

He wanted something that was easy to move in, cheap, and would preserve the bare minimum of sociability. As a result, that male teacher had chosen premade slacks, a dress shirt, and a cardigan. He would wear different patterns of cardigan depending on the day. He could barely get away with it as a teacher, but it would have been unacceptable in general society.

“?”

Was he taking his job seriously or not?

Any elementary school would be alive with children’s voices afterschool, but this one was especially noisy today. The male teacher poked his head inside the evening classroom and saw 5 or 6 children using the synthetic leather cases for their recorders as bats to hit a balled-up printout they no longer needed.

His hand shot out like a whip and casually grabbed the printout ball before asking a question.

“...What are all of you doing here?”

“Ah, Kihara-sensei!”

A problem child with black ringlet curls raised her makeshift bat. She seemed wholly focused on increasing her batting average, but he wished she would worry more about her skirt.

“We had no choice. We were playing in the empty lot, but that stubborn old hag got mad!”

“That must have been scary.”

“It’s true we broke the glass, but she didn’t have to yell at us that much.”

There was a part of that he could not simply ignore.

The male teacher named Kihara breathed a gentle sigh, crouched down to match her eye level, and asked what she meant while being careful not to intimidate her enough that she kept her mouth shut.

He could not relax just because she was so full of energy now. Humans of about 10 were not simple enough beings that they would grow as long as you planted them in a pot, set them by the window, and made sure they got plenty of sunlight and water.

A Student Keeper’s job was not over after saving them.

Problem children would continue to have greater psychological ups and downs. Just because she was happily attending school every day now did not mean she would not refuse to leave her dorm again after something happened. And in fact, this girl had already had a few relapses when she briefly refused to attend school once more.

It was a lot like piling up pebbles in children's limbo, but he could not just give up and lament their fate if that pile collapsed. A teacher had to think of everything they did as supporting other people's lives.

At any rate, the ringlet curls girl frowned, swung her recorder case around, and argued her case.

"Everyone makes mistakes! We felt bad about breaking the glass and that's why we went to apologize. But that old hag just kept yelling at us and wouldn't listen to what we were saying. We couldn't get a word in edgewise!"

"After that, you aren't going to go anywhere near that empty lot again, are you?"

"She even yelled at us when we tried to clean up the broken glass. What are we supposed to do?"

"Hm."

The male teacher in a cheap cardigan and slacks placed a hand on his chin.

He more or less understood the situation now.

Going over her head would only discourage her in the future. But if her trust in teachers was shaken, her heart would grow unstable. He had to tread carefully here.

"Kumokawa-kun. You said you apologized, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we all went there and bowed! Not one of us ran away!!"

"But none of you knew what you did wrong or why that...old woman? was angry. Is anyone going to accept your apology if you bow down without giving a reason why?"

When he slowly explained, the mix of boys and girls surrounding the girl named Kumokawa exchanged a look. As expected, that had not occurred to them.

Problem children were children with a problem, not incomprehensible monsters. If you understood their individual problems and approached them in the right way, they actually accept what you said quite readily.

After a bit, the male teacher named Kihara continued.

"Let's think through this one step at a time."

"Think through what, Sensei?"

"You broke the glass and the old woman got angry. I do not feel like that is enough information. Do you know the exact timing? When after the glass broke did the old woman get angry?"

He thought it very unlikely that she had started yelling the instant the glass was broken. If the children had avoided her out of fear at that point, they would not have gone together to apologize.

Thus, it was best to assume she had not been angry from the beginning.

Then what had been the exact trigger?

The ringlet curls girl named Kumokawa Maria pouted her lips and answered.

“That was, um...you know? When we tried to clean up the broken glass.”

“You tried to clean it up?”

“Yes! We tried to clean up our own mess, but we couldn’t even do that because that old hag started yelling at us!”

“Then wouldn’t that be the reason?”

The male teacher named Kihara readily presented the answer.

He explained it to Kumokawa Maria as she quizzically tilted her head.

“She was not angry because you broke the glass. She was trying to stop you from touching the broken glass with your bare hands. And she was frantic enough that she started yelling without meaning to. Don’t you think that was all it was?”

He was answered with silence.

This silence was longer than before.

There was no meaning in bowing your head if you did not know why.

They must have finally realized what he was talking about because they all began speaking at once.

“...I’m going to go apologize to her again.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah! Let’s all go together!!”

As he watched the children express their agreement and leave the classroom, the male teacher named Kihara, who worked as Student Keeper to prevent students from dropping out of school, breathed a gentle sigh. Getting a problem child to learn their lesson without falling into a psychological pit seemed simple but was actually quite difficult. And that was what made it so worthwhile. He had no further business in the empty classroom. He returned to the faculty room, grabbed his things, and made his way to the faculty entrance.

He was on an elementary school’s grounds, but for some reason, a collarless golden retriever was obediently waiting there. A woman stood alongside the dog like an aide.

And they spoke with a mechanical voice.

Not the baby-faced aide. The dog.

“Oh? So you’re going to do it, Kagun-kun? Given the risk discovered in the prior investigation, I assumed you would leave this one to me.”

“Pull out a cigar and I will kill you. This is an elementary school. ...Besides, did you think I did these things because I like them?”

That warning would send a tremor through anyone who knew who that golden retriever was, but Kihara Kagun simply slipped past the large dog. The baby-faced aide must not have liked him much because she stuck her tongue out at him, but he ignored her. Unfortunately, when it came to their level as a Kihara, she was inferior to Kihara Kagun or the large dog.

Of course, with Kihara Kagun’s job, he did understand how that actually made her cute.

“No Kihara has made as much progress in the field of life as you have.”

He could still hear the golden retriever’s voice behind him.

“But be careful. Get too involved with Birthday and you will once more find yourself burdened with a darkness you thought you had escaped. ...That field is in competition with Byouri-kun after all.”

“Say anything more and I will set the children after you again. Do you want to have Kumokawa-kun ride you around shouting ‘full speed ahead’?”

“No, I would rather not,” said the dog before cutting his advice short. He had apparently fled with his tail between his legs.

Kihara Kagun circled around to the faculty parking lot with his car key in hand. It was time to climb inside a round car.

The male teacher in a cheap cardigan and slacks drove to one corner of District 13. It was a perfectly normal-looking empty lot, but that was not his destination. He was interested in the old house immediately adjacent to it. It was small and run down. It was nostalgic but also strange. It was rare to find that kind of old-fashioned residential scene in Academy City which had little land and tended to build upwards. There was no one around. He drove his car through a back road to easily pass by the children walking along the main road. They were on their way to bow down to the old woman who owned the house, but they did not have a box of cakes ready.

They had not been on their way to apologize in the first place.

The overall structure was wrong.

“Excuse me.”

With that quick announcement of his presence, he kicked down the front door, stepped inside, and found an entirely different scene within. The perfectly normal-looking old house was transformed. There were beakers, flasks, test tubes, alcohol lamps, graduated cylinders, Petri dishes, condensers, stills, and more. All that laboratory equipment linked

together by glass cylinders and rubber caps looked like a detailed model amusement park made from glass.

It seemed to have an especial focus on cooling.

Ice cubes seemingly made in an ice tray were held in hemispherical bowls to surround the clear tubes.

And the glass on the end by the yard was shattered and hastily swept up. Kihara Kagun breathed a somewhat melancholic sigh when he calculated out *what must have escaped and how much of it*. He could tell this was going to be worse than trying to capture a snapping turtle from the park pond.

“...Another problem child, I see.”

This was the answer.

Most likely, it was accurate to say the children had broken some glass.

But no one had ever said it was a window they had broken.

Kumokawa Maria and the other children had seen their ball fly toward the house and had heard glass shattering, so they may have naturally assumed it was “just” a window.

There were no lights on.

The setting sun gave the rundown house an eerie contrast of orange and black. Or maybe it was a laboratory. A living creature could be heard breathing in the very, very back. Kihara Kagun sensed a sticky gaze that was clearly not a mechanical device.

“Researching life...no, defiling it. So this is Birthday.”

“...”

He sensed a graceful femininity from the silence and breathing. Did the faint floral scent come from a perfume? The children kept calling her an “old hag”, but that seemed to have been simple abuse that ignored her actual age. She was much younger than he had expected. If she had looked after her appearance a bit more, she might have passed for half the age he had imagined. ...It was also possible 10-year-olds like Kumokawa Maria saw everyone who had graduated high school as “old”, but Kihara Kagun decided that was too depressing an idea to pursue.

Something fluttered in the darkness like a curtain. Was it a raincoat or something like an extremely long veil that fell from head to ankle?

“You could have done your work anywhere, so why would you choose this noisy place? ...Because of the children perhaps? Are you attempting to recreate someone who died?”

Something tore through the dusty air as it flew toward him.

The man easily grabbed it in one hand and found it was some kind of beak. The horribly twisted life form had a bird of prey's head, a fish's backbone, and several thin dragonfly wings. Kihara Kagun readily tossed aside that collection of blasphemies that could neither eat nor breathe on its own and could only ever live inside the glass container.

He did not bat an eye.

There was no change at all to that Kihara's expression.

"No, that isn't it. If you were attempting to recreate your lost child, I would see some of their possessions here, or at least some sign of someone other than you. This place is your exclusive territory."

"...I...failed..."

"Did you attempt to create it from scratch? Did you enjoy being alone and rejected others, but one day you found yourself overcome by the fear of aging? Let me be blunt, *newcomer*. Instead of trying to skip steps, learn how to love."

"I planned out my life entirely wrong. I must make up for lost time no matter what...!!"

"A frozen mammoth."

His response was short.

Perhaps because Kihara Kagun had chosen the path of a teacher, he decided to explain further. As if he sought a shared understanding with others.

"It is well known that the corpses of long-dead animals were frozen and preserved, but there is another story derived from that. ...No matter how well you freeze something, the effects only go so far. Not even a cutting-edge freezer could preserve a mammoth that well for so long. *Thus, that is not something that was preserved in the distant past.* It is an identical but distinct lifeform designed in more modern times by some inhuman person using a below-freezing uterus. Of course, that idea came about during one of the occasional apocalypse and UFO booms."

"..."

"Whatever the case, there is one thing I can say. ...This is no longer science. If anything, these laws belong to the other side that exists outside our world."

Kihara Kagun gave a pitying shake of his head.

There was a clear line there.

But anyone living a normal life would never even realize that line existed in the first place.

"That distinction might be meaningless *to someone at a higher level*, but I still find the distinction to be important. You must not pursue Birthday. You cannot just create anything you want and send it out into the world. I apologize for being so self-centered,

but I too have mastered the field of life. I know better than most what happens when things are chaotically given life.”

Something squirmed in the darkness.

The thing covering her like a raincoat or a very long veil shook, flipped up, and silently fell down.

The silhouette revealed below was not at all human. It was more like an evil god. Was it repulsive? Or was it beautiful? Whichever impression it left on the people who saw it in exchange for their own destruction, if a normal person were to directly view that form, that alone may have been enough to shatter their personality.

“Someone as wise as you is sure to catch on eventually.”

But Kihara Kagun gently sighed.

That was all.

He found her repulsive because it was like viewing a researcher who had filled their brain with mold to increase their mind’s processing speed. He could not understand why someone living a normal life would take such a great risk. He found her beautiful because it was like viewing a specimen as transparent as crystal. She felt like a distant being that left no openings for such raw feelings.

But none of that mattered to the man who approached with his sober expression entirely unchanged.

When he viewed the being before his eyes as she was, she was such a puny existence.

“The hint was the children’s fingertips and the broken glass. To create something from scratch, you first need an accurate diagram. Calculations alone are simply not enough. You had reached the point where you could no longer find any valuable information by reading through documents and acquiring dead flesh by all means available to you. You needed to cut open living children. But unfortunately for you, I will settle this before they arrive with those innocent looks on their faces. That is best for us both.”

She had been mistaken about one thing.

As twisted as she was, there was no way she could surpass Kihara Kagun.

It took an instant.

Truly only the blink of an eye.

Kihara Kagun ignored the distance between them as he casually stepped into the darkness. He formed a handgun gesture with his right hand and pressed his index finger against the center of the mysterious villain’s chest. That was all. All of that extreme grotesqueness was stripped away from the actual person and only the puny human form remained.

He did not need any fancy weapons or products. The theory alone was enough.

“A mere 80 millivolts,” a voice whispered.

Almost like an afterthought, all the glass instruments shattered. These were not the actions of a normal human, but it was a mistake to speak of this man as a normal human. As the countless glass shined in the setting sun’s colors, Kihara Kagun said more.

“That is only about 1/20 of a single 1.5 volt battery. A human’s bioelectricity is no more than that. The heart, brain, muscles, nerves, and every other organ function based on an electrical potential that would generally be seen as a rounding error. There is no need to use the other world here.”

“...”

“Do you understand, *newcomer*?”

She had no chance of doing anything.

She was not allowed a chance to counterattack. She may have felt like she had worked her way into the underside of the world and gained freedom there. But if she had not gone there, she never would have met him.

“It does not matter how much potential you have, how much you train, how much you reinforce yourself, or how careful you are.”

He was a gatekeeper.

No, a hunter.

“The soul is *no more than this*. There is no room for cheap miracles or simple emotions to alter the values. All people can be saved or killed with no more than this.”

Did that make it hollow?

Did that make it noble?

Only those who had experienced it for themselves could say.



“They said she moved away.”

“We went all that way to apologize and she wasn’t even there.”

Kumokawa Maria and the other children discussed that and shook their colorful backpacks on the way to school the following morning. A golden retriever walked right by them. He spotted a male teacher carrying a plastic bag and putting up a fight in front of a convenience store on the way. Urban convenience stores rarely had parking lots, but it seemed he had parked his round car on the curb and been spotted by a security robot which was trying to scan his license plate.

“Hello,” said the dog.



“This unit was supposed to be patrolling the next street over. That intern...Yuiitsu was it? She was the one that sent this thing after me, wasn’t she? Keep a tighter leash on your assistant!”

“Yes, sorry about that. Puff, puff.”

“Cigar smoke!? I’m on my way to class!!”

“Sorry about that too. Puff. Academy City is really lax about these things despite being a city of children. Puff. If you ask me, this is less a city of students – puff – and more a city of researchers, but what do you think? Puff, puff.”

The smoke was turning into a crazy form of punctuation. The dog’s apology did not sound remotely sincere, and not just because it was given in a mechanical voice. Kihara Kagun was about ready to kick him even though he was a dog.

The golden retriever used a mechanical arm to shove the giant cigar butt into his own portable ashtray and then he resumed speaking.

“Do you enjoy protecting children?”

“I hate that I must protect them. It is such a tragedy that we live in an age that glorifies fighters.”

Kihara Kagun spat out the words, lightly kicked the drum-shaped robot, and immediately regretted it when a buzzer sounded and he was given another ticket.

The golden retriever continued after some mechanical laughter.

“That is all life is.”

“...”

“That was your conclusion after killing more than any other Kihara in history as pure experiments rather than anything motivated by good, bad, like, or dislike. You worked out the definition of life itself down to a one-line formula. Yet you also know that *it is far more than that*. Truly contradictory, isn’t it? You have sealed away the answer you yourself discovered and you still contain a contradiction of that level. If you ask me, that is proof that the romance of life is eternal. Of course, you lack the good taste to appreciate that, so I suppose something so subtle would not be enough for you to forgive yourself or the world.”

He wanted to see something that surpassed himself.

When he saw those problem children shake free of the darkness they carried and crawl back up with their tiny hands and feet, he wanted it to include something not covered by his puny answer. He wanted to believe his answer was a well-made and believable illusion, like the geocentric model or phlogiston.

What was life?

He wanted someone to teach him that it was as noble a thing as people believed it was.

...He had no idea how that task could be accomplished, so he was well aware that shoving it onto someone else was a result of the stereotypical adult ego.

“Excellent. Your romance is so beautiful. You really are fit to be a good researcher.”

“I don’t want your meaningless praise.”

“I am only saying that even those who dedicate themselves to science need a sense of aesthetics. Some will smugly say there are no mysteries in this world, insist that the mystical is all an illusion, and drag it all down with scientific theories. ...Those ones are the shittiest of the shit. A scientist who does not understand dreams and romance is no different from a murder weapon development simulator. Those idiots will destroy the world just for fun. They are such malodorous shits that I would honestly rather they not call themselves researchers at all. And the worst thing about those shits is that they fail to notice the flies gathering around their heads. Meanwhile, the researchers who should truly drive the world are those who allow the simple formulas they themselves have derived to prove what is accurate, accept the result – whatever it may be – without adding to or removing from it, and yet can still face the romance of snow crystals being formed from only 120-degree angles and truly feel the beauty of it.”

“...The Board Chairman would probably cry if he heard you say that.”

“Not to worry. My friend is used to crying. Also, he is the same as you. He looks twisted because he so stubbornly denies the romance within him, but he is a beautiful thing deep down. Heh heh. It’s honestly adorable that he thinks he’s hiding it from anyone.”

That judgment was truly horrible.

Kihara Kagun was a little worried what would happen if that human really did bite his lip and start trembling.

“Anyway,” said the dog. “You are the same as that sandwich pumped full of preservatives. You remain so bright and kind that it actually seems grotesque.”

“I don’t want to hear that from a current front-line Kihara.”

“You killed the villain, didn’t you?” The golden retriever used his mechanical voice to laugh. “And then you brought her back to life. You have killed more people than any other Kihara in history, but you have also brought every last one of them back to life. Academy City contains many people who punish those who defile life and death, but you are the only one who makes them experience it themselves.”

“...”

So many people viewed lives too lightly and arrived at the research known as Birthday because they did not understand what it was as they were getting involved in. Since they only had one life, they could only experience death by imagining it. Or so their fixed ideas told them.

So he only had to show them. Once they understood how horrific a thing it was, they would never again attempt to reach out and touch it.



Learn from experience.

That was the lesson given by the man who had been the strongest Kihara in his time and had now started down the path of a teacher.