flute to her lips.

All the events up until this point played back in my head.

A reproduction of all the incidents she must have caused flashed through my mind.

—I heard the sound of shattering glass, and then countless shards fell from the ceiling.



—I heard the sound of a tire popping, and then a station wagon with a punctured tire came careening towards us.

—I heard the sound of a lock being undone, and the door that should have been locked, opened.

Then it hit me.

What was it? What was it that was bugging me?

There was nothing strange here.

Nothing strange at all.

But even still, what was this sense of incongruity I was feeling?

Was something different this time? Was something different from the other events?

The difference...that was right. I was looking right at the door when she unlocked it.

For all the other times, like when the glass was broken and when the tire popped, I only turned to look after I heard the sound.

That's how I was able to confirm what happened.

But this time, this thing with the lock was different.

And it wasn't because Asuka didn't use the flute to attack.

The biggest difference was that I was looking this time.

At that exact moment, I was looking at the door, or rather I was looking at the lock.

That's what made me feel something was off.

But what was it?

Why did the single event that I happened to see feel so wrong?

It was because there was something not quite right with what I saw with my eyes.

But what was it? What was it that felt wrong?

There was no doubt the door was locked.

But despite that it was opened.

I heard a click, and then the lock opened.

What about it?

Was there something strange about that?

What was it that was bugging me?

Asuka took a breath to blow into the flute.

Calm down.

Don't panic.

Even if there's only a second left, I absolutely cannot panic.

Realize.

If I have time to panic, then realize.

Remember.

If I have time to panic, then remember.

I need to remember the moment the lock opened.

I need to realize what's bothering me.

That was literally the key.

I didn't hear an impact, I heard the lock open.

The lock clicked, completely naturally, then it opened.

"Huh?"

Not yet. Something was still bugging me.

Why did it bother me?

Why I was I so bothered about a lock being opened?

Why did I think there was something strange about a lock being opened?

—The lock being opened made a sound, and the door that should have been shut opened.

Was there something strange about that?

—The lock clicked, and the door that should have been shut, opened.

There was nothing strange about that.

—The lock clicked, and the door that should have been shut, opened.

Wait, it was strange.

—The lock clicked, and the door that should have been shut, opened.

*That* was strange.

Visual information and auditory information.

Which did people sense first?

It didn't really matter, did it?.

It wasn't all that complicated.

The incongruity I felt came from one brief instant.

But that was it.

That was exactly it.

In all the years of my life, it was something I had sensed unconsciously, and naturally—something reinforced over and over.

It was that sense that made me think something wasn't right.

The sound that accompanies an event when it occurs.

That sound...came early —

Sound came after.

The fact that the sound didn't come after was strange.

The was supposed to make a clicking sound because it was opened.

But this time the lock opened *because* the sound was made.

The incidents were probably the same.

If I had seen the other incidents first, then I was sure I would have seen the orders reversed.

A shattering sound was produced, and then the glass broke

A popping sound was produced, and then the tire burst.

With all of them, the sound was created first, and *then* the event occurred

In other words—

“A Relic that causes phenomena based on the sounds it creates”

Almost as if to confirm.

Or perhaps to mock me for noticing after all this time.

Asuka smiled and blew into the flute.



I knew he was under the wrong impression.

That's why I was able to push him into a corner here.

Otodama was a Relic that caused things to happen depending on the sound it produced.

I could use it for direct attacks if I manipulated the sound just right, but that's not all it could do.

It was capable of so much more.

As long as it was related to sound, there was nothing Otodama couldn't do.

His face was tense.

It was colored with fear.

*Relax, I won't kill you.*

*I'll have you faint for a short while, and in that time I'll take your Relic is all.*

*I should be able to use Dowsing to find out where you keep the Relic.*

*But I wouldn't mind killing you if you resist.*

*Because there won't be any evidence.*

*If that does happen, I'm sorry.*

*But you see, I can't just let you go.*

*Everything is for Shun's sake.*

*If you want to regret anything, then regret the fact that you ever got that Relic.*

So what kind of sound should I produce?

Should I make a sound break the fence? I guess it would be too much to expect him to lose consciousness from that though.

Should I make a sound to collapse the scaffolding under his feat? He'd probably die if he fell from this height though.

How about making a sound to hit him with lightning? But then it would be a problem if the Relic got destroyed, wouldn't it?

What a conundrum. I can't think of anything perfect.

I really didn't want to do this, but I guess I don't have a choice.

*There's not much I can use on this roof, so I'll have to hit you directly.*

A sound to split his head? I'm pretty sure that'll kill him.

A sound to break his bones? I don't know if that'll be enough to make him faint.

A sound to burst his body, I'm pretty sure that'll kill him too.

Ah, whatever. I'll just make a sound to hit his head, just enough to give him a light concussion. I did the same thing to him last time so it should probably going to be alright.

But this time I'll be more careful.

*I was in a hurry last time so I didn't moderate the sound that well.*

*I feared the worst, but you did well to survive.*

*I'm sure it's not going to be as bad this time.*

*If you do end up with some lasting damage though, I'm sorry.*

*Won't you chalk it up to bad luck and give up?*

I settled on hitting his head and blew into Otodama.

Oh right.

Maybe I should have let him borrow my Fortune pendant first...



Asuka played a sound on her flute, and caused something to happen.

—or at least, that how it was supposed to go.

My whole body was tense, but I didn't notice anything change.

Her eyes had clearly been focused on my head.

I tried to touch it. But my head wasn't gone, nor was it spurting with blood, nor had it been split open.

It was just the same as it was before.

I looked around in a fluster.

The fence wasn't broken and the scaffolding hadn't collapsed either.

But she must have done something.

Something was supposed to happen once she blew into the flute

This wasn't matching up with my expectations.

“ ”

*Hey, what did you do!?* I tried to shout.

But my voice didn't come out.

Was I really that scared? My throat seemed to have seized up.

I took a deep breath and shouted one more time.

“ ”

But sure enough, my voice didn't come out.

What if I was already dead, and just hadn't realized it yet?

Did I die even though Vision never showed me anything?

I knew it. There was something wrong with it after all.



But the world around me wasn't dark, and I still had some strength left in me. I was still standing there.

And as proof that I hadn't become a ghost, I still had legs too.

I didn't get it. Just what was going on?

When I tried to ask again, I saw that Asuka herself was looking at her flute with a shocked expression.

Then she turned to glare at me.

Almost if she was instead demanding to know what I had done.

She raised her flute again, aimed at me, and blew.

But there was no sound.

Come to think of it, there was no sound earlier either.

What did it mean when a Relic that relied on sound to make things happen didn't make any noise?

Was it broken?

No, something wasn't right here. Her flute wasn't broken.

I finally realized what was strange.

It wasn't just the sound of the flute.

It wasn't just my voice.

I couldn't hear anything right now; not the sound of the wind blowing, and not the rumble of the cars that should have been driving down the street below.

What was going on?

It was almost like—

No, it couldn't be anything else.

I shifted my gaze.

Behind Asuka, next to the roof door, Saki was standing.

And in her hand was—

—A mirror

The Mirror of Serenity: it was a Relic that covered everything shown in its reflection in complete silence.

It was the same Mirror of Serenity that a certain composer had so desperately wanted to obtain, and had caused him to lose someone important to him.

Tsukumodo Antique Shop came into possession of the mirror after he returned it.

And now thanks to Saki, it saved me out of a difficult situation.

Asuka still didn't understand what was happening and tried to play her flute over and over.

But no sound came out.

I walked over to Asuka, who had stopped paying attention to her surroundings and was putting everything she had into playing the flute, and snatched it from her.

She looked up at me with a start, fear clearly written all over her face.

Without her flute, she was just a powerless girl.

Having recognized that, Saki put the curtain on the Mirror of Serenity.

In an instant.

Sound returned to the world.

“What is your goal?”

Asuka was looking up at me with a terrified expression, but that wasn’t going to get her anywhere. She was just about to kill me; I wasn’t simply going to let her go.

“Are you going after Relics?” I asked in an even stronger tone.

But as expected she didn’t answer at all. She tried to open her mouth like she was going to say something, but then quickly closed it.

Her right hand was rummaging in her pocket.

But I grabbed her hand and raised it up.

“What are you trying to do!?”

Was she trying to use another Relic this late into the game?

“What are you trying to do!?”

Asuka drew back and made herself small when I shouted.

I unconsciously increased the strength of my grip.

Her face twisted in pain.

I dug through her pocket.

What I took out was a Fortune pendant, and also a cellphone.

“Where you trying to call for help?”

She shook her head and looked at me.

Insisting I was wrong. Desperately trying to convince me.

The way Asuka looked up at me like she wished someone could help pissed me off. She, the one who smiled as she was about to kill me, was so scared of my hard questioning that she couldn’t even speak. She was making a face like she was the victim.

I was already irritated, and this was he last straw.

“Say something!”

When I twisted her arm upward—

“I’d like you to stop right there. She can’t use her voice. The blood may have gotten to your head and made you forget, but you should know that right?”

I heard someone speak up from near the door.

The boy from before—Asuka’s partner—had arrived.

## ***Chapter 3: Future***

“If I could alter fate, I would.”

Everyone’s had thoughts like that before.

But we all live frantically within the bounds of fate, with nothing ever changing.

No doubt *they* also lived the same way.

Until they obtained a certain power, that is.

But they did obtain it—

—an item known as a “Relic” that had the power to alter fate.

And alter it they did.

They altered the immutable force that was fate.

But who could blame them?

If fate could be altered...

If unpleasant fates could be changed...

Anyone would have made the same choice

But fate would not forgive them—it would not forgive those people.

Never would it forgive.



The world was unequal.

Unequal to we, who never asked to be born into this world.

From the moment we were born, we were handed inequality.

From the moment we were born, we were allotted different amounts of happiness.

Differences in our race, in ourselves, in our wealth, in our gender, in our strength...and in our happiness.

The sort of differences we take for granted—inequality.

Like the parents we were born to.

Like the bodies we develop in the womb.

Like the first steps we take into society.

Like the power we're given.

Like the tides of our fortune.

Nobody chose these things for themselves.

These are differences set from the moment we're born.

These are differences set until the moment we die.

There was a time where I tried to change things.

I believed things could change if I lived the right way.

I believed that someday the world would come to save me.

But then there came something I could not do no matter how hard I tried.

Saving just a single life. That was all it was.

It was so simple, but no one could do it.

Even if I prayed, or begged, or cursed, nothing changed. No one couldn't change anything.

Almost as if it was meant to happen from the very beginning.

That was the meaning of the word “fate”.

I learned of fate, and I despaired.

I learned of fate, and I gave up.

I learned of fate, and I abandoned hope.

I would live like this, and die in this unfair world where fate was decided by God or whoever else.

The moment I was left all alone in the world, I abandoned everything.

That’s why it didn’t matter if I did nothing.

Even if I did nothing, the world would still turn on its own and I would keep living.

The outcome wouldn’t change whether I did something, or whether I did nothing.

As humans had no choice but to live in this predetermined, unequal world.

It was then that I encountered Relics.

A certain person owned a Relic could make otherwise impossible things happen.

It felt like it changed fate itself. No, not ‘felt like’—it *did* change fate.

It changed the inherent inequality of the world, and then brought about even more inequality.

Despite there being people who lived and died within the bounds of their allotted fate.

Despite the fact that there were many people like that in the world.

Despite that fact that I gave up because everyone was like that.

How could they use Relics to warp fate to their own convenience when everyone else suffered inequality and an inescapable fate? It was unforgivable.

I seized those Relics and destroyed them.

However I learned that this world was full of these so-called Relics.

I couldn't change the world by destroying just one.

I wanted to change the world.

I wanted to change it with my own hands.

But to do that I needed I certain Relic.

If I used that Relic along with my own, I could change the world for the better.

That's why I was searching for and collecting Relics.

To change the inherently equal world, and to put an end to source of the ever-increasing inequality.

To challenge the inequality of the world and change it to one where everyone is equal.



"R-run, Saki!"

Saki had come to save me after I was cornered by Asuka. With her quick thinking she was able to use the Mirror of Serenity to get me out of a jam.



But in the heat of the moment I ended up focusing too much on Asuka.

That boy had shown up behind Saki at some point.

I noticed him too late, but still shouted to warn her.

But Saki did not move.

Clearly Saki had noticed he was there. He was standing right behind her—there was no way she didn't notice. But Saki made no attempt to escape.

No, that wasn't right. It wasn't that she didn't want to run. It was that she *couldn't*.

He must have done something to Saki—she was essentially his hostage.

“Come to think of it, I never introduced myself did I? Just call me Shun.” The boy cheerily raised his hand and introduced himself.

“Let's go, Asuka.”

Asuka quickly ran to his side when he called for her.

I frantically tried to stop her, but then I bumped into something that stopped me from moving. I stuck out my hand and felt something solid even though there should have been nothing but empty air. It was almost like an invisible wall.

“Huh?”

“You won't be able to reach the door.”

I found myself looking at Shun.

On his face was a faint smile.

Sitting snugly in the palm of his hand was a small black box with geometric patterns.

“Labyrinth.” He announced the name of the Relic that was blocking my way.



Labyrinth—in other words, a maze.

“You sure ran into some problems, didn’t you, Asuka. I came here because I was worried.”

Shun spoke to her with the kind voice one might use for a child.

Asuka showed him her phone to reply. She was using text so I had no idea what she said. The invisible wall was stopping me from going to Saki’s side.

“That’s not right, Asuka.” Shun refuted whatever she wrote. I was curious about what they were talking about.

Asuka took out a triangular pendant from her pocket, and held it up by its chain. The pendant seemed to show some kind of reaction and began to spin in an arc.

“Though it does seem Dowsing’s showing a reaction.”

Shun turned his gaze from Asuka to Saki.

“I’ll be taking you with us somewhere else. If possible, I’d like you to come quietly. I don’t want to be rough, but there are ways to compel you if we must.”

“Wait!” I heard those ominous words and banged on the invisible wall.

I tried to stop Shun and Asuka from taking Saki away, but knew more than anyone that my words would have no effect.

“Well then, shall we go?”

Right as Shun was about to leave, Asuka showed him something on her phone again.

“Ah, really? Well that’s a problem. And his path’s blocked off by Labyrinth, isn’t it...

“Hey man, could you do me a favor and give Otodama back?” Shun boldly asked.

I looked at Otodama— the flute I had stolen from Asuka. How was I even supposed to give it back when there was an invisible wall between me and Shun? At any rate, maybe I could use it as a bargaining tool.

“Do something about this Labyrinth wall thing right now if you want me to give it back.”

“Fine then, I guess you can keep it.” Shun easily shot my negotiation attempt down.

He gave up on Otodama and turned back to the door.

“Hey!”

“You should know your place.”

Shun then urged Saki to the door, looking almost like he was escorting her. Saki herself quietly went along, perhaps thinking it was best not to resist.

But before she left, she turned to me just once.

And in her eyes, I saw fear, and a plea for me to save her.

“Saki!”

I knew it was pointless, but I couldn’t help shout.

I knew it was impossible, but I couldn’t help but pound on the wall.

But it had no effect.

Shun and the others neither waited, nor took down the invisible wall.

“If you’re thinking of following us to negotiate, you have to bring Otodama with you. Don’t forget. You have to bring it.”

The cold sound of the door closing group through the roof.

“Shit!”

I pressed my hands on the invisible walls, and slumped down on my knees.

I couldn’t do anything.

And Saki was taken so easily.

“Argh!” I ganged my head on the invisible wall.

It wasn’t to break the wall, but to break out of my pointless thoughts.

Reflecting, and lamenting on my powerlessness wasn’t what I was supposed to be doing now.

“Calm down.”

Shun and Asuka were after Relics.

The problem was with how much information they had at right now. From the gym at Toujou-san’s school, the concert hall with Maria and finally the time spent tailing Saki and me today. How much information did they get from all that?

Going by how they took Saki with them, there were a few things I could gather.

If all they wanted was to steal the Mirror of Serenity from Saki, there would have been no need to take her along. Either they wanted to

use her as a hostage and steal my Vision, or they were going to try using her to get more information on Relics.

My worst fear was that they even learned about Tsukumodo Antique Shop and were investigating it, among other things.

I didn't think Saki was simply going to tell them about Vision and Tsukumodo.

But if Saki insisted on silence or tried to tell a clumsy lie, there was a chance that Shun and the others would do something to her.

There was no time.

The things I needed to do hadn't changed, but thinking things through had calmed me down.

First thing was to figure out how to break through this invisible wall and follow after Shun and the others.



I took the girl with me and went down the emergency stairs.

I was thinking I'd have to do something if she tried to escape, but now it seemed that concern was unnecessary.

We went down the emergency stairs and got to the first floor.

"Well then...Maino-san, right? Why don't you tell me what kind of Relic this is?" I held up the mirror Relic we had taken from her earlier. "Though from the look of it, it seems to be a Relic that blocks sound."

"... It's the Mirror of Serenity."

She answered quietly and slowly, choosing her word carefully.

“So what are you going to do now that you know? Do really want Relics that much? If you’re collecting them for fun, then I suggest you stop. Relics bring misfortune on their owners.”

“Sorry, but I’m not interested in playing questions and answers with you about that right now. If you’re trying to buy time, then I’d say give it up.”

I didn’t think he could break through Labyrinth, but in the off chance that he did escape, it would take him so long that there was no need for me to rush.

“You think so?”

Asuka wasn’t exactly expressive herself, but this girl was also something else.

“You believe in him? Well, I suppose that’s alright. Let’s get started now then to out of respect for him.”

I had no intention of keeping up the small talk, of course.

“I’d like you to cooperate with us.”

“Huh?”

“You said before that we were collecting Relics for fun, but that’s not correct. We’re working to achieve a goal, and for that goal, we need you. More precisely, we need your Relic.”

“What are you going to use the Mirror of Serenity for?”

“No, that’s not the one we need.”

I fixed my eyes on her and spoke.

“I’m talking about the other Relic that you possess.”



After moment of silence. "... I don't have any other Relics." She replied with the same unchanging expression.

The lack of any reaction was so complete, that I was liable to believe her even if there existed a Relic that could read people's hearts.

"We've met twice now haven't we, you and him both. There was the time at that one girl's school, and at the concert hall. Ah, that's three times if you include today."

"It's all the same to me."

"I suppose it is. Regardless, there was something I was extremely curious about in our first two encounters. The first time we met, you evaded all the falling in the gym even though you didn't have a Fortune Relic."

"You two didn't have a single scratch on you either."

"That's true, but that's because we were the ones who caused it. Though I guess there's no point in admitting to it now. Either way, my guess was that you two were further away from the rest of the crowd and managed to evade because you noticed before everyone else."

"That's right."

"And then there was the incident at the concert. You hit the fire alarm before anything even happened at the venue, didn't you? We were thinking of dropping the stage light and killing Maria and her mother at that time, and would have never imagined that the fire alarm would go off first. Though in the end, I suppose it was good thing everyone was able to evacuate."

"Yes, that was fortunate."

“Now allow me to check something.” I said, and took a pendant out of my pocket. “This is a Relic that reacts to other Relics. It’s called Dowsing.”

“.....” She swallowed ever so slightly, but otherwise kept silent.

“I’ll say this one more time. We need the Relic that you possess, because with it, we will—

—Change the world.



“Did something happen? Saki-chan took the Mirror of Serenity earlier, but she hasn’t come back.”

The very first thing I did was call Towako-san.

He usual teasing tone was gone. I had yet to return to the shop and Saki had taken the Mirror of Serenity with her, so Towako-san had an idea of what was going on to some extent.

I was thankful for that because it made the conversation so much faster,

“We were attacked by the pair from before. They took Saki hostage.”

There wasn’t much time, so I just gave her the simple version of what happened before hanging up.

Thankfully I was able to learn about the characteristics of Labyrinth from Towako-san while I still had her on the phone.

Labyrinth was a Relic that prevented its target from reaching a set location, or in other words, a goal. In my example, it created a maze that prevented me from reaching the entrance to the roof. It was possible Shun also used Labyrinth as a practical way to keep Saki from escaping.

But at the end of the day, it was still a maze. There wasn't a maze in existence that had no route to the goal. Basically I just needed to find the way out.

What I had to do was simple, but it was by no means easy.

I slid my hand along the invisible wall, and it bumped into another wall. Then I stood up and continued to the right. The wall continued that way until it reached the fence. I stretched my hand out to the fence, but hit an invisible wall this time too.

There was a wall blocking my path in front of me and to the right.

I ran to the left. Suddenly the hand I had sliding along the wall thrust out into the air.

"There's a space here."

I groped along the wall to get a better feel for the space. There was enough room for someone to squeeze through.

I pushed myself through that space and continued forward.

But just as I got within three steps of the door, I was stopped by another wall.

Sure enough there was a wall to my right, but nothing blocking me on the left.

Maybe if I were able to see the walls, I would have known this was a path that turned left.

I continued left, but then bumped into another wall. This time there was nothing blocking my path to the left or right. It was a T shaped intersection.

If I went right, I'd be closer to the door. If I went left, I'd be further way.

... Given that this was a maze, it wasn't likely for there to be a path straight to the door.

I choose to go left, temporarily distanced myself from the exit.

"Tch"

But after going for a while, I was stopped again.

My expectations were betrayed. It was like Shun had me in the palm of his hand.

"Shit"

I kicked the invisible wall, then turned around and headed towards the door.

This route also ended at a wall, and once again the path split to the left and right. Which one should I choose this time?

Labyrinth—the invisible maze. Yeah, it definitely was huge and invisible.

I chose the left path and continued. This one was a dead end too, but this time only a path to the left was open. I was already quite far from the door now.

Should I return? Or should I keep going?

I chose to continue—and the next thing I knew, I was right back where I started.

"Shit!" I shouted. My irritation had reached a boiling point.

It was nauseating just how good this Relic was for buying time.

Who knew what kind of horrible things Saki was going through while I was stuck doing this, and yet here I was, taking on a maze in a place like this.

What could I do? No, this wasn't the time to stand around worried.  
If I didn't break through this maze—



"Change...the world?" She showed looked slightly bewildered after hearing of our goal.

"That's right. We're working to change the world."

"Is something like that even..."

"It is possible," I declared, "as long as we have your Relic and mine together."

"....."

"We promise not to harm you if you cooperate. But if you refuse, we'll take it by force."

Things would probably get violent if it came to that.

"That's why, if possible..."

"Can that Relic change the past?" She didn't wait for me to finish, and conveyed her own wish.

She wanted to change the past.

I glanced Asuka. She used to have the same wish in the past.

But her wish didn't come true.

Not even my Relic could change what happened in the past.

"Unfortunately that's impossible." I gave her a straight answer.

It would have been simple to hide that truth and take her in as our ally, but that would have been cowardly behavior. I couldn't betray her hopes like that, even if it resulted in us having to steal her Relic.

My own honor would not allow me to earn her trust by hiding the truth and telling her lies.

That would make me no different from those who hid the truth and used Relics to make a perfect world for themselves as they saw fit.

"The events of the past cannot be changed."

I could see the clear disappointment from her face.

"But if I change the world, maybe I could also grant your wish. If it's alright with you, could you tell me about it? Your wish, that is."

"....."

She didn't answer.

Her wish wasn't one she could share easily, it seemed.

"Does your wish have any connection the Relic he has?"

"!" Her expressionless mask broke, and now her face was the very picture of surprise.

"You thought we didn't notice?"

"....."

"Well we did, and that's why we've chosen the best way to do this. A method that doesn't harm him or you."

Rage flared up in her eyes.

"Are you saying you'll do something to Tokiya?"

“If we must...” I responded.



“Shit!”

I slammed my fist against the invisible wall.

I was now back at the starting point.

Just a few meters away from the door.

But it was so far.

I couldn't make it there no matter how hard I tried.

Was there really an exit to this maze?

What if it made to look like there was an exit when there really wasn't?

Doubts like that were starting to pop up in my mind.

No, stop. My heart would break if I kept thinking this way. There's no way I could give up. Saki was waiting for me.

I looked at my cellphone.

I was using it to mark down my route so I wouldn't forget.

It was a top down view of the maze, with the door facing north, with numbers of steps written down for all the paths going north, south, east, and west. I would have been able to draw an easier to understand map if I had a pen and paper on me.

I double checked the route.

There were four paths from the starting point, no more than that. From there they split into countless other paths. I had input dozens

of routes into my phone at this point. Enough to make me if I really hadn't found all of them. .

But the fact that I had yet to reach the entrance meant there had to be at least some routes I hadn't discovered.

"Where is it? Where am I overlooking?"

Suddenly a sudden gust of wind blew around the building.

The wind blew in some leaves that passed through the invisible walls.

It was almost like the leaves were mocking me; they were completely unaffected by the invisible walls and floated right to the door.

"....."

In the end, that's all this maze was doing. It was blocking me from the entrance.

It was an imperfect maze that couldn't even stop leaves.

That's right. The maze wasn't perfect. There had to be some gaps I could take advantage of.

The wind blew again.

I turned around to face it.

The roof of this building was higher than its surroundings. All I could see were buildings far in the distance, and a clear blue sky.

Suddenly a flash of inspiration, not the noise of static, ran through the back of my head.



"Really?" She asked in a vanishing voice. "Can you really do something like that?" She sounded full of hope.



“Yeah. I won’t lie.”

Once more. My own honor would not allow me to earn her trust by hiding the truth and telling her lies. That’s why I admitted the truth.

“I will change the world. If you cooperate, we can change the world. Even if the past can’t be changed, we can surely reach the world you desire.”

I wasn’t saying that because I knew exactly what her wish was.

But if it was related to Relics, then I would probably be able to grant it.

I could sense that her heart was starting to waver.

What was it that was making her hold on?

Did she want proof that her wish could be granted, or...

“If you want proof, then you’ll first need to tell me your wish.”

“My wish is...”

“I should be able to grant it for you.”

“My wish is...”

All of a sudden I heard a clanging that sounded like something was hitting metal. That sound was clearly approaching here.

I looked at Asuka.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and listened carefully to the approaching sound.

“[Someone is coming]”

At the exact same time Asuka told me what was happening, a shadow fell from the atrium of the first floor.

The one who appeared was Kurusu Tokiya, his shoulders heaving.



With my frantic arrival, I saw the people I was looking for.

Shun, Asuka, and Saki.

“Saki!”

“... Tokiya.”

I shouted to her, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Saki began to run towards me.

But Shun was faster.

He ran his finger across Labyrinth, which he had in his hand, and Saki suddenly stopped, looking as if she had bumped into something. Shun must have put up a wall to stop her from going anywhere.

Saki tried to yell something, but her voice didn’t reach me either, because Asuka had taken the Mirror of Serenity from Saki earlier, and was pointing it towards her.

Neither Saki herself, nor her voice could reach me now.

“You arrived faster than I thought you would. Well done escaping from Labyrinth so quickly. But there’s something I don’t understand...I noticed you didn’t come down the stairs.”

“That’s right.”

“Meaning...wow, what a surprise. *That’s* what you resorted to?”

“Yeah, well I wouldn’t have made it without surprising you. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

I thought back to when the winds turned in my favor.

The wind was blowing, carrying with it leaves that floated right through Labyrinth’s invisible walls. Those leaves were what showed me the way out of the maze.

I wasn’t talking about a way to get to the door. What I realized was that the leaves floated into Labyrinth from behind me.

Which meant that there was also an open path behind me.

And that led to me jumping off the side of the building.

I didn’t just drop to the ground, of course. The building was still under construction, and that meant there was still netting in place to protect the exterior and glass, and also to keep the scaffolding from blowing away.

I used that netting and the scaffolds to run down the side of the building.

Although Vision didn’t show me a future of death, I held on the unreliable netting for dear life as I went down all eight floors. I couldn’t even begin to describe the terror. By the time I got to the bottom, the hands I held onto the netting with, and the legs I ran down the scaffolds with were so tense, they hurt.

Still, I made it somehow.

“I’m here for you.”

I couldn’t exactly say I made it in time.

But I was still here.

“I’d like to remind you that going around the maze is against the rules.”

“I wanna remind you, that kidnapping people and stealing their Relics is against the rules.”

“I suppose you’re right. Either way, we both went against the rules of the world the moment we used Relics. At this point these kind of infractions mean nothing.”

“Don’t try to act like we’re the same.”

Shun shrugged. That gesture, along with his lackadaisical attitude hit a nerve.

“You know, I didn’t think this would end up turning into a standoff. What to do do...? By the way, you did bring Otodama with you, right?”

“Obviously. It’s my bargaining tool.” I held up Otodama for him to see.

“I’d like to congratulate you, but if possible, could you not get in our way?”

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but you can’t be surprised that I’m going to try stopping you.”

“I suppose so. If only you had arrived just a little later, I could have...no, forget it. Anyway, what are you going to do?”

“Let me think about it after I capture you two.”

I didn’t give Shun time to protest, and ran to grab him

“Oh well. I figured things would turn out like this.” He waited for my charge with a relaxed attitude.

My outstretched hand reach Shun, and—

“... Huh?”

—My hands came out empty, even though I was sure I had gotten him.

I lost my balance, stumbled, and fell onto the floor.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?”

I looked up and saw Shun standing there, hands in his pockets with a smile on his face.

I was absolutely sure I had caught him, but he had dodged by a paperthin margin. It almost felt like the type of move a master martial artist would pull off.

“Shit.”

I quickly got back up and tried to grab Shun one more time.

This time, I didn’t look away, and kept my eyes on him until the very end as I reached out to grab him.

“Wha—?”

But again, I just barely failed to catch him.

“You know, I’m actually not that good with these kinds of physical altercations.”

Shun was so relaxed, it was pissing me off.

“Did you really think you could do anything after going through a few fights with Relics?” His unpleasant smile grew even wider. “You might have thought the fact you arrived here would be enough to win, but now you’ve been caught in another maze. A labyrinth where

I am the goal. Surely you didn't think making mazes was all this Relic was good for."

Labyrinth hadn't just been a tool to stop me from escaping the roof.

Originally it was to prevent people from reaching the treasure at the center of the maze.

I was already trapped inside the next one—a maze that blocked all paths to Shun.

... How was I supposed to deal with this?

In order to reach him, I had to take Labyrinth away.

But in order to take Labyrinth away, I had to reach him first.

I have no way to beat him without doing something about this dilemma.

"So how are you going to break through this paradox?"

I was naive. What the hell was I thinking, assuming everything would be alright once I escaped the roof?

Now I understood why he was so relaxed.

At a glance, he seemed to be a weak looking boy that was younger than me, but given just how many Relics he had, he had probably gone through battlefields that someone like me had never experienced.

I had also run into classmates and criminals that went wild with Relics.

But Shun was different from my usual opponents.

He wasn't just going wild with his Relics, he was *using* them very deliberately.

Fear of this unfathomable opponent ran through every part of my body.

But there was no way I could break here. Not until I saved Saki.

I was going to find a way out of this, just like I did when I escaped from the roof.



He had a look in his eyes like he was searching for something as he made his next move.

First, he tried to grab me, same as all the other times.

That didn't work at all, of course; he missed me completely.

However, unlike before, he didn't stumble and lose his balance this time.

Meaning he already knew wasn't going to catch me and came prepared.

Next he threw a punch.

Naturally, he missed.

Next he through a kick.

Naturally, he missed.

I had a vague idea of what he was after.

He was trying to find out what could, and couldn't reach me.

I suppose he was going to try a lot more things to see what kind of attacks were effective against me after this.

Indeed, it was an appropriate choice for someone involved with Relics like him.

He understood that Relics were not necessarily all-powerful.

... This was turning into a bit of a pain.

To think, if only he had arrived just a little later, everything would have gone exactly according to plan...



My grabs, punches, and kicks weren't working...nothing was reaching Shun.

It was just like he said, all my paths to him were totally blocked off.

Going by the exchange so far, it was probably safe to assume that I wouldn't be able to break through Labyrinth with a direct attacks.

Put another way, I needed something else.

If Labyrinth's power was currently directed at me, then that meant Saki was free to move.

It didn't look like her movement was being restricted, but I wasn't planning to ask Saki to do something and put her in harm's way.

I put my hand in my pocket to confirm it was still there.

*Otodama.*

To be honest, it wasn't the type of Relic that could be used lightheartedly, but this wasn't the time to worry about that. Moreover, I was feeling anything but lighthearted right now.

If I used this, maybe I'd reach Shun—

I put Otodama to my lips and blew.



But all I got was a high pitched whistle. No attacks came out like when Asuka used it.

I tried blowing again and again, but nothing changed.

“Otodama isn’t a Relic you can learn to use in an afternoon. Not even I can use it.”

Shun must have anticipated this, because he didn’t look shaken in the slightest.

Otodama wasn’t the kind of tool where you could just blow into it and have it automatically produce the sound and phenomenon you wanted. You still needed to have the appropriate technique to produce the right sound.

That was my miscalculation.

My grabs, punches, and kicks didn’t work, and now the Relic I was putting my hopes on was useless too. What options did I have left? There was hardly anything else I could do.

“... Shit!” I threw Otodama at Shun.

“Wait, wha—” Shun exclaimed, looking surprised.

“I never thought you’d actually throw the Relic. How unexpected.”

Looks like I was able to catch him off guard a little bit. But aside from making me feel a little better, that didn’t help my situation at all.

“Don’t you think you’re being too reckless here?”

“If can’t use it, I don’t need it”, I spat and charged at Shun one more time.

It went without saying that Shun dodged my attack.

But I had already anticipated that.

I didn't turn around, and kept running straight past him.

My target was Asuka.

She raised Otodama up, having picked it up when I threw it earlier.

But even still, I wasn't cursing myself for being stupid enough to throw my enemy a weapon.

I already knew this was happen. What I did was intentional, and all part of the plan as I charged towards her..

The distance between she and I quickly shrunk.

I was close enough that if she tried to do something like collapse the ceiling, she'd be caught up in it too.

"Asuka!" Shun shouted to warn her.

She nodded in acknowledgment, put Otodama to her lips, and blew.

—What was she going to do?

A small boom came out of Otodama, the sound of an explosion, almost like a compressed air bomb.

Perfect. With the distance between us, it was impossible for her to pull off indirect attacks like collapsing the ceiling, or breaking something in the area.

A direct attack—this was definitely going to be a direct attack.

Knowing what was coming, I instantly jumped to the side.

And with me out of the way, there was now someone else directly in front of Asuka's line of fire—Shun

I hadn't thrown Otodama because I was reckless and angry. If my punches and kicks weren't working, then my only option was to

attack with a Relic. And if I couldn't use Otodama myself, I just had to give it to someone who could.

Everything was going according to plan, from Asuka picking up Otodama, to her using it for a direct attack.

Everything after this was going to be a gamble.

I looked in Shun's direction while I rolled out of the way.

There he was—standing there with a cool smile.

"What a shame." Shun started, sounding like he had seen through my strategy. "I can't be harmed by any attack that comes from Otodama."

Shun *should* have been hit by the shockwave that Otodama created, but he was just standing there looking composed.

The materials on the ground were caught in the blast, and they were lifted from the ground and slammed into the wall.

There definitely was a shockwave.

But it was only the area around Shun that seemed like it had no wind at all.

Shun didn't dodge this attack.

But even though he didn't dodge it, the attack still didn't reach him.

Was this also because of a Relic's power?"

"Disappointing, isn't it? You had a good plan, but I told you before, didn't I? You're reckless."

This gamble end in my loss.

I lost, and all I accomplished was handing over a weapon to the enemy.

Asuka fixed her gaze on me, and raised Otodama to her mouth one more time.



Leaving aside whether or not he could use it, I foresaw he would try to use Otodama against me and took measures beforehand.

However, I never imagined he would actually throw it at me.

Nothing would have changed even if he hit me, assuming it was even possible for his attacks to get past Labyrinth in the first place.

That wasn't the issue, though.

The problem was that I never considered that someone who knew the value of Relics would ever do such a thing.

In the end, there was a limit to what I could predict.

People didn't always behave as I expected them to.

But that didn't matter anymore.

All we needed to do now was take him down with Otodama.

With that, the fight would end.

And when it did, our wish would be granted.



"Why don't you behave yourself now?"

There still weren't many things I could hide behind here on the ground floor. I dealt with this problem the first time by running up the stairs, but there was no way I could do that now.

Leaving Saki here and running away simply wasn't an option.

I noticed her try to take advantage of the opportunity and move while Labyrinth's power wasn't being aimed at her, but Shun was a second faster. He ran his finger on Labyrinth and sealed her movement again.

"That applies to you too, behave yourself. I won't let you go to him."

"He's right, stay put. I'll be there to save you soon." I smiled at Saki, even though I really didn't have that leeway right now.

"Asuka, do it."

At Shun's signal, Asuka raised Otodama to her mouth.

I hid myself behind a nearby pillar.

A moment later, I heard the same exploding sound as before, followed shortly by a matching blast.

The pillar on my back shaking from the force of the explosion.

*Was she seriously trying to kill me?* A cold sweat went down my shivering spine.

Then I heard the sound of something breaking above my head.

I responded instinctively, and leaped forward without even looking up.

A few seconds later, steel poles came crashing down at the spot I had been standing just moments before, clanging as they landed and rolled on the ground.

Just from what I could see, Asuka had a number of things she could use to attack in this unfinished building, from the lumber leaning

against the wall, to the steel poles assembled above us, to the concrete chunks off the ceiling .

Next, I heard a pop, and the light above my head burst into pieces, showering glass above my head.

I jumped to the side and rolled to avoid the shards.

Having rolled out from behind the pillar, I found myself in front of Asuka.

Thanks to that, I could now see Saki's face too.

She was still reflected in the Mirror of Serenity, and Labyrinth's invisible walls were stopping her from going anywhere.

But even still, Saki was pounding against the invisible walls, trying to tell me something.

*Don't worry. Otodama can't hurt me at all.* ...I tried to imitate Shun, but couldn't force myself to be so relaxed, and my faces cramped up instead.

Asuka focused on me, and played Otodama again.

Boom!

Another explosion rang out, sending steel beams flying at me almost like someone threw them.

I instinctively protected my face with my hands.

Of the six poles, four of them went in a different direction, and one of them hit me in the side. Before I could even scream out in pain though, the remaining one then hit me square in the head.

A wet substance flowed down from my head and dampened my forehead.

I would have been skewered by now if it was the tip of the pole that hit me.

But this was still fine.

Vision hadn't shown me anything.

I wasn't facing life threatening danger just yet.

I wiped away the blood from my head with my sleeve and responded to Asuka's next attack.

It was the same kind of explosion used against Shun earlier.

But due, to the damage on my head, I had failed to hear it in time.

And that was a fatal mistake.

I took the shockwave almost head on and was slammed to the ground.

Pain battered my body, and for a moment, I blacked out.

It was only the pain from my head bumping into the lumber leaning on the wall that let me hold onto my consciousness.

I was getting hit on the head an awful lot between yesterday and today. What was I going to do if I got even stupider somehow?

It was then, in that moment, that I saw Saki.

She was shaking her head—and if I wasn't imagining things, she wasn't expressionless as usual. Saki looked like she was about to cry.

It hurt. Never mind my head, there was another part of me that felt an aching pain.

*Don't make that face. Just your usual expressionless face is fine.*

... Ah, I was the one who caused her to make that face, wasn't I?

What should I do? How can I settle this without Saki crying, without her making that face?

Simple. I just had to beat these two.

If I beat them and saved Saki, then what more did I need?

... That said, it was going to be a bit harder than usual this time.

I was all out of ideas.

Vision hadn't shown me anything, which meant I wasn't going to die just yet...but I wasn't optimistic enough for that to be a comforting thought.

It was probably only a matter of time before Vision showed me a future of my death.

And when that time came, I wasn't confident I'd have the strength to avoid it.

*Stop being so weak*, I tried to psych myself up.

Not for anyone's sake. Not even Saki.

Then, I heard the snap of something coming apart.

The wire holding the leaning pieces of lumber together fell onto my face.

There's no way I'd survive if I got pinned under the lumber like this.

I leaped up, and quickly jumped out of the way.

"Ah!"

Asuka walked over to inspect after I jumped out of the way, perhaps to see if I had been crushed underneath.



If she's this close...

I psyched myself up, and leaped at Asuka to snatch Otodama from her, and

*Smack!*

Suddenly my eyes were spinning.

For a moment, I had no idea what just happened.

I crashed into something and fell to the ground.

It was as I lay there that I realized—

—*Labyrinth's invisible wall.*

I didn't even have the luxury to feel regret falling for the bait, because when I sat up, the next thing I saw was...

"This can't be real."

The sound of a rumbling forklift engine as it made its way towards me.

*Otodama can even make sounds like that?* I could only bounce those stupid thoughts in my mind while I waited for the forklift.

My body couldn't move, but my mind was still pointlessly active.

And it wasn't like I could think efficiently given the circumstances. Pointless thought were all I was capable of now.

—It's all over.

But just when the thought went through my mind, by sheer coincidence, a number of steel beams suddenly crashed down in front of me, and acted as a shield to stop the forklift.

It seemed I still had some luck left somehow.

“Looks like I’m late.”, I heard a reliable voice say from behind me.

The timing seemed almost intentional, but I was going to assume it was just a happy coincidence.

Towako-san had come for us.



I suppose it would be cruel to call it Asuka’s weakness.

Her Otodama was actually capable of making direct attacks.

A sound to tear skin, to break bones, to cut blood vessels...there were countless sounds she could use to injure people.

But Asuka wasn’t good at that.

Her skill with Otodama wasn’t the issue; the problem was with how she wanted to use it.

If Asuka was left with no choice, or was in a dire situation—or maybe if I asked her to, she would likely dirty her hands.

But I didn’t want to force her if I could avoid it.

I didn’t want to hurt her.

... Perhaps you could call that my weakness.

But it was just a matter of time.

No doubt this battle would soon come to an end.

Was Maino just going to forgive us and cooperate even though we hurt him so much?

No, perhaps it was best not to dwell on that.

She all but wanted nothing to do with us now.

But all we could do to achieve our dreams was harden our hearts against pity.

Asuka used Otodama to play an engine sound.

A nearby forklift responded to her playing skills that could even be called art.

The forklift wasn't moving all that quickly, but I suppose it was good enough given the heavy steel beams it was carrying.

This whole thing was going to go a lot faster once he was concussed or otherwise stopped from moving.

We would get what we needed and leave.

Just as the forklift was moments away from hitting him—

“What?”

It was stopped by a cascade of steel beams.

A smile returned to his face even though he was still covered in injuries and was just on the verge of giving up moments ago.

“Just like you to show up with this timing.”

A lone woman had stepped onto the stage.



“Looks like they kicked the crap out of you.”

“Oh it wasn't that bad.”

Towako-san's banter sparked a fire in me, even if I knew she was doing it on purpose. In fact, it was *because* she was doing on purpose that I wanted to act tough.

“So did you bring the thing I asked for?”

Truth was, I had called Towako-san earlier and asked her to bring a certain Relic with her. With it in our possession, we could probably find away to turn this fight around.

“The thing you asked me for...”

The Relic I needed was Mind’s Voice.

I was going to use it to read Shun and Asuka’s minds to learn more about their plan as well as the Relics they owned.

“I couldn’t bring it with me.”

My mind went completely blank at Towako-san’s reply.

“Why!?” The next thing I knew, I was shouting.

The glimmer of hope that I finally had was disappearing all too quickly.

“I looked, but it wasn’t where I left it last. Did you guys go in there before on your own and take it or something?”

“Ugh. Actually that’s...”

“Really now. That’s why I keep telling you guys not to go in there.”

Even though we kind of brought this on ourselves, this turn of events hurt.

“I can’t call it a replacement exactly. but I did bring another Relic instead. I’ll try to work something out with it.”

“Replacement?”

“No time to explain. Tell me what happened here first.”

“Right. Well, let me say these guys are the worst.”

I told her about how they kidnapped Saki, how Asuka’s attacks had driven me into a corner, and how Labyrinth was blocking all of my attacks.

“Is that your friend?”

Shun’s smile didn’t falter even after Towako-san’s abrupt entrance. He took out a Relic from his pocket, the one they called Dowsing, or something. It looked like he was trying to see whether or not Towako-san had any Relics.

“I’ve got a Relic, alright.” Towako-san didn’t bother hiding anything and flat out admitted it.

“Towako-san...”

But Shun kept Dowsing swinging.

“I just told you I had a Relic, didn’t I?. I don’t see why you need to keep checking.”

“You think I’ll just believe what an enemy tells me?”

“You don’t believe me? There has to be more to it than just that...I think you’re looking for something else. Dowsing doesn’t just react when there are Relics nearby. Its movement can also reveal a Relic’s name. At the end of the day, what you really want to know is the name of my Relic, isn’t it?”

Shun looked shocked.

“Tokiya, not knowing the names of a Relic puts them at a disadvantage.”

Towako-san pointed that fact out with her usual unpleasant and lighthearted grin, wiping the relaxed smile right off Shun’s face.

“You seem to be quite a dangerous person.”

“I suppose I am for people who use Relics to commit crimes.”

“Now, then”, Towako started, and took a deep breath. “I’ll have you return my precious employees back to me.”





Dowsing's power worked by moving in reaction to nearby Relics.

Tracking its movement would then spell out the name of said Relic.

But it wasn't all-powerful in that it could tell me about every everything.

There was a limit to the area it could search for one, and the further the distance, the more unclear the movement became. The fact that investigating took some time was another of its downsides.

Additionally, because its movement was dependent on the chain it swung from, Dowsing was also weak to outside forces like the wind. This wasn't too much of an issue if all I wanted to know whether or not someone had a Relic, but it was hard to use to if I wanted to determine a Relic's name.

That was the reason I didn't use Dowsing on the roof earlier. There was no way to expect an accurate answer with all the wind blowing there.

But why did this woman know all this?

She knew a lot. Too much, even.

Who was she, exactly? She was able tell a Relic's name and power at a glance.

Was that the result of some Relic ability?

Or was she just that deeply knowledgeable about Relics?

Either way, things weren't looking good the way they were going.



This situation was only going to get worse if I didn't make the first move.



"Tokiya, which one is harder to deal with: Otodama, or Labyrinth?"

After thinking about it for a bit, I responded, "Labyrinth."

True, there was nothing more annoying than Otodama's attacks, but if you asked me which one was harder to deal with, I had to say it was Labyrinth. Given that fact that it made all my attacks ineffective, among other things, I didn't see any way to win.

"Got it. I'll do something about Labyrinth, so you do something about Otodama."

"You really think I..."

*...could do something like that?*, I didn't finish that sentence.

If Towako-san said she was going to do it, then I would believe her.

Things were looking better now that she was here.

That said, it didn't mean there was a surefire strategy for victory.

Towako-san probably knew that too, and that's why she was going for a brute force surprise attack without waiting to get a better feel for the situation. It was do or die, and if there was any time to win, this was it.

"I'm off."

I chose to believe in Towako-san and ran towards Asuka.

It looked like Shun had snapped out of his daze; Labyrinth was still in his hand.

But Towako-san told me she was going to do something about him—

Asuka raised Otodama up.

—Which meant my job was to do something about her.

Asuka's reflexes and judgement ability weren't all that great, so if I could confuse her, then victory was mine.

Thanks to the series of attacks from before, there was now some distance between Asuka and Shun.

I positioned myself so that Shun came diagonally between me and her as I ran towards Asuka. She must have recalled the event from earlier, because that caused her to hesitate from attacking for just a moment.

That was the chance I needed. I took advantage of that moment to close the distance between us.

Shun was watching, and put his finger on Labyrinth to stop me.

But Towako-san made her move before he could do anything.

“.....”

I couldn't make out what she was saying from behind me, but I did gather that she was muttering something.

Then I heard the soothing sound of a bell ring out from behind me.

And immediately after—

“Ah!”

Labyrinth slipped out of Shun's hand and landed on the floor.

It was too perfect to have been a coincidence.

In other words, the Relic Towako-san had caused it. Now there was nothing blocking my path forward.

“Tokiya!”

Towako-san’s voice urged me on from behind.

Asuka was surprised that Shun dropped Labyrinth and was slow to react. She recovered in time to play Otodama, but in her panic, the sound she produced was at best a harmless pop that wouldn’t have even killed a fly.

“Asuka!” Shun yelled.

Asuka panicked and tried to play Otodama again.

But I was now close enough to snatch it now.

I stretched out my arm to grab Otodama, and—

Bang! An attack sent me flying back.

—What just happened?

I was so sure that I made it.

I was so sure I snatched Otodama before Asuka could play another sound.

But before my hand reached it, there was an explosion, and I was suddenly sent flying back.

“Tokiya!”

Towako-san’s voice woke me up, and I saw Asuka standing right in front of me. She was about to play Otodama again.

She wasn’t close enough for me to counter attack, and to make things worse, I was in a terrible position.

I wasn't going to make it...

Tokiya—!

It felt like I was hearing a voice.

The next thing I knew, I was right next to Saki.

I saw her soundless screams.

She pounded on the invisible wall, shouting at me with a voice that couldn't reach.

It was that voice that let me see a way to save myself.

If I was here, that meant—

I quickly grabbed the mirror in front of me, the Mirror of Serenity, and held it up.

Reversal at the brink of death, and without a moment to spare.

I pointed the Mirror of Serenity at Asuka, enveloping her in a perfect silence—

“The Mirror of Serenity's silence cannot block Otodama.” I heard Shun say from behind me.

Asuka looked unconcerned even as she was reflected in the Mirror of Serenity. She raised Otodama to her lips and let off the sound of an explosion.

That's right, I heard the sound.

Why...?

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like I was frozen stiff, my body couldn't move.

Suddenly a shadow darted out in front of me.

That shadow took the brunt of the hit, and was sent flying past me.

I didn't have to take a moment to wonder what that was.

Even as dazed as I was, I knew.

"Towako-san!"

I ran over to where she was lying on the ground. It almost looked like she had been hit with a real bomb; her usual shirt and suit pants were tattered, and her body—

"Towako-san!"

"....."

"Wake up! Get a hold of yourself!"

"... Don't make such a pathetic voice" Towako-san's face was pained, but it was the same unpleasant smile as always.

"At my signal, go save Saki.", she whispered in my ear.

"But you..."

"I actually put in some effort for once, so make it worth something."

I saw now that Towako-san had taken Relic into her hand at some point.

She had done it. She actually kept her word.

Completely different from me.

"I'm sorry. All I've been doing is wasting my chances."

I should have been able to make it.

I should have been able to steal Otodama before Asuka could play a sound.

I did get to her in time, so there was only one reason I couldn't take it, and that was because I didn't do it right.

"You idiot. Get it together. There's no way you would have wasted your chance in that situation."

"But..."

"Doesn't it feel like that have another Relic? There has to be something. A reason why things keep going exactly as they want. You can't win without figuring out what it is, so do it."

Figure it out.

That was a tall order.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to try.

Labyrinth, Otodama, and Dowsing. They had another Relic besides those three.

They had another Relic hidden in their sleeves.

I sifted through all the information I had so far.

Grabbing Shun didn't work.

Neither did punching him.

Neither did kicking him.

It was fair to assume all of that was because of Labyrinth.

But the most recent event was completely different. The fact that the Mirror of Serenity didn't work was an entirely different matter.

The Mirror of Serenity did without a doubt stop Asuka's Otodama from making a sound when we were on the roof.

But despite that, it wasn't working now.

Remember.

*"The Mirror of Serenity's silence cannot block Otodama."*

It was Shun who said that.

Remember.

*"I can't be harmed by any attack that comes from Otodama."*

I knew that to be true as well.

Reality was going according to what Shun predicted.

... Was that really it? Could it actually be that the words Shun spoke had real life effects?

Wait, calm down. That was impossible.

If he had that kind of power, then everything would have gone exactly to his plan and this fight wouldn't have happened in the first place.

Remember.

When I failed to snatch Otodama from Asuka.

That wasn't because I wasted my chance.

It was a fact that Asuka didn't react in time. She hadn't played Otodama.

But despite that, a sound came out.

Due to some other power.

Remember.

*“Tokiya, not knowing the names of a Relic puts them at a disadvantage.”*

Those were Towako-san’s words.

Not knowing the name of a Relic put them at a disadvantage. Why did they need to know the names of Relics?

Because that information was valuable for them.

It was all connected. .

The power of the other Relic that Shun held.

From everything I had seen so far, there was only one possible conclusion.

Shun was able to manipulate the abilities of Relics that he knew the name of—

“Tokiya, are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

I knew what I had to do next.

“I’ll teach you the magic words that let you use this Relic’s power.”

Towako-san whispered the magic words in a weak voice, and place her Relic into my hand.

It was a small spherical Relic that was almost weightless, but to me, it felt extremely heavy.

“Just know that due to its special trait, there’s a limit to how much you can use it. My guess is that you get one more use, and that’s it. Make sure to only use it where it counts.”



“Got it.”

Towako-san pushed me away.

That was the signal.

She ran her finger across the surface of Labyrinth, and then her arm lost its strength and fell to the floor.

It hurt to see, but I couldn't afford to stop now.

I turned my back to Towako san, and dashed towards Shun.

Asuka immediately put Otodama to her lips and—and then she noticed...

... That Labyrinth's invisible walls were restricting her movement.

Her hand which held Otodama, was blocked from reaching her mouth so she couldn't play anything.

“Labyrinth cannot block Asuka's movement.”

Shun's words rekindled Asuka's spirit.

I couldn't afford to hold back.

Before Asuka could play a destructive sound, I held up the Relic Towako-san gave me.

“Unfortunately for you, I've already discovered the name of that Relic.”

Shun held Dowsing in his hand as he chuckled.

As long as he knew the name of a Relic, he could manipulate its power.

But it was too late. I didn't mind that, and chanted the magic words Towako-san taught me.

A moment later...

A chunk of concrete came falling down from the crumbling ceiling above Shun and Asuka's heads.

Unlike Otodama's direct attacks, this was indirect and couldn't be stopped even if the Relic's power was manipulated.

“—It doesn't fall on me and Asuka.”

However Shun chanted without hesitating.

The words to manipulate this Relic's power.

Remember.

In the gym. The incident at Toujou-san's school.

What were they doing when the glass on the ceiling shattered and rained down on everyone?

All the other students suffered huge injuries because of the falling glass.

The two Toujou sisters were unhurt because of their lucky Fortune bangles.

I saw what was going to happen before with Vision, so Saki and I were able to find cover.

But what about Shun and Asuka?

... The didn't attempt to dodge the glass. They just stood there with carefree smiles on their faces.

Almost as if there was no need to dodge the glass shards.

Or more accurately.

As if there was no need to dodge the glass that was broken by Otodama's power.

It was like that earlier too.

It wasn't that Shun was manipulating the sound that Otodama made. What he did was turn the ineffective pop that Asuka played before into an actual explosion.

In other words, Shun's Relic wasn't one that manipulated other Relics.

— It was one that warped *their effects*.

It was like that day in the gym all over again.

Shun and Asuka didn't take a single step, and the concrete chunk crashed down somewhere else.

I had been naive. My read on them hadn't been complete enough.

Or maybe I had just been wrong.

A thin smile returned to Shun's lips.

"Asuka!"

Asuka, who had escaped from Labyrinth, raised Otodama to her mouth, and set her aim on me.

Saki was in view.

*I hope you at least get away.*

But my wish went nowhere.

Saki, that reckless idiot, instead of using this chance to escape, saw it as a good opportunity to turn around and snatch Otodama from Asuka now that there was nothing stopping her.

As soon as she did, Asuka lost her aim on me.

But there was still enough time for her to fix her aim.

I couldn't do anything about Shun right now, but at the very least I could do something about her.

In which case, maybe I still had a chance.

I could make it in time—or so I thought.

I thought that this time for sure, I would reach to Asuka and steal Otodama before she should attack.

But I was mistaken.

I couldn't call this making it.

What I should have focused on wasn't attacking Shun, or stealing Otodama from Asuka. It was saving Saki. I had forgotten such an important thing.

There was no need for Asuka to aim at Saki, who was trying to snatch Otodama.

It was completely unnecessary, because Saki was right in front of her.

Otodama's attack blew her away, just as Towako-san was earlier.

... I did indeed make it before Asuka attacked me.

I made it to Saki, who was injured because of Otodama.

Then.

Asuka turned to Saki, and raised Otodama to her mouth, seemingly ready to finish her off.

There was nothing I could do except shield Saki with my body.



This wasn't part of the plan.

I didn't want to injure anyone like this.

I didn't want to hurt Asuka either.

But the fact was, we were simply facing that pressured, and lost didn't have many options.

Perhaps it would be harsh to say they deserved it, but this was something they brought upon themselves.

We had already completed our objective.

It was done a bit forcefully, but that was just how things went.

That said, if Kurusu Tokiya hadn't made it in time and we had escaped, then this kind tragedy of might have never happened.

Was this also the inescapable fate of those who got involved with Relics?

If yes, then I was going to change that fate.

That was why I was here.

... As if. I wasn't going to feel any better about this no matter how much I consoled myself.



How long was I unconscious for?

When I came to, I saw Shun and Asuka leaving the building with their backs towards me.

I saw them walking right past Towako-san, who was collapsed to the side.

Strange.

Saki wasn't there.

What happened to Saki?

Where was she?

Shun and Asuka kept walking away while I was busy wondering.

But who cared about them.

I didn't care what they did anymore.

What about Saki? How was she?

... Ah, here she is.

So she was this close to me the whole time.

This close to me...it looks like she collapsed?

I forced myself to crawl to where she was.

Her face was turned the other way.

Her back was facing me.

Shun and Asuka were continuing to leave while I was busy doing all this.

Who cares.

It didn't matter to me that I lost.

It didn't matter to me that they stole our Relics.

If Saki was alright, then that...

"... Saki?"

She was unresponsive, so I rolled her over to face me.

Her body turned over without resistance and put all its weight on me.

"... Saki. ... Saki? Hey, wake up! Hey!"

I shook her.

But there was no response.

Then, the beautiful silver hair that was covering Saki's face gently fell away.

"——!"

Then, I heard the sound of myself snap.





“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!!”

A wild animal scream escaped my throat.

Shun and Asuka turned around, looking surprised.

I charged to where they stood at the building entrance.

Going by the events so far, I knew I wasn't going to be able to do anything to them, but there wasn't enough reason left in me to consider that.

I leaped at them, and failed, falling to the ground in an unsightly heap. Then I quickly got up, and charged at them again.

Even when my head hit the ground, even when I crashed into a wall, even when I hit the construction material lying around, I kept attacking.

Over and over.

Like a bull going up against a matador, I charged at Shun.

My attacks may not have reached, they may have been meaningless, they may have been unsightly, but I didn't stop.

I didn't stop even after I exhausted my strength and stopped being able to stand back as quickly.

“Isn't it about time you came back to your senses?” Shun asked, sounding like he had been waiting for the opportunity.

However.

“... Like I could do that.”

Who in the world could respond reasonably after what they did

“How could you do that to her.” I asked them to buy enough time for me to stand up.

“How could you do that to her!?”

“For the sake of our goal.”

“Your goal...?”

“Surely you’ve realized by now what my Relic can do.”

“You can warp the effects of other Relics’ powers.”

“You don’t disappoint. That’s exactly right. That is the power of the Relic I have.”

“Then why—!?”

“But my wish can’t be granted with this alone.”, Shun continued.

“Don’t you think this world is unequal?”

“Don’t be naive. Of course the world is unequal.”

“Right. The world is unequal to everyone in the same way. That’s how it should be. But there’s exist objects in the world that bend that inequality to one’s will..”

“You mean...”

“Yes, I mean Relics.”

For the first time, Shun spoke with passion in his voice.

“You remember the incident before with the lucky bangles, right? Fortune and misfortune are normally granted unequally to people in unbalanced amounts, but they used Relics to make themselves lucky whenever they wanted. And it’s not just either . All Relics lead to

people using them for their own selfish needs. And you know, I just can't forgive that."

"So?"

"So I'm going to straighten the distortion. I'm going to straighten this world that has been distorted by Relics and return it to how it should have been. That is my mission as someone who understands Relics."

"You're not any different, you know."

"Hm?"

"You're the same as the rest of them." I laughed mockingly.

"I'm saying you're exactly the same as all those other people who were controlled by their Relics. There's not much difference between you and the girl you were mocking for obsessing over her own fortune. That naive stuff about a mission makes you even worse, I'd say."

"I can't let that pass without comment. She and I are completely different."

"What part of it is different? Look at all the things you did to get your hands on the Relics you wanted and—"

"I told you it was for our goal, didn't I? They simply weren't enough. The Relics I had before weren't enough to change the world. I can't possibly manipulate the effects of every single Relic. Even if I can when a Relic's power is activated, I can't do anything *before* it's activated. That's why..."

"That's why...?"

"...I had to take it."

What followed, were the last words I ever wanted to hear.



Grimoire, A Relic that could distort the effects of other Relics.

It's appearance was that of a book.

The words written in it became spells that activated when they were chant it.

Through Grimoire, I was able to warp the phenomena produced by any kind of Relic.

However, the restriction was that any Relic powers that weren't written down in advance couldn't be manipulated even if I chanted the magic words.

My usual strategy was to use Dowsing to investigate people used Relics selfishly and correct they distortions they created. If circumstances permitted, I also seized the Relic or destroyed it as well. .

That was my mission.

However, the restriction that things had to be written down in advance was a huge obstacle for my goal.

I had to write down every outcome the Relic could used for, and what would happen once it was distorted.

This restriction meant I was required to predict all the phenomena thatt could possibly occur.

But that was impossible for one person.

It wasn't like I could predict the future.

That's why I wrote down what I predicted would happen in an encounter. I wrote as much as I possibly could.

But people subverted expectations. The actions they took turned my predictions on their head.

I suffered scores of difficult situations because of missed predictions. How many losses must I have taken by now...

Of people I should have saved, of life, of happiness.

I had the power to save people, but I had failed countless times.

I had the power to warp Relic powers, but there was nothing I could do.

The sense of powerlessness was just so frustrating.

That's why I was searching for it...

... the one Relic I needed to complete my goal.

That's why—

"I had to take it."

In order to change this world to how it should have been, where everyone was equally unequal.

"The Relic to see the future—"



It was almost like he was another me.

He had a Relic with the power to save people, but there were many people he couldn't save. Despite that, he held on to the hope that he could at least save *somebody*, and failed again.

Over and over.

He came to know the truth.

He came to obtain power.

But he couldn't bear to give up.

If perhaps, he never known about Relic, or perhaps if had been powerless from the beginning, maybe he would have given up.

But even if I told myself that, I wouldn't forgive him.

This guy hurt Saki.

When I—when I saw Saki's face, I snapped.

Because what I saw...

... was that Saki's eyes were missing—

The reality of what those empty eye sockets meant weighed heavily on me.

It was a cruel, heartless reality.

The reality that Saki had become a victim because of me.

That was the thing I could never forgive.

It was the Relic Shun and the others were aiming for.

Their Relic, Dowsing, could only tell if someone had a Relic or not and identify its name.

They tailed us, to see what kind of abilities we had. Perhaps they became suspicious after the events in the gym and concert hall, and suspected us.

And then they found out.

That the Relic I owned, Vision, could see into the future.

But they made one miscalculation.

They didn't anticipate that Saki and I were always together.

So they misunderstood.

They thought the owner of the Relic wasn't me, but Saki.

They stole Saki's eyes.

I couldn't forgive them. There's no way I could forgive them.

No matter what happened, I would never, ever forgive them.

I just couldn't.

"Well, we got what we wanted. Why don't you let us go home now?"

"You think I'll just let you walk away?"

"Can you stop us? The Relic that woman brought you that you were relying on is mine now."

"You think you're all that because you stole a Relic from me, huh? Well, it doesn't matter if you have it now; I've already finished making preparations."

I had the magic words Towako-san taught me.

"Oh? But I already know this Relic's name. Even supposing you did something beforehand, or somehow take this Relic back, I can warp its effects. Didn't I already explain that to you?"

"This time not even your Relic will be able to stop it. You want to try it?"

"That's what I'd like to say."

"...Are you sure you want to try it?"

"Persistent, aren't you? Just do it already."

“I suppose I will, then.”

I chanted the magic words Towako-san taught me.

“By chance, construction fall on top of you—”

As if in response to my words, the leaning construction material shook, and started to fall towards Shun.

These were heavy steel beams, about three meters in length.

It wouldn’t end well for anyone that got caught beneath.

But Shun didn’t take a single step away, and stood there quietly.

He had no intention of dodging.

Because there was no need to.

Because all he had to do was warp the effect.

Like the time he and Asuka stood without moving an inch among the countless shards of falling glass in the gym at Toujou-san’s school.

Shun quietly strung some words together.

Probably the spell needed to activate his Relic.

The same words he used to block my attack earlier.

A hex to distort the magic words Towako-san entrusted to me.

“Coincidences caused by Pendolo will not effect me—”

With that, he distorted the result that was meant to happen.

The falling steel beams, just like the shards of glass in the gym, avoided Shun, and crashed into the ground.

—or that’s how it should have been.



But the steel beams didn't deviate from their course and kept falling.

Slowly they picked up speed, and simply, just simply gave in to the laws of physics. Unaffected by any outside power, they fell.

Straight at Shun.

The falling steel beams did not avoid Shun.

And Shun could not avoid the falling steel beams.

—There were times where I felt disgusted with myself.

Even after I saw what they did to Saki and snapped, there was always a part of me that was scheming on how to beat them.

If I going crazy was what it took for me to become stronger like some kind of a manga hero, then I definitely would have done it from the start.

But I couldn't. I didn't have that kind of power.

That's why I hatched a plot.

I used a trick.

I told a lie

A reckless plot to make the steel beams fall with that timing.

A trick to make something certain look like a coincidence.

A lie, using the magic words moments before the beams fell.

The Relic Towako-san gave me allowed its user to purposefully create coincidences.

But this wasn't a coincidence brought about by the Relic.

It was a certainty that I made look like a coincidence.

That's why the Relic Shun had, the hex that he used—could not warp its effect.

“———!”

The steel beams that should have avoided Shun slowly, but surely, kept their course and collapsed on top of him.



Kurusu Tokiya and the woman they called Towako were standing in front of me when I regained consciousness.

In her hand was a black leather book embroidered with silver thread. It was my Relic—Grimoire.

They must have taken everything while I was unconscious.

“You’re pretty lucky.” Kurusu Tokiya said as he looked down at me.

We were surrounded by fallen steel beams. He was pointing to Asuka next to me with his chin.

On her arm, I saw a bangle—the one that granted you luck when you shared your fortune with other people.

Asuka had put her life in danger to herself to save me, and in exchange earned enough luck to save her own life. If she hadn’t been here to save me, I might have been crushed and killed by the steel beams.

“I see.” said Towako as she flipped through the pages of Grimoire. “You wrote down all the things you expected to happen.”

“Did he really?”

Tokiya Kurusu had understood the nature of Grimoire, and used that knowledge for his bluff.

That's why I had been completely outwitted.

"Well, what do you plan to do with me?"

She closed Grimoire with a snap and looked down at me.

"From what I understand, you're collecting Relics."

"... Yeah."

"I'm also collecting Relics."

"Don't act like I'm just some ordinary collector ..."

"At the same time you believe the world would be better off without Relics, huh?"

"....."

Kurusu Tokiya next to her also looked surprised.

"Relics bring misfortune on to others. That's why I believe the world would be better off without them."

"I suppose that's something we agree on, then."

"I wouldn't go as far as stealing them though. If possible I'd prefer if people let go of them willingly."

"You're a softhearted person, aren't you."

"Yep, and opportunist too."

"That's something we don't agree on."

"But you're not some special exception. You said Relics bring people misfortune, right? That's exactly why you shouldn't have any either."

"... I see. It looks like we have a difference of opinion. You see, I do believe that Relics bring people misfortune, but that refers to *other*

people. I don't care one whit about the misfortune that befalls the those who own Relics."

"That includes yourself?"

"Please don't group me with those people who abuse Relics for their own selfish desires. I'm only using them for the sake of my mission. And even if I were met misfortune, I'd be satisfied if that's what it took to lead the world back to the correct path...and if that's what it took to save those made unhappy by Relics."

"Tokiya already told me about your goal."

I felt there was a benefit in talking to her, so that's exactly why I was concerned. Did she really understand my goal?

"Fate is predetermined and unequal, and everyone in this world is bound to it equally. I want to return everything to how it was, before Relics were used to warp the world to people's own convenience."

"I see things the same way you do, and that's exactly why I'm telling you this."

"That's exactly why?"

"Relics interfere with otherwise predetermined fates."

"That's right."

"However, fate has the power to return things to how they were before, and invites misfortune to those who interfere. That's why Relics lead to sorrow. Misfortune will be the only thing that awaits you if you keep trying to reach your goal."

"You have the same philosophy as I do, but still reject me. Why? It doesn't make any sense."

Towako had a similar way of thinking as me. In fact, you could argue it was the same. Relics created misery and the world would be better off without them. That was the entire reason for my mission, but she still didn't approve of it.

For the sake of my mission, I wouldn't complain even if I ended up miserable.

Was it perhaps that she was worried about me?

I didn't need her concern.

"There's one thing you don't understand."

However, her next words weren't what I expected.

"What is it? What don't I understand?"

"You said you were going to save the people hurt by Relics."

"That's right."

"But look at how much misery you've caused though Grimoire and the actions you've taken. You don't seem to what you've done, and even if you do, you're not taking responsibility."

"....."

"You caused a lot of students serious injuries to correct a girl who used a Relic for luck. You let another girl's mother die because she was using the Switching Dolls. In your path to save others, you also hurt Tokiya and Saki.

"... You're looking away. You're protecting yourself behind a shield of self justification and looking away because you don't want to see. That's why I can't support your actions. If you really want to correct the inequality that Relics create, then do it without using any Relics

yourself, no matter how hard a path it may be. Your words won't move anyone if you don't."

... She had a point.

But that was exactly why I couldn't relate. That kind of reasoning was far too lenient for those who used Relics for their own selfish ends.

"This is why I said you were too softhearted."

What a shame.

Even though I thought I had found someone who really understood my thoughts, and didn't just support me like Asuka did.

"... Let's make a bet," Towako announced, "I'll leave Labyrinth here, but you'll only be able to escape the maze if you let it go."

"Why are you doing this?"

"You'll see soon enough." She left it at that, and left with Kurusu Tokiya.

They had taken all of our Relics. Grimoire, Dowsing, and Fortune were all gone, not to mention the ones that already belonged to them.

All I had now was Labyrinth in front of me.

It was true, I couldn't move right now.

She had used Grimoire to manipulate Labyrinth.

But if I let go of it now, then everything would end here.

This was ridiculous. What exactly was she trying to accomplish, going as using Grimoire.

Was she trying to buy time to prevent me from attacking on their way back?

This wasn't going to buy them any time though. All I had to do was—

I was moments away from letting go of Labyrinth, but for some reason my hand froze.

The moment I let it go, I would return to not having even a single relic in my possession.

It was a strange feeling.

Like my whole body was going numb.

*Tap.*

A touch on my shoulder.

Surprised, I turned around, and let out a sigh when I saw it was just Asuka, who had woken up at some point.

*What's wrong*, Asuka looked at me as if to ask.

*Nothing*, I shook my head and explained the situation to her.

“[Are you going to follow them?]” She asked me through her, phone which somehow still intact.

Of course, I nodded.

I couldn't fight without taking my Relics back.

*If you really want to correct the inequality that Relics create, then do it without using any Relics yourself, no matter how hard a path it may be. Your words won't move anyone if you don't.*

Those were nothing more than pretty words.

I didn't have the same soft heart she did.

To fight a war, I needed weapons.

That's why I was going to take Grimoire back.

I would throw away the one Relic she left behind and—

“.....”

But contrary to what I wanted, my hand just couldn't let go of the little black box. Almost like a curse, Labyrinth was stuck to my hand.

“[What's wrong?]”

Asuka was looking at me confused when she saw me not moving.

I had to abandon Labyrinth and get back the rest of my Relics. I couldn't fight without them.

But if I threw away Labyrinth, I wouldn't have a single Relic left, and that was unbearable.

... I was afraid to let go.

I had gotten new Relics over time, but never had to let any go.

There had never been a time where I didn't have any Relics since I first learned about them.

I was realizing that I had become dependent on Relics.

I couldn't escape if I didn't let go.

I couldn't let go because I was afraid.

Faced with this contradictory paradox, I was trapped inside the maze.





*If you really want to correct the inequality that Relics create, then do it without using any Relics yourself, no matter how hard a path it may be. Your words won't move anyone if you don't.*

Towako-san's words were still on my mind.

Shun rejected her, saying she was too soft, but I wondered if he would ever realize that those feelings came from his own weakness.

If he didn't, then he wouldn't be able to move a single step.

And if he did, then he'd be able to embark on a new path.

Would he start to collect Relics again when that happened?

"You've forced a really hard problem on him, didn't you?"

Towako-san's expression turned bitter at my comment.

"As if I had any right to say that to him." She was being self-deprecating.

"But I don't think what you said was wrong."

If someone with a Relic told others to abandon theirs, then of course their words would hold no weight. .

Maybe Towako-san's self-deprecating smile was because it was like she was looking at a mirror.

In fact, even I agreed with Towako-san's thoughts that Relics brought people misfortune, I also had a Relic that I couldn't let go of.

There were also times that I was left frustrated when my words didn't reach others.

It felt like Towako-san had just pointed out why.

I didn't have any grand ambitions like Shun did, but as someone who had done similar things, it hurt to hear.

What if Towako-san saw the same thing when she looked at me.

Or was it just that she thought I was reliable.

I was kind of afraid to know, so I didn't ask.

And also...

"Can I ask you something?"

There was something even more important that I had to ask her—

\*\*\*\*\*

—Immediately after Shun collapsed.

I ran over to Saki, whose eyes had been taken, and held her.

When I felt her weight and saw her slumped over in my arms, the fear inside me expanded and became even more real.

I couldn't look directly at her face.

"Hurry! Hurry! Get her to the hospital! Get her an ambulance!"

I was calling for an ambulance to get Saki out of here as soon as possible.

As I tried to climb over the steel rubble, I saw Shun's body through the gaps.

Up until that point, I hadn't even considered whether he lived or died. In fact, you could say I didn't even care.

But now that I felt with my own hands the danger he put Saki in, a new rage boiled inside me. I wanted to stomp the unconscious Shun to death.

This time, I really was going to lose it.

“Tokiya!”

The one who pulled my arm to stop me was Towako-san who was now conscious again.

She was injured by Asuka’s attack, but it looked like she was at least able to walk now.

But I was so seething with anger that seeing she was alright gave me no sense of relief.

“Stop it.”

“But he...Saki!”

“Saki-chan is fine.”

“What part of her looks fine to you!?”

“She’s fine.”

“Her eyes...”

“That’s why I’m telling you she’s fine!”

Towako-san raised her voice and forced me to shut up. She sounded serious.

“Saki-chan’s are just like yours. They’re artificial.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“What do you mean?”

If it hadn't been for those words, I might not have been as calm as I was right now.

Towako-san's determined that Saki lost consciousness after taking Asuka's attack head on, but she didn't sustain any major injuries.

"I understand that Saki's eyes are artificial..."

There was something she said that bothered me.

"But when you said it's the same as mine, does that mean..."

Shun was looking for the Relic that could see the future.

I thought he was after Vision, but made a mistake and stole Saki's eyes instead.

But was really true?

Were they really after Saki this whole time?

If that was true, did that mean Saki had the power to see into the future?

In that case, Saki's artificial eyes were..."

"If you have questions, then ask her yourself." Towako-san said evasively.

Or maybe she just didn't want to answer herself.

I could hear an ambulance siren getting closer, and didn't say anything else.

With that, this story was over.

That's right.

It was finally all over.

## ***Chapter 4: Past***

People are forgetful creatures.

That's why memories fade.

Even if they were important.

Even if they left a deep impression.

Even if they were never supposed to be forgotten.

Eventually people will forget.

But people revise their memories.

Consciously, or perhaps unconsciously.

That's why memories of the past are what they are.

They mix with other memories, get tinted by our own impressions,  
and slowly get painted over.

For example, this is why two people could have different memories  
about how they met.

It makes sense, doesn't it?

After all, their first meeting happened exactly once.

That is an unchanging fact.

But if two people have differing memories about how they met.

... it means they must have misremembered something

It's nothing more than trivial differences in memory.



My world was always full of light.

When I was a little girl, even the ordinary days felt like they were shining.

Mom woke me up in the morning every day.

I went to school and had silly chats with my friends.

I learned new things in class.

I sat around the table with my family for dinner.

On weekends, I went out shopping with mom and dad.

Every once in a while, we took a family trip to places I had never seen before.

The things I saw, the things I heard, the things I felt—they all filled my world with light.

Back then, I could even smile naturally.

There were bright lights on *that* day too.

They twinkled, like shooting stars flying towards me.

That was of course, a mistaken impression.

I wasn't seeing any stars.

It was the middle of the day; there were no shooting stars.

The lights, which weren't stars after all, shot into both my eyes and—

On that day, I lost my light.

And so.

I ended up with artificial eyes.

I became very used to those artificial eyes and could see with them almost as if they were real.

I could see even more things than with my real eyes.

I saw something else—the cost of using these artificial eyes.

I saw—

The future.



It was a quiet time.

So quiet, that it was almost impossible to believe we had been in the middle of a battle a few hours earlier.

But the scars from that battle still remained.

I was in the hospital room with Saki

She was sleeping on a white bed.

The doctor had finished a preliminary checkup and now I was waiting for the results. It seemed likely that Saki was going to be hospitalized for a few days, so Towako-san had gone back to Tsukumodo for a bit to bring back changes of clothes and whatnot.

There were no other patients in the room and no one else to talk to. Every so often, a rustling sound came from the open window as a breeze blew past.

That sound was the only proof that we weren't enveloped by the total silence of the Mirror of Serenity.

That was the tranquil atmosphere in the room.

Saki had some scratches here and there, but her breath was calm, and she was sleeping peacefully.

While her face looked peaceful, it was still the same blank expression as always.

Lately Saki was slowly becoming more expressive, and I was slowly getting better at noticing.

But Saki's face right now was just like it was when we first met.

It hadn't been that long since Saki and I first met.

But still, it felt like a long time had passed since then.

My first meeting with Saki left such a strong impression, that there was no way I'd ever forget.

Meeting led me to Towako-san, and that led to my introduction to Relics.

Everything started when I met Saki.



I was having a dream.

I was aware enough to recognize that it was a dream, but still couldn't move my body.

What happened after that, I wonder?

Was Tokiya okay?

What ended up happening to me?

I could feel someone's presence next to me.

Was it Tokiya?



Or was it that boy named Shun?

I hoped it was Tokiya, but there was no way for me to check.

Even if it wasn't Tokiya who was next to me, I wouldn't mind as long as he was okay.

My thoughts about the real world were being filtered through my dream.

But I still wasn't fully conscious enough to understand that.

Before long, I fell back into a dream.

I hated dreams.

I hated the misleading things I saw in them.

But this was a dream of fond memories.

I wondered why it was coming back to me now of all times.

A dream that hurt, but was still important. Memories of a time that I would never forget as long as I lived.

A dream of the day I met Tokiya.

A long time had passed since then.

I was fully aware of just how long it had been.

But these were important memories that would never fade.

My meeting with Tokiya left a deep impression that I would never, ever forget.

Meeting him led me to Towako-san and introduced me to Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

Everything started when I met Tokiya.



I was working hard at my part time job that day.

This was before I started working at Tsukumodo.

Back then, I was registered at a staffing agency and did all sorts of things depending on the job I got assigned. Among other things, I had worked at stores during special sale, managed lines at events, cleaned buildings, and worked as a parking lot attendant.

My job that day was passing out tissues.

I wasn't being paid per hour, but per item. The job would be over when I finished handing out all the tissues filled in the box. A number of us, including the crew chief, were stationed around the avenue handing out tissues. I was very motivated to hand out as many as I could to get this over with as soon as possible.

Tissues were better than fliers because people were more likely to accept them and sample products.

I continued handing them out at a steady rate until I was down to my very last packet.

That's when I saw a girl walking down the now almost abandoned avenue towards me.

All I had to do was give it to her. Then my job would be over.

The girl kept walking straight ahead, making no attempt to avoid me.

She probably wanted to take one.

I held out a packet of tissues when she reached me.

However, the girl didn't even glance at the tissues. More than that actually, it was almost like she didn't see me at all as she continued walking by.

Oh well.

I just had to give it to someone else.

But in the end, I got a little greedy because I thought this job was finally over.

That's why I didn't pull my hand back fast enough.

The girl didn't slow down at all as she walked past me.

That's why.

She bumped right into my outstretched hand.

It was an act of God.

I should have apologized and immediately pulled my hand back.

But unfortunately, my hand was at exactly the same height as the girl's chest.

That why, well...how to say this...my hand ended up touching her chest.

The girl glanced at me, apparently noticing my presence for the first time.



Her gaze was so cold that I couldn't even begin to utter an apology.

I would have actually preferred it if she got angry.

But all I got was a blank stare.

I had never been given such a cold look in my entire life.

Her icy stare literally pierced me and froze me in place.

And as a result, my hand also stayed planted on her chest, putting me in a situation where I couldn't even excuse myself anymore.

I knew that, but it was a fact that I couldn't move.

Her gaze alternated between me and her chest for a while before she slowly opened her mouth to speak.



"Do you happen to know any killers?"

Maybe that wasn't the best way to word it.

I wanted to follow up with an explanation, but it was already too late.

I might have been a bit flustered since this meeting was unexpected.

My emotions didn't show up on my face so it was easy to get the wrong impression, but despite what it looked like, I did have feelings.

"Don't treat me like some criminal just because I touched your chest!" he shouted.

I knew it. He misunderstood me.

The other people in the area heard his showed and turned to look at us.

It was no wonder. Anyone would turn around if they heard someone shout about a criminal.

And unfortunately, there also happened to be a police officer nearby. He started walking towards us with a suspicious look on his face.

This wasn't good.

Things were going to get annoying if the police officer started questioning us.

"Follow me." I grabbed the boy's hand off my chest and ran away with him.

We ended up going to a fast food spot that he recommended.

Getting away from the police officer was good enough for me, but it seemed he still wanted to apologize.

I didn't know what he was apologizing for, but went along with it since there wasn't any reason not to.

He bought a hamburger combo for himself and one for me before sitting down at the table across to me.

I was starving since I hadn't eaten anything since that morning, and there was also something I wanted to talk him about, so this was perfect.

He took out his cellphone and told his job that something urgent came up after he finished his work and that he had to go straight back home.

I quietly waited for him to finish.

He glanced at me from time to time, but quickly looked away every time.

I wonder why.

“Alright, then.” After hanging up, he cleared his throat once, and straightened his posture.

“Uhh...well, how do I say this...that absolutely wasn’t on purpose earlier. It was an accident...or a freak occurrence if you want to call it that.”

“Yeah.”

“Just so you know, I’m not saying what I did wasn’t wrong. It was, and I’m reflecting on my mistake.”

“Yeah.”

“So take this food as an apology, and let bygones be bygones. And well...you might think it’s cheap, but this kinda all I can afford...”

“Yeah.”

“Cause I’m broke and... uhh are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

To be honest, I still didn’t understand why he was apologizing so much.

“Wait...are you actually not mad at me?”

“Who’s mad?”

“You.”

“Why?”

“Because it felt like you were.”

“What made you think that?”

“Your expression, or maybe your aura, I guess.”

“You can see auras?”

“No, I mean, I can’t see them but... ok then, why you were looking at me with such cold eyes?”

“I always look like this though...”

“.....”

“.....”

“... Are you really not angry at all?”

“About what?”

“You know what I mean. You started talking about killers all of a sudden and were looking at me so coldly that I couldn’t even guess how furious you were.”

“Could it be that you’re sorry about keeping your hand on my chest for thirty-four seconds?”

“That didn’t bother you?”

“Not really. I was just counting the seconds.”

“I see.”

That seemed calm him, because he let out a deep sigh of relief, and began devouring his hamburger.

Since he was the one who recommended it, I took a fry.



We didn't say anything until he had finished his hamburger and I had finished half my fries.

I wasn't particularly uncomfortable, but it seemed he was unable to endure the silence.

"My name's Kurusu Tokiya. What about you?"

"Maino Saki."

"Maino-san, huh", he repeated.

"Kuruku-kun."

"Huh?"

"....."

Since I had food in my mouth, his name came out wrong when I tried to say it.

I swallowed and tried again.

"Tokiya-kun."

"You changed what you said."

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"You're dodging the issue."

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Do you happen to know any killers?" I told him the reason I had come here today.

"You're bringing that back up? I'll get mad if this is some kind of prank."

"It's not a prank. I'm completely serious."

"Ok, listen." He took a deep breath and took on a lecturing tone.

"How on earth would an ordinary high school student like me know any killers?"

"Do you plan to meet any killers soon?"

"Hell no!" He raised his voice into a shout.

"I see. Yeah, I guess so. I'm sure this means you'll meet them by chance, then"

"Meet who?"

"You will be attacked by a killer soon, maybe even today."

"Huh?"

"I understand why you'd be surprised, but there's no need to worry."

He looked worried, so I followed up with something to calm him down.

"Because I'm the one who's going to die."



I couldn't believe my ears.

What was this girl saying? I was tempted to ask if she was alright in the head.

Was she one of those eccentrics I had been hearing about lately? Cause if she was, then this was about to get really annoying.

"Just making sure I got this right."

"Okay."

“You’re saying that I’m going to get attacked by a killer today?”

“Yeah.” She replied seriously.

“So uh...how do you know this, if I may ask?”

“Because it’s fate.”

“Fate?”

“...I can’t tell you the details, but yeah.”

“Hm.”

No doubt about it, she was an eccentric. Wait, actually now that I looked, her clothes were all pitch black. Maybe she wasn’t just an eccentric, but one of those occult freaks? She looked like she was going to pull out tarot cards and tell my fortune any moment now.

I wouldn’t mind if that was all, but what if she pulled out some strange items too and tried to sell them to me? I looked around just in case. It didn’t look like she had any companions, but I still couldn’t afford to let my guard down. Yeah, let’s just end this here.

“Well, that’s about it for me.” I shoved the rest of the burger and fries into my mouth and stood up.

She hurriedly finished the rest of her fries and stood up with me. There were still about two bites left of her burger.

“Oh, there’s no need for you to rush. I’m going home, but you can stay and finish the rest.”

“If you’re going, then so am I.”

Oh no. Now she wants to follow me around. Not good. This was a problem. She must have gotten attached to me somehow, so my plan of giving her food and disappearing wasn’t going to work. I had

a feeling she would put a strange curse on me or something if I tried to resist.

How terrifying. Getting rid of her clearly wasn't going to be easy, so I might as well try playing along.

"What did you mean when you said that earlier?"

"Huh?"

"That thing about me meeting a killer today."

"You believe me?"

"Of course I do. I can't imagine you'd say something like that as a joke. And that's the thing, if your prediction is true, then it's best you don't go with me. Makes sense, right? You'll get caught up in the attack as well if we're together, so I think we should split here."

I had to admit my words sounded like lines from a play, but she'd understand me this way...

"So yeah, see ya." I raised my hand and coolly turned to leave, but—  
She grabbed onto my sleeve.

*Please. I'm begging you. Let me go. I wanna go home.*

"Not a problem. There's no need to worry."

"Why not?"

Did something I say not add up? No, that wasn't possible. My logic should have been impeccable. I believed her, and demonstrated I was concerned for her safety.

I didn't make a single mistake.

Then why? Why was she still trying to stop me?

She looked at me as I struggled to find an answer and replied without hesitating, almost as if it should have been obvious.



“Because I want the killer to murder me.”

I really didn’t think he was going to believe me.

I thought he was just going to make fun of me.

“... What did you just say?” He stopped trying to leave and sat back down.

“What I just said?”

“You just said you wanted to get killed right?”

“I did. Why is that a problem?”

“You’re asking me what the problem is? Are you going to tell me it’s for some crazy ritual or something?”

“Ritual? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, never mind. What do you mean when you say you want to get killed?”

“It means I am hoping someone will murder me.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“What are you talking about, then?”

“I’m asking why you want someone to kill you.”

“Obviously because I want to die.”

“You want to die? Are you suicidal?”

“Getting killed by someone else isn’t suicide. If anything, I want to be homicided”

He sighed and adjusted himself in his seat.

“I’m just gonna go ahead and ask, but why do you want to die? Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Huh? ... Well, I guess it makes sense you don’t want to talk about it to a total stranger.”

“That’s not it. I mean exactly what I said. There’s nothing worth staying alive for.”

“Nothing to live for? Nothing at all? You’re alive, so there has to be at least something good in your life, right?”

“Something good? Like what?”

“I dunno... like something fun?”

“Nothing.”

He faltered for a moment at my immediate answer, but soon came back with a reply.

“Don you have anything you want to do?”

“I don’t.”

“What any future dreams?”

“None.”

“...if nothing else, is there anyone who’ll be sad if you die?”

“There isn’t.”

He was looking slightly annoyed as he scratched his head. "... this is kinda irritating."

He was starting to get upset with me. I suppose ordinary people would react this way...maybe I ended up saying things I shouldn't have.

"Is that good?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if the hamburger I bought you is good."

I didn't understand why he was asking this all of a sudden.

But since he did treat me, I suppose I should give him my impression.

"... Yeah, it was okay."

"I asked you if it was good or not."

"It was just okay though."

"Don't you want to eat it again?"

"Not really?"

Unfortunately, I no longer cared whether or not something was delicious or not.

Why did it matter...food was food.

I was sure I wouldn't feel anything even if I ate the same thing every single day. I'd simply consider it good and put what I had in front of me into my mouth.

"Dammit. Ok then, are there any things that you like? Doesn't have to be food...what about music?"

“Nothing.”

“There has to be something. Anything is fine.”

“Alright then...if you insist, then black tea.”

He was pressuring me, so I answered.

It wasn't like I really enjoyed tea or anything. I just happened to see through the window that the building across the street was a tea shop.

“Tea...hmm, I wonder if there's anything for that around here... Oh? Look at that, there's a tea shop right over there.

He muttered to himself, and then checked his wallet.

“Alright, let's go.”

After that, he took me with him out of the fast food restaurant.



I ran out of the fast food restaurant with her and went straight for the teashop across the street.

Now that it had come to this, my only choice was to make her satisfy her and make a clean break for it.

My experience with eating out was pretty much limited to fast food, curry shops and beef bowl places. Sometimes, when I went to family restaurants when I was feeling fancy. Because of that, I had never so much as set foot in a trendy place like this teashop here.

“Welcome,” a man dressed like a butler invited us in.

Relaxing music was playing in the background. I was a little overwhelmed at the stark contrast between this atmosphere and the hustle and bustle outside.



The waiter guided us to a table and sat us across from each other.

The chairs themselves looked like they were made from aged wood, totally different from the cheap seats at the fast food place.

The waiter elegantly opened up the menu and handed over.

*...This makes no sense.*

The menu was wordy and several pages long, but I had no idea what was what.

On the shelves were huge jars with tea leaves in them...were all those different types of tea? Tea is just tea right? As far as variety went, it was straight, lemon tea, or milk tea, right? If I wanted to change it up, then wasn't apple tea enough? What on earth were Darjeeling, Assam, and Earl Grey?

I looked over my menu to the girl in front of me.

She was flipping through the menu without even blinking.

So this was what it was like for someone who enjoyed tea. She wasn't even a little bit unsettled.

Anyway, maybe I should just ask for a recommendation...I made up my mind and looked down at the menu again.

*It costs how much!?*

I was feeling a little more confident when I looked down at the menu, but quickly lost my confidence again.

Was tea really this expensive? I thought it would be like 300 yen or something.

I knew how much money I had from checking my wallet earlier, and while I did have enough to cover the bill, it meant all the money I earned from work today would disappear.

Oh, come on! Enough already! This wasn't the time to think about money!

"Have you decided on an order? You can order cake or whatever you want. It's a fire sale!"

When I said that, she closed the menu and replied...



"I don't know what any of these things are."

The menu was several pages long, and had words all over the pages, but I had no idea what anything was.

There were big jars of tea leaves stuffed into the shelves, but were those all different types of tea? Tea was just tea right? When talking about variety it was basically straight, lemon tea, or milk to...or if I wanted to change it up, apple tea, right? What on earth were Darjeeling, and Assam, and Earl gray supposed to be?

When I honestly confessed to my ignorance,

"Ahahaha." He started laughing out loud.

"What?"

Of course I got offended and asked him what he was laughing about.

"Oh, it's nothing. You were just looking at the menu so confidently that I thought you understood all of it."

"....."

Well, nothing I could do about that. I only said I liked tea because it was the first thing I thought of. It was my first time ever in a shop like this.

“It’s fine though. Leave it to me.”

He explained to the waiter that we were new to tea and asked for some easy to drink recommendations.

A short while later, the waiter returned with some tea along with some other pots and cups. The pot of sugar cubes was placed in front of Tokiya-kun across the table, and a pot of honey was placed in front of me. Between us was a pot of milk. I was a bit surprised to see that the milk had even been heated.

The waiter explained some details about the tea and poured us the first cup.

Tokiya-kun mixed milk and sugar into his tea to make it milk tea.

I was about to do the same, but then the smell of the tea wafted into my nose, so I tried to just drink it as it was. It was a little bitter, but the fragrant aroma spread throughout my nose and mouth.

The scone that came with it was wonderful too.

It may have been the first time I ever ate or drank anything so good.

I drank the first cup straight, the second cup with honey, and the third with milk and sugar. I wanted to try out all the different tastes.

Each of them was delicious; I was thoroughly enraptured.

And there was one more thing.

The waiter was also very skilled in preparing tea. The tea that I tried to brew myself smelled totally different even when I used the exact

same equipment. I could hardly hide my surprise when I learned that changing how it was brewed could result in such a difference.

He was also very knowledgeable and good at explaining things to total beginners like us.

That's when I first learned the depth of both tea and customer service.

"How was it?"

Tokiya-kun was asking for my thoughts.

I believed before that I no longer cared if something tasted good or not.

"I was ignorant. To think something so delicious existed in the world."

"Don't you want to drink it again?"

"Yeah. I want to try other teas too. It's too bad this will be my last time."

"I see, I see."

"I liked this shop. I'd like to come again if I could."

*Yep, Yep*, he nodded his head seeming satisfied.

"Alright, then. Let's go to the next place."



Maino-san looked confused, but I paid that no mind and took her to our next destination.

We've had enough of food and drink for today, so I wanted to try something else. That said, there was only one place to have fun that came to mind.

We were going to the arcade.

"Have you ever been to a place like this?"

"I haven't."

There was no emotion on her face as always, but she seemed somehow restless, with her eyes darting from place to place.

"Try this one."

"I've never played before, so I don't know how."

"Just try it. I'll show you how."

I sat her down in front of the arcade machine and stood next to her to teach her how to play.

I wasn't entirely sure she got it, but for the time being I just wanted her to try as I put money into the machine.

To no one's surprise, it didn't even take 30 seconds for her to get a game over.

"You're not very good at this, are you."

"It's my first time playing, so of course I'm not." She protested with her expressionless face.

It was painfully obvious that she was a total beginner. It wasn't just arcades...she probably didn't play any video games at home either.

"Let me borrow that for a bit. I'll show you." I took her spot and started playing instead.

And for the record, there was nothing unfair about having her play a game I was already good at.

I played so she could follow along. Every time I glanced in her direction, I saw her expressionlessly alternating her gaze between my hands and the screen.

She seemed puzzled, wondering how I could use the controls like this.

“Are you secretly a professional?”

“Professional, huh? Nah, I’m just an ordinary high school student.”

“I don’t believe you. It was like you know exactly what’s going to happen next, as if you knew the fut—”

“No, no, you’re exaggerating.”

It was simply the fact that the enemies on the screen were pre-programmed. Anybody could guess how they’d move by playing the game enough times. More importantly though, I already had this game at home and also owned a strategy guide.

She didn’t seem to fully understand even when I explained all that to her

“A strategy guide?”

“That’s what you’re confused about? Think of it like a game manual.”

“I see...so you can learn to do all that from reading a book.”

“That, and experience, but yeah.”

“So just reading books, and putting it into practice, huh.”

I chuckled to myself imagining her running off to buy a strategy guide.

“What?”

“Nothing. Alright, it’s your turn now.”

“Huh? What?”

“Come on, hurry up.”

“It’s too much for me.”

“Don’t worry and give it a shot.”

She worriedly looked back and forth between me and the screen, but eventually resigned herself and sat down because the game was about to start. Unsurprisingly, it quickly ended with a game over.

“This is why I said it was impossible.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s how it is when you start out. You’ll get better with practice.”

I walked around the arcade looking for another, simpler game to play when I noticed her staring at something.

It was a crane game filled with stuffed animal prizes.

“Want to play that?”

“Huh?”

I pulled her along to the crane game.

“What kind of animal is this?” She asked and pointed to one of the plushs in the cage.

That wasn’t exactly an animal. It was a famous cellphone commercial character. To be honest, the fact that she didn’t recognize it made me wonder just how ignorant she was to the world.

Maybe she just didn't have any interest in stuff besides the occult...though in the end I was just assuming that was what she was into.

"Is that the one you want?"

"I don't know if I want it necessarily...but I do think it's the best, I guess?"

"How come?"

"Because it's black."

"... Oh?"

Well, her reasoning aside, I was glad she found something she liked.

I took control of the crane and set my sights on the character she wanted. However, it wasn't so easy that I could get it on my first try. I wasn't that good at crane games.

"One more time."

"Wait a minute."

She held my hand back before I could try again.

"Let me try."

She must have learned how to use it from watching me, because she pressed the start button, moved the crane into position, and pressed the button to lower the crane.

But the claw didn't grab onto anything and went back to its starting position.

"....."



Her face which was reflected in the glass didn't change, but looking at her from behind, I could tell she was a little despondent.

I sighed and inserted another 100 yen coin.

"Wha—?"

"This is your last chance."

Maino-san nodded quickly and turned back to the claw game.

She set her aim on the plush, making small adjustments to the crane as she went.

"Don't you think it should be a little more to the right?"

"No. This should be good enough."

The passion she was showing despite her lack of expression made me chuckle in spite of myself.

She carefully got crane into position and pressed the button.

But with no regard to her passion, the claw just barely missed grabbing the plush.

"What a shame."

"Ah." She exclaimed in an uncharacteristic show of surprise.

I really thought the crane had come up empty, but it had miraculously gotten snagged on a thread off the stuffed animal.

The crane went up, taking the plush with it. It swayed dangerously in the air, at risk of falling at any moment.

Her eyes were glued to the crane.

I found myself caught in the moment too and stared at it with her. Just a little more until it got to the chute.

“Almost there.”

But the moment those words left my mouth, the thread that was hanging on to the crane slipped. The plush tumbled and landed precariously on the edge of the chute.

“Ah...”

There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice.

I quickly looked around, and then purposefully bumped into the claw machine. The impact caused the plush to fall into the chute.

“Huh?”

I put my finger to my lips, shushed her before taking the plush out the chute.

“Is doing something like that allowed?”

“Only if do it just once.”

I boldly lied to her since she didn’t know any better and handed over the stuffed animal.

I thought she was going to look at her new prize, but then—

“Thank you.”

She surprised me with a sudden show of gratitude.

Her expressionless face was the same as always, but it sounded like there was happiness in her voice.

I could have just been imagining it though.

We played a lot of different games after that.

Even though she was a total amateur at the start, she was starting to show signs of getting better after playing for two hours.

I ended up spending a lot of money, but strangely enough I wasn't upset by that

It was pretty late by the time we finished trying all sorts of things at the arcade.

"Did you enjoy the games?"

"I did. They were fun." She said it with her usual blank face.

I couldn't actually tell how much fun she had from her expression, but it did seem like she had enjoyed herself a little.

"It was too bad about that last game. I'm sure you'd be able to clear at least the first stage if you tried a couple more times."

"I could have done it for sure if I had one more chance."

She didn't seem all that upset though.

"Oh, if it isn't Kurusu", I heard someone call my name from behind.

Turning around, I saw my classmate, Shinjou, standing there.

"How rare, seeing you around these parts."

"Ah, yeah. It's cause my job this time was close by."

Unlike me who always worked after school, Shinjou was part of a club.

"I'm about to go get something to eat. Want to come with me? Food just doesn't taste as good alone."

“Nah, I already ate today.”

“Oh...I see. So that’s what you’ve been up to.”

Shinjou’s eyes were focused behind me. He was of course, looking at Maino-san.

“...That job of yours must be nice, huh.”

He didn’t say anything else, but the icy look in his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

“Wait, I can explain...”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it, man. See ya.” Shinjou said with a understanding tone.

“Who is he?”

“Oh, an acquaintance from school.”

“Is it really okay for you not to go with him?”

“Yep.”

He did invite me to have dinner with him, but I didn’t have enough money for two meals today. Plus, I wasn’t even that hungry anyway.

Also, it was about time she and I went our separate ways.

But before we split, there was something I had to confirm.

“What did you think of today?”

“Huh?”

“Was the tea delicious?”

“Yes, very much so. I could fall in love with it.”

“That was your first time going to an arcade, right?”

“Yeah. I had never been to a place like that before. It was quite the experience.”

“Did you have fun today?”

“Yes...I think so.

Then, I stood right in front of her and asked her straight.



“Do you still want to die?”

As his questions continued, I slowly realized what he wanted to say.

And by the time he finished, I realized what he had wanted to do.

By having me drink tea, he wanted me to understand that I wouldn't be able to taste the things I liked if I died.

He asked me if I wanted to drink tea again to make me understand that there would be no 'again' if I died.

Taking me to the arcade was to teach me that there were fun things that I didn't know about.

He went out of his way to spend time and money on me, a total stranger. What a truly kind person he was.

I was glad the last person I met was someone like him.

... that's right. The last.

Because my feelings remained unchanged.

Even if I drank delicious tea or had fun at an arcade

My determination wasn't so shallow that something like this could shake it.

But still.

"You're right. I don't want to die as much anymore," I said in appreciation to him.

It was in return for his kindness towards someone like me.

"That's good to hear."

He smiled like a happy child.

It was a touching smile.

If I still had the capability to smile, I definitely would have smiled back at him.

Then, at that moment.

I heard a scream from far away.

I looked towards the direction of the scream and saw a crowd forming around the commotion.

Tokiya-kun and I glanced at each other and headed towards the crowd.

He looked towards the center of the crowd between the gaps and—

"Shinjou!"

His friend was there lying there in a pool of blood.



Shinjou was lying on the floor covered in blood.

I had seen him just a moment ago, going to get something to eat on his way back from club activities.

How did things end up like this?

Shinjou's face was twisted in pain; his torso was dyed a dark red. The liquid staining his jersey from underneath...I know what it was, but I didn't even want to think about it.

What on earth happened?

What could have happened to make him bleed so much?

"Call an ambulance." I heard a calm voice from behind me.

I came back to my senses.

"An ambulance! Call an ambulance!"

The people around me responded to my shouts and took out cellphones to call an ambulance.

I desperately called out to the Shinjou as he lay there, taking out the towel he used for his club out of his bag and pressing it against his torso.

"Are you alright!? Hold on!"

Shinjou let out an anguished groan in response. His weakness sent a jolt of fear throughout my body.

Was he going to die here...?

The thought hit me like a lightning bolt.

The feel of the lukewarm liquid soaking through the towel almost made me want to vomit. I wasn't feeling sick, but the fear and the tension were already well beyond what I could handle.

I had never faced directly with someone's death before.

And I never thought I'd come face to face with death like this ever again.

There was nothing I could do even though he was right in front of me.

There was nothing I could do except wait for an ambulance as I watched someone I knew bleed to death.

Could Shinjou survive this?

Was there anything at all I could do to help?

"Don't worry."

I looked up when I heard those words.

The girl I just met was looking at me with a calm face.

"He won't die. I know this for a fact."

Maybe she was trying to encourage me in her own strange way.

Her facial expression was unchanging as always, but her kindness did reach me.

"Oh, really. So you can tell that kind of thing?"

Grateful for her kindness, I forced myself to smile.



I wonder if I pulled that smile off?

Maybe it didn't come out like I hoped it would.

I wanted to smile and tell him everything would be okay and make him feel better.



I'm not sure if I did the smile right, but I think I was able to give him a little courage.

His friend wasn't going to die.

There was no question that he was going to live.

I knew this for a fact.

I knew it.

Suddenly I noticed a particular man among the crowd.

He was at a slight distance, staring intently at Tokiya-kun's bloodied friend.

His face was completely blank.

He and I were the same in that regard.

There were worried people, sympathetic people, others who winced at the obvious pain, as well as those who were simply curious.

All sorts of different expressions among the gawkers, but he was the only one who expressed nothing at all.

Same as me.

But he looked far colder, inhuman.

The man and I met eyes.

For just a few seconds.

He noticed my gaze, and quietly escaped from the crowd.

That's when I realized.

I knew who this man was.

You could say that I remembered.

I had to follow him.

I was a little hesitant to leave Tokiya-kun alone with his friend, but I still chose to follow the man.

I brought my face to Tokiya's ear and whispered.

"Thank you. And goodbye."



"Please stay with him."

She whispered in my ear and quickly merged into the crowd, leaving me behind.

"Hey!"

But she disappeared into the crowd without even turning around.

She left so suddenly...

True, there was no reason for her to be here.

And once the ambulance arrived, there was no reason for her to go to the hospital with me.

My friend was the one injured, and she had only met me just today.

That's why I didn't particularly blame her for separating here. In fact, my entire goal was to split with her smoothly...this was something worth celebrating.

But it was just...it felt a little cold.

She was expressionless to the very end, but by no means was she acting cold.

But that's what I felt from her as she left.

We met in such a strange way.

I unexpectedly and accidentally touched her chest at work. To apologize, I took her out for fast food where she ominously announced that I was going to meet a killer. Then I came up with a stupid plan to make her have fun and cleanly get away from her.

It truly was a strange encounter.

Or perhaps I was the strange one here.

Why did I spend time with her like that?

Was it that I couldn't ignore her?

"You will be attacked by a killer soon, maybe even today."

It was the first time in my life that anyone had ever said something like that to me.

It was a memorable meeting.

However, that's not all it was.

There was also something I couldn't ignore.

Maybe because I saw through the crack in her expressionless mask. I noticed she was being considerate of me.

That's right. She was worried about me.

Even if her face didn't show it, I could feel it somehow.

... I wonder, did that have anything to do with this situation?

I wonder, did this incident, with Shinjou on the verge of death, have any relation to the killer she mentioned?

Of course it did.

If there was going to be a victim, there also had to be a perpetrator.

Shinjou was hurt this badly, and there was obviously someone out there who did it.

But what did that have to do with her leaving?

Was it simply because wanted to separate with me?

Was she perhaps afraid in getting wrapped up in all this?

No, that couldn't be it. She was the one who told me I'd meet a killer. If she wanted to run, she would have done it long ago.

It was strange that she chose to leave with this timing.

But despite that, it was a fact that she was gone.

I could hear the sound of the ambulance approaching.

The crowd separated.

Paramedics ran over with a stretcher.

I let the paramedics start caring for Shinjou and got into the ambulance with him, supporting him with encouraging words all the while.

For just a moment, she surfaced in my mind.

However, it wasn't like I could leave Shinjou alone just because the paramedics were here.

She also told me to stay with him.

Put another way, she was telling me not to follow her.

Not to follow her?

Another doubt rose up within me.

Why would she tell me not to follow her, knowing that I would encounter a killer...?



“I am the one who will die.”

I believed those words more than anyone else in the world right now.

At the end of a narrow back alley, I finally caught up to the man.

I lost sight of him several times, but still made it here by relying on my memories.

I confirmed everything. The area, the time, and the man in front of me.

I remembered the place.

I remembered the time.

I remembered the killer.

This was it. This is where I would die—and this man would kill me.

He was looking at me.

There was no way out.

From another perspective, it looked like I was the one cornering him.

But I was the one who was going to die.

The man stopped trying to escape, and quietly fixed his eyes on me.

I didn't know how he would kill me.

Would he stab me with a bladed weapon?

Strangle me?

Club me with a blunt weapon?

But I had no interest in knowing how I would die.

I would accept any method.

As long as it killed me.

I wouldn't be so selfish as to demand a painless death.

Anything worked as long as it killed me.

Because there was nothing in the world that could possibly be more painful than staying alive.

How could I have ever thought that the world was full of light,

When it was covered in such darkness.

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed.

I felt his bloodlust.

I felt his determination to kill me.

As someone so used to death, I could feel it. It was a strange feeling.

The man took a step forward.

There were only ten steps between me and him.

Ah, I was finally going to die.

Ah, at long last I could die.

I closed my eyes and waited for the moment.

— — —

There was a sound.

One that I'd never heard.

Then, there was warmth.

A warm something splashed onto my face.

There was no impact.

There was no shock.

But I could understand that something had happened.

There was nothing that could have happened here besides my death.

Therefore, I must have been killed.

I was just killed by the man in front of me.

Ahh, at long last...

A feeling, something like relief came all over me.

Only to be shattered by—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

—A boy's scream.

“.....”

I opened my eyes.

My field of vision was dyed red.

For a moment, I could not understand what just happened.

Not the sound of him falling on the ground.

Nor the frightening amount of blood that flowed from between his fingers as he held his face.

Nor his writhing on the ground like a crazed animal.

Nor the anguished screams that echoed through the alley.

There was not a single thing that made sense.

Because the only thing that should have happened here was my own death.

Because I didn't know.

Because I hadn't seen this kind of future.

—Everything began on that day.

I looked up at the sky.

The glimmering sky.

Shining, like it was full of shooting stars.

But that was an illusion, of course. It was noon, why would there be any shooting stars?

Those stars were simply shards of glass.

They alone, were not an illusion.

The glass shards rained down on me.

They rained down on my two eyes.

Those glimmering lights hit me.

And took away my light.



After I lost my eyes, I had surgery and was given artificial replacements.

Naturally they weren't going to let me see again.

Even as a child, I understood the fact that I would have to live the rest of my life blind.

But that understanding turned out to be undue fear.

For some reason, I could see with this artificial eye.

Almost like it was real.

I asked my dad where he got them, but all he did was insist that he couldn't quite remember. That was probably the truth, knowing just how bad he was at lying.

All he could say was that it was a small old antique shop in a back alley somewhere.

As a child, I didn't understand how bizarre that was.

I just thought it was amazing.

My father who only half-believed, and my mother who hadn't been convinced at all, burst into tears of joy when they saw I could see again.

I didn't think too much about it and accepted them when I saw how happy they were.

The artificial eye became a part of my life.

They felt a little off at first, but I quickly got used to it.

I thought it was only a matter of time before I could get back to my old life.

But from that day on, I started having strange dreams.

One time it was a person run over by a car.

Once time it was a person falling from a building.

One time it was a person getting stabbed with a knife.

I became afraid to sleep and often ran to my parents' bed in the middle of the night.

They thought I was still suffering from the shock of the accident and kindly let me stay with them.

But the dreams continued.

And frightened as I was at first, I eventually got used to them.

They were just dreams. Not any worse than horror movies. That's what I convinced myself of.

It wasn't so much that I was flexible as much as it was that my heart was already starting to break.

My friend from elementary school came to visit me at home that day.

She was going on a trip the next day, but I of course, couldn't go. She went out of her way to visit me thinking that I was sure to be depressed about it.

I spent some time chatting with my friend since I hadn't seen her in so long. Then, as I looked towards her back as she was leaving, I saw a certain scene.

My friend was slowly tilting forward.

In her field of vision, a cliff. She was falling, tumbling down. Down to God knows where.

“Wait! You can’t go!” I yelled out to stop everyone.

They looked at me puzzled, wondering what was wrong.

My mother smiled awkwardly, perhaps thinking I suddenly started feeling lonely.

“You can’t go on this trip!”, I continued.

My friend looked uncomfortable.

Mom scolded me for being unreasonable.

But I continued.

For the sake of my friend, I continued.

“Tomorrow, someone will fall from a cliff and die.”

My friend looked at me, shocked.

Mom thought I was just jealous that I couldn’t go; she sent everyone off and yelled at me.

I continued in a panic, trying to get everyone to stop.

I desperately tried to get them to believe my words.

That’s when I learned.

That my artificial eye could see the future—

I heard news of her death the next day.

My friend had fallen off a cliff on her trip and died.

Mom took me along to her wake.

My friends were all crying, but I was not. I already knew what had happened, and had spent all of crying. That's why I couldn't to cry now.

My friends saw me at the wake, and accused me.

*Saki-chan said those weird things, and they became true.*

My departed friend's mother hit me. Apparently my friends had told her what I said.

She was venting her anger.

But then everyone asked *me* to go home.

As if I had no right to be there.

As if I was the one the one who did something wrong.

Like that I left and went home.

I later heard that my friend's mother had gotten hospitalized for mental trauma.

As well as rumors that it was my fault.

I returned to school and found my desk gone.

Nobody talked to me.

People gave me unpleasant looks.

My ominous prediction had become a rumor.

There was no place for me at school.

My home room teacher was my only ally while all this was happening.

He'd scold the others and tell them not to ignore me.

I was grateful, and to thank him, I gave him a warning.

“A fire will occur in the home economics room tomorrow and someone will die. Please be careful.”

The next day after school. A gas fire erupted in the room during the home ec club’s activities. The teacher in charge of the club ended up dying in the fire.

From that day on, my homeroom teacher treated me the same as everyone else. He looked at me unpleasantly and started to avoid me.

Having lost my place at school, I ended up becoming a recluse at home.

Mom began to ask if I was seeing dreams more often.

I didn’t want to lie to her, so I decided to answer her honestly.

That lately I was seeing them even when I was awake.

Once I pointed to the television and told them what I saw.

The stuntman for this drama will die during filming.

The next day, the news went exactly as I had predicted.

“I told you, didn’t I?”, when I brought it up, Mom ran out from the living room to escape my sight.

She never looked me in the eye again.

Starting from dinner that day, they started dropping food off in front of my room and left me to eat all alone.

Deep into the night.

I began to hear my parents arguing more often.

“There’s nothing good about that eye! This is all happening because you brought it here!”

“So you’re saying it would be better if she were blind!?”

“Yeah, it would! Rather than seeing all those awful things, it would be better for her to see nothing at all!”

“And you call yourself a mother!?”

“Even mothers have things they can’t stand! Don’t act like you’re not avoiding her too!”

I entered the room to ask them to stop fighting, but then, the argument suddenly stopped.

The two of them quickly left the room to avoid me.

Perfectly in sync, as if they had a perfectly understanding relationship.

It was like my mom said. Being blind would have been much better than this.

And so.

I stopped leaving the house.

I stopped talking to anyone.

I stopped interacting with anyone.

I continued to live alone in my room. Trying to stifle my breath.  
Trying to disappear into the darkness

Trying not to burden anyone.

So no one would look at me.

That's why.

I forgot how to laugh.

I forgot how to deal with people.

I forgot how to express emotion.

However.

The dreams, they continued.

When I slept.

And when I was awake.

That alone did not change.

I continued to see the futures of people I had never met before.

I continued to see thousands, tens of thousands of futures.

When I saw them, my body did not react.

When I saw them, my heart did not move.

Peoples' futures simply passed through me as though they were nothing more than eerie videos.

The future, and what it held had nothing to do with me.

I saw a certain scene one day

Of a back alley, and a large man, and a boy my age.

Along with the entirety of everything that was to happen that day.

It was the usual vision of the future.

A future that would come for someone.

A future where someone was killed.

But there was one big difference.

I was more familiar with this future than all the others I had seen before.

I understood.

Ah, this is where I will die.

*Finally*, I thought. In fact, part of me wondered why I never thought of this before.

I thought back to the place I was going to die.

It was outside.

It was in a deep alleyway, but I more or less knew where it was since there was a famous building visible near by.

If I went there, I could die.

There was nothing else.

Nothing except death left for me.

I ran outside for the first time in many years.

Searching for the place in which to end my existence.

Where I could finally be saved.

That's when I met him.

The boy my age who I saw standing at the place of my death.

I was certain that I'd be able to die if I stayed with him.

And like that, I met the man who would kill me.



I didn't want to see the boy injured like in my dream, so I left him behind to avoid that.

That's why, all that was left was to die at this man's hand.

But the boy followed me.

He sacrificed his body to protect me.

I didn't know this future.

*I never saw a future where he risked his life to protect me.*

More than anything, there was absolutely no reason for him to get hurt for me.

Why, then?

Why did have to get hurt for someone like me?

We just met today.

There was no value in saving me.

I wanted to die.

Everyone wanted me to die—

Then he said.

“... You said you didn't want to die as much anymore, right?”



In the end, I couldn't stay on the ambulance and ignore Maino-san

I left Shinjou in the care of the paramedics and went after her.

It wasn't like I was following her.

It wasn't like I knew where she had gone.

But I found myself running with a strange sense of conviction.  
A back alley off a major road. A narrow path leading into it.  
To this day I believe I took the fastest possible route.  
And when I arrived...  
She and a man were facing each other.  
I took a step closer.  
I didn't know what was going to happen next.  
I wasn't completely certain that this was the man who hurt Shinjou.  
But before I knew it, I had put myself between her and the man.  
An intense pain pierced my right eye—  
I didn't know what just happened.  
I didn't know what the man did.  
Although there were so many things I didn't understand, the one thing I was certain of, was that my right eye was dead.  
—I knew that I had protected her.  
With my uninjured left eye, I could see her shaking her head with both hands covering her mouth.  
But then she quickly came to her senses and ran over to hold me.  
The pain and the shock were making it too hard to think.  
But my mouth still moved; I had to say something.  
She asked, and I answered.  
I can't quite remember what I said.

But my brain was so sluggish, that I let out my true thoughts, with no pretense or any attempt to make myself sound cool.

With all that happening, there was only one thing she said that I remembered.





“...You said you didn’t want to die as much anymore, right?”

He hid his pain and smiled with a bloodstained face.

“For something so small...?”

“It’s not small. I think it’s important.”

“But that was...”

“But that was...?”

“That was a lie.”

“.....”

“I was lying when I said that!”

I told him before that I didn’t want to die as much.

It was true, I did say that.

But I was lying.

It was a white lie, to express my gratitude. How could it have led to this...

“... You think I didn’t know that?”

But he didn’t utter a single word of complaint, and instead told me he knew all along.

“I don’t know what your circumstances are. But it must be bad enough to make you want to die. It had to be at least that tough, right? I’m not so stupid to truly believe that having fun for a few hours would be enough to change your mind.”

What he was saying made sense, I still didn't understand why he did it.

"It's just, your mind changed just enough...enough that you could say you didn't want to die as much, right? In that case, I don't think it was a lie. Maybe it wasn't exactly true, but it wasn't a lie either."

"That's why you believed me?"

"Yeah."

"That's why you protected me?"

"Yeah."

"Even though I wanted to die?"

"You wanted to die a little less, right?"

"Even though there was no point in protecting me?"

"I protected you because there was."

"Even though everyone wanted me to die?"

"I didn't, so not everyone."

"Even though I don't have anything?"

"You do. Even you have something."

He rejected it.

He rejected all my thoughts about dying.

He rejected every reason I had to die.

"I don't know what it was that pushed you far enough to say that. As someone who just met you, it isn't right for me to pry, so there's nothing else I can do."

He had risked his body to protect me. There was a lot of blood flowing out from his right eye, he was in so much pain that he was about to pass out, and now he was saying there was nothing else he could have done.

He didn't know just how much that saved me.

No one else had ever denied me.

There were some people who denied me as a person, but no one denied my yearning for death.

Except him.

He was the only one who denied my wrong way of thinking.

He was the only one who recognized my existence.

—He accepted me

Then, something stabbed into me.

Almost as if the support had been pulled out of my body, I collapsed right there.

I didn't know what just happened.

But understood clearly that this was death.

I saw him crawling to me. He had forgotten about his pain in his right eye and was getting closer to me.

He was crying. Tears were flowing from his left eye. He hadn't cried even when he was writhing in pain from his injured eye, but now he was crying for my sake.

My body didn't hurt, but my heart was in pain.

My vision was getting blurry.

He was becoming harder and harder to see

I must have started crying

Were these tears of happiness? They were. They certainly were. They had to be.

This was what I had wished for.

This is what was I looking for.

I wanted to die.

I really wanted to die.

Something touched my hand.

It was his hand.

A very warm hand.

Stop.

Stop throwing my heart into chaos.

I wanted to die.

Indeed. I *wanted* to. For so long I had wanted to die.

I wanted to die...

Not I *want* to die, I *wanted* to...

That's right, I wanted to die.

That's right. My thoughts of death were already a thing of the past.

... Ah, I was so stupid. I really was so stupid.

I was having a change of heart after all that had happened.



This wasn't supposed to happen.

Even though it wasn't supposed to happen like this...

Even though I wanted to die feeling a sense of relief.

Despite everything.

I didn't think that way anymore.

Without thinking, I put more strength into my hand.

I clung to the hand that was holding mine.

I clung to his hand like I clung to life.

Not, not yet. Not like this...

"...I don't want to die..."



The man was getting closer.

He was going to do something to me—he was going to do something to us.

Without a doubt, it was going to end in despair.

Even I, with my brain half-working as it were, knew that.

"Run", I told her.

She shook her head.

"It's fine, so run", I repeated.

She shook her head.

And then she covered me, as if to protect me, and confidently whispered in my ear.

“I’m sure it will be alright.”

And almost as if to answer her,

A lone woman appeared.

She had shapely eyebrows, and strong, willful eyes. She was tall for a woman, slender and bold. Her straight glossy hair down her back. The clothes she was wearing also bold. She wore a jacket over a fitted shirt and slim leather pants that showed off her long narrow legs.

She had arrived like a protagonist in the final hour.

But her expression didn’t match, her face was wrought with grief and sorrow. It felt fair to say she didn’t seem reliable at all compared to the mysterious man.

But despite that, seeing her calmed me down.

That sense of calm relieved me of what little consciousness I had left.

I didn’t know what happened after that.

I heard later that she managed to chase the man away.

—That was the day I met Towako-san.

And then.

Saki and I were taken to Towako-san’s store and were given medical treatment.

Following that, I began working part time at Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

Incidentally, I heard that the man from before was using some kind of Relic, and that’s what he used to damage my eye.

From that incident, I learned of the existence of Relics.

My right eye was completely dead, but thanks to the artificial eye Relic that Towako-san gave me, my sense of sight was restored.

And the name of that Relic was—



... When I came to, I was sitting in a corner of my own room.

It felt like I was dreaming.

I was awake, seeing that dream again.

However.

It felt different from my usual dreams somehow.

I wonder why.

I raised my hand to touch my artificial eye, and noticed a dampness on my cheeks.

I was crying?

I was surprised to learn that I still even had tears left, and also felt a sense of doubt.

Why was I crying?

Where these feeling causing my tears to flow?

What were these feelings?

I was confused by the sense that I had just woken up from a dream and was perplexed by my own feelings.

What were these feelings?, I wondered.

Sadness, but that wasn't all.

Anguish, but that wasn't all.

Pain, but that wasn't all.

...There was also warmth.

Somewhere in my heart, there was warmth.

Even though I was sad, even though I was anguished, even I was in pain, for some reason, I felt warmth.

It made no sense.

What was causing these feelings to sprout in my heart?

Why—

At that moment, a noise-like distortion ran across my eye.

Another place.

Another time.

Another time.

A tilting field of view.

Through my artificial eye, I was seeing the world from someone's perspective.

Someone who was going to lose their life.

But that didn't happen in reality.

This was one of the "dreams" I always saw through my artificial eye.

Of the nightmare called the future.

But this "nightmare" did not end there.

There was a continuation.

Nothing like this had ever happened before.

I saw, with my artificial eye...

...Another future. One that continued after death.

That was—...

After waking from that dream, I knew.

What was going to happen to me.

What these feeling sprouting inside of me were.

And...the weight of the sin I had committed.

I unconsciously put my hand to my artificial eye.

The eye that Dad got me after I lost my light.

This eye could show me what would happen in the near future.

But it didn't show me everything. I couldn't foresee the winning lottery number, the winner of a sports match, or even the weather. I couldn't see any future events at will either.

But there was one type of future that I never failed to see.

That was the future that everyone was destined to meet—yes, it showed me the future of people's deaths.

When that happened, a distortion, much like TV static would run through my eyes, followed by a cut-in of the future.

When I started to see the future...

I lost the light of this world.

I lost the light of hope, and then everything else.

This special eye changed my destiny.

Its name was...

— Vision.



The first time we met.

It really was strange.

Thinking back, it almost felt destined.

I wonder if it really was.

I felt quite stupid, noticing now after all this time.

Could it be that Saki was carrying that secret this whole time?

Keeping it to herself without telling me?

Why did she have to do that?

Was it because she couldn't talk about it?

If it was, I was considering asking her. I wanted to asked her.

What she was hiding beneath that expressionless face.

What was the future that she saw—

She had nothing to worry about.

Nothing was going to change.

Because I was here.

*I won't change and leave your side.*

*So please, open your eyes.*

## ***Intermission***

She put her hand on the book.

It was a Relic, Grimoire.

The one she had been looking for.

For so, so long, she had hoped to attain it.

But despite that.

Why was her heart clouded over?

But she didn't take notice of those feelings.

She turned away to not notice...

And ran her pen across the page

The words written here would become a hex, one that would take effect when chanted.

It had the power to distort the effects of any Relic.

But she did not chant the words.

Not because she was hesitant.

Not because she was reluctant.

But because she was waiting for the right time.





# ***Afterword***

I've kept everyone waiting.

I mean that literally. This volume took quite some time, so I wanted to apologize to all the readers that had to wait.

But despite all that, it's here, Tsukumodo Antique Shop volume 6. It was a real struggle, but in the end what matters is that the book was able to make it to the readers.

As with previous volumes, this one was split into four chapters, but since the stories are all connected, I recommend starting from chapter one and continuing from there.

With that out of the way, let me introduce and talk about the chapters a little, as has become custom.

## **Envy**

The dolls that Saki is posing with on the cover, the Switching Dolls, are the theme for this chapter. Usually Takeshi-san presents several illustrations and the editor and I choose from one of them. This particular illustration of Saki and the dolls was strange in just the right way and was a one-hit-KO with me.

Takeshi-san also brings in multiple designs for Saki's outfits, and each and every one of those rough sketches are safeguarded in my treasured items folder. Consider it an author's special privilege

## **Sound**

There are some authors who put on music while they work, and some who do not. As for me, I prefer listening to music when I work at home. I'm not exactly particular about which songs I play, but I like to have energetic music for fight scenes, and calm music for serious

scenes, and so on. It feels like I make faster progress when the music fits the scene.

Incidentally, I wonder what kind of music suits Tsukumodo? One would think the author himself would know the answer to that right?

## **Future**

The future is something that cannot be predicted. For example, there probably wasn't anyone who could have predicted that Tsukumodo would last this long (laugh). Even I as the author had about twenty Relics prepared for the plot, and would have never even in my dreams thought that they wouldn't be enough.

## **Past**

This is the chapter depicting Tokiya and Saki's meeting. It's not a lighthearted story this time, but I hope everyone finds it enjoyable. story like usual.

And now to the main point.

Tsukumodo heading into its climax, and volume 7 will be the last. Please look forward to seeing what paths Tokiya, Saki, and Tokwako-san take.

Finally, and as always, I want to express my gratitude.

First, to my editor Takabayashi-san, who's always helping me out. Next, to Takeshi Masatoshi-san, as well as everyone who expended the utmost effort to get this book published. And finally and most importantly, all the people who read my work.

It was only thanks to everyone's efforts that I was able to get this far. I'd overjoyed if you could accompany me for just a little longer.

Let us meet again next time, in the final volume of Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

Odou Akihiko

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