

奈麗西神

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散る

御影瑛路

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Design # Yuji Ogikubo





一章 三津井千美

## Prologue

The first time she fulfilled me was by the means of sound.

My arms full with teaching material, I walk through an empty corridor, grumbling and complaining. "I can't believe it. She must be thinking that a class president is a maid-of-all-work or something..."

This stuff is heavy. Why would a teacher make a delicate girl like me carry so much? ...Ah, right, there are no guys here in the Junseiwa School. Tch, obnoxious whether they're around or not, that men species.

"And *of course* who would think of giving me a hand, right?"

Sure, it has only been a week since I've come to this school, but I was convinced that we're getting along well enough that one or the other would help me with this. Perhaps I have yet to fully integrate myself into the complicated social network that has formed due to the singularity of the environment that is the Junseiwa School?

...Or maybe they're simply a lazy bunch.

I put down the material for a moment and lean against the wall. *You better be of good use for our education*, I grumble as I scowl at the material before me, and give them a weak kick.

[*Plink*]

I tense up; a piano note played as if to condemn me just when I vented my frustration.

*Excuse me for taking my anger out on innocent teaching material!*

I lift up the material once again—but just as I'm about to walk away, the sound of the piano keeps me from moving.

It's—It's beautiful.

This piece must be the "Heroic Polonaise" by Chopin. I'm all but versed in classical music, but because I used to take piano lessons in elementary school, I know one or another composition, and I can also judge a pianist's skill.

There is a certain level that cannot be reached simply through effort but requires talent and individuality. I didn't have that sense, but she does. The music she produces is incredibly unique. Something bothers me, however: normally, a great performance like this will reveal the emotions of the artist. Here, it's the exact opposite. I can't see a trace of the artist's emotions, and yet the music reaches my heart. It feels translucent... no, that's way too harmless an expression. The sound feels... void. Even though it feels fake and somehow mechanic, I can't deny that there is something transcendent about it. If I were to compare it to something—  
—it's like water.

The music fulfills me like water.

Guided by the music of the piano, I walk to the second music room. Since the Junseiwa School aims for a rather high social class, quite a number of students happen to be trained in playing the piano, and as a consequence, there are 3 practice rooms with a piano inside. The music in question is coming from the second one, but I can't see any other students around. Perhaps a teacher who failed at becoming a pianist is playing it?

I prepare myself for the case that a teacher is inside and knock at the door. I figured that if I praised her performance to the skies, the player wouldn't be too angry about being interrupted; but the



performance doesn't stop. *Probably... my knocking was drowned by the music*, I conclude, and therefore directly open the door while shouting "Excuse me!"

And then—I was taken in.

"How may I help you?" the beautiful girl asks with a smile after stopping to play the piano.

*Huh? What? What is this smile?*

"Hello...?" she asks again while I am frozen on the spot.

*Oh, I have to reply something!* I think to myself, but I can't talk. I'm still taken in by the beautiful girl in front of me, incapable of escaping her spell.

Taken in.

What was taken in?

I was taken in. My existence, my values, my meaning, my beliefs, my goals, my future.

—the entirety that was my world.

A gigantic tornado wreaks havoc on the town that was me, turning it into dust and taking everything in. Even though I have been completely and utterly destroyed, I can't help being enraptured as my corrupted town is being taken in by that mighty and beautiful tornado.

"Ah—"

My voice produces a sound, but no words.

*This is odd. I think to myself. She is beautiful indeed, but what of it? I may hate men, but I'm not lesbian. Besides, even if I were, it's absurd to be "taken in" on first sight.*

But as a matter of fact—I was "taken in."

I look at the smiling girl. Ah... what is this feeling? I feel like I were wandering between reality and illusion. Huh? Is this the first time I met her? ...Of course it is. Had I met her in the past—even just for a split second—I wouldn't have forgotten her for the rest of my life.

But then where does this sense of déjà vu come from...?

Ah. I see.

I haven't met her before nor have I ever come across her, but I have always pictured her to myself. She is my ideal conception. Yes, I haven't met her before nor have I ever come across her, but I'm sure that I have still encountered her countless times because she's a supernatural being.

Celebrating our encounter as though the memory of my previous life had just been revived—I start to cry tears that contain something else other than salt and liquid. Delighted by that, I continue to shed tears until their meaning changes.

I'm-Pleased-To-Meet-You! You who exist for my sake!

"Are you all right...?"

"—I'm fine!" I finally say. "Your play was beautiful."

I can talk normally now. I've already taken her in. No? I was taken in? Ha, it's the exact same thing at the end of the day. She entered and fulfilled my body as easily as water.



And thus, Reina Kamisu had taken me, Sakura Kawai, in just by existing.

## ***Chapter 1: Yukimi Mitsui***

Voices are like invisible razor blades to me.

We are all alone from birth to death, and even though we can't really understand each other we are still forced to associate all along the way. There are only two ways out: biological death or social death.

The world is brimming with people observing me, no matter where I escape.

And again, another day starts where I am forced to blend into a group.

I am suffocating, crammed into a tiny, narrow box, our classroom, together with various people who keep attacking me.

We're on a small break right now. Girls are noisy beings, and as such, even the high level of this school doesn't stop them from nattering away with their shrill voices. Female voices are—perhaps because they're higher than male voices—very sharp. Sharp like razorblades.

Laughter. Certainly not directed at me. But it sounds to me like they're sneering at me.

"Your face is a mess today, isn't it?", "Stop spreading bad mood," "Aren't her legs quite fat?", "She completely messed up that question there, didn't she? And she sucks at English, anyway," "Isn't something smelling funny here?" "I bet she's a slut," "Disgusting," "Gross," "Sickening."

They're not saying these things against me. They're not saying them against me. I'm not as odd as to be called such things.

But my imagination won't stop taking their voices as attacks against me.



Stop it! Don't talk in front of me!

"Stop being so noisy!"

A shout reverberates, shrouding the classroom in silence... with my voice.

Astonishment and some discontent for being yelled at without a reason shows on their faces. But as expected from Junseiwa students, not a single one of them shows any anger. Instead, they resume their conversations with quieter voices than before.

But it's not like they don't care. Deep inside, they must hate me; they must feel the urge to attack me.

And like this, I continue to get myself into a jam. In order not to get hurt, I isolate myself from others and keep everyone away. But by doing so, I also lose the chance to find someone who understands me and supports me, and I stay in the dark about what they think of me. As a result, anxiety keeps growing.

"She pisses me off!" someone groans and others laugh in response.

My body tenses up.

No, that wasn't directed at me. Please, be concise! It sounds to me like you said "That Mitsui bitch pisses me off." That's what it gets converted to in my head.

I cover my ears in a manner that doesn't get noticed, even though no one is looking at me. *Why am I so sensitive?* Why isn't everyone just gentle to me? I wish someone would appear who understands how delicate I am, but such a person does not exist. Instead, I am thought to be a rude and strong girl and keep being injured—be it wittingly or unwittingly—because they don't bother looking closer at me.

That's why I gaze at Reina Kamisu.

Today, she is talking with the members of Hashigami-san's group. Reina Kamisu, an exceptional girl, has pulled off the feat of not belonging to a group and still getting along with everyone. ...No, she's much more than just exceptional.

I know—no, everyone knows—that she would never hurt anyone. In other words, she wouldn't hurt me either.

Reina Kamisu is a girl who seems to be made purely of ideals.

She, our image of "perfection," does not belong to anyone's group. She isn't biased. Reina Kamisu is always neutral toward anyone. Therefore, she wouldn't hurt anyone.

Reina Kamisu would not pull me up if I held out my hand; but she wouldn't shake off my hand either.

That's why I can gaze at her at ease.

Noticing my glance, she suddenly returns my look. I would have quickly averted my eyes had it been someone else, but if it's her, I don't have to fear anything and can keep up eye contact for a while.

Kamisu-san beautifully smiles at me.

Ah, she's so beautiful.

That was enough to make me feel vindicated.

All of a sudden—something stone-like forcibly enters my head.

It's a stone. If I shake my head, it rolls around inside and damages my brains. Quick, I have to get rid of it. Of what? Of the cause that made this happen.

The cause is—



...Huh? Why? Isn't she the only one who will never stand against me...? Yes, that's exactly what distinguishes her from everyone else.

She may be different, but I don't care. The problem is that something about her is being detected by me as a stone, as "harm".

Why—?

I look at her again.

She is still smiling beautifully at me.

"Who do you think you are?"

A few days after I started feeling something bizarre about Reina Kamisu, I was suddenly approached on the corridor during lunch break. The girl who approached me didn't show the least of restraint and just blocked my way, seething with irritation.

An attacker. There's no doubting it.

However, the attacker isn't one of my classmates, who must have accumulated frustration against me, but a freshman named Sakura Kawai.

"Hah? Careful what you say now!"

If it's a real attack and not just my delusions, I can counter to my heart's content and ensure that the attacker will stop in the future.

I can fight. Even though I might get hurt in the process.

Sakura Kawai, however, doesn't wince. "I know about the dirty look you're giving Reina-san!"

"Filthy look? What are you talking about?"

"I think I expressed myself clearly enough! I don't know if you're jealous, but would you please stop looking at Reina-san like that?"

"Jealous?"

She's right in that I often look at Kamisu-san. I have been watching her even more these days because I wanted to find out the cause for what's bothering me about her, in addition to my urge to be vindicated, but she couldn't be farther off by calling this jealousy.

"Know your place, okay? Even if you're the student council president, you're still younger than me. Don't you think you're a bit insolent?" I argue.

"I don't wish to be rude toward an upperclassman, either, but there are things that I just can't let pass."

"Things you can't let pass? And that would be me, or what?"

"Yes! Just think about it. Reina-san is a wonderful person. I have so much respect for her, she's my inspiration".

Ah, so Sakura Kawai *is* one of them. It's obvious looking how she follows Kamisu-san around everywhere: Sakura Kawai is a firm "believer" of Reina Kamisu.

The number of Reina Kamisu's "believers" at this school is everything but small. No, you could say they're the majority.

It might be a nasty comparison, but if one were to compare Reina Kamisu's charisma with poisonous gas, the gas would be so strong that breathing in 0.1mg would be enough to kill a person with a likelihood of 99.999%. If released in a town, the whole town would die out. In addition, the virulence would be extremely high as well; just touching an infected person would get you killed.

I'm exaggerating? Perhaps. But anyone close to her would unanimously nod at this comparison.

Anyway. Being locked into this closed environment, Reina Kamisu is fulfilling and corroding the school without leaving out a gap.

What's the obvious consequence?

Reina Kamisu attains an absolute status within this small community. As a matter of fact, she *is* the law and driving force at the Junseiwa School.

"I... no, we won't let you get through with this! Scowling on Reina-san... Aah, I'm disgusted just by thinking of it! Anyway, we won't let you look down at Reina-san! No one can deny her. What makes you think that someone as petty as you could?"

"...What did you just say?! Besides, you're completely wrong. I'm not looking down at her at all."

"I'm not deceived that easily!"

"But you're really wrong!"

"Cut out those lies!"

It's no use. This girl won't listen no matter what I say. She is already firmly convinced that I'm looking down on Kamisu-san.

But that's not true; I have great respect for her as well. After all, I'm just another member of this small, closed community.

Therefore, I'm not looking at Kamisu-san with scorn.

—Unless the odd thing I'm feeling about her is of a negative nature.



"...Look, it seems like you know what I'm talking about," Sakura Kawai reproaches me with conviction, apparently having noticed the slight doubts that showed on my face.

"...It's a misunderstanding!"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Just apologize and swear to keep your eyes away from her!"

My patience is wearing thin. Who does she think she is? She means nothing to Kamisu-san; it's not like she's her family or even just a friend of hers.

"Hmph! Even if I *did* scorn her, what of it? I wouldn't be bothering anyone with it, would I?"

"What did you just say...?"

"If someone is bothering Kamisu-san, then it's certainly not me, but you guys who stick to her like fish shit!"

"W-What?!"

Sakura Kawai's face turns red like a tomato.

—Oh no.

She isn't the type of attacker who gets afraid and stops attacking. I knew that and should have retreated at the right time, but I accidentally continued to hold against her.

And right now, I rubbed her the exact wrong way.

It's too late. She's going to keep attacking me, keep hurting me.

And on top of that—

I got too worked up and forgot who she is.

"...I went too far," I say apologetically, but my words don't reach her. She isn't open to apologizes anymore.

"...you scoffed at us."

Plural.

Right, this attacker is—the student council president.

"I will not forgive you for this..."

Her wailing before was a thousand times better than this. Now there is a deep, hateful tone in her voice that gives her hatred a firm shape.

Ah, it's over.

Up until now, I've simply been reacting over-sensitively to ambiguous remarks, interpreting them as attacks against me. Of course, some of those remarks must have been really directed at me, since I'm the type of person who makes herself a lot of enemies. However, in the majority of cases, it was just my overreacting that got me hurt.

But this is going to change now. I'm going to be under fire from all sides for real.

"She's making me angry," "What an insolent bitch," "Get out of here," "Piss off," "Go die in a fire," "Go west," "Die."

I'm going to really get such insults; after all, this attacker right before my eyes is the student council president. She's the second most powerful person here. If Sakura Kawai openly announces that she won't forgive me, then the number of attackers will grow. She does have the authority and the social network to do just that.

To make matters worse, Reina Kamisu's "believers" have uniform beliefs. If one of the central authorities like Sakura Kawai says that

she won't forgive me, then the other "believers" are bound to share her will.

Inside this closed environment, it is an absolute taboo to get on the wrong side of Sakura Kawai.

Reina Kamisu treats everyone equally, but her followers can't emulate her deeds. Jesus Christ said that if someone slapped you on one cheek, you should turn to them the other also, and yet the believers kept waging war. That's how it works. Sakura Kawai has the power that it takes to unite everyone against me under the pretext of protecting Reina Kamisu.

She is aware of that, too, and that's why she was able to act so bold against an upperclassman like me.

"...I'm sorry."

However, as expected, my apology only adds fuel to the flames.

"...Prepare yourself! I will teach you that there is no place for you in this school anymore," Sakura Kawai proclaimed.

That's not a threat. It's a decided fact.

In a few days from now—I will have no place anymore.

Once I got home, I shut myself into my room, plunked into my semi-double bed, and buried my face in my pillow.

"Aah..."

It's over... I can't take this anymore...



This place was a painful, exit-less box to begin with, but now I'm going to be lynched by everyone on top of it; even though all I want is not to be attacked, not to be hurt.

That's just horrible: If striking back in order to protect myself angered the other party so much that she now unites everyone against me, then what should I have done instead?

I don't know the answer, but I've always had a hunch that things would eventually come to this; that someday, someone would hate me for good and initiate an organized attack against me. At the very least, I had deemed it more probably than North Korea making an onslaught on Japan.

...I've always had a hunch that things would eventually come to this?

But that means that I didn't have a chance to begin with.

Fuck! Fuck! Are you kidding me?! Why does nobody treat me gently?! Why does nobody understand me?!

No, that's wrong... It's all my fault... I know, I know!

As I continue this pointless and endless train of thought, I clutch at my pillow so hard that it almost bursts.

*Goddammit!*

*Knock, knock*, goes my door all of a sudden. It must be my sister judging from the sound pattern.

"What?" I ask bluntly toward the door.

The door opens and my little sister, Yoshino, enters the room. "Um..." she mutters reluctantly as I scowl at her, still lying on my bed.

"Get the *fuck* out of here if you've got no business!" I shout, turning my frustration at my weak sister who is 3 years younger than me. As always.

"I-I am sorry..." she apologizes despite not being at fault.

A thought suddenly crosses my mind as I gaze at my downhearted sister: she will certainly lose all her self-confidence because of me and become a dejected person.

I'm sorry for that. But I'm not in an easy situation either, so it can't be helped, can it?

"So, what is it?" I ask again.

"Um, someone has come over to see you..."

"Someone...?"

Sakura Kawai crosses my mind.

Was she not satisfied with attacking me just at school? That's absurd... but I haven't made myself any friends that would go out of their way to come over here. So... it's well possible that Sakura Kawai is already done preparing her attack on me and has come here.

No... Please not! Don't torment me any more than this!

"...Onee-chan... quick..."

"I know! Just shut up!" Yoshino winces again at my sharp voice.

*Yes, that's right! It's Yoshino's fault. I've only gotten myself into this situation because her lack of resistance gradually made more offensive!*

While casting the blame on others in my head, I push Yoshino aside with my right hand and walk to the entrance.

What am I going to do? How am I going to handle this situation? I can no longer defend myself by attacking, that's for sure, but I don't know any other way. I'm not deft enough to ward off an attack. I'm the type of person who deliberately gets hit by a bullet in fear of the gunshot that would follow; that's why I have to take care of the attacker before she can fire a bullet no matter what!

Full with despair, I open the door and look the the visitor.

Time stopped.

"—Huh?"

I unwittingly react with the clichéd act of rubbing my eyes in disbelief and look once more at her.

"Hello," she says. With an absurdly beautiful smile.

"—Kamisu-san?"

"Please excuse my sudden visit, Mitsui-san. I take it that I must have surprised you?"

"I don't mind... but what brings you here?"

I try guessing her reason to visit me... but I fail to come up with anything plausible.

Kamisu-san treats everybody equally.

Of course, in her eyes I'm just another equal person. Therefore, there is no reason why should would come visit me.

However, as a matter of fact, she stands right before me, smiling.

"Would you be so kind as to let me in? While I do not mind talking right here, I am sure that you had rather take a seat and not have your family hear our conversation."

"Y-Yes..." I say, left with no other choice but to approve. While her way of speaking is incredibly polite, she doesn't seem to tolerate any dissent.

"..."

What is there to get so flustered about? Cool down: a classmate has come over to my place, that's all.

However—

Everyone who knows Reina Kamisu—or has just caught a glimpse of her at some point—will inevitably think the following: *there must be a reason of utmost importance for her visiting me. A reason deeper than the reason of life itself.*

I lead Kamisu-san to my room. Her every movement seems so harmonized that looking at her from this short distance disrupts the rhythm of my own heartbeat, making it pound randomly. As I wonder how many millions of yen one would make by selling her beautiful black hair to a jeweler, I let her into my room.

"What a lovely room," she praises me with a sincere smile, gently satisfying the pride I have in my room layout. She managed to stir me just by praising me.

I ask her to take a seat on my precious red sofa. She accepts my offer politely and sits down in a manner just as beautiful. For a while, we talk about my room, until Yoshino comes in and brings us some black tea in stead of my absent parents. Confronted with Kamisu-san's



beautiful face, however, Yoshino gets startled and blushes as Kamisu-san gives her a smile.

After waiting for Yoshino to leave and taking a sip of the black tea, Kamisu-san says with a smile:

"It has come to my attention that you have been watching me in a peculiar manner lately."

While attempting to calm down my racing heart, I look closely at Kamisu-san but fail to read anything off her mild expression.

*"I know about the filthy look you're giving Reina-san!"*

I start to ponder. If Sakura Kawai's complaint is the general consensus and not just a result of her deluded mind, then it would be highly probable that Kamisu-san feels offended by my gaze as well.

What if the will to harm me lies hidden beneath her perfectly adorned smile? No, that's not a "what if".

Kamisu-san came over to my place. Why? Simple.

To attack me.

"Ah, please excuse me. I do not mean to blame you," she says, probably to a certain degree guessing my internal train of thought.

*She might be lying*, I apprehend but the fact that it's "Reina Kamisu" who is saying it makes me calm down anyway.

"I am just curious to know what causes you to watch me like that."

"Did you come all the way here just to ask this...?"

"Among other things, yes," she nods.

"Why didn't you approach me at school...?"

In response to my question, she puts on a wry smile and replies, "You know Sakura-san, do you not? Certainly she would not be eager to see a conversation conducted between the two of us."

I see, she's right. Sakura Kawai is always hovering over her; it makes sense that she would have gotten wind of our conflict today.

"I do see where you are coming from, Kamisu-san... but I'm fairly sure that I'm not the only one watching you. What makes my case so special to you?"

"Yes, there are a lot of people who are watching me, but while those gazes might strike others as 'strange,' they are actually fairly common for me. For instance, I am very used to being approached like I was by your sister before."

I think I see her point. The looks Sakura Kawai gives her might be abnormal seen from others, but as someone exposed to them on a daily basis, they become ordinary and lose their abnormality.

"So... in other words, you are saying that the way I'm looking at you is odd even on top of that?"

"Yes, I suppose you can put it that way."

"OK, let me be blunt: are you troubled if I watch you?"

With an unchangingly mild expression, Kamisu-san shakes her head. "As I said, that is not my intent. In fact, the reason why I am here is probably the exact opposite of what you think it is."

"...The reason I think?"

"I do not intend to 'attack' you."

"Eh...?"

—Did she just say 'attack'?

Sure, I always and everywhere feel attacked, but most of that is just me picking up random sentences and interpreting them as attacks. No one other than me can possibly know about it

And yet—Kamisu-san clearly and readily said 'attack'.

"I know that Sakura-san is about to proceed against you. Therefore, I feared that you might fall into the mistaken belief that *everyone* is now set against you."

Ah, I see... Silly me, I just got ahead of myself. It's not at all surprising that she would use the term 'attack'; the 'attacks' I used to imagine to myself are becoming real starting today, after all.

In other words, my gut feeling that Kamisu-san has known all along that I'm hurt is nothing but an misconception.

...just a misconception.

"I am sure that it would be very sad and tough to consider yourself threatened by everyone. If, by any chance, there are other people joining Sakura-san in attacking you, then it will merely be a temporary trend. Neither will those attacks continue forever, nor should you care about them. I have come here to tell you this."

"...But knowing that doesn't make it any less painful when everyone denies me."

"All right, I promise."

"What do you mean...?"

"I promise to stay on your side."

*Huh—?*

I find myself awfully confused; after all, it's *Reina Kamisu*. The person who treats everyone as equals. What would prompt her to become my ally of all people...?

"Although I am sure that is no comfort to you..."

"But yes! Of course I couldn't be happier—"

—*but why me?* I think but I am unable to add this question.

"That is a relief. Ah... that reminds me, you have not answered my question yet."

"Your question...?"

"I was wondering *why* you are watching me."

"T-There's not—" I stutter as I give it some thought myself.

That feeling I've been having toward Kamisu-san is not admiration for her beauty or wits, or anything else positive. If the looks I've been giving her bore a positive connotation, then Kamisu-san wouldn't take special heed of them and call them "odd", since she's used to positive glances.

Therefore, I suppose there *is* ill will in my glance, and that's also why Sakura Kawai took action against me.

"—There's not much to it... at least I can't put my finger on it."

As a consequence, I couldn't give her an honest answer even if I were able to put that feeling into words.

"You do not not know, either... I understand," she says, and then she smiles. As though that question never happened. "All right, I think it is time for me to take my leave."

"Mm..."



We stand up and go to the entrance. Even something as mundane as putting on one's shoes turns into a captivating ceremony if done by Kamisu-san.

And even after talking so much, that strange feeling I've been having toward her hasn't disappeared.

No, if anything—

"Well then, goodbye Mitsui-san."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow at school."

After waving at me once, Kamisu-san disappears on the other side of the door.

"..."

On the other side. Yes, she and I, we stand on opposite shores and live in different worlds.

There's one thing that keeps me thinking: if there really is ill will in my glances, and if even Sakura Kawai noticed that ill will, then is it at all possible that someone as intelligent as Reina Kamisu would *not* notice, despite being directly concerned?

But then, why would she so clearly suggest to remain on my side whatever happens? How can she promise to support me, not to do any harm to me, when she noticed that I'm an attacker to her?

At the very least, I couldn't do that in her position. No... we couldn't do that.

"Hey, Yoshino?" I ask my sister who has been sneaking peeks at Kamisu-san.

"W-What is it, Onee-chan?" she says, wincing in fear of being reproached for her watching us.

"I'm not angry. I just wanted to hear your opinion on the girl that just was here."

"Ah, okay..."

"Yoshino. What impression did she make on you?"

Unsure what kind of answer I'm expecting of her, she only groans,

"Um..."

"Don't worry; just tell me your first impression."

"O-Okay... I thought that she is pretty."

"...Well, fair enough."

It's a perfectly valid opinion—and probably the only thing she can say because she's afraid of offending anyone.

However, against my expectations, Yoshino wasn't done yet.

"So pretty that I can't believe she's human."

And thanks to that remark—I finally recognized why I felt like chewing on aluminum when seeing Reina Kamisu.

Sakura Kawai acted faster than expected—two days after our confrontation, there were only enemies around me.

Thrown into the slicing and piercing machinery that is our classroom during lunch break, only wearing standard clothes instead of an armor or a shield, I keep showering blows from all sides.

People are strong in groups. Naturally.

In reality, there are very few people who can defend themselves like heroes who swipe away hostile troops on the TV. If the attacks are not of physical but of mental nature, however, then there is nothing you can do about it. You have to swallow the collective attacks.

Exclusion, blatant slander, mockery, dirty looks... much more than it is sly bullying, you might say that there is a law here that works

toward excluding me; as a consequence of everyone denying me, the place is filled with a mood that stimulates further denial and that keeps tormenting me. Children and girls tend to be very sensitive to such peer pressure, and what I fear most is that I end up being led into denying myself by that air.

That is the law that Sakura Kawai has set in the Junseiwa School.

I keep being cut into pieces on the chopping board.

*Chop, chop, chop.*

Until yesterday, I would have probably already given up fighting back and instead decided to live with it.

However—

I look at Kamisu-san. Noticing my glance, she smiles at me.

She's my ally. An ally who does absolutely not reach out to me.

I do have a goal now. A strong aim is barely holding me together like glue, keeping me from breaking into pieces.

It's time to carry out—my experiment.

People are strong in groups.

However, that is a result of the group being strong as a whole. It doesn't imply that the individual members are strong. Therefore, not all members are as strong as Sakura Kawai when they are not with the rest of their group.

I'm a sheep. I'm the prey, not the wolf. But as long as we're among sheep, it should be possible even for me to attack other weak sheep who strayed from the pack.

"Haha..."

I may be only armed with a rusty paper knife that can't even cut paper anymore, but it still acts as a good weapon against a sheep that is completely unarmed.

I enter the corridor. "Isn't she creepy?" an underclassman says with her finger pointed at me. Her friends agree. Ah, I think I've seen her before. She's a member of the student council, which has degenerated to Reina Kamisu's personal protection force. I think her name was "Fuyuki"?

All right. I found my sheep.

"Hey you, you are making fun of me, aren't you?"

I press the sheep against the wall of the restroom. The lunch break is already over and classes have started. However, there are only special purpose rooms in the vicinity of this restroom, and these are all empty right now.

"W-What do you want from me?! Stop it please!"

As expected: she's not a predator but prey.

She's trying to appear firm because it's me, but alas, her eyes are giving away that she's scared and only add fuel to my urge to trouble her.

I'm good at finding this kind of person. After all, I'm talking with Yoshino every day.

"Is it fun mocking me before my eyes?"

"Stop it...! Let go of me!" she shouts, struggling with a pale face to break free instead of replying. Her resistance is weak, however, because she fears to anger me. "I-If you do me any harm, y-you will be treated even wor—"

Ah, look, this is a characteristic for prey: they immediately rely on others. They don't even try to find a solution by themselves.

"I don't care. Attacking me some more or some less won't make a difference."

But I crush her hope right away.

"D-Don't put on airs—EEK!"

I slap her face. It didn't put in much strength; there's no way she could get hurt by my rusty paper knife.

However, the fact that *I used actual violence* finished her off.

"How about an apology first?"

The ashen sheep nods pathetically and repeats, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Now she can't defy me anymore. That was easier than I thought.

"Look, I don't mean to hurt you or to vent of my anger on you."

Fuyuki-san nods repeatedly, although I don't know if she's really listening.

"In fact, I'm actually trying to make your dream come true."

"...my...dream?" she asks confusedly.

"Yes. You're in the student council, right?"

"...Y-Yes... I'm the secretary."

"But in truth, the student council is just the fan club of Reina Kamisu, isn't it? Sakura Kawai being the prime example."

Fuyuki-san moves her head in an awkward way that could be taken both as nodding and as shaking.

"Don't dare deny it!"

"Y-Yes... it is true that we all have great respect for Reina-san..."



Hmph, I sneer and grab her chin. A short shriek escapes her lips because of the sudden touch, proving that she's even more scared.

"And so do you, right?"

"Y-Yes..."

My mouth distorts to a grin.

"If that's the case, then you surely wish for her to be all yours, right?"

Her eyes open widely.

"What? Why do you react like this?!"

"U-Um... I'm not seeing Reina-san in that light... like, I don't want her to be my lover or anything, you know..."

I think I know what Fuyuki-san is getting at. Reina Kamisu is far, far beyond anyone's reach and seems to be impossible to capture. She's just too grand to be dealt with as a common person. Even if, purely hypothetically, someone were to win her heart, the law of exclusion would work even harder against that person than it does work against me. That person would be constantly attacked by everyone; and maybe even driven into death.

That's how hard it is to "capture" Reina Kamisu.

Besides, Reina Kamisu is not someone to make a relationship with, but someone to admire; one might be inclined to keep her near oneself for that purpose, but considering the effort required to maintain that state, it is much better to watch her from afar. Likewise, it's much better to watch elephants in a zoo rather than trying to keep it as a pet in a small house.

So, I'm sure Fuyuki-san is being honest with me. However—

"You. Surely. Wish. For. Her. To. Be. All. Yours. Right?"

—I don't care.

I press her chin a bit harder as I repeat my question word by word, all the while scowling right in her eyes.

"—Uh..."

She clearly thinks otherwise, but I've threatened her enough to keep her from disagreeing with me.

"You can't tell me that you have no such desire *whatsoever*?"

"—Uuh..."

Right. Somewhere, Fuyuki-san, too, feels the desire to keep Reina Kamisu near her.

People like Fuyuki-san, who were pampered all through their lives, tend to be very bad at telling lies. As a result, she has trouble denying my claim that has a grain of truth in it, all the more because she's scared on top of that.

"Hehe... I'll help you," I say with a distorted smile as I let go of her chin.

"...Help me with what...?" she asks anxiously.

"Hm? Isn't it obvious?"

I clearly state my intent.

"—With your love confession."

I'm very sorry, but you can emit as much despair as you want, I'm not going to change my plans.

But I know for certain that you won't escape. Not because you're so scared of me. You've been *craving* for this, haven't you? For an excuse to confess your love to Reina Kamisu; for a permit that frees you of all blame in the improbable case that you win her over.

—For that bewitching masterpiece that is going to ruin you.

After school, I asked Kamisu-san to follow me to the back of the gym, which is the—admittedly clichéd—place I'd chosen for the confession to take place. While I was talking with her, the other girls around her kept frowning at me with blatant hostility.

Needless to say, their hostile attitude hurt me, but fortunately, my goal is of much higher importance to me right now, so I don't have time to think about the pain... but I'm sure that this scratch is going to open once I'm back home, turning into a gaping wound.

Kamisu-san's surroundings urged her not to listen to the request of someone they had deemed a dangerous person, but she adhered to her promise of being my ally (for now), and followed me.

Perfect, looks like I can conduct my experiment.

"Mitsui-san?" Kamisu-san asks as we walk. "Is it that you want to come back to our conversation the day before yesterday?"

"...No, that's not it."

"I see... I thought that you wanted to consult me about a way to improve the situation."

"Would we find a solution? After all, there's no bullying or violence. I'm just being hated by everyone. Even if the situation improved superficially, the actual hostility wouldn't disappear."

"Do you think so? I am convinced that this artificial hate would disappear with time once we took care of the problem on a superficial level. After all, it is just the peer pressure that is influencing them."

"..."

She has a point. Most likely, those superficial feelings wouldn't persist long when the general mood changed.

...But then again, is their hatred against me superficial? Isn't it possible that I have made myself those enemies before this incident and was only left alone because their hostility hasn't been united? Judging from the speed at which they assembled, they must have taken issue with me outside the incident with Sakura Kawai.

"Besides—" Kamisu-san continues, seeing that I'm at a loss for words.

"—I can take care of their hostility deep down, too."

That she says with stunning ease; and it's nothing but a truth. She *does* have the power to do just that.

Actually, I wanted to discuss this matter some more, but we reached the back of the gym where Fuyuki-san is already waiting. On noticing her, Kamisu-san gives me a brief look. She remains silent, but I'm sure she has grasped the situation.

I scowl at Fuyuki-san so that she won't give in to her nervousness and escape. Kamisu-san seems to have noticed, but she doesn't say anything—as I expected.

"Sorry for... calling you out to such a place," Fuyuki-san says reluctantly.

"No, I do not mind at all," Kamisu-san replies in a casual manner. Apparently, they know each other pretty well, since she's a member of the student council.

"Um... Reina-san."

"Yes?" Kamisu-san asks with a friendly voice and expression.

After much wavering and hesitating Fuyuki-san then eventually said:

".....I love you."

She must have drafted a much longer confession than that—with adornments and pretty clauses, with reasons and excuses; her head must have been full of them—but in the end, those were the only words she could muster in the face of Kamisu-san.

"...I love you," she repeats.

Those are words of courage, of sincerity. No matter if it was a forced confession or not, the underlying feelings are real.

In response to that—

"Thank you, but I am sorry..."

—Kamisu-san smiled sadly.

"Gh..." Fuyuki-san groans as she drops her gaze. "...Thank you...for your time..." she mutters in a hardly audible voice and ran off without raising her face once.

Out of the corner of my eye, I observe Kamisu-san looking after her.

—It's just as I thought.

"Mitsui-san?" she says after directing her eyes at me.

"...Yes?"

"Why did you force her to confess to me?"

"Ah, you noticed?"



"That I did," she says. "Fuyuki-san is... not someone who would confess of her own."

"I only gave her a little push because she didn't seem to have the courage!"

"What is it that you wanted to observe about me, taking advantage of her?"

That's Reina Kamisu for you; she can easily see through all my intentions. Hahaha.

"Also—"

"—Why are you looking at me like this?"

Right, you also noticed *that*, didn't you?

"Well, you said that you stayed on my side, didn't you?"

"I did, yes."

"Even if I look at you in this manner?"

"...Yes."

"That's what I wanted to hear. You know, I noticed something when you promised to stay on my side. And just now I confirmed my assumption through a little experiment."

"Reina Kamisu, you do not have a soul."

Even after I said so, her expression hardly changed. Probably—because she did not know how to.

"...No soul? What do you mean?" she asks.

"Oh come on... Kamisu-san, you're just a pretty shell without any content inside. You can't react in a differentiated manner to our behavior."

Reina Kamisu puts on a wry smile.

"It's true that I forced Fuyuki-san to confess to you, but her feelings for you are without a doubt real," I explain.

"Yes, I know."

"But you shooed her away."

"Shooed her away? Indeed, I was sadly unable to give her my consent, but I think I have replied to her sincerely. Or do you think that I should have beaten around the bush and told her a sweet lie instead, Mitsui-san?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Looks like you really don't understand. Alright, listen, Fuyuki-san was serious. Do you have the slightest qualms for turning down her honest feelings for you?" I ask.

"I do."

"On the surface, that is, right? After all, your sad expression vanished into thin air the moment she left."

Kamisu-san remains silent, probably feeling forced to acknowledge my point.

"You only managed to bear feelings for a heartfelt confession at the moment when it occurred. The very instant you looked at me, your interest in Fuyuki-san died out!"

"You are over-interpreting things... no?"

"Over-interpreting, you say? No, not at all. You *couldn't care less* about others. Whether I hate you or not, whether Fuyuki-san and Sakura Kawai idolize you or not, you simply do not care. Right? Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to treat everyone as equals."

"...I never intended to treat everyone equally to begin with."

"That's a flat out lie. You're perfect. *Everyone* will react the same when they see you: admiring your beauty and deeming you perfect. That's how everyone views you."

"You are exaggerating!"

"Oh, don't give me *that*. You're prefect, absolutely perfect, and in order to maintain that state, you abandoned your content; your soul. You realized that it's the soul that makes us all decompose physically and mentally! You do not deeply socialize with anyone, and if someone gives in to the temptation and comes too close to you, you bite them and corrode them with the perfectness that is you, propagating it in the process. That's how you maintain your state of perfectness."

"...You seem to have lost touch with reality, Mitsui-san... I admit that I might have a certain tendency to lack interest in other people, but that is all there is to it."

"No."

"Mitsui-san..."

"I mean, just look at all the power you have gained already. Who else apart from me at this school is *not* your subordinate?" I ask.

"That is exactly what I meant by 'over-interpreting.' Or do you perhaps think that every single student at this school would obey if I told them to commit suicide?"

"They would."

"..."

Even Kamisu-san is left speechless in front of my straight answer; but surely not because she thinks I'm crazy, but because she doesn't know how to counter my argument.

After all, someone like Sakura Kawai would readily follow an order as simple as 'commit suicide,' and Kamisu-san is aware of that.

"I don't know what you plan to do at this school—maybe nothing at all—but I just want you to know that I realized that you're not normal. You're irregular. And you're aware of that more than anyone else. Yes—"

"—You can't be human."

I may have acted too carelessly.

Not only was I seen together with Fuyuki-san and when taking Kamisu-san to the back of the gym, I also disregarded the fact that Fuyuki-san is a member of the student council.

Therefore, this situation is not at all surprising. It's just that I was too occupied with Reina Kamisu and the disconcerting feeling I had.

"You think you're funny, huh?"

With these words, Sakura Kawai presses the club she is holding up against my nose. Ironically, they have taken me to the same place as I forced Fuyuki-san to confess: the back of the gym.

I am unable to oppose her; the pain from the stun gun they used on me when carrying me off has broken my will to resist.

The several students surrounding me are looking down at me with blatant hostility. Fuyuki-san is not among them. *So she can't stay on the side of the predators after all... looks like Yoshino isn't going to resist me anytime soon*, I think to myself, knowing well how awful that thought is.

"Do you really want to beat me with that thing? You do realize that you'll get yourself thrown out of school?" I counter with my remaining spirit. My rusty paper knife has long since broken, however, and can't even scratch them anymore.

"Only if I'm found out," she says with a distorted smile. "I don't think that will happen, though."

"Yeah, I see that you've made sure to have some of your subordinates keep watch. But... what if I tell someone?"

"I'll just have to prevent that, no?" she replies.

With a dirty smile, the girl standing next to Sakura Kawai produces a digital camera.

"...What are you going to do with this camera?"

"I heard your grandfather is quite the big wig in the Mitsui Group, Mitsui-senpai. Oh, but I also heard that your father was so busy gaining your grandfather's favor that he blew it with his wife and daughter of the big wig so much that he ended up moving out."

"Why do you know this...?"

"Your family is of such influence that a divorce is out of question. Don't you think that there is a market for naughty pictures of a young girl that belongs to such a remarkably influential family?"

"...Are you serious?"

"Don't you think it's a bit late for that question?" she answers coldly.

This can't be... real. I never thought something unhuman like this could occur outside of fiction. Even if there is some war with countless people dying, that doesn't directly affect me and the world I live in. The attacks that I am supposed to face are slander and pranks, and that alone was enough to inflict deadly damage on me...



But as a matter of fact, the bunch around me have already used a stun gun on me, and they are armed with a knife, a club and a digital camera.

Sakura Kawai scowls at me and asks, "Where is it going to be?"

"...What?"

"I asked you where you want your first blow!" she suddenly roars and kicks me in the stomach.

"Ugh..."

It hurts.

It hurts horribly.

It hurts incredibly.

This is... violence.

I always felt like I were in a small box, and I felt agonized by the people that were crammed into that box along with me. I hated that box. But in truth, I was protected by that box. Outside of it, I would have been beaten up and died in an instant.

But then where can I live in peace?

Nowhere, I'm sure. A weak person like me will be attacked and killed wherever she is.

I don't care anymore. I just don't care anymore.

"My head," I say bluntly.

"Hah?"

"That's where I want the first blow! Why don't you beat my head?"

Apparently, she took this as a provocation; Sakura Kawai became red with anger. Oh my god, she's going to club my head for real, even though she won't get away with it if I die...

And so she raised the club and—

"What are you doing there?"

—stopped on the spot.

I look at the beautiful savior of my life.

"Kamisu...san..." I mutter.

Sakura Kawai takes the club down for the time being and gives Kamisu-san a troubled look: "Reina-san?"

"I am very discomforted by this sight. There will be consequences if you beat someone with that thing."

"No, it's OK! It doesn't matter what happens to her! She's making fun of us! More importantly, she's making fun of *you*, Reina-san! That's unforgivable!" Sakura Kawai shouts with a fire-red face, only to be looked at by Kamisu-san in a calm manner.

"If you are doing all this for my sake, then I wish you to stop. I am not angry at Mitsui-san."

"That's...because you're kind, Reina-san..."

"Please *stop*," Kamisu-san repeats with a slightly stronger tone.

Sakura Kawai looks at Kamisu-san, after which she catches a glimpse of me just to return her gaze to Kamisu-san.

".....OK..." she eventually says, sulking like a scolded child.

Having heard that, her colleagues exchange glances and traipse after her as she leaves with a downhearted face.

*Aah, what a non-independent bunch. They should all just die.*

And like that, the two of us ended up in the same setup as the day before.

"Why... why did you save me? I mean, I was so impudent as to say that you're 'not human' yesterday."

That was a superfluous question.

As a proof, Kamisu-san is smiling as she answers it:

"Did I not promise to be on your side? Besides, to be honest, I would like to avoid that cruel stuff even if I am not human."

"Hahaha..."

Incredibly. She's perfect.

She really does not have any interest in anyone. She doesn't give a damn about my view of her.

"...By the way, does that mean that you acknowledge what I said yesterday?"

Kamisu-san smiles wordlessly in response to my question.

Ah... her smile is so beautiful.

"Not human and soulless, huh...", I unwittingly mutter.

"I'm so jealous."

Kamisu-san gives me a slightly surprised glance upon hearing that mutter, "Jealous?"

"Yeah, I'm jealous. I could—do without a soul."

Suddenly, something Sakura Kawai had told me crosses my mind.

*"I don't know if you're jealous, but would you please stop looking at Reina-san like that?"*

Heh, so in the end, she was right all along.

I was jealous.

I envied Reina Kamisu for not being hurt by anyone's words.

"I can't recover from this blow."

I'm done for. Sakura Kawai may have been stopped, but that only means that all that negative energy has not been vented; I will continue to bathe in her and her group's resentment, hurting myself, taking damage, driven into a corner.

It's June right now; that means that there's more than half a year until graduation. All the while until then, I will continue to be attacked, and once I've graduated, I may be released from them but new attackers will appear in their places. The attacks themselves won't stop—the person executing them will simply change.

Now and forever—as long as I am who I am—I will keep throwing myself into the spears others have thrown at someone else, getting hurt in the process, and attacking them myself until they really aim their spears at no one else but me.

This is how I'm done for.

If *that* is what makes me human, if *that* means that I have a soul—  
—then I can well do without this... rotten soul.

"I want... I want to become like you, Kamisu-san."

That's an honest wish of mine, and in response to that heartfelt mutter, Reina Kamisu—

"Do you want me to give you a hand?"

—laughed.

"Huh...?"

"Oh, erasing your soul is not all that hard, really!"

That's not it. I wasn't surprised by her offer.

Did Reina Kamisu just... laugh?

She was always smiling; not because she seemed delighted or amused or anything like that, however, but because smiling is her neutral expression.

I think this is the first time I've seen her expressing real emotion.

The way she laughed was of course beautiful too. Beautiful indeed... but something about it struck me as incongruous, unbalanced, and filled me with disgust. Although I can't put my finger on what that is.

However, I decide to forget my misgivings for now and ask her about her offer instead.

"It's easy to erase one's soul...?"

"Yes, it is easy to do what you would define as 'erasing one's soul.' You just have to drop all your interest in others, and that can be done easily."

"That's... absurd."

However, Kamisu-san does absolutely not look like she's joking. And—she looks like she could do that any moment.

"But do you not agree that if, for the sake of argument, you lost all your five senses, you would not even be able to take an interest in others, since you could not feel anything?"

"Well, yeah, but I think that's a really grotesque example..."

"Yes, but I am still right, no?" she laughs and continues:

"I will help you get there!"



After that, Kamisu-san took me to an empty music room. Apparently, she was entrusted with the keys because she practiced the piano every day there—a feat that only someone as esteemed as she can accomplish.

In the end, she disappeared somewhere, saying, "Concentrate on your surroundings."

While getting sinister looks from Beethoven and his composer colleagues, I ponder about the meaning of her words. *Concentrate?* What on earth is she scheming? There's no way a "human" could do something like erasing someone's soul...

Or do you want to tell me that Reina Kamisu is unhuman for real and not just metaphorically?

Yesterday she evaded the argument, but I got the impression that today she was kind of admitting that she does not care about others. And she "laughed."

What is the meaning of this... what is the meaning of her revealing her true face only to me? Isn't there perhaps—a really grave meaning behind all this?

*Why... why am I here, all alone?*

Because Kamisu-san took me here, of course.

Hey... What if the thing I discovered was something that Reina Kamisu wanted to keep secret *no matter what*? What if she was perfectly aware of the reason for my looks when she came over to my place? What if she only pretended to be my ally in order to observe me? What if she was deliberately controlling Sakura Kawai

and the others with a certain goal in mind? What is she's really not human?

If all that is true, then—

—she's going to erase my soul.

I feel like Beethoven and Mozart and Händel and Kosaku Yamada are laughing at me. Do their pictures perhaps have a soul, considering that their eyeballs are said to move in every list of school wonders? Maybe they are hurt whenever we call them "scary" or insult their haircuts, and avenge themselves by moving their eyes?

Please, don't look at me. I'm much, much easier hurt than you guys, since I still have a body.

Perhaps Reina Kamisu is controlling them in order to take my soul somewhere? Maybe. I feel it wouldn't be impossible to her.

All of a sudden—I heard several screams outside.

Curious as to what is going on, I look out of the window. I should have acted with more care; because then I would have easily noticed that Kamisu-san's order to *concentrate on my surroundings* was referring to nothing else but those screams. I was acting exactly as she wanted me to, digging my own grave.

I opened the window.

And then—my soul was erased.

"—Haha..."

I see now.

So that was your plan.

"Hahaha..."

Reina Kamisu tore my soul out of my body and took it with her.

That must have been her goal at this school; and she is going to continue collecting others' souls to return to her real form.

*Right?* I ask the person before my eyes.

—She responds with an upside down smile.

Others, others, others, others, others, others, others, others, others.

Hey all of you, is there a reason why you exist? Do your words bear any meaning when you are all destined to be harvested by Reina Kamisu? Of course not. Your lives have no meaning at all. You, too, are crammed in little boxes where you hurt others and get hurt by others. You are Reina Kamisu's subordinates, her servants, her slaves. We're all of no import whatsoever. Meaningless humans.

There's no reason why I should listen to what other worthless people say.

Reina Kamisu is right in every possible way. Only her own words are of substance, and that's why everyone around her was meaningless to her.

Yeah, that's right.

That's the truth.

Right?

And there she goes—there she falls.

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

Plomp. And as the screams grew even louder—

—I lost all my feelings for good.

It's June.

As I stand protected under an umbrella, I ponder where the rain, which shows no sign of stopping, is headed—while gazing at the white outlines of a person that have been drawn on the concrete ground near the sakura trees.

The sakura trees have long since lost their bloom and instead put on green leaves. But no one is looking at them. They exist solely for spring and are only planted here for that purpose. As such, they are forgotten during the period when they're not magnificent and become a meaningless piece of scenery.

The trees cried as the rain beat down on them.

There's no doubt that the Junseiwa School is about to fall apart.

It's an undeniable fact that Reina Kamisu jumped down. There have been several witnesses, and above all, there was a corpse in the middle of the carpet of blood spreading below. And that dead body belonged to Reina Kamisu.

Reina Kamisu died.

The absolute ruler, the absolute law, disappeared. As a result, the Junseiwa School has gotten caught up in confusion and is about to collapse.

And I am sure that she did all of that deliberately. In the face of her goal, everything is petty and of no import.

This isn't the end; it's the start. From here on, Reina Kamisu's *real* goal will become apparent. I don't know what will happen to me in the process, but I'm sure that I could struggle against her as much as I wanted and still be dancing to her tune. It's all her plan. It's all fate.

The die is cast.

Therefore, I won't do anything.

I don't care about all that stuff anymore.

Bereft of my soul, I don't care anymore.

Come to think of it—not that it matters—people with grudges against me keep appearing because I was the last person who spoke to Reina Kamisu.

The hatred and the hostility against me has become so blatant by now that even the teachers are slowly noticing. What a waste of time. I couldn't care less. As if your brittle spears could ever hurt me when I'm soulless and transparent. Oh boy, you should all just die.

I take notes of the lesson that is taking place. Now that I think about it, I've neglected studying a bit recently. I have to get more serious. I don't feel like thinking anymore; I'll just follow the rails laid out for me.

After our classes—which I followed carefully—the prime example of a trivial person came to me.

"It's your fault that Reina-san died!" Sakura Kawai roars as she enters my classroom.

Oh boy, what a noisy girl. I was ignoring her, but I guess I ought to respond to her.

"Even if that's true, what of it?"

"...What did you say?" she asks with a red face as she draws near. It's getting old.

"Haha..."

"W-What's so funny?!"

"What can *you* do? What can a fox who borrowed the authority of a tiger do, now that Reina Kamisu is no more?"

"Don't mess with me! I still have colleagues who follow me!"

"Even though Reina Kamisu abandoned you?"

"...What do you mean by that?"

"You don't get it, or what? And you call yourself the representative of Kamisu-san's fan club? Looks like you were blinded by her superficial beauty, eh?"

I continue with absolute certainty:

"Reina Kamisu isn't dead!"

"Wha—?!"

Oh wow, looks like she really didn't understand. Pathetic.

"That's absurd, now! Don't make up things!"

"Absurd? Haha... you're quite the funny one, aren't you?"



"But I'm right! How do you explain her corpse then?!" she asks in response.

"Beats me. But listen, she would never end her life for someone else's sake, nor would she despair and kill herself when she doesn't even care about others. Well? That leaves only the option that I brought up."

The red in her face slowly drains and changes into white instead.

"You're—out of your mind," she mutters.

"I'm not the one who's insane," I answer bluntly.

"Are you saying that I'm the one who lost her mind?!"

"You could say that, but in truth—we have all lost our minds."

She grows even paler.

"We have been too long at this school that was pervaded by Reina Kamisu. We're beyond rescue! ...You, too, will realize soon enough that she isn't dead. She's only watching us from afar for the time being. She might approach us again someday, with a smile."

"C-Cut out this crap... I'm going to kill you!"

"Good luck with that. But I'm going to defend myself because I don't like pain. I guess I'll make sure to carry a knife around since you just threatened me."

"Gh! What is wrong with you?! Who do you think you are?!"

"Me? I'm the same as you! Just another student going to the Junseiwa School. A human. And—a subordinate of Reina Kamisu's."

In the end, Sakura Kawai spit out a final insult before she left and stopped to bother me.

The rain still hasn't stopped.

Sakura leaves have fallen on the outlined figure on the ground, but unlike the blossoms, which are said to be beautiful even after scattering, they don't stir any emotion inside me.

The rain still shows no sign of stopping.

—Reina Kamisu scattered **here**.

But while it is true that she threw herself down here, was it really then that she threw her body away? Couldn't it be that she did so in the past or will do so in the future?

I don't know. I also don't know whether it was she herself that scattered or just her magnificent blossoms.

But there is one thing I do know.

"We will meet again, won't we?" I mutter in a voice that is drowned by the rain.

However—

"—Yes."

A voice that must be an illusion reaches me, causing me to raise my head.

Of course, there is no trace of anyone. All I can see is a tree.

"Hahaha..." I laugh toward the sakura tree.

The blossom-less sakura tree somehow resembled Reina Kamisu's smile.

## Chapter 2: Ryoji Kamisu

"I will die in a few days from now," says my little sister, Reina Kamisu, while she is enjoying a cup of Darjeeling tea on the terrace.

"Hm?" I groan not because I didn't understand her, but because I couldn't catch the meaning. After all, she wouldn't speak about her death like about the weather tomorrow.

"As I said, I will die in a few days."

I attempt to read a metaphorical meaning into her words, but at least for now there is just no plausible explanation why she would suddenly come up with such a statement.

"Die?" I ask.

"Yes."

"You?"

"Yes."

"That joke is—" *Lame*. And Reina *does not* tell lame jokes. "...Are you serious?"

"I am serious," she confirms without hesitation.

"Okay—"

What's the deal? Does she want to bother me with nonsense? Reina...? No, she wouldn't do that. What she said must be a simple truth.

Reina will die; if that's the truth, I ought to become disconcerted. However, I don't know about others, but at least I can't just believe and embrace the thought of her death just because she predicted it. No, maybe I can't do that *because* it's me.

"You...you don't have some incurable disease, right? Haha...this isn't some schmaltzy book, after all."

"No, I do not have a disease."

"All right, let's set aside for a moment whether or not you'll die. Why did you tell me that, anyway?"

"Because it is the truth and you belong to my family, Ryoji-san."

"Ha!" I sneer. Family?

Reina dryly calls me "Ryoji-san" instead of using some sort of nickname as is usual for siblings. I'm sure it's not actually with intent, but I can't shake off the nasty feeling that she is trying to deny our blood relation.

Well, I'm probably the only one who thinks like that.

*Family*, eh? I don't know about her, but at least I never considered her family. To me—to our family—she is not a member, but a piece of art.

"Excuse me, but did I say something bizarre?"

"No," I utter in response.

Despite talking about her own death, Reina gives me a smile. Yes, she is smiling indeed—and that's our punishment for treating her like a piece of art.

I don't remember an exact date, but when Reina was around ten years old, she lost all her emotions. At the very least, I could no longer observe any stirrings of emotion in her. The only thing she would show—regardless of the situation—was a smile. In fact, I can't even picture her to myself without one.

There is one thing I always think when looking at her:

—We must not disturb her smile.

Reina is a person. But we somehow forgot about that while associating with her and eventually treated her with utmost care as

though she were a fragile work of art. Reina became obliged to smile and we became obliged not to disturb her smile.

She was sensible enough to recognize that role we had force upon her and played along.

However, she also had the skill to fulfill that role. Since she was intelligent to begin with, Reina quickly became what one could call *perfect*. She became perfect in every thinkable aspect—be it her appearance, manners, wits, personality, or her skills—so much that it bordered on being plain creepy.

We were all equally shaken, I presume, but nobody said anything; after all, this is what we had wanted Reina to be. Besides... what problem is there with being perfect?

Therefore, all we could eventually do was watching in amazement as she elegantly drunk tea on the terrace as if she was a piece of art.

...But I digress.

"If you know that you will die within a few days, that means that you plan on ending your life, right? In that case, it would indeed be plausible to say that you will die in a few days."

"So you think that I will commit suicide?"

"No, I don't."

"But?"

"If you thought about committing suicide, then you wouldn't tell me, would you?"

Reina smiles in response to my statement.

"I would stop you, Reina, if you told me about suicide, although there would be no need to tell me in the first place if you were serious about it. Moreover, you might give me a guilty conscience by evading my attempts to stop you, and you are too smart a person for such a

misconduct that nobody profits. You aren't so weak as to say this because you want me to stop you, either. But most of all... you don't trust me enough to confess your plans of suicide to me."

"That is not true."

"I wonder," I say with a wry smile and sip at my lukewarm cup of black tea. "Anyway, the answer is that you are going to be killed in a few days."

"But did you not say that I will end my own life a few moments ago?" Reina asks.

"You said that *you will die in a few days*. In other words, you are aware that you are going to be killed. No one is holding you captive, Reina. Even if someone was threatening you, you could escape with some effort. However, you don't, which means that you have decided to end your life. Besides, if you really planned to commit suicide, there would be no need to use a vague expression like *in a few days*."

"I understand," says Reina with a nod. I doubt that something I can think of would not occur to her, so she might just be trying to be polite.

"Compared to a normal person, there are more reasons to target someone like you. For one thing, our family is fairly wealthy, and your looks would justify an attempt to murder you as well. There are more than enough reasons for murder to occur."

"That might be true," she says with a smile, agreeing with the absolutely disagreeable fact that I pointed out. It's perfect. The mask she is wearing is perfect.

Is she scheming something else beneath that beautiful mask of hers? Perhaps. But if nobody is able to perceive what that is, those thoughts are technically non-existent.



"All right," I say, finally cutting to the chase. "What do you want me to do, Reina?"

Reina answers with a smile. "I just wanted you to know."

"Hold on! So you want me to sit on my hands and do nothing even though I now know that my sister is going to be killed?"

I may have said this, but as a matter of fact I can't imagine Reina getting killed; although I don't know if that is because she's so blunt about it or because I've subconsciously sorted out the possibility.

Or perhaps because I care about other people as little as Reina does.

"...I see where you are coming from. Asking this of you might be cruel indeed."

"See?"

And because of that, our empty conversation felt very artificial and superficial, with neither of us putting their cards on the table.

"In that case, go to my room when the time comes."

"...To your room?"

Come to think of it, I can't remember when I last was in her room even though we live under the same roof.

"When the time comes...?"

"You will be able to tell!"

If anyone else other than Reina had told me so, I would have laughed it off. However, Reina is saying so and she is smiling.

"Do not worry about me, Ryoji-san," Reina says to me while I'm struggling to find the right reaction. "I will die—"

"—but only metaphorically."

However, Reina died.

A few days after our conversation—three days, to be exact—Reina killed herself by jumping off the roof of a school building.

She didn't leave behind a last will, but there were more than enough witnesses to confirm her death, since it happened shortly after school was over. Reina jumped head-first off the building and died. Unless all the witnesses were lying, that's a truth.

However, because more than half her pretty face was missing after the fall, I have not seen her body.

Every person dies eventually. Every person.

This always gets me wondering; would Reina really die? Would a being so perfectly balanced really die like the bunch of us?

Even though the answer is as clear as day, my head keeps telling me "no". But that's absurd.

But Reina has indeed said it. She's many times smarter than me, and she has smilingly said it.

*"Only metaphorically."*

I know it's foolish to believe it, and yet I know that I'm right. I suffer of two conflicting thoughts.

Somewhere, maybe in the course of our conversations, Reina has infected me with a Trojan horse that keeps asking me—

—is Reina Kamisu really dead?

"Whose shoes are those...?" I mutter as I spot unfamiliar leather shoes on entering my home.

"Ah, welcome home Ryoji-san," a woman says as she hurries to me. She, Sakairi-san, is not my mother but an employee who has kept the house for our family for twenty years.

"Hello, Sakairi-san," I reply and take off my shoes.

Twenty years; that's the same amount of time as I have lived so far. In other words, her first job here was to look after me when I was still a baby—which effectively makes her my second mother, since my true mother shuffled off all the hard labor as a housewife to Sakairi-san.

Likewise, she was also Reina's second mother.

In fact, when I saw her crying at Reina's funeral ceremony, it occurred to me that she might actually be the person who mourned for Reina the most and accepted her death before anyone else.

Our family members treated Reina as someone special, but what about Sakairi-san? No one else had seen more of Reina's mundane sides than Sakairi-san, who changed Reina's diapers and emptied her trash bin. Perhaps, she actually thought of Reina as a normal person.

As such, she was bound to be saddened by Reina's passing.

Suddenly, Sakairi-san cuts off my train of thought: "Ah right, I should tell you that a former friend of Reina-san is here."

I drop my gaze to my feet and look at the unfamiliar shoes again.

Sakairi-san was by no means the only person who cried at Reina's funeral ceremony; mother teared up as well—although I can't say the same for father—and so did many of the students from her school, sobbing and weeping. So many tears were shed that day, in fact, that it could have rained.

I must have been the only one who was not concerned with her death.

"Come to see Reina's altar, I take it?"

"Yes."

Leaving behind an indifferent *uh-huh*, I start to walk to my room upstairs. However...

"Would you mind saying hello to her, Ryoji-san?" Sakairi-san suddenly suggests.

"Huh? Why?"

"I already bid her welcome, of course, but I'm afraid that it might be considered impolite if no one from the family welcomed her."

"But why me...? What about mother?"

I quickly regret my remark. It has only been five days since Reina's death and mother has sunk into depression. I don't know if it's because she lost her daughter or because she lost a piece of splendid art, though.

At any rate, *that's* what happens when pampered little princesses grow up under a shield of protection. It's really bothersome.

But I'm sure this won't last for long; everything will be back to normal within a month or so. Even while mourning, she won't just stop eating and defecating, and she probably won't miss out on the next lesson at the ballroom dancing school that she has taken to visiting. Before long she will have forgotten to be sad, since such feelings have to be locked away when dealing with our everyday chores. We are conditioned to by our society.

Therefore, feelings serve no purpose to begin with.

I wonder, though, if our parents would be just as sad if I were the one who died ... which is a stupid question. The answer is obvious.

As if they would care.

"...Fine, fine. She's by the altar, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll go greet her. I'm sure you already served her some tea?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"I expected no less."

With these words, I get on my way to our Japanese-style room and walk through the unnecessarily long corridor of the house.

When I pushed aside the sliding door, I found a girl gazing at the photograph at Reina's altar.

In her eyes I recognize something that's neither sadness nor despair. Uh-huh, she's one of *those*. Well, in Reina's case that's perfectly possible even if she went to an all-girls school.

The girl was simply enraptured by the photograph of Reina.

That's a common reaction. The same happened to some of the business associates of my father who had to attend her funeral: the instant they saw the picture, they were so charmed that they forgot to act mournfully for a moment.

"Ah..." the girl gasps nervously as she notices that someone witnessed her enchanted gaze. I play dumb in response and greet her instead.

"Hello," she returns. "Are you Reina-san's ... brother?"

"Well, yes."

That fact alone was enough to gain her respect. Well, well, if my sister's influence isn't amazing. She's pretty—maybe I should look out for a chance to sleep with her?

"What's your name?"

"My name...? I'm Sakura Kawai," she answers with her eyes fixed upon me. "Excuse me, but you don't happen to ... have picked up my name somewhere?"

"Huh?"

"I've taken over the position of president of the student council from Reina-san. So I thought that she might have ... mentioned me at some point ... perhaps."

"Hm ... I'm afraid not."

"I see..." Kawai-san mutters with blatant disappointment. She must have concluded that she wasn't important enough to Reina to be worth a mention.

"See, Reina never talked about others."

"She didn't...?"

"Yeah."

My excuse was enough to make her smile again. What a simpleton.

It's true that Reina hardly ever talked about others, though. In fact, I don't remember ever hearing anything about her reputation at school.

...Hm, why don't I grasp the opportunity and ask the girl before me? Well, her reputation was obviously mostly positive looking at this girl.

"What kind of person was Reina at school?"

"A wonderful person," Kawai-san replies without missing a beat.

"...Wonderful in what way?"

"I can't explain it. Everything she did was wonderful ... at any rate, she was my ... no, our guide, our goal, our ideal."

"..."

I was prepared for a favorable opinion, but Kawai-san's turned out far more intensive than expected. Her eyes were glittering with adoration—and even struck me as void—as she spoke about Reina. You could almost think she was a—"worshipper" of sorts.

On the other hand, I can somewhere understand her. If Reina doesn't appear human even to her family, then she could definitely make a godlike impression on unrelated people. Even more so in the case of the Junseiwa school: all-girls, for wealthy people, and on top of that, a high percentage of the students seem to be staying at the dorm. I can't fathom what effect Reina must have had on a school with such a highly unified value system.

Suddenly, I recall my conversation with Reina and feel a shudder run down my spine.

"...Kawai-san?"

"Yes?"

"You weren't there when Reina jumped off the roof, right?"

I quickly regret my question. Kawai-san is Reina's "worshipper" and I figured that confronting her with the death of her idol is rather cruel.

However, my fears prove ungrounded. In a perfectly composed manner, the girl replies, "No, I haven't been there." Relieved that she is apparently not as fanatic as expected, I ask another question:

"Then ... do you think that Reina committed suicide?"

During my conversation with Reina, I concluded that she would die of murder, but that assessment might have been wrong after all. If she was aware of my indifference to others—and thus indifference to her suicide—that would have enabled her to deliberately mislead me into thinking of murder.

But *why* would she do that in the first place?



What if my initial assessment wasn't wrong? What if she was killed and didn't commit suicide?

As a matter of fact, these fears seem to be grounded when looking at the Junseiwa school. Perhaps, her idolized image developed a life of its own?

Oh, what an absurd thought. I'm such an idiot. If that were really true—

"Reina-san did not commit suicide."

Kawai-san replied to my question and interrupted my train of thought.

"Huh...?"

"As I said, Reina-san did not commit suicide!"

"D-Don't be silly! That would mean that dozens of people are lying about witnessing the scene of her suicide!"

Exactly. That fact clashes with my assessment of murder.

Kawai-san, however, asks bluntly:

"Do you think that's impossible?"

"...Impossible?"

"Do you really think it's impossible that dozens of Junseiwa students would lie about Reina-san's death?"

I gasp.

The present condition at Junseiwa is an unknown to me, and yet I was able to easily envision her as a special individual to the students at the school. That's why I started to suspect murder.

But what if reality exceeded my imagination?

"Dear brother of Reina-san, listen. She is absolute to us. Can you follow me? Absolute. Things like common sense, good sense and the law don't matter when Reina-san is involved."

The Junseiwa school is a detached domain. On top of that, females are highly adaptive and skilled at building up their own little community.

What are the implications of throwing Reina Kamisu into that mix?

"At our school, Reina-san made the rules."

Yeah, right. That's what happens.

"I'm sure you understand now, right?" she asks. "Our students will happily make false statements as long as Reina-san wills it."

"...Wait! *If Reina wills it?* Do you mean that Reina made you kill her? No, in this case it means she made you help her with her suicide—"

"What are you talking about...?"

"...Hm?"

"Who said that Reina-san was killed?"

"Huh?"

Kawai-san pulls her lips to a smirk, and makes me realize that her level of "worship" is indeed fanatic.

The girl opens her mouth again.

"Reina-san isn't dead."

How terribly deluded she is. Kawai-san has come to a silly conclusion just because she doesn't want to accept Reina's death.

However—

—Is she the only one who came to this conclusion?

"—*is Reina Kamisu really dead?*"

Is this just a coincidence? Was Reina so unearthly that she could give us both the same impression?

Or is it simply the truth?

At any rate, I decide to ask for Kawai-san's opinion.

"Kawai-san ... you're being absurd. Then who on earth is that person that was cremated and buried six feet under?"

"I don't know. But dear brother ... have you seen the body?"

"...I haven't."

"See?"

"...No, you can't gloss it over like that. The students at Junseiwa may lie for Reina, but the police staff that examined her body do not," I argue.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that."

"What?"

"We have quite a few students with politically active parents or with parents who work at the police. They could apply pressure."

"...I doubt those parents would listen to their daughters just like that."

"We also have money. And ... well, we are young and pretty. It shouldn't be impossible to bribe one or the other examiner with those means, don't you think?"

"...What about her corpse? You can't tell me that you'd kill someone who looks similar just to replace her. You wouldn't go that far even if she—"

"But we would. I told you that she is the *absolute* rule to us and exceeds good sense and the law, didn't I?" the girl says with iron determination.

...I mustn't let her deceive me. It might be true that Reina would not be incapable of feigning her own death.

But that's only hypothetical.

The likelihood isn't zero, but the number is so small that it can be considered mathematically irrelevant and can be reduced to zero.

On the other hand, I can't deny the fact that I also wondered why Reina would go out of her way to commit suicide at the Junseiwa school.

"Your reasoning is all over the place, Kawai-san, but I do get your point. But let's be honest here: you arrived at this explanation because you can't believe Reina is dead, right?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Why did you think Reina isn't dead? Did she tell you that she wouldn't die, or something?"

"..." Kawai-san seems to be at a loss for words at first. At last, she continues: "No. I simply noticed."

As I expected. Kawai-san has merely built a logic around her delusions.

However, the next thing she says rattles me.

"A former enemy of mine, who is also a subordinate of Reina-san's, was also aware of the fact that Reina-san isn't dead. Ironically, she is the one who pointed it out to me. After giving it some thought, I also realized that Reina-san can't be dead."

"..."

Kawai-san and I are not the only ones who came to that conclusion?

"Fine, fine! That's enough!" I shout, unable to suppress my irritation.

"...Excuse me. It might have been inappropriate to say these things to a relative of hers," Kawai-san says while hanging her head.

"Yeah, I've heard enough. In fact, you didn't even need to tell me. I was already certain of it."

"Huh...?"

At last, I admit it.

"Reina Kamisu is alive."

The likelihood is zero. And even when taking Reina's exceptionalness into account, the likelihood stays infinitely close to zero.

However, the very fact that Reina was born into this world is an even greater miracle. A miracle atop of a miracle is nothing to be surprised about. Both things have a 0 chance of occurring. They're absurd. If one impossible thing happens, then everything that occurs afterwards can be considered just as impossible and therefore there is no need to be surprised. No matter how many miracles occur, in the end it's just one miracle.

"Metaphorically."

Reina told me figuratively that she would die. She did that, because it was the only way to express what was going to happen and what did happen.

In the end, she still has us all in her palm of her hand.

Reina is trying to achieve something by dying socially, by vanishing off the face of the earth. However, the question of her goal is far above me.

But there is one thing that I do know.

If things are going according to Reina's plan—then it's only a matter of time until everything falls into place.

I split up with my girlfriend after dating her for three months and ignored her when she asked why with tears in her eyes. I had learned from experience that it was no use trying to explain my reasons when splitting up with a girlfriend.

Why I ended our relationship?

Because I wasn't satisfied.

Because she didn't become mine.

She didn't truly look at me.

Most of my ex-girlfriends would then either deny it or flip out, saying that "it was my fault." That's why I decided to split up without making any excuses this time around. However, I've recently come to think that my ex-girlfriends may have been not so off the mark. After

all, I'm indifferent to others, and they were no exception. In that case, the problem was clearly on my side.

I'm sure I realized that because I'm getting older.

Oh boy ... what a shame. She was my type in both looks and personality. She even loved a guy like me and never did things I didn't care for. Why did it have to end like this?

...Well, at least I got to bang her.

After I cut off my train of thought like this, I leave through the gate of my university, walk for a bit and catch myself a taxi. "To the Junseiwa school," I tell the driver, take out my cell phone and navigate to the newest entry in my address book.

*[Sakura Kawai]*

She answered the phone after three rings.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is that Reina-san's brother?"

I turn to the driver to inquire about the time until arrival and forward the answer to Kawai-san. She will be waiting at the gate for me.

After making the appointment, I hang up.

"Meeting up with your sweetheart?" the driver jests.

"No, I just split up with my girlfriend."

As I reply in a leisure manner, I notice that I have lost all interest in my ex-girlfriend.

Neither am I hurt, nor do I feel any guilt.

"Hehe..."

Well, well—

Looks like I didn't care about her after all.



Kawai-san was waiting at the gate as promised.

"Sorry for bothering you," I say, assuming that she had to come all the way here from home since it's almost 6 pm.

"It's okay. I live just around the corner."

"Ah, in the dorm?"

"Yes."

I look up at the school gate while talking with her. *Mmm, quite impressive.* As expected from a school for rich girls. Oh, look at that! They even installed surveillance cameras!

"...Is it safe for me to enter this campus?"

"I told our advisor that a relative of Reina Kamisu is coming. Besides, you should be fine if you stay together with me, even if word hasn't reached all teachers yet. I'll explain it to them if they ask."

I recall that she is the head of the student council and nod.

"Excellent. So, can you show me where Reina died?"

"Come again?"

"Ah, let me correct myself. Show me where Reina 'scattered.'"

With these words, we enter the grounds of the Junseiwa school.

I'm now inside an all-girls school that only lets in girls and women. A secret flower garden of sorts—which is a very cheesy yet strangely suitable simile. Reina has indeed secretly sown flowers here, and they are budding soon.

I must find out what they are.

Because that is probably the reason why Reina had that conversation with me three days before she scattered.

The dark red school building did indeed look magnificent from the outside, but once I entered, it was no much different from the high school I attended, though a great deal more luxurious. Well, granted, while the high school I went to was not as high-class as the Junseiwa school, it was by no means a cheap one. It was the kind of school that would take its students abroad for the school excursion, so my opinion may be a little biased.

There is something distinctly different, though: it's not the architecture, but the students. Their (visual) quality is far higher than what I'm used to for starters, but there is also something different in the way they greet each other whenever Kawai-san walks into a fellow student. The students that pass us may give me curious looks, but they don't ask any questions. I don't know whether that is because of their composed nature or because I'm with Kawai-san.

The rooftop almost looks like a sidewalk café with the fashionable tables and chairs that have been installed there. Because of what happened to Reina, I assume, nobody is using it at the moment. The fence around the area has been built rather high due to the many visitors this place has; it's impossible to fall from the rooftop by accident, unless the fence happens to be damaged.

I look down through the fence and find the white outlines of a person.

"...This is where Reina fell?"

"Where she is said to have fallen," Kawai-san corrects.

"Quite high."

There are four floors below us. When adding the 2 meters of the fence, this makes about 20 meters.

"But not high enough to commit certain suicide. Also, it's possible to get caught up in the tree over there."

Unable to get my point, Kawai-san cocks her head.

Suicide. If Reina genuinely planned to commit suicide, then she would not choose a place like this per se. She would choose a place that offers certain death and does not bother anyone. Jumping to death requires courage—it makes no sense to increase the difficulty by choosing this building.

Or did she perhaps want somebody to notice her and step in? Did she feel special about this school? ... No, I doubt Reina is a person who thinks like that.

There is thus every indication that there is a meaning in her decision to scatter here.

"Metaphorically,"

And it might be found in—

—the way she made everyone believe that she is dead.

I look around and then again at the white outlines.

"...But I'm fairly sure that there was an actual corpse," I claim as I keep my gaze fixed on the chalk outline.

"I wasn't there, so I can't say anything."

"Even if the people who said that Reina jumped off the rooftop are liars, it should be safe to assume that there was a body."

"Why?"

"Just one more thing: Am I right my assumption that the pathway the chalk outline is drawn on is not unused?"

"I suppose so. Not that frequently, but people do use it."

"See? If everything were a lie and there were no body, then the people using the passage would become suspicious. The liars can't do anything about that."

"Reina-san might have jumped when no one was down there ... I mean ... they could say that."

"That's a good point, but keep in mind that this rooftop is visible from many places. See the windows in the other school building? That means that somebody might show up who can testify that nobody has jumped down from here at that time."

"Maybe there is somebody like that, but she is just keeping it to herself?"

"Even though it's about the death of Reina Kamisu, the 'absolute rule' here?"

I was sure that Kawai-san would be at a loss for words, but her response was swift:

"You are right. It might be safe to think that there was a corpse or something to the same effect."

"..."

She admitted it just so.

This is a strange feeling. I feel like I am trying to beat clouds with a bat, like this discussion has no substance whatsoever. Kawai-san is only passively listening to my opinion.

That's odd. She is supposed to be just as interested in Reina's death as I am, but then why does she not reason together with me? There's no way she doesn't care—

—No, perhaps she really doesn't care.

Kawai-san does not assume that Reina is alive. Kawai-san is certain that Reina is alive.

Reina's death is nothing but a silly lie to her.

My opinion is therefore of no interest to her. I can say what I want, she has made up her mind.

My opinion doesn't matter.

—doesn't matter.

"...Kawai-san. You are convinced that Reina is alive, right?"

"Yes," she nods without hesitation.

"I'm here to find proof for that, but your conviction will not change either way. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you lead me here today? Why did you put yourself to this bother?"

Kawai-san replies as if it's nothing: "How could I say no when you're Reina's brother?"

Aah—

So that's what it boils down to.

That's all there is.

I'm just an extra.

All that is ever asked of me is to be Reina's extra.

She is not looking at me.

She is not looking at me, either.

"...Let me ask you a question: If Reina killed someone or had someone killed in order to feign her death, would you still admire her?"

Even though it's a question that should leave her speechless, Kawai-san doesn't require a second of thought:

"Of course!" she instantly replies. "Did I forget to mention it? Reina-san was absolute to us. Things like—"

"I know!"

Sensing that I'm irritated, she falls silent and gives me a suspicious look.

No, that look isn't for me. It's for Reina Kamisu's brother. She is looking right through me, at Reina Kamisu.

This makes me sick.

This. Makes. Me. Sick.

"We're done here," I say and walk toward the exit without looking at her.

"...Is something wrong...?"

While hearing these slightly worried words behind me, I enter the school building. Kawai-san follows me, though a bit nervously, as I walk down the stairs, get back into my shoes and leave the school building. I then walk to the chalk outline-

"—Jesus...!"

Why do I let it get to my head so easily? Haven't I gotten used to it by now? With Reina beside me, everyone looks only at her and ignores me. It's always been like this. Father, mother, Sakairi-san, the other house keepers, my teachers, my friends, my lovers ... they do not see me. They only see the Reina Kamisu behind me. They only see Reina Kamisu, the impersonation of absolute beauty. The faint light that I

am disappears amidst the dazzling, huge light that she is. Oh, haven't I gotten used it? What is there to be sour about? Nothing has changed. The only thing that changed is that—

Is that—

"———"

"...What's wrong?" Kawai-san asks. "Did I offend you?"

"—Reina's not here anymore."

"...Huh?"

"No more ... Reina is no more, and yet, nobody sees me...?"

"...Dear brother?"

We arrive at the chalk outline.

Welcome to the magic show! Hop inside the line and you will disappear! One, two, three, and Reina is gone! And even though she is gone, even though she has disappeared socially and physically, we are still occupied with her.

I've finally found the answer.

Why do I believe that Reina's alive?

Of course, part of the reason has to do with that conversation we had. But that's not all. Another significant reason—the real one—is that nothing has changed around me. Everyone is still exclusively looking at Reina. Nobody is looking at me still. Because of that, I'm unable to feel losing Reina.

Everyone is looking at a void, claiming it's Reina, and ignoring me. Even though I'm the one who's still alive.

Everyone leaves me alone.

Alone?

"———"



I see ... We are much alike, Reina and I.

We are truly brother and sister. Kindred spirits.

I was alone. Nobody saw me because of Reina. With someone far more valuable by my side, nobody saw my value.

But Reina was just as alone. We did not see Reina. We only saw her value.

As a result, Reina and I lost interest in our blind social environment and with it our sympathy.

That's why we only associated with others superficially.

We're truly alike.

However, I tried to resist. I dated girls, made friends and enrolled at a shitty university, in the hope that somebody would understand me. Even now.

But Reina took another path. She created a personality that was perfect enough to leave no room for others to approach her, and distanced herself from us.

Why did Reina disappear?

It's as simple as it gets.

Reina dissociated herself even more from us.

That's why—Reina scattered.

"Kawai-san."

"Yes...?"

"Can you step inside that chalk line?"

"If ... you insist...?"

There's nothing special about this patch of earth. There's no land mine hidden underneath. The white line simply signifies that a

human person died here. There aren't even any traces of blood left. If not for the outline, people would walk over it without a second thought.

However, right now you can't do it without any instinctive scruples.

Reina had drawn a line, too. A line she wanted us to respect and keep out from. It was nothing more than a mark that people could easily cross like this chalk outline here, but she did signalize that she didn't want us to.

Reina was admired by everyone, but she was not loved by anyone.

And I'm sure that's what she wanted.

This girl here, Sakura Kawai, however, is clearly crossing that line. She is clearly crossing the no entry line Reina has drawn. She, and the whole rest of her bunch. They defiled Reina's sanctuary and left behind countless footprints.

—I don't think Reina would forgive that.

"I don't know what Reina wanted to achieve by scattering, but I do know the cause."

This time, my words manage to make her eyes widen.

"What is it...?"

"The cause is—"

—Why did Reina have to commit suicide at this school of all places?

"—you and your friends."

Misfortunes never come singly.

Somebody might fail his entrance exam. That's the first misfortune, but the chain goes on.

After he fails his exam, he might find himself disillusioned with his skills. He loses hope in himself. He becomes depressive. That in turn

makes him unappealing and causes his girlfriend to dump him. He starts to think that nobody likes him, and as a result, it becomes the truth. He loses hope in everyone. He despairs. He wants to vanish. He begins to think about dying. He decides to commit suicide. He jumps into a rolling train and dies. And that's it. Bad end. The story is over.

But the misfortune goes on. The chain has not been broken.

The station staff who had to tidy the place of the human shreds might not be able to bear up with the repulsion and quit his job. If he loses his income, he might get into conflict with his family and end up divorcing. A passenger might suffer trauma from witnessing the gruesome scene of blood and guts getting flung through the air. He might not be able to eat his loved meat anymore. The family of the victim might plunge into debts because they can't come up with the money for the damages. They might end up hanging themselves in fear of the violent debt-collectors. And the chain of misfortune continues in some way for them.

Like this, a misfortune spawns another one. Because unlike fiction, reality does not end. It's an endless misfortune.

Likewise, Reina's scattering is not the end.

The misfortune Reina created goes on.

*"Go to my room when the time comes."*

Quite frankly, I had no clue what "time" she was talking about. I actually went there when she died, thinking it might be the "time", and a few times after that.

However, whenever I went there, I found nothing of import and had to leave empty-handed.

But now I'm certain.

The "time" is now.

It's now that Sakura Kawai and her friends jumped to death.

I open the door to Reina's room. The setting sun is shining through the window, dyeing the simple and somewhat lifeless room in the colors of twilight.

Yeah, I was right. The time is now.

As I look at the most lifeless thing in this lifeless room, I open my mouth to speak up:

"Reina."

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Ryoji-san," she smile beautifully.

Reina is standing in front of the window and leaning against the frame. Illuminated by the setting sun, she does not only look stunningly beautiful, but also turns her onlookers contemplative like a magnificent painting. Aah ... I can't shake off these thoughts even though I know it is what drove her away.

"You're ... alive?"

I'm hardly surprised.

Even after I noticed why she didn't feel dead to me, I found myself unable to believe her death.

Yes, from a realistic viewpoint someone was burnt to ashes and these ashes can't belong to anyone else but Reina, but it is Reina we are talking about.

I did find out why she wanted to distance herself from us, but I didn't find out why she would commit suicide. As a result, I still considered it possible that she was alive.

"Yes, I am alive. Although perhaps only metaphorically," Reina answers with a smile.

I now understand the meaning behind her words.

I take a deep breath and inquire: "Reina ... was it you?"

Reina gives no answer and keeps smiling.

"Did Kawai-san and the others become an annoyance to you?"

"Why, not at all."

Well, is she telling the truth? Or has Reina lost the ability to discern between what's true and what's for show after wearing a mask for so long?

However, it's apparent that Reina was involved in their suicide, be it directly or indirectly. It was her will.

I have no means of telling what is going on in Reina's head. More precisely, not once in my entire life have I ever understood her. Her goal is incomprehensible to a commoner like me.

There is only one fact I know:

Reina killed Kawai-san and her group.

But what about me? What happens to me? I'm also one of Reina's marionettes, just like Kawai-san, and it's clear at which occasion she programmed me.

"Tell me, Reina, why did you talk to me about your death?"

"...Are you sure that you want to know?"

"Of course."

Reina peers into my eyes.

"Your eyes have changed a little, Ryoji-san."

"...You think so?"

"Yes ... I think I can tell you now. I wanted you to become aware, Ryoji-san."

"Aware of what?"

"Of yourself. Of your own value."

"Of my own value...?"

I don't understand. Well, I do understand what she means, but I don't get why Reina would care.

"Hey, I know what I'm worth. I will have no success and I will not be of use to anyone, just like a wayside stone," I say with conviction, but Reina shakes her head.

"You were so unfortunate as to be rated in comparison to me. My value was of a far too apparent kind. The comparison between us must have deranged your sense of self-worth."

"That would happen to anyone in this position, Reina."

"Then why did you not simply stop comparing yourself with me?"

I falter for a moment but then counter, "I would've done that if possible. But as a matter of fact, you were there and the comparison was unavoidable. I was always in the position to be compared with you and you were always twice as good as me. In anyone's eyes. And so nobody cared about me. Nobody looked at me. And I stopped caring about others. All that was inevitable with you as my sister."

"Even now?"

"Yes, even ... now—"

Even now that Reina is no longer here?

"...Wait, we're digressing! I didn't ask about myself, but about the reason why you approached me!"

"No, we are not digressing, Ryoji-san. What did you do after I told you about my death?"

"What I did? Well, I pondered about the meaning of your words and started to have doubts in your death."

"And then you discovered that our conversation was not the only reason to harbor doubts, therefore you started investigating?"

"...Yeah..."

"And then you noticed that everyone is still occupied with me even though I have vanished, which in turn led you to the answer to why you were really doubting my death."

Reina's words are so spot-on that I'm left speechless.

"And you are starting to realize that you do not need to feel alone anymore, now that I am gone."

"No, that's not true ... everyone is still only looking at you!"

"But it is a void they are looking at."

"..."

"And the one who is peering into this void harder than anyone is no one else but you, Ryoji-san."

"...What?" I ask in response to her unexpected statement with my glance fixed upon her.

However, Reina does naturally not answer my glance.

Reina is smiling.

"If I had not approached you before my death, you would have never even thought about stopping to concern yourself with me."

I always thought that nobody was looking at me. That all the attention I was supposed to get was sucked toward Reina like by a black hole. That nobody knew me. That I was just there.

But Reina is saying that the same applied to myself.

She is saying that my attention was sucked toward her as well.

She is saying that not even I saw myself.

"..."

*Is Reina Kamisu really dead?* I used to think, and I noticed that the reason for these doubts was to be found in that conversation and the lack of change in my environment.

But is that really all?

Probably not. I was probably scared.

Scared that my environment might not change even after Reina's disappearance—no, I was scared that my environment might still *feel* to me as though it had not changed after Reina's disappearance.

If Reina was still alive somewhere, then there was nothing strange about feeling that nothing had changed. Everything was the same. Of course, people would still not look at me.

Because of *that*, Reina had to be still alive.

And that's how I disregarded myself.

"—I am afraid that it is time to say goodbye," Reina says with a smile after waiting for me to arrive at the conclusion.

"Where are you going, Reina...?"

Reina just keeps smiling.

I will never see her again. Of that I'm sure.

My loneliness will be fading from now on.



Reina, however, will stay alone.

"...Reina," I say as I gaze at her. But still, she doesn't answer my look. She gazes elsewhere, somewhere far away yet nowhere.

—And **here** she scatters.

I blinked my eyes, and a moment later, Reina was gone.

How? I don't know. Reina disappeared. She scattered. She is not here anymore.

Reina is no longer in this twilit room.

At last, I discovered myself.

Finally, I obtained the ability to associate with others.

And so I let something out that I had held in for a long time.

I cried for Reina.

## ***Chapter 3: Sakura Kawai***

The thought of how thin the ice was I have always stood on until now makes my skin crawl. I have been wiggling left and right like a balancing toy, prone to leaning over—or falling over—any time.

Japanese religion counts thousands of gods.

But doesn't that just mean that people could not decide on a single one? The god you cherish can't be the same as mine, and the god he cherishes can't be the same as yours. In other words, we all consider different things important.

There is no such thing as an universal god.

In other words, there is no god.

If you are able to look at things in a somewhat objective light and look at the state nowadays, then you will see: It is foolish to believe in something.

What people ultimately believe in are tangible things. Money. Because money is much more certain than intangible things like love and friendship. People believe in money, the inorganic, equivalent and quickly betraying thing that gets stained with finger marks in people's pockets and created day by day by human hands at the bank.

It's filthy in a way.

And yet, I knew that nothing could help me better than money, and that I could even buy love and friendship if I used it the right way. In the end, I believed in money in every respect. On one side, those old, wrinkled banknotes that came and went to and from my pocket were dear to me, and the other side, I felt filthy and ended up in despair.

Ultimately, in my world there was nothing to believe in, nothing to hold on to.

I wanted to believe in something beautiful, something pure.

However, there was no such thing no matter where I searched and even if I tried to believe in something, I couldn't shake off my doubts. I ended up trembling in fear of falling.

But that time has ended.

[*Plink*]

Whenever I think of what creates and defines my foothold, the "Heroic Polonaise" starts to play in my mind. This transparent and vacant and false and mechanic yet transcendental melody is my guide to a steadfast world.

If I were to describe it as an image, then it would be a lake with water so transparent that I forget that there is water.

What I believe in?

—Reina Kamisu.

I do therefore not forgive people who deny her.

But because everybody knows how beautiful and splendid she is, I did not have to deal with such a person. It was unthinkable that someone would deny her.

However—

Yukimi Mitsui appeared and denied Reina-san.

Enemy! She was my enemy! She was the enemy of us who believe in Reina-san!

I could not let her get away with this. Never.

Denying Reina-san is equivalent to destroying my foothold, to putting me back on thin ice. I could not allow that. What right did she have? "Who do you think you are?" I thought and actually asked her.

However, she ignored my warning and chose to remain my foe. Her attitude was a clear message of enmity to me and the other believers.

*Yeah, you have got some nerve. I'll fight you back, then.*

I told the members of the student council, which was constructed of students who also believed in Reina-san, about Yukimi Mitsui. That was enough to arrange her removal from the Junseiwa school. This place is full of people believing in Reina-san, who also consider anyone who denies her their enemy.

I was satisfied.

After I had launched a devastating attack at my foe, I was already satisfied.

I was forgetful.

A baited cat may grow as fierce as a lion

Yes, satisfied with making an attack, I forgot to keep my guard up.

Blood.

When I returned to my room at the dorm, my roommate Anna Fuyuki was lying in her own blood in the shower room.

For a few moments I was overwhelmed. Absent-mindedly I gazed at the blood flowing down the drain, at the razor blade, at Anna's naked body as water showered on her, at her left wrist and the straight cut, at the blood spilling from there, and finally I screamed, "Anna!" as I rushed to her and held her.

Brr!

Anna has been taking an ice-cold shower, but that is hardly the only reason why she's so cold. Red blood. Milky skin. Blue lips.

Aah, what should I do? I-I must stop the blood ... B-But warming her body comes first. And I have to call the ambulance. Aah, where to start? Why did this happen, anyway?

Only after I take a deep breath it occurs to me that I should stop the shower.

"...Sakura," Anna mutters.

"Why did you do this...?"

"...Sorry for ... troubling you," she says without answering my question. There's no need for her to apologize!

I shake my head and dash out of the room with a "wait a second!" I can't cope with this alone. I need help. After I fetch Yuuko Kasuga and Emi Tachibana from the neighboring room, I have Yuuko bind up Anna's wound because she aspires to become a doctor. In the meantime, Emi calls the ambulance and informs the head of the dorm, whereas I wipe Anna with a towel, put her underwear on, and wrap a blanket around her.

"I'm so sorry..." she keeps apologizing while we are helping her.

To my relief, the flow of blood stops surprisingly easily. "It's not deep," Yuuko whispers into my ear.

"I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry ... I didn't mean to trouble you!" Anna cries.

I shake my head a few times.

Anna, why do you keep apologizing? Didn't you just cut yourself impulsively because something hurt you? Then why—

"———"

A thought suddenly crosses my mind.

The cut is not deep according to Yuuko, but when I found Anna, she was bleeding profusely.

Most likely, she had cut her wrist moments before I arrived at our room.

No ... considering how hard she is apologizing, something else suggests itself.

Anna cut her wrist in the very moment I arrived here.

We have been living here for over a year; I think I know Anna fairly well. I know about her family problems and the fact that she's so weak as to cut her wrists, and I also know that she's so weak as to be afraid of dying.

Self-harm is a little different from attempted suicide because the scars are made for others to see. They're a message to the world that screams "look how much I'm suffering!" Then who did Anna want to send this message to?

The answer is quite obvious: to me.

Anna is weak.

She does not believe in her own strength, she undervalues herself, and because of that, she is dependent on others. She thinks she can't solve her problems on her own.

Anna wanted to show her suffering to me. She wanted me to save her.

"I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry..."

As she keeps weeping, I give her a hug.

"Sakura...?"

"It's okay, don't worry!"

We have a savior.

We have Reina-san.

After a short while, the ambulance arrived (of course we made sure that Anna wore her clothes at this point). I got into the coach together with her and kept holding her hand on our way to the hospital. By the time we arrived, her hand had turned a little warmer than it initially was.

Since the blood flow had already stopped, there was no need for a blood transfusion. The treatment of her wound didn't take too long; I sat next to her and watched as the doctor scolded her, saying "Don't do this again," and proceeded to disinfecting her wound and binding it up. As a side-note, her parents didn't come. I don't know if they were even contacted, though.

After we left the hospital, I took her to a café that serves delicious black tea. I figured that we would end up getting home a bit late, but I was sure the chief of our dorm wouldn't sound us out after what had happened.

I ordered Darjeeling tea, Anna ordered apple tea. We both kept quiet while we were waiting for our tea to be served.

During that time, I sneaked a few peeks at the bandage around Anna's left wrist.

The cut may have been not that deep, but considering the amount of blood that spilled, this is going to leave a scar.

I wonder if Anna is even aware of the graveness of that scar?

There is only one reason for a scar in a place like this. As soon as someone sees it, that someone will immediately look at her in a different light.

...No, that's still a minor issue.

The one who should not look at this scar the most is—Anna herself.

No matter how happy her life, she will always have this scar with her. And whenever she looks at her wrist, it will remind her of the moment she cut herself. She will become anxious again. She will have to face her family issues and the actual reason that led to the self-harm over and over.

They say that with every sigh you lose a bit of your happiness, which I can fully understand. After all, if you think you're unhappy, then you will inevitably turn unhappy regardless of your actual situation. Once you persuade yourself of your own misery, you will blame everything on it. Met with an accident? Because you're hapless. Got dumped by your lover? Because you're hapless. Lost in that lottery? Because you're hapless. Tripped? Because you're hapless. Your haplessness becomes the source for everything, even though there might be valid other reasons. Things that you would originally not even care about feel like mishaps. And since you think it's your fate, you keep falling down into misery for the rest of your life.

In this sense, Anna's scar is a much clearer sign of "misery" than a sigh, and as such, a much stronger curse that attracts misery.

Our tea arrives. I use this as a sign to start a conversation.

"Anna, what's wrong?"



She ponders for a moment and, for some reason, eventually decides to shake her head.

"It's ... nothing."

"Of course there's something."

"No ... as I once told you, living is painful to me, Sakura. It hurts so much to live. This feeling has been growing for a while now and simply reached the limit."

Is she lying? No. I can read as much off her face.

However—

"But there has to be something that triggered it. You wouldn't cut your wrist without a reason."

I am sure of that. Otherwise, there would be no point in harming herself in front of me.

My remark was correct, apparently: Anna casts her eyes down.

"Come, Anna, tell me about it."

However, Anna hesitates long enough for me to finish my Darjeeling tea, and yet she subconsciously *wants* to say it. She is not faltering, she is just hesitating. I'm starting to get annoyed.

In the next moment, however, my annoyance is blown away.

"I can no longer be by Reina-san's side."

"Huh?"

In utter surprise, I forget to place my tea cup back on the table.

"Reina-san rejected me."

What is the meaning of this...?

Reina-san rejected Anna?

That's not possible. Reina-san does not make exceptions when associating with people. If she would reject someone, then because—

"Anna ... did you perhaps confess your love...?"

"...I did," she nods with tears in her eyes.

Yes. If Reina-san were to reject someone, then because that someone approached her up to that distance.

"Why would you do that?! Reina-san cannot be degraded to a love interest. I can understand the urge to have her all for yourself, but why would you betray us and risk to be rejected by—"

Suddenly, it clicks with me.

Anna would not do something like this of her own accord. That's just not her personality. She would never take a risk so big as to cut her wrists while knowing that she hardly has any chances.

Then why...? Why did Anna confess to Reina-san?

"———"

Ah, of course.

"...Who threatened you, Anna?"

Her tear-stained eyes widen.

"You weren't just talked into it, right? You're the type of girl who would keep some distance if the other girls joked about 'confessing to Reina-san.'"

"..."

"Who was it that threatened you?"

"..."

Anna does not answer. She must have been told to keep quiet about it. Or perhaps she's just afraid of angering the culprit.

Considering her gentle nature, she might just want to avoid hurting that person.

After all, I'm not willing to forgive the culprit.

It goes without saying how deep the sin and how severe the punishment of taking Reina-san from one of us is.

A world without Reina-san ... Aah, just picturing it to myself makes me feel as if I was drying up from the inside.

Because the liquid that is Reina-san is drawn out of my body...?

Indeed ... as a matter of fact, Anna did also lose her own red liquid.

That's the horrible thing the culprit did to Anna.

I will kill her.

I will kill that culprit!

"Who was it, Anna?" I ask again.

"..."

"You have to tell me; she made you cut your wrist!"

"...But..."

"No buts!"

"...I mean..."

"...Fine. I'll just have a guess."

There are only so many suspects. Firstly, it can't be one of "us." Apart from the fact that "we" understand the pain of losing Reina-san, we would choose another method even if we wanted to bully Anna because there was a chance that she would succeed. Then again ... Anna is not a person with many enemies. In fact, I don't know of anyone who dislikes her.

That means that the culprit is not set against Anna herself, but "us" as a group.

—A person who is hostile against "us"?

I know one. I know someone who fits the bill perfectly.

"Yukimi Mitsui."

From the expression on Anna's face I can read that I am right.

So it was she, eh?

That scumbag who made fun of Reina-san, eh? So after insulting Reina-san, so even hurt my weak Anna?

I'll kill her.

I'm gonna kill her!

I resolved to eliminate Yukimi Mitsui from the Junseiwa school.

There is no doubt that it was she who cornered Anna. A few other students witnessed how she took Anna somewhere (and I'm shocked that they did not step in to help her).

I purchased our weapons through the Internet and drilled down her personal information. As most of the students at this school, her

family environment turned out to be very peculiar. This piece of information will be useful to torment her.

Together with Yuuko, Emi, and other students who loathed Yukimi Mitsui for what she did to Anna, I proceeded to executing the elimination plan. We will show no mercy to our enemy. It is important to choose your friends and foes wisely, especially at our age where we are still weak by ourselves. If you show mercy to your enemy, you will end up suffering yourself. Anna did not take part in the elimination. Poor thing. That's why she has to suffer!

After school, we first make sure that Reina-san isn't around and then march into Yuki Mitsui's classroom. The disquieting air about us causes the other senior students, who are still present, to look at us, but because Yukimi Mitsui is the center of trouble, they don't intervene.

"What is it?" she asks snappily. "What does the bunch of you want from me?"

I ignore her barking and press my stun gun against her side.

"Ugha!"

She sinks into a crouch.

"Hmm? What was that strange screech about?" I smirk and, as I look down at Yukimi Mitsui, who is holding her side, I command, "Senpai, mind tagging along with me"

She looks up at me with—haha!—fear written all over her face.

"...Where?"

"Just shut up and follow me, okay?"

She didn't dare to resist or escape. Quite satisfied by that, we walk to the back of the gym.

Once we arrive at our destination, I order my companions to keep watch and turn to Yukimi Mitsui, who is clearly intimidated by us (although she is still trying to look brave), with a scowl.

"So I heard what you did."

"...Did what?"

"Want to play dumb? Remember what you did to Anna Fuyuki?"

She screws up her face and averts her eyes without a word of denial.

"You think you're funny, huh?"

I proceed to corner her with the information I gathered, the weapons I bought, and piercing words. Even she could not help losing heart. But my anger hasn't been vented yet. I kick her in the stomach. It's not enough. I haven't vented on her enough. She made fun of Reina-san, she made fun of "us", and she hassled Anna. I can't forgive her. She hurt "us". I won't forgive her.

And yet...

"My head."

"Hah?"

"That's where I want the first blow! Why don't you beat my head?"

Despite the situation she is in, she started to provoke me.

She completely blew my fuses. That just burned a few of the wires in my head. This girl is playing me for a fool, thinking that I won't really beat her. She is belittling me, thinking that I'm just a tag-along who's clinging to Reina-san. She is looking down on me. She thinks I'm a dependent piece of shit. Don't you think you can make a fool of me! I'll show you what I'm capable of! I'll eliminate you not only from this school, but from this very world that Reina-san lives in!

I raise my club.

"What are you doing there?"

All of a sudden, Reina-san's voice reaches my ears.

I lower my club again. Yukimi Mitsui seems to be just as surprised as I am. It's unlikely that she called her.

"Reina-san?"

"I am very discomforted by this sight. There will be consequences if you beat someone with that thing."

"No, it's OK! It doesn't matter what happens to her! She's making fun of us! More importantly, she's making fun of you, Reina-san! That's unforgivable!"

However, Reina-san calmly brushes off my yell and counters, "If you are doing all this for my sake, then I wish you to stop. I am not angry at Mitsui-san."

"That's ... because you're kind, Reina-san..."

"Please *stop*," she says in a slightly insistent tone. It might really be just slightly in all objectivity, but this is the strongest expression of intent in Reina-san's scale.

Why would she stop me? Yukimi Mitsui is a jerk who even tormented Anna and—

"—Ah."

I look at Reina-san.

I see ... she knows everything. Of course, I'm mad at Yukimi Mitsui for making light of Reina-san.

However, I only went this far—or at least I only thought of murder—not because of Reina-san, but because of Anna.

I was about to use Reina-san as a pretext for avenging Anna.

As such, she has all the right to stop me. She would never approve of being an excuse for taking revenge on somebody. No, her word is absolute to us either way.

"...OK..."

So I have to obey.

We gave up on using violence on Yukimi Mitsui and walked away from the gym. Since I was disheartened by Reina-san's clear denial of my actions and the others were aware of that, we exchanged no words for a while.

We then called it a day. Only my neighbors, Yuuko and Emi, stayed with me.

"Was that really okay?" Yuuko asks.

"...Nothing we could do, was there? We can't just disobey Reina-san!"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Huh?"

"I was just wondering if it was okay to leave Reina-san alone with Yukimi Mitsui."

I immediately returned to the back of the gym, but they had already left. I headed to the school building.

Yukimi Mitsui must not be underestimated. She can be very belligerent, and on top of that she must be irritated because of what we did to her. God knows what she's going to do to Reina-san, the person who symbolizes "us."

Needless to say, harming Reina-san is on a whole different level compared to harming Anna.



But Yukimi Mitsui might have turned desperate and plan to soil our symbol.

I run around on the school grounds back and forth, and at last, find Reina-san in the corridor where the second music room is located.

"Reina-san!"

She turns around to me. At a glance, it doesn't seem like she was hurt in any way.

"Kawai-san?"

"Are you all right? Did Yukimi Mitsui do anything to you?"

"Mitsui-san?" she asks and then smiles. "It seems that you have a false picture of Mitsui-san. She is not the kind of person who would do anything to me."

"I don't have a false picture of her. But ... are you really unhurt?"

"Yes, of course."

I let out a sigh of relief. Apparently, my fears were ungrounded this time.

Reina-san gives me a wry smile.

Suddenly, I feel horribly embarrassed as I recall that she has willfully denied my actions earlier.

However, her next words blow me away.

"You have come at the correct time. I was searching for you."

"What?!"

Me? Reina-san was searching for me?

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

Reina-san nods with a smile.

"There is something I wanted to tell you."

"Ah ... I feel honored."

"You are exaggerating."

As if!

"What is it that you wanted to tell me, if I may ask?"

With an ever-so-beautiful smile, she said:

"Please take good care of Reina Kamisu."

Ten minutes later Reina-san died.

I picture Reina Kamisu to myself.

Above all she is beautiful. It's as if she was perfection given form. No, you could even say that she is perfection.

She is water so pure and transparent that you can't tell where it starts. I tasted from this pure water and had my life saved by it. A human body consists to 70 percent of water. In other words, 70 percent of my body consists already of Reina-san.

The water that is Reina-san is becoming clouded? The foothold is collapsing?

Impossible.

The conclusion that can be drawn is simple.

Reina Kamisu is not dead.

"Reina Kamisu isn't dead!"

Yukimi Mitsui said so.

Even the girl that I considered my enemy said so.

She also claimed herself as a subordinate of Reina Kamisu.

Quite frankly, I underestimated Reina-san's excellence.

I was under the impression that by being with her I was able to increase her value to some extent. Of course, I was completely wrong! Reina-san had no problems showing her splendor to its best advantage even in places that are outside my circle of influence.

Therefore, it's perfectly possible that plans for feigning her death came to be without my knowing.

How they did it?

I don't care. The only thing that matters is the fact that she's alive.

Besides ... would Reina-san even need any realistic means for something as minor as feigning her death?

Of course not.

Reina-san can overcome even death.

I met Reina-san's brother, Ryoji-san. He has also noticed that she's still alive. That makes him the third one of us and proves that it's an undeniable fact that Reina-san's alive.

On his request, I showed him around in school. He acted a bit strange here and there, but he also said this to me:

"I don't know what Reina wanted to achieve by scattering, but I do know the cause."

"What is it...?"

"The cause is—you and your friends."

I was confused at first.

What is the meaning of this? It was us who made her scatter? Has her brother perhaps gotten to this conclusion by talking to me?

Reina-san scattered because of ... us?

No, Reina-san scattered for us.

Which means...?

Right, Reina-san feigned her death for us.

I see. That would explain why she chose to feign her death at this school. It was all for our sake. Reina-san is trying to save us hopeless lambs.

Right, we are hopeless.

Anna, for example, suffers because of her family problems. I, for example, am unable to see anything but a dark, dull future. Because there is no god in this world, there is nothing to depend on and there is no hope for us.

That doesn't make sense!

This system is way too unbalanced. Too unfair. Too absurd. How is that OK? Everything's a lie except for the things that hurt? That's cruel!

Therefore, Reina-san can't be dead.

No, she can't be dead.

She can't be dead.

She's alive.

A-L-I-V-E.

I will kill everyone who dares to claim that she's dead in front of me. Because they're too stupid to be kept alive. Why do these ugly maggots even breathe even though they are blinded by commonsense, even though they believe in nothing but money!

Reina-san simply disappeared somewhere because of some reason.

"Please take good care of Reina Kamisu."

The meaning of her last words starts to dawn on me.

She entrusted me with a task.

What task?

To preserve her place for when she appears again.

Reina-san is not dead, but only very few are aware of it. At this time, it's only Yukimi Mitsui, her brother and me. There may be more, but the number stays small. Moreover, there must be people who have doubts about the lie that is Reina-san's death, but they are lacking evidence.

However, it's true that the lie she spread is very cunning. So cunning, in fact, that the lie will become true once everyone starts to believe it. I don't want to state the obvious, but the dead can't coexist with the living. Dead people lose their relation to the living.

Reina-san will come back, but I feel that her return is bound to certain conditions.

After all, Reina-san is trying to save us. Salvation does not come to people who don't believe in salvation. Therefore, those who forgot her, those who lost faith in her will not be saved. There is no reason

for her to appear in a place where she has been forgotten, in a place that is outside the range of her salvation.

It means that I have to make sure she has a place to return to.

In order to meet Reina-san—in order to meet again her again—I have to keep her place unoccupied.

I see! This is a trial.

A trial to test my faith in Reina-san.

As a way to arrange a place for Reina-san, I chose to take advantage of my position as the president of the student council. I asked the teachers to let me have a speech at the monthly assembly and received permission.

The day of the assembly arrived in no time. Through the microphone the teacher who presided over the assembly says, "The president of the student council would like to take the floor." Following his announcement, I climb on the stage and encounter almost five hundred faces, some of which are older than me, some of which are the same age, and some of which are younger than me. Most of their gazes are directed at me. I've gotten used to this sight. After receiving the sign, I, the teachers and the nearly five hundred students bow to each other.

I survey the audience.

Nearly five hundred people. This is hardly anything when comparing it to the numbers used by the mass media, but it's quite an overwhelming sight nevertheless. Is it really in my power to reach their hearts and project Reina-san into them? I don't want to admit it, but Yukimi Mitsui was right when she remarked that my charisma has dwindled. The weight of my words depends on whether or not

Reina-san is present. Is it really in my power to show them the right path?

Don't falter! The more numerous the audience, the better. I don't need to convince all of them. I only need enough of them to create a place for Reina-san.

I open my dry mouth:

"Good morning, my dear schoolmates. My name is Sakura Kawai and today I would like to address Reina Kamisu's suicide."

Their gazes focus on me as I address the hottest topic at school. Everyone knows that I took on the position as president of the student council from Reina-san, and that I was her primary servant. They must be fairly curious about what I have to say about this subject.

"As you all know, Reina Kamisu was a special student. I am certain that I do not need to lose any words on *how* special she was. As such, many among you must still be confused by the sad news of her death. Many among you must still be mourning for her. I was one of them, too."

The students who noticed that I used past tense start to whisper to each other. Not a week has passed since Reina-san throw herself from the rooftop; in normal circumstances it would be impossible for me, her primary servant, to overcome the sadness of losing her.

"However—"

As expected, the majority of the students are all ears for my words. I deliberately choose to provoke them.

"—Let me be frank. Only a fool would be sad about her death."

My words create a general stir.

The students start to exchange glances and the teachers become alarmed. I don't mind if they stop me in the worst case, as long as I

can communicate the important things. I only need to get their attention. Some of them will be curious enough to approach me of their own to hear the rest, and I will tell them. My thrilling ideas will soak through them and then automatically spread among the rest of the students.

My network is extensive enough to pull this off, even without Reina-san.

"Why is it foolish? Before I answer this question, let me read your mind."

I feel almost all of their five hundred gazes on me. Excellent.

"Certainly, you were all shocked by her suicide. You are bewildered and you are sad. But above all, do you not have a 'fuzzy feeling' in your chests? Do you not feel that something is wrong?"

As I stand on the stage, I discover a few students who nodded.

"I know what that 'fuzzy feeling' is. Let me get straight to the resolution: you have this feeling because you think that Reina Kamisu might still be alive."

My words create yet another stir.

"Please do not misunderstand me: I mean it quite literally, not in the clichéd sense of her living on in our hearts. Her metabolism is still intact. You may say this is absurd, but then answer me: Can you deny it with all honesty? Can you really say for sure that Reina Kamisu is dead?"

To be frank, I'm only spitting nonsense. A fuzzy feeling? Well, of course they have that feeling! After all, Reina Kamisu, the person who occupied a large part of their hearts, died (they think) from one day to the next without a reason! How could they not have ruffled feelings about it?



However, the ones who fell for it and bought my explanation for their fuzzy feeling will think that everything I said might be true.

Some of them might naturally see through my trick, but can they deny my words with certainty? Can they pass on the compelling thought that Reina Kamisu might still be alive, just to deny what I said? Can they thrust the ones who got their hopes up back into the abyss of despair, even if they were certain it's a lie?

Reina Kamisu is dead. Reina Kamisu is alive. If you had to choose one, you would choose the latter.

If both options are hard to believe, then you would choose the latter.

It's a shame that I have to trick them, but sadly, only few are able to see the truth like me. It's highly unlikely that anyone understands Reina-san like I do.

I proceed to the final blow.

"Dear colleagues, my ideas must sound absurd to you, and I am aware of that. I would laugh it off as ridiculous if I was one of you.

"But ... it is the truth.

"All of you who are laughing at my words will be laughing out of the other side of your faces next week. Why? It's simple."

Yes, I understand Reina-san.

I know the answer.

I only need to give them a glimpse of the answer.

"Because next week, on the first day of July, Reina Kamisu will come back."

My speech turned out less successful than anticipated. The majority view seemed to be that my claims were too implausible, and because this became the mainstream, the people who actually believed me could no longer openly say so.

I don't think it was wrong to hold a speech. Actually, I'm positive that it was the best choice I could make. However, it seems like the world has become too science-oriented to leave room for the thought that someone could resurrect from the dead. Damn ... aren't men the ones who are supposed to only make logic decisions? Our society makes it hard to spread correct ideas. Even psychics who clearly have some sort of power are called fakes these days.

But I don't care.

I haven't failed.

It's true that the majority are fools who are unable to question Reina-san's death, but they're only the majority.

People who believe me, who believe in Reina Kamisu, may be the minority, but they do exist.

"I also thought that Reina-san is still alive! I was relieved to hear that I wasn't the only one who thought so!"

"That 'fuzzy feeling' you mentioned was really preying on my mind. You took a huge weight off my mind when you pointed it out to us and uncovered the truth behind it."

"Reina-san is still alive! There's no way she would die, is there?"

"I'm not entirely convinced ... but if you are so certain of it and even know when she's coming back, I want to try to believe you."

"I never believed that Reina-san was dead!"

People who said things like this appeared before me. 17 in number. Most of them were third-year students who inherently spent more time with Reina-san than the younger generation. 17 is not a large number compared to 500, but it's not so small, either, if you think of it as half a class.

*Is Reina-san going to appear again even with such a small number?*  
Though a little anxious, I decide to be optimistic.

I mean, Reina-san is much smarter than me. She must have foreseen that I would only be able to convince a small number of people even if I did my best. But most of all, the girls who believe in her "presence" are the ones who long for salvation so hard that they have no other choice but to believe in her "presence." Reina-san would never abandon them.

However, that doesn't mean that we can sit back and wait. Just thinking that Reina-san might still be alive is not going to bring about any progress.

What we need is unification. Unified prayer. We have to focus our prayers so strongly that they will reach Reina-san.

That is what has to be done to accomplish Reina-san's return.

In order to proceed to action, I told "the girls" who believe in Reina-san's "presence" to assemble at the Student Council Room after school. By the way, part of the student council, which also includes Anna, also believe in Reina-san's "presence."

It's unfortunate that I'm the only one who "knows" of Reina-san's "presence," but it's not a problem. I only have to guide "the girls" to this knowledge.

It's Thursday, the 29th of June. The first of July will be the day after tomorrow. Time is running out. I have to make sure that "the girls" will make a beeline for our goal without getting sidetracked by anything.

After we assembled at the Student Council Room, we had a long conversation. About Reina-san. About our devotion to Reina-san. About our selfless love for Reina-san. About our relation to Reina-san. About our need for Reina-san. About the importance of Reina-san. About how Reina-san feigned her death. About why Reina-san disappeared. About how Reina-san is going to affect us in the future. About how Reina-san's Reina-san is Reina-san and Reina-san can Reina-san with Reina-san to be Reina-san. Unfortunately, six of the initial seventeen members could not keep up and left our ranks, but the rest of us were able to talk about Reina-san without end. In this manner, we deepened our trust in Reina-san and synchronized with each other.

However, talking only about Reina-san does not suffice. If Reina-san were a diamond and you wanted to fascinate someone with it, you could preach about the diamond's beauty as long as you want and still achieve nothing. Fortunately, they are already fascinated by the diamond that is Reina-san, but still it doesn't suffice. "The diamond suits you!" "It makes you charming!" "You need it!" Similarly, by talking about *why* we need the diamond and *why* we have to be fascinated with it, we can strengthen our faith in Reina-san.

"Anna?"

I decide to start with Anna, the easiest target, because she's my classmate, my roommate, the secretary of the student council, and a cutter. Not only can I predict her answers, she is in dire need of Reina-san. She's also a perfect case for the others to listen to.

"Do you have those moments when you feel tired of living in this world?"

Her eyes widen as I pose an unexpected question. It's obvious how she will answer this.

While looking at the bandage on her wrist, she replies, "...All the time."

I nod as compassionately as possible. The other girls, who have been talking with each other, start to give us their attention.

"...Do you also feel like this sometimes, Sakura?"

"Sure," I answer.

"That's a little surprising."

"Do I not look like someone who would get tired of living?"

"Mhm. I mean, you're clever, flexible, and pretty. You ... are good at making your way, I guess? I thought that people like you don't think like that."

"Good at making my way ... huh? Perhaps you can say that. But what if that's exactly why I'm suffering?"

"...Huh?"

"I'm clever. I'm also popular enough to make it to the student council president, although I may have gotten backup from Reina-san. I know how to make my way. I'm a realist. Because of that, I was unable to believe in anything and also unable to depend on anything."

Talking about yourself first is a common trick to break the ice. It will unlock Anna's heart.

"I understand that you don't have it easy, either," Anna says and adds hesitantly, "...But does it really make you suffer?"

"It does! When you're a realist, you lose the ability to have dreams, you know? For instance, let's assume I wanted to become a writer. In that case, I would realize that it's futile before even trying. There are thousands and thousands of aspiring writers, but only a small fraction of them make it, and only another fraction is able to get by.

"Because of my position in the student council, I often find myself surveying all of our students from the stage. Almost five hundred. That's an overwhelming number! If only one of those five hundred received the talent of succeeding as a writer, how many lots would I have to draw? Do I have that talent right now? Of course not. I never was the best in anything."

"...Mhm."

"When you're a realist, you look up, and when you look up, you see an endless sky. Why would I have the privilege to go all the way to the top? How could I soar up into the sky when I'm currently crawling on the ground? Do you understand, Anna? This is the pain of being realistic."

"...I think I understand."

"Tragic things like child abuse, divorce and accidents aren't the only things that make us suffer. I think that it's the things close to us that really torment us."

Everyone nods in agreement. I know that they all feel discontent with something in their lives.

How should we be optimistic in a world where nothing ever works out? How should we have dreams when we can't even make it into the University of Tokyo, which counts more than 3000 admissions every year? If we earnestly tried to accomplish our dreams, all we would get is scoff at believing in skills we don't have. That's why we give up. Realistic thinking bereaves us of our future and makes us give up. This is how the world throws us into the abyss.

"What about you, Anna? What is tormenting you?"

Anna remains silent. Not because she doesn't want to answer, but because she doesn't know how to word it.

"...I often wonder why I'm living," she eventually says with her glance cast down. "Because it doesn't matter whether I'm alive or not."

"That's not true, Anna! I'd be sad if I lost you."

"Mhm, thanks. But ... that's it."

"What do you mean...?"

"You'd be sad and that's it. Or would my death follow you for your entire life? Would you mourn for me for the rest of your life?"

"I—"

Of course, I would be sad if Anna died. I would probably cry. But ... I don't know how long that sadness would last.

"If I died a shocking death, it might subsist as a trauma. If I died young, you might remember it for that. But in that case, you wouldn't remember me but only my 'death,' right? I'd only live on as a bad memory, which means that my value is negative.

For example, if I went missing, I'm sure you would be worried about me in the beginning, but after only a month you would hardly talk about me anymore, and after a year you would have forgotten me. I think that I don't mean much to all of you."

"That's not true!"

I'm aware that I sound a bit phony.

Of course I care about Anna. She's a good girl—the type who gets along with everyone. On the other side, in many senses you will never find a person of this type in the center of a group. In short, she's one of many. Anna is never the center.

"But Anna, listen ... if, for the sake of the argument, we wouldn't mourn for you so long, what about your family?"

Anna suddenly contorts her face.

Aah—looks like I put my foot in it.

I immediately realized it. The moment I saw her self-ironic face when I said the word "family", I realized what her answer is.

The answer to my question is "no" and more importantly...

This is the cause for Anna's view on life.

"My family?" Anna sneers with her eyes cast down. "Even though I only have a father who hasn't exchanged a word with me for over a year?"

I couldn't ask about her mother. Nothing good would come of it.

"...Oh, why would anyone care about or understand me when even my family doesn't?"

No one understands her.

I would like deny that, but again, I can't.

It's a fact that her father did not come when she cut her wrist. Of course, she cut her wrist to show me her wound, but at the bottom of it is her family, her father who neglected her.

No one understands you.

Exactly.

The same applies to me: nobody understands me. People are so good at feigning understanding that I sometimes almost buy into it, but in the end, nobody ever understood me. Everyone always dismissed my worries as the wailing of a pubescent, spoiled girl.

Even though they were so defining to me.



Nobody understands my values and beliefs, and I don't understand the values and beliefs of anybody.

Therefore I'm sure I can't understand Anna, either.

"Aah—why do I live...?"

Anna is serious.

To Anna, who is in the firm belief that even her family lacks understanding for her, living can't be enjoyable. She must be wishing to disappear like melting snow. Just like me.

Will this sentiment ever disappear? Will we find ourselves doing some generic office work in our future, and giving birth to cute babies while experiencing twinges of emptiness from time to time? Is that what we will become to survive?

Just thinking about it makes me sick.

This thought is so realistic. So filthy.

We may have been foolish, but we were pure.

"Anna."

"Hm?"

"This sucks."

"Yeah, it does."

"This world sucks."

"It does."

"It's painful, right?"

"It's painful!"

"Do you want to be saved?"

"I want to be saved!"

"Do you want to see Reina-san?"

"I want to see Reina-san!"

Dear God, whether you exist or not.

We need salvation.

I demand of you to return Reina-san immediately.

"Reina-san is different from us," I say.

"Yes, she is different. She is incredibly pretty and perfect and I'm sure that there's a meaning to her life even if there's none to ours."

"Yes, I agree."

"...Yeah."

"Unlike us, she does not have any fixed definitions that predefine her life."

"Yeah."

"Then how do we want to define Reina-san?"

Anna and the others look up into space.

"Aah—"

—Their eyes start to twinkle.

"—I see now," Anna mutters. "Aah, I see ... I see!"

"You're right, Anna. Listen, everyone, you found the answer!"

There's no need to explain everything. There can't be a need to explain everything, otherwise it wouldn't be believable.

I only needed to lead their way to a sentiment they already have.

"Living is so painful to us, which is why ... Reina-san lives."

Reina-san is water.

She is sweet water that fulfills you the more desperate you are.

Reina-san bears a deep meaning just by existing.

A person like her—

"She can't be dead," someone says.

"Reina-san is alive," I assure with a nod. "And—she will appear on the first of July."

Ah, at last!

They all made it there.

Anna has become reliable.

She could even tell where Reina-san is going to appear, now that she arrived at the conclusion that Reina-san is alive.

"If she disappeared on the rooftop, wouldn't she also appear there again?"

I see. That stands to reason.

I can't believe that she was able to deduce this without my guidance.

The other girls who had made it to my level also become reliable and were able to discover the answer.

We head to the rooftop.

It's still eight in the morning. As we make our way to our destination, we receive the blessing of the sun that is shining brightly through the windows.

Such fine weather during the rainy season! This must be a sign from heaven.

While keeping an even pace we walk up the stairway. With cheerful smiles. With eerily beautiful and uniform smiles. For we acquired a goal that we can live for without any hesitation and distractions.

The sparkling door comes into view.

Beyond that door. Beyond that door, Reina-san is waiting.

I lay my hand on the shining door.

"Wait, Sakura."

Somebody calls my name from behind. Slightly disgruntled, I turn around and find Yuuko. She is one of the blinded fools who didn't believe me and think that Reina-san were dead.

"What's the matter, Yuuko?" I ask in a calm tone of voice because there's no point in getting angry at her.

"...That's my line! You're not allowed to go to the rooftop, and you should know that."

It's as she says. While I did go there once with Reina-san's brother, it has officially been forbidden since Reina-san's incident. However, because the students of this school are generally trusted, they didn't lock the door.

"Today is the first of July, right?"

"Well, yes," I answer Yuuko's obvious question.

"Girls ... do you really, really believe it? That Reina-san is alive?" she asks, looking hesitantly at each of the twelve of "us". "And that she's on the rooftop? That's what you think, right?"

"Yes!" I assert without hesitation.

"...As you may know, my family runs a hospital."

I nod.

"I often went there when I was a child," she explains. "My father gave me free entrance because he thought I could learn something. I often made friends with elderly people.

"And I often had to see them dying."

"...What's your point?" I ask.

"You know my point. What I want to say is something that every child knows: the dead do not come back to life again. That shouldn't be news to you girls."

"Reina-san isn't dead."

"You just don't want to admit it!"

"Reina-san isn't dead," I reply calmly.

Oh dear ... Yuuko knows nothing. Unsurprisingly so.

Yuuko seems a bit daunted because I didn't show any signs of becoming angry, but she continues nevertheless:

"...You'll only be disappointed if you go past this door, Sakura! What you will find isn't a bright future, but the bitter truth that Reina-san is dead."

"That's not possible."

"Even if you were to find her ... then it's nothing but an illusion!"

"If you're so certain, then why don't you come with us, Yuuko?"

"Huh?" she utters with an open mouth in response to my apparently unexpected proposal.

She must be thinking that only "we" are allowed to be there.

"You don't mind, do you?" I ask my companions and they nod peacefully. "So? Coming with us?"

"...Fine," she sighs after some hesitation.

You shouldn't be sighing, Yuuko ... you'll lose some of your happiness!

I lay hand on the door again and—open it.

Light.

"—Aah!"

The world opens itself to us.

And then—

And then—

—I was taken in.

Just like then, just like our first encounter, I took in her, who is water, or maybe she took me in.

I listen carefully.

Instead of Chopin's Heroic Polonaise, her transparent and vacant and false and mechanic yet transcendental voice reaches my ears.

"I am delighted to see you all again."

Amidst the light she spoke to us.

Amidst the light Reina Kamisu spoke to us.

As I beheld her beautiful countenance, I started to cry and shiver with excitement.

"Reina-san," I say. The others follow suit and mutter her name as well, also crying and shivering with delight.

Aah, they can see her just like I do. Wonderful. Nothing stands in our way to happiness now!

Poor Yuuko seems to be thunderstruck by the sight of who we are looking at.

"Forgive me for keeping you waiting," the beautiful girl apologizes with an apologetic smile.

"It's OK! We believed in your return."

"Thank you."

Reina-san responds to my words. Aah! That alone makes me so happy!

"Reina-san...! So you feigned your death to save us, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"If you don't mind, could you explain to us why there was a need to do that?"

"I am afraid that it might be a little complicated. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

"As you can surely feel, Kawai-san, this world is rotten."

"Ah, so it's as I thought."

"It is impossible to become happy in this world. Suffering is the only option. If you deceive yourself and turn a blind eye to various things, however, it is possible to obtain an illusion of happiness. But since it is only an illusion, it means that you are not really happy by definition."

"This sounds so rotten."

"Yes. Hence, there is no happiness or salvation as long as you do not disengage from this world. This is why I decided to temporarily leave this world and search for a better one."

Does that mean that she counts as dead in this world? ...No, the idea of death is of no importance. As a matter of fact, Reina-san is standing before my eyes. That's all there is to it. There's no need for me to investigate further.

"And—I discovered our paradise. Therefore, I have appeared **here** again."

All that's left is to give myself entirely to Reina-san.

"It is a place free of suffering, where everything is gentle, where everything is enjoyable, and where everything is beautiful."

I listen closely to her, completely in raptures. The same seems to apply to the others.

We are going to be saved.

I'm so happy that I believed in Reina-san.

I'm so—happy.

"I am afraid to say that I am not able to remain in this world. In fact, it is questionable if you can even say that I am **here** right now. I may



have only just arrived, but I will therefore disappear once more from **here** temporarily."

Please don't. I don't want to be separated.

"Are you not going to take us **there** right now?"

Reina-san shakes her head.

"I cannot take you **there** anytime. It is difficult to explain, but ... please picture to yourselves hundreds upon hundreds of holes. Once our minds leave our bodies, they are judged based on various conditions and then thrown into one of these holes. Some of them lead to worlds that are even worse than **here**.

"To some extent, I can control which hole you will be thrown into. However, depending on the 'time', which is one of the various conditions, it might not go well."

"I understand."

Reina-san nods sadly. "I will appear here again tomorrow at six o'clock in the evening. I am sorry ... time has run out. I shall see you tomorrow."

With these words, Reina-san disappears.

She did not walk away, she literally vanished.

I look around. My companions, too, still seem bemused and are gazing at the place where Reina-san was standing. Some of them are also talking to themselves as though in trance.

One among them is showing a different reaction, though. I approach her.

"What do you say now, Yuuko? Reina-san's alive, isn't she?"

Yuuko turns her head to me like a rusty robot. On her face I recognize exceeding bewilderment.

In all that bewilderment, she slowly opens her mouth and asks:

"What kind of joke is this?"

—I don't understand.

Why would she say that after such a miracle?

"Why are you all gazing into space and crying?"

Yuuko is looking at the place where Reina-san was standing.

No, that's not quite accurate.

She is simply looking at the place where our gazes meet, with fear in her eyes.

"Sakura! Come to your senses! For crying out loud—"

"—Weren't you the first person to find her body?!"

Was I, now?

Aah, yes, I was.

I completely forgot about that because it doesn't matter.

Because of that, I also told her brother that I hadn't seen how Reina-san fell.

I mean, what of it?

Is that supposed to prove Reina-san's death, or something?

I was smiling from ear to ear and almost started skipping along.

*"Please take good care of Reina Kamisu."*

*Aah, she wasn't annoyed at me after all! Reina-san needs me!*

Suddenly, I heard a scream.

I raised my head to look what was going on.

An instant passed.

In this instant...

A tragedy took place in front of me.

It—

It fell not with the elegance of cherry blossoms, but just like a heavy lump, following the laws of physics, and with a thump.

A warm liquid squirted around and stuck to my skin.

———

Time stopped.

*No way.*

*This is a lie.*

As a matter of act, my flow of time was in complete disarray, going faster and slower at random, and it felt much more unrealistic than a dream even ... at any rate, it was a lie.

After all, Reina-san had just told me to take care of her, which clearly was in conflict with the thing that just happened, and, aah, at any rate, this was a lie. *What's the deal with ... this? Why did this, huh? I don't get it.* At any rate, it was a lie, a lie, and a lie, so I silently laughed aloud.

The hideously deformed *something* that resembled Reina-san and yet was completely different stared at me.

It stared at me without doubt.

It stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

And it moved its lips and jerked its bloody red tongue.

"—D-O N-O-T F-O-R-G-E-T M-E."

Since there was no sound, I could not hear anything, but it certainly tried to form these words.

Something was clearly out of order. Something was a lie.

This *something* before me was clearly not Reina-san. After all, it was obviously filthier than anything I'd ever seen. Filthy = Reality? Reality? So it had nothing to do with Reina-san. This *something* could impossibly be Reina-san. Impossible.

*Aah, **where** are you, Reina-san?*

***Where** have you gone? Did you die? Did you disappear because this something stole your soul?*

*I don't understand.*

*I don't understand. However.*

*If I don't find the answer, Reina-san will disappear.*

Neither Yuuko, nor Emi, nor the other people tried to stop us. We made it to the second of July without any trouble.

The only unexpected thing was that one of our companions stubbornly claimed, "Reina-san did not say anything about assembling tomorrow at six o'clock!" It was unexpected, but I concluded that she didn't make it to our level and gave up on her.

We go again to the rooftop. Unlike yesterday, a gentle rain is falling, which is a shame but still better than seeing the moon, because the moon always follows us around.

Suddenly, I notice that somebody is sitting in front of the door to the rooftop. Did Yuuko not learn her lesson...? No, it's not her. It's not one of girls who fell through, either. Upon seeing me, the girl stands up.

"You're going to meet Reina-san, right?"

I recognize her voice.

"Oh, you're here as well?" she continues. "Didn't she turn you down?"

I see how Anna stiffens.

"What do you want, Mitsui-senpai?"

Yukimi Mitsui.

One of the servants who arrived at the knowledge of Reina-san's "presence."

"Do you want to join us? I'm sorry, but I haven't forgiven you even though you may be a servant of Reina-san's. I can't let you come with us."

"Join you just to meet Reina-san? Ha!" Yukimi Mitsui sneers. "I don't need your help for that."

"...What was that?"

"I'll be damned if I resort to your means," she laughs and steps aside. She continues in whispers, "I'm here to warn you."

"We don't need your warning."

"Don't misunderstand, okay? I don't care what happens to you, but if this is the last time we meet, I want to get it off my chest at least," she says and flashes a grin. "My worship of Reina-san and yours are as different as snow and ashes."

"...Well, I don't want to be thought hand in glove with you, either!"

"Huhu, is that so? Well, why don't you go ahead and meet your Reina-san? Bye then. We probably won't meet again."

"Goodbye," I say without even turning around to Yukimi Mitsui, who is waving her hand. After stroking Anna's hair gently, I walk up the stairs again, and—

—open the door.

A gentle rain is falling.

Reina-san is already waiting for us in the center of the rooftop.

Reina-san is waiting, smiling and without getting wet..

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Reina-san."

"Why, no, it was me who kept you waiting, Sakura."

I nod with a lopsided smile.

As the rain soaks our hair and clothes, we are reminded of our physical body through the unpleasant feeling. Sadly, this acid rain is filthy and thus can't wash us clean.

We need purification.

"We don't have much time, right? Please tell us how we can go to your world, Reina-san."

She nods. "It is simple. You just have to employ the same procedure as me."

The same procedure...

I recall the chalk line I examined together with Reina-san's brother.

"Do we have to jump...?"

Reina-san nods again.

"I know that it requires courage. I would like to use a different method as well, but there is none."

I look at the others.

They look at me.

They may not say so verbally, but their eyes are clearly telling me to take the lead. We are all afraid. Of course, we trust Reina-san, but we all know that the panic of falling and the pain of hitting the ground are things that cannot be avoided.

Indeed, I have to take the lead. I have to jump first and show them their way. Just like I have been doing so far.

However—

"I'm sorry, but I can't jump first."

Surprise and discontent appear on their faces.

"There is something I want to confirm at the end."

"Can you not do that now?" Anna asks and I nod in response.

She surveys me, then the bandage around her left wrist, and eventually smiles.

"Okay—I will jump first, then."

Surprised but impressed, we applaud to her.

"Anna ... thank you so much."

"No, you don't need to thank me ... It's an honor to be the first to go to Reina-san!"

I'm so proud of Anna. The source of her present strength may be weakness, but it's still strength.

Anna climbs on the fence in a somewhat clumsy manner and stands on top of it. She almost slips because the rain is getting stronger and thus making the fence slippery. Careful, Anna! Don't fall! Hm? Ah, stupid me. You will fall either way.

Anna stands upright atop the slippery fence and speaks straight ahead:

"Reina-san."

"Yes?"

I can't see Anna's face because she's looking forward.



"I will never forget what you said to me yesterday. I was really happy when you said that you would always need me even if nobody else did."

Reina-san nods.

"My scar will disappear once I reach the other world, right?"

"Yes."

"...I'm so happy."

I'm moved.

Reina-san did a great job.

*"I will always need you even if no one else does."*

This is the very thing Anna wanted to hear the most.

It would sound false from anyone else's mouth, but if Reina-san says it, it's the truth.

But then—

—I don't think I remember Reina-san saying that?

"Sakura," Anna suddenly calls me, interrupting my thought process.

Anna is still looking forward, beyond the rain, so I still don't know what her face looks like.

"Yes, Anna?"

"—Thank you."

Her voice falls downward.

And is cut short.

Anna vanished and spoke simultaneously.

"Thank ... you...?"

Why?

Why would she thank me?

It's Reina-san who saved Anna, and it's Reina-san who will guide her to a better world. You probably can't even say that I bridged the gap between her and Reina-san.

Thank you ... words of gratitude.

But this makes it seem—as though I was the one who brought about this ceremony.

As I'm overcome with this strange confusion, my companions continue to jump one after the other. And before they jump and scatter, they all cite words that I don't remember hearing from Reina-san and give their thanks to me like Anna did.

Watching them makes me feel as though I were looking at artificial flowers that have withered.

Eventually, I end up alone with Reina-san.

The rain has gotten even fiercer. *I might catch a cold*, I think for a brief moment and sneer at myself.

I'm the last one.

"Kawai-san," the undrenched girl says. "What is it that you wanted to confirm?"

"Yes, there is something I wanted to ask you no matter what."

"Why did it have to be now, 'at the very end'?"

I look at the floor. A water drop drips down from my hair and enters my eye, making me feel filthy from the inside.

The reason why it had to be "at the very end."

It's—because I couldn't let the others hear it.

"Reina-san."

"Yes?"

"It's so hard to explain and I don't know how to put this, but please bear with me."

"Who are you?"

Reina-san remains calm. She is still smiling.

"You're Reina Kamisu, of course, and that's the only way to call you. You are no doubt Reina Kamisu.

"But—you are not the Reina-san who played the piano, are you? You are someone else."

"...Why do you think so?"

"I was always fascinated by Reina-san, but she always made a somewhat strange impression on me. I don't know what it was, but I do not get that impression from you."

Reina-san silently listens to me.

"It's an ambiguous feeling. Perhaps, my memory is playing tricks on me because I haven't met you in a long time, but ... I doubt it."

"Why do you doubt it?"

"Because it's the former Reina-san who gave me that strange impression. If it was the other way around, it would make sense ... but ... as a matter of fact ... you feel way more genuine to me than the previous Reina-san. Isn't it strange that you feel more genuine now than before?"

The rain is getting stronger and I'm starting to get worried if my voice even reaches her.

"If," Reina-san starts. "If I am a different being than before, what will you do?"

"It doesn't matter," I respond without missing a beat. "You are Reina Kamisu. Nothing else."

"Yes," she nods. "I am Reina Kamisu, and nothing else," she says with her beautiful smile. "If you say so, may I tell you the truth?"

"Yes. My decision won't change."

I walk up to the fence and lean against it with my back. I don't even want to think about the sight down there.

"I am a phenomenon that becomes visible to those who believe in my existence."

"...A phenomenon?"

"To you and your friends, I am Reina Kamisu, because that is what you named me. If given a different name, I adapt accordingly. For

example, some call me 'god' and some call me an 'angel'. By being given a name, I take shape and become *visible*."

"...Do you lead the people who can 'see' you to another world?"

"This is the role you gave me."

"But I wasn't the only one who believed so," I argue.

"That is because you took the lead over them and defined my role for everyone. All I ever do is fulfill my purpose."

I defined her role?

It's true that I guided them to believe in Reina-san's "presence," but that's all I did. Reina-san is the one who is to do the rest and save us.

Right, I'm not to blame.

Not to blame?

What? What am I talking about? Blame? What blame? I only did the right thing and struggled to break free from this filth and didn't believe in Reina-san's death and, aah, yes, that filthy corpse wasn't Reina-san's. It wasn't hers, so I realized the truth and now I'm facing Reina-san in person and, aah, I was right from start to finish.

Impressive! I didn't do too bad, did I?

"I ... I don't care anymore."

I climb on the fence.

Like Anna and the others, I stand upright and gaze straight ahead.

"You are Reina Kamisu."

"Yes, I am."

"You will save us from the filthy."

"Yes, I will."

"Please fulfill your role."

"Yes, I will fulfill my role."

There's no hesitation.

The others jumped down, too. I can't hesitate. It's too late. Wait, too late? For what? I do not need to hesitate anymore. The answer is clear, I only need to carry it out.

One question—

One question suddenly crosses my mind.

I was Reina-san's servant.

But why did I decide to obey her without a single doubt? What was so special about Reina-san?

Of course, she was beautiful. Of course, she felt different.

But ... that's no reason to obey her.

It makes me think.

Everyone admired Reina-san, everyone was captivated by her, so much that she belonged in the same category as "god" and "angels."

But where did that deification come from?

I mean—

—We don't know anything about Reina-san.

I stop thinking.

I won't turn around to her anymore.

I'll just look at her the same way as I always did.

I'll just project my idea of perfection on her and look upon her in a perfect light.

I step forward.

And as I do, I devote my last thoughts to her:

*I ... we may have suffered a lot, but—  
—she must have suffered just as much.*

## ***Chapter 4: Reina Kamisu***

I have not seen myself in the mirror in years.

Instead of me, the mirror of my dressing table is showing something similar to me. Needless to say, this is not some mechanism that has been built into my antique dressing table, and yet my reflection is missing from the mirror I am looking at right now. The thing that appears from time to time like a visual trick is subdivided in 33 parts which makes it impossible to examine it in its entirety.

The foreign reflection resembling me smiles at me.

"It is futile to loathe me!" the girl within the mirror says with an irritatingly beautiful smile. Again: this is not me but something that visually resembles me. "For I have already been associated with you."

Why did it come to this? She has always been around indeed, but while she hovered over me like a shadow, she did not use to cling to me.

"You seem thoroughly fed up. Do you not think it is time to stop ignoring me and converse with me?" she suggests.

Spare me. Conversing with you means admitting your existence, and admitting you just once means giving in to you. I will not make the mistake of concerning myself with a delusion that has become to real, that can even be explained.

I will not admit the delusion that is you nor will I accept you.

Even if, as a matter of fact, I do not appear in the mirror.

"I may not be able to exist without you, but unlike you, I know why I came to be!"

Do I want to know? There is no need. It is easy enough to deduce the answer, as I already have.



Deduced the answer?

Aah, no, that is not right. I do not know the reason for your existence, because you do not exist to begin with.

I am a rational person who does not suffer from delusions.

"Yes, you do know—"

I do not. I do not hear anything.

"That I exist—"

I do not. I do not know anything.

"After all—"

"—When people look at you they see me."

I find myself in the second music room, playing a song from a movie that came on TV the other day on the piano. The students that have gathered around me let out gasps of joy.

How did I wind up exhibiting my piano skills in an open place like this, anyway?

Obviously because I was asked to.

My classmates wanted to hear me playing the piano, so I started to perform here in the second music room, showcasing the fruits of practicing at home. I originally used the practice room, but my performance became popular among the students to the point that even the teachers got wind of it and, for some reason, suggested to use this room.

Thanks to them, I am now forced to perform day in, day out. Even though I do not plan to become a pianist.

With smooth motions I move from one piano key to the next.  
Because I have taken lessons since I was a child, playing the piano  
now feels approximately as natural as writing.

Of course, I did not take lessons because I wanted to.

The music reaches my ear.

*It sounds just as boring as always.*

Why do they all look so captivated as if I were performing like a first  
class pianist when I play so poorly? There is no emotion in my music,  
just raw, mechanical skill. *They cannot be moved by something like  
this.* I feel irritated, as if I was watching an apathetic conductor.

After I finish my playing, the audience surrounding the piano give me  
their applause, some of them even with tears in their eyes. *Stop  
that! This was just a crude performance by a student like you!*  
Without showing a sign of my true thoughts, however, I smile at  
them and thank them.

"I love that movie!" says Kawai-san, who became president of the  
student council after me. *Of course you do. It was your request, after  
all.*

"...You do?" I smile, again without showing my true thoughts.

"Your performance is so touching, Reina-san."

"Yes, indeed. I wonder why your music turns out so different."

"You are magnificent!"

"Thank you," I say and feel the same thing as always: a one-way  
mirror is extending around me.

A one-way mirror. A curious mirror that lets me see everything that  
happens on the other side but does not let them see me.

The girls on the other side are cheerfully chatting with the mirror in front of them, and even though I do not show any reaction whatsoever, they are delighted by the reaction of whatever they see in the mirror. *Girls, come to your senses! Do you not see that you are talking with a mirror? What is the point in reacting to your own reactions?*

But they feign ignorance and enjoy the conversation.

Everyone except for me, who is standing inside the one-way mirror.

With an unvoiced sigh, I start playing the piano and the girls around me fall silent. I prefer them to just hold their tongues rather than get engrossed in a conversation that I cannot take part in.

As I watch my audience, who think my performance were something special, I ponder. *At the end of the day, nobody is interested in me.*

Nobody wants me to talk. All they want me to do is nod to them and approve of them. I am not permitted an own will.

I wear a specialized, tailor-made mask for every single one of them, and they love that.

Therefore, I cannot talk about myself.

And yet—even though I have not told them a single thing about me—they act as though they were in an intimate relationship with me.

—Tell me, what do you see in me?

It was a terrible mistake to enroll at the Junseiwa school. I feel that negative phenomenons like my fake reflection or the one-way mirror have been aggravating and getting more frequent ever since I came here.

Hm? Why did I come to this school, anyway?

This is easy to answer. Because my mother wanted it.

In the end, my own will is not to be found anywhere. None of my actions reflect my will. I only move by being pulled by someone.

I focus on playing the piano and shake off my stray thoughts.

As always, the melody sounds empty.

I finish my performance and receive a grand applause.

After being forced to play for more than a full hour, I walked home together with a few students that live in the same direction. I commute to school from home. At the Junseiwa School students are obliged to live in the dormitory if possible, but because of some serious trouble during my time in the middle school section (it should not be difficult to imagine this when considering my current situation), I was allowed to live at home when I graduated to the high school section.

However, because I had been separated from my family for three years (except for holidays, of course) the distance between us had become insurmountable. My position in our family had always been unstable, but now they completely and permanently forgot how to treat me as part of it.

They started to treat me like I were fragile.

Having sensed that, I had no other choice but to take the same attitude toward them as to my fellow students, which entailed tailoring masks and looking at my family through a one-way mirror. Only Sakairi-san, our housekeeper, did not treat me like something fragile, but it was still far from normal.

There is no haven for me anymore.

I opened the door, greeted my family, had a mostly wordless dinner and took a bath.

From the three bathrooms we have, I went to the middle-sized one, added in some bath oil and soak in the bath. Our largest bathroom is big enough to accommodate us and our housekeepers and still have space for more, but it is barely ever used by anyone. The larger the bathtub, the longer it takes to fill it with warm water, and the faster it cools down, and the more gas it takes. It is a terribly unpractical bathroom, and with it losing its novelty, its bathtub has deteriorated to a merely big hole. There are many of these useless things in this house. Apparently, the larger a house gets, the more useless things accumulate. Even though maintenance gets costlier.

While showering myself off, I shift my thinking to my future.

What might become of me after high school? Well, I will certainly enroll at a first-class university. But after that?

I would make myself unpopular if I said this aloud, but there are not many things that I cannot become. It might be out of reach for me to become a specialist in something that requires training from an early stage on, like a competitive sportsman, but I am confident that I would be admitted by any university and I am just as confident that I would be hired by any company. I might even be able to make my way into the show business and become an actress or a singer, something that everyone dreams of but gives up on.

My mask can be customized to deliver the best performance in any job, and from experience I know that it performs outstandingly well.

*However, I think. What do I want to become?*

This may seem like a problem that everyone has, but my question is of a different nature. I believe most people know that they would like to become, but are either too embarrassed to talk about it, have set their goal too high, or are frankly not that bent on it.

I, on the other hand, can think of absolutely nothing that I would want to become. Not in the slightest. All I ever do is standing still in a

white realm without a horizon, waiting idly for something to arrive because there is nowhere to go, and simply reacting to whatever is happening before my eyes.

Yes, even though I have the sense to do anything, I cannot become anything.

Powerless. Meaningless. Worthless. Yes, I do not have anything.

Maybe I should just die, then?

Die? Why?

I do not know, which is why I will probably not die.

Still gloomy, I leave the bathroom and go to our video room to watch a DVD. I have not decided on a certain DVD, but because my father has the habit of buying several DVDs every month despite not watching them, there are plenty of movies that I have not seen yet.

By the way, I do not study much when I am at home. Since the speed of teaching is adjusted according to the average of the class, it tends to be slow for me despite the reputation of the Junseiwa School. I repeat old knowledge and prepare for the new things in the spare time during my classes.

Efficient? Certainly. But I do not know for what sake.

When I enter the video room, I find that I am not alone.

"Ryoji-san."

I call his name and he turns around to me.

"Oh, it's you?" he says briefly and looks away.

I have changed into my pajamas. I am not concealing my body with a single bath towel. And yet, Ryoji-san averted his eyes in a way that I

consider is unnatural for family, at least in my definition of the word "family."

But he has always been like that.

Ryoji-san is always averting his eyes from me. He only sees the parts of me that he likes to see.

When I wear my pajamas, I remind him that we are family, which is why he does not like to see me like this. He has shown signs of feeling attracted to me in a non-family manner and thus seems to have difficulty getting along with the other sex. Is he interested in me as a love interest? While I do not believe that is as simple as that, it might be something close to it. Ryoji-san is suffering from an inferiority complex that can be attributed to overestimating me by looking at me through rose-colored glasses of admiration. Most likely, he does not know the true shape of his feelings for me himself, so I do not know anything else, either.

"Want to watch something? I'm only trying to pass my time, so I can go if you want."

It does not seem like he is trying to be reserved; he really is just passing his time. He has a liking for action movies because they keep him awake and are therefore suitable as a way to pass time, which is the only meaning he sees in watching movies. Even now he is watching some Hollywood movie that is mostly known for its tremendous production costs.

"It is the same for me. Do not mind me."

"Uh-huh," he mutters without even looking at me. Not that it bothers me, but why does it not occur to him that we could also watch the movie "together"?

Slightly curious about his attitude, I decide to ask, "Ryoji-san?"

"Hm?"

"What do you think is bothering me about you, Ryoji-san?"

Fairly surprised, he looks away from the screen and gazes at me. After pondering for a while, he replies, "Before I can answer this question, I need to think about the reason why you asked it."

"Yes."

"Your question makes me think that I'm less worth than you. That you are blaming me."

"Yes."

"However, you are able to predict my reaction and thus would not pose this question lightly. In other words, the true answer is more complicated."

"Yes."

Like this, he keeps complicating the intention of my question. I must commend him for his excellent imagination, but he clearly lacks the ability to tell apart right from wrong.

The answer is much simpler: *Why do I have to be so polite even though we are siblings?*

I suppose I am to blame for that, but you do not give me another choice because this is how you want me to treat you.

In the end, you have no clue what I want from you.

Dear brother, what do you see in me?

And this is how I spend my time, finding no rest in anyone's presence.

I enter my room and can finally be alone.



However, there is no rest even when I am alone.

The thing inside the big mirror of my dressing table is watching me.

I ignore it and quickly finish my homework. I then continue reading an interesting foreign novel in its original language, armed with an electronic dictionary on the table.

"Admit it."

What is *un avocat* again? Ah, of course, a lawyer.

"You are smart. You should have noticed by now that I am only telling the truth."

*...So do I hear this voice even without looking in the mirror now?* I sigh and perk up my ears. But I still have my novel open. Because I have not admitted anything.

"No one is looking at you. All they see is someone else."

Someone else? Certainly, they are not looking at me, but at themselves in the one-way mirror.

"And that someone else is me."

But why should that be you?

—Wait!

People are not looking at me but at the one-way mirror that is surrounding me.

At the mirror.

And that mirror is showing you?

Oh, the irony—

—When I look in the mirror, all I see is you as well.

"I will now talk to myself," I say, alone with myself in my room. Of course I am talking to myself. "Mind you, this is a soliloquy. I am not

talking to anyone. I do not expect an answer, and even if I feel that I heard one, I will ignore it."

The thing in the mirror that resembles me remains silent. No ... Again, there is no one here besides me.

"Yes, I do get the impression that no one is looking at me. I sometimes even feel that they see something else instead of me."

The room is dead silent.

"But that is only because I have many faces. Because I make use of more than 30 masks to enact the role of a flawless beauty. I am certainly more skilled at using masks than an ordinary person, sometimes to the point that I forget which my real face is, but ultimately everyone uses masks. In psychology, there is a concept called *persona*. Human beings are thought to create a personality, or a persona, specialized for socializing. I simply happen to use personae more frequently than an ordinary person."

I am able to explain why I feel that others do not seem to look at me like this. It is absurd that my masks would get out of control and get a life of their own, let alone become visible to anyone else.

Exactly. This is a satisfying explanation that is clearly correct and in line with common sense.

But there is one problem.

The fact that I explained it to myself.

Obviously, I know what I just explained. I think it is absurd to see someone else in the mirror.

And yet, I can see the girl inside the mirror.

"But you are beautiful," she says in a voice almost the same, and thus essentially different, as mine

Ironically, the more rational I get, the more I realize that she is not a mere illusion. No, am I not contradicting myself with this very train of thought?

I do not know.

"You are beautiful like me."

I do not know, but I heard her voice.

"And you are aware of your beauty."

She says something that would not even occur to me. That would not even occur to me. In other words, if she were just a delusion, she could not have said it.

In utter surprise, a question slips out of my mouth:

"What ... What are you talking about?"

*No!* I think, but it is already too late.

This cannot be undone.

I talked to her.

And thus—I subconsciously admitted her existence.

Her gaze pierced through the one-way mirror all the way to me.

Surprised by this now unfamiliar feeling, I found myself looking at her before I knew it.

Mitsui-san...?

She is not looking at me anymore, but I am looking at her and even paused putting my schoolbooks into my bag.

What was that? Did I see things?

"...Reina-san? What's wrong?" Kawai-san, who has come all the way to my classroom just to hear my performance, asks suspiciously.

"...No, never mind," I answer wearing my mask again, but it seems like Kawai-san has already realized that my surprise was a special sign.

After our short exchange, I notice that Mitsui-san has already left the room.

"Excuse me, Kawai-san, but there is something I need to take care of at home, so I would rather not play the piano today."

"Huh? Ah, yes ... of course, if you are busy."

With these words, I bow my head to her and secretly pursue Mitsui-san. She has not joined any club and does not seem to have a lot of friends, so often goes straight home. I hurry to the shoe lockers.

I found her.

While she is busy changing into her outdoor shoes, I walk up to her. Noticing that someone is approaching, she turns to me.

"Kamisu-san...? Is something wrong?"

"No, I was just in a little hurry because of a pressing matter," I explain and observe her. In an unobtrusive manner, of course.

*Aah, it is as I thought.*

Mitsui-san is looking at me right through the mirror. There is no doubting it.

"...Goodbye then, Kamisu-san."

"Goodbye."

I part with her in a natural manner.

It feels like it has been a long time since someone other than Sakairi-san last saw me, not "her". Mitsui-san did still project something else on me, so it is still far from sufficient, but she is definitely different from Kawai-san and the others, who are entirely blind of me.

...But why Mitsui-san?

I am not particularly intimate with her. Well, I am not intimate with anyone, but she is one of the people who barely have any contact with me. She is just a classmate.

Is the answer hidden in her nature, then? She is a very aggressive person because of her vulnerability. She believes that everyone wants to do her harm, which is why she has drawn a defense line to protect herself in the event of a real attack. But ... how is that related to the way she looks at me?

"———"

I try contemplating for a while, but I am entirely lost. There are two less leads.

Besides, is there even a point in finding out?

Perhaps there is none, but now that I have become unable to completely deny "her" existence, it strikes me as important to find a way to discern people who see "her" from those who do not.

If I do not take measures, "she" is going to take me in.

I have not admitted "her" ... I think. But ... as a matter of fact, I accidentally talked to "her". It is as clear as the day that this mistake is going to help "her" to pervade me slowly but surely.

Being taken in by "her". While I do not know if that is a good thing or not, I am neither enlightened enough nor desperate enough to willingly surrender myself to an unknown being.

*I suppose I will have to talk to Mitsui-san in person...*

I waited on a moment that lent itself to talk with her about it.

However—there was no indication of such a moment to come.

My momentary surprise when first taking notice of Mitsui-san's look turned against me in an unexpected form. Kawai-san, who had astutely observed my slight change, also noticed that Mitsui-san's gaze was different. That would not be an issue in and of itself, but for some reason she mistook Mitsui-san's look as one of scorn.

Because of that, Kawai-san and Mitsui-san have made enemies of each other.

It is impossible for me to disregard Kawai-san's will and become friends with Mitsui-san. As someone who exists for others, I do not have any freedom.

At any rate, it has become difficult for me to approach Mitsui-san.

What should I do? Can I even earn something by approaching her?

I do not know, but ... I feel that it would be wrong not to act when at last I have a reason to.

Therefore, I looked up her address and went there.

Although not as big as ours, the house in which Mitsui-san and her family lived was a quite magnificent brick house and was suitable for a student of the Junseiwa School.

I rang the doorbell and was answered by the lovely voice of a girl, who was probably Mitsui-san's little sister. After I told her why I was here, she briefly said, "The door is open. You may wait inside if you like," and stepped away from the intercom. She must have gone to call her big sister.

Accepting her offer, I walked to the entrance. This would not be necessary in the case of normal houses, but because there was quite a distance between the gate and the entrance, I would have otherwise made Mitsui-san unneeded work.

For a while nobody came. Considering that her sister answered the doorbell, it was possible that they had not employed any housekeepers. They did seem to have their house cleaned from time to time.

While I was gazing at the expensive-looking objects and handicrafts, Mitsui-san arrived and looked at me with blatant bafflement.

"Hello," I said as gently as possible to reduce her caution.

"—Kamisu-san?"

Apparently, my effort to get her guard down ended in a failure, but she was so kind as to take me to her room. Unlike my room, hers was only equipped with the things necessary, which was quite to my liking, and I also praised her for that. After her little sister had brought us some black tea and she had lowered her caution a little, I decided to go ahead and ask her.

"It has come to my attention that you have been watching me in a peculiar manner lately."

Much to my surprise, her expression changed abruptly. *Is she aware of the fact that her look is piercing through my one-way mirror? Or is she aware that hers is different from the looks of others?*

*No ... I suppose not. She has practically been threatened by Kawai-san. She must think that I am blaming her. She is that kind of person.*

"Ah, please excuse me. I do not mean to blame you," I assured, trying to calm her down. I also said things to the effect of not intending to attack her and staying on her side, which, for some reason, seemed to surprise her.

Is it so surprising? Even though I am just putting on masks that happen to fit the situation?

This is odd. Does that mean that she was not really looking at me, after all? If she was, then her current attitude makes no sense. Her attitude suggests that she does not know what kind of person I am and what kind of actions I take.

She is not deflected by the one-way mirror and does not see that thing that resembles me. But what if that is all there is to it?

"Ah ... that reminds me, you have not answered my question yet."

Right, what matters is not how she thinks of me but why she is looking at me in this way.

"Your question...?"

"I was wondering *why* you are watching me."



"T-There's not..." She pauses for a few seconds and continues. "— There's not much to it ... at least I can't put my finger on it."

She seems to be telling the truth.

"You do not not know, either ... I understand."

That means that there was no point in coming here. In that case, I have no business here anymore.

"All right, I think it is time for me to take my leave."

"Mm..."

I stand up and see myself in the mirror.

—No, I see "her" who resembles me.

She is smiling. With a beautiful smile like mine.

Aah—

—It cannot be undone.

The bitterness of biting a coffee bean spreads in my mouth. This bitterness may belong to "her" but it is something different. I don't know this. I don't understand this. I don't admit this. But I do recognize it. I am also aware of the fact that I pretend not knowing the answer. I want to keep feigning ignorance. But now that I can see "her" beautiful smile, I cannot suppress it anymore. I instinctively know what "she" is going to do ... no, what I am going to do using "her", and I also know that it is morally reprehensible. But I cannot control it. There is no one to stop me. I am "she" and "she" keeps accelerating me.

I am not interested in the individual—  
—and the individual is not interested in me.

"She" is smiling. "She" is calling me.

\* \* \*

Unable to gain anything from approaching Mitsui-san, I lost to reality.

I face my mirror. I face "her" who resembles me.

"I believe that the evil witch in Snow White lost to herself."

I start to talk to "her".

"Mirrors only reflect. If you ask it who the fairest one of all is, you will only receive the answer you believe yourself. The witch lost faith in being the fairest and thus the mirror answered Snow White. And then she tried to kill her with a poisoned apple."

"But ultimately, even if Snow White had deceased, the mirror would have never again said that the witch was the fairest. It would have continued to say different names, because the witch had admitted Snow White's beauty and with it the possibility of others being more beautiful than herself. The mirror would not have given the answer the doubtful witch sought."

"What might the point of telling me this little allegory be?"

"Mirrors only reflect."

"That is true."

"That means that you are me and I am you."

"You are stating the obvious."

"Yes, so it is impossible to escape from you."

"Yes, because you are longing for me."

"Longing for you? Even though I do not know what you are?"

"You claim not to know what I am? Even though you have a fair grasp of my nature?"

"But I have not understood you entirely. I need an explanation."

"I suppose you do," "she" smiles inside the mirror. "I am a phenomenon."

"What kind of phenomenon?"

"A phenomenon called 'Reina Kamisu.'"

"That is my name."

"Yes, it is. But what else would you call me?"

"Point taken," I smile.

"I am a phenomenon with no powers other than being visible. A phenomenon that can be given a role by naming it."

"But if you are 'visible' then you must be linked to something, right?"

"Yes, I am linked with the Form that is based on beauty."

"The theory of Forms."

"That might be a close term for it."

"Are you independent?"

"To almost no degree. I am dependent on other beings and I lack the ability to reflect and to actively update information. I do, however, have knowledge and I do obtain a consciousness when taking shape."

"The ability to update information?"

"Even I have to adapt in order to persist. For example, when I speak your language, I make use of your knowledge to transform raw information into words. Since my hosts, which are you human beings, are in permanent change, I have no other choice but to change with them."

"In other words, information is what links you with us?"

"This is not everything that it entails, but it certainly is part of it."

"It is difficult to follow you."

"As I said before, I am transforming information into language, so my words are lacking accuracy."

"It is no different for us! I also often feel restricted by the imperfection of words. But that aside ... if you are connected to us in such a way, do we also suffer from any side effects?"

"I suppose that because of my remoteness to your common world view, there is a chance that you might lose it by 'seeing' me."

"Which means?"

"Your world view is a filter of sorts. By sending information through it, you are able to process data smoothly and without falling into confusion. Did you know that if you are born blind and have a cornea transplanted, you may not be able to see anything even though your eyes are properly functioning?"

"I think I have heard about that."

"Why is that? It is because they cannot process the information gathered by their eyes! People who have been born blind lack the

practice of 'seeing' and therefore do not know how to cope with the light sent through the cornea. They cannot filter the information. As a result, they see nothing."

"In other words, by 'seeing' you we are forced to cope with the kind of information that would normally be filtered out by our subconsciousness?"

"Yes. As a result, you might fall into confusion, stand out in the world that is defined by the common world view, and mistake your selection of what information to filter out."

"Has that already happened to me?"

"Who knows?"

"This sounds synonymous to 'insane' to me."

"That is another way to put it."

"Am I insane?"

"I cannot deny that."

"Quite honest, aren't you?"

"However, you have already defined me as true."

"That alone is the truth."

"There is no such thing as universal truth, though."

"Sadly, you are right."

"Well then, let's get to the point. What role have I given to you? Why did I wish for you?"

"Do I even need to say it?"

"I suppose not. After all, you are *Reina Kamisu*."

"Yes, my role is—you."

"Your role is—me."

"I am the you who you believe has been lost inside others."

"Yes, you are the most perfect and beautiful and inanimate mask I have ever created."

""That is why others will see *Reina Kamisu* when they look in these eyes.""

"You then wished for me."

"I subconsciously wished for a perfect mask. By obtaining a new self, I wanted to lose my interest in others because they would only ever ignore me."

"Because it would make you relentless."

"Lose my interest in anyone."

"Lose your sympathy for individuals."

"Lose my soul."

"Therefore, my role is—"

"Yes, your role is to go against this world that turned me into this. To be—"

""—a tool of vengeance.""

\* \* \*

I became aware of the being that is *Reina Kamisu*.

I became aware of my tool of vengeance.

And the moment I became aware, I lost my powerlessness. I was set free from the control of others.

Even better, I am now freer than anyone else and can even soar up to the skies.

I am in a position where I can easily have my will.

After all, I have become one with *Reina Kamisu* and can freely make use of her.

This is how I use the perfect mask that is *Reina Kamisu*.

Or perhaps it is how *Reina Kamisu* uses me.

Either way, all that is left is to head straight for my goal.

Until everything crumbles into dust.

Until I crumble into dust.

*Reina Kamisu* is a concept that belongs only to me. Even if the phenomenon can exist by itself now that it has received the name of *Reina Kamisu*, it is safe to assume that its scope is still limited to myself at this point.

However, the people around me can clearly see *Reina Kamisu*.

For example, if your view is obstructed by some kind of white haze, you may interpret it as a ghost or as a white cloth, or you do not even bother yourself with the question of what it is at all, but you can see it in any case.

Likewise, other people can clearly see her. The perfect mask I have obtained by losing my soul certainly exists. I may be the only one

who interprets her as the phenomenon *Reina Kamisu*, but they can see something that is different from what I see but that is essentially the same.

For example, it might be yourselves reflected by the one-way mirror.

"I will die in a few days from now."

I say something that can be interpreted in many ways.

"Die?"

"Yes."

"You?"

Which leads Ryoji-san to start puzzling over the deepest meanings of my words. All that is left for me to do is to say the things he wants me to say. I do not get an answer from him. All he can do is present his answers to *Reina Kamisu*.

Alas, dear brother, with so few hints you cannot get it right!

As always, Ryoji-san engages in fairly solid reasoning and drifts off from the answer more and more.

I say the phrase I prepared for him:

"Go to my room when the time comes."

The mirror is there. *Reina Kamisu* is there. Of course, she is only visible to me, though.

This is my way of putting a curse on him. A curse that I am afraid he is unable to lift for the time being, for—

"I will die."

—Right. Because I will die.



This will cause him to use *Reina Kamisu* and aggravate the curse I put on him. There is a low probability that he might notice that it was not really me who he has seen, but if that happens then so be it. It would that he earned himself the right to be released.

"—but only metaphorically."

Right, I may die but *Reina Kamisu* will not.

And as long as Ryoji-san's own *Reina Kamisu* does not die, the curse will persist.

Death.

It is a tool that is most useful in the event of controlling someone's heart.

It has a tremendous emotional impact and can even be destructive depending on how you use it.

Death is unavoidable and of equal significance to everyone.

Therefore I decided to take advantage of it.

I start to make preparations.

I start to make preparations, using my *Reina Kamisu*.

Step by step, my vengeance gets executed.

After school, Mitsui-san called me out. While I do not know what she needs from me, I cannot turn her request down in front of everyone, since I am using *Reina Kamisu*.

My assumption is that she is seeking for help after being hurt by Kawai-san.

"Is it that you want to come back to our conversation the day before yesterday?"

"...No, that's not it," she says with eyes that do not see *Reina Kamisu*. They see *me*, not *Reina Kamisu*.

I suddenly feel a little unsettled.

Might her missing ability to see *Reina Kamisu* get in the way of my plan of vengeance? Her words bear far less weight than *Reina Kamisu's*, so I doubt that anyone would listen to her even if she tried to stop me. If, however, there are more people like Mitsui-san who can see "me" to some degree, they might give an ear to her.

What should I do? What if Mitsui walked around spreading her suspicions?

"After all, there's no bullying or violence. I'm just being hated by everyone. Even if the situation improved superficially, the actual hostility wouldn't disappear."

"Do you think so? I am convinced that this artificial hate would disappear with time once we took care of the problem on a superficial level. After all, it is just the peer pressure that is influencing them."

I fail to come to a conclusion.

For the time being, it might be a good idea to display my influence.

"Besides—I can take care of their hostility deep down, too."

It is but the truth, and Mitsui-san is aware of that.

She is left speechless.

We arrive at the back of the gym where she wanted to take me. The secretary of the student council, Anna Fuyuki, has already been waiting here and seems to be in a state of horrible agitation. It is quite obvious what is going to happen now.

I glance over to Mitsui-san.

Fuyuki-san is not someone who would willingly confess her love, let alone have Mitsui-san, an enemy of Kawai-san's, help her arrange it. That means that Mitsui-san has coerced her into this situation.

Why?

Before I arrive at an answer, however, Fuyuki-san opens her mouth:

"Sorry for ... calling you out to such a place."

"No, I do not mind at all."

I would like to catch a glimpse of Mitsui-san's facial expression, but *Reina Kamisu* is not allowed to avert her eyes from the earnest girl in front of my eyes.

Is that also part of her plan? No, I doubt she is *that* scheming.

Fuyuki-san struggles for a long time to let out a single word, but eventually succeeds:

".....I love you."

Her words are extremely powerful. There might be no ill will in them, but they are essentially a threat. If I am basing my threat on my death, she is basing hers on her fragile and honest feelings.

They are so pure that they cannot be easily crushed.

*Reina Kamisu* fails to reply offhand.

"...I love you," she repeats.

*Reina Kamisu* manages to respond her pure feelings with a smile.

"Thank you, but I am sorry..."

And crushed them.

She crushed her pure feelings.

"...Thank you...for your time..."

With these words, Fuyuki-san disappears. The *Reina Kamisu* inside her should be fine, but ... it was a close call.

The total energy of emotions does not change so easily, but their direction does. Especially in cases like this.

Well then—

—Yukimi Mitsui is the greater problem right now.

I look at her. *Ah, as I thought.*

Her gaze is piercing through *Reina Kamisu* and reaches me.

"—Why are you looking at me like this?"

"Well, you said that you stayed on my side, didn't you?"

"I did, yes."

"Even if I look at you in this manner?"

"...Yes."

"You know, I noticed something when you promised to stay on my side. And just now I confirmed my assumption through a little experiment.

"Reina Kamisu, you do not have a soul."

No soul.

I did not expect her to figure out that much. Most impressive.

"...No soul? What do you mean?"

I feign ignorance, however, because it might be a wild guess on her part.

I must not readily admit to it. If she has really seen through me, my fears that she might stand in the way of my plan of vengeance could turn out true.

"Oh come on ... Kamisu-san, you're just a pretty shell without any content inside. You can't react in a differentiated manner to our behavior."

Interesting. Referring to me a "shell" is quite an accurate simile. For someone who does not see my content, *Reina Kamisu*, I certainly must look like an empty shell.

"It's true that I forced Fuyuki-san to confess to you, but her feelings for you are without a doubt real."

"Yes, I know."

"But you shooed her away."

"Shooed her away? Indeed, I was sadly unable to give her my consent, but I think I have replied to her sincerely. Or do you think that I should have beaten around the bush and told her a sweet lie instead, Mitsui-san?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Looks like you really don't understand. Alright, listen, Fuyuki-san was serious. Do you have the slightest qualms for turning down her honest feelings for you?"

"I do."

I am perfectly aware that I crushed her pure feelings and even had difficulties doing so. However—

"On the surface, that is, right? After all, your sad expression vanished into thin air the moment she left."

—You cannot say that I have feelings of guilt?

"You only managed to bear feelings for a heartfelt confession at the moment when it occurred. The very instant you looked at me, your interest in Fuyuki-san died out!"

"You are over-interpreting things ... no?"

Wrong. It is just as she says. I can no longer explain my way out, but I must.

But I am not able to. Mitsui-san has understood me. By observing others, she has understood what *Reina Kamisu* is. She correctly

assessed me and was convinced of her assessment when she saw my reaction to Fuyuki-san.

Driven into a corner, I make a slip of tongue.

"Or do you perhaps think that every single student at this school would obey if I told them to commit suicide?"

I accidentally tell her part of my plan.

I expected her to deny it. She could not possibly have such a fine understanding of me.

However—Mitsui-san replied without missing a beat:

"They would."

I am at a loss for words.

"I don't know what you plan to do at this school—maybe nothing at all—but I just want you to know that I realized that you're not normal. You're irregular. And you're aware of that more than anyone else. Yes—"

"—You can't be human."

How accurate.

*Reina Kamisu* is a phenomenon and I am her vessel.

Neither of us is human.

The following day I learned that Fuyuki-san had cut her wrist.

Beyond doubt, that confession was the cause. Fuyuki-san is a precious sacrificial lamb of mine; if I do not take measures, she might turn unusable because she is most likely planning to dissociate herself from me as it is. Do I look for a substitute, do I give up on one sacrifice, or do I get in touch with her and bring her back in order? After some wavering, I decide for the latter.

I walked to her classroom before school started, sneaked a peek inside, and found her sitting at her desk, hanging her head. She was easy to recognize thanks to her friends surrounding her. To my relief, Kawai-san was not among them.

As I enter the room I create a stir. With widened eyes Fuyuki-san notices me and immediately looks away. I suppose this is the natural reaction in this case.

Nonetheless, I walk up to her without hesitation.

"Fuyuki-san."

Surprised that I called her name, her eyes widen once more.

"H-How can I help you?"

"I would like to talk. Can you spare me a moment?"

Fuyuki-san nods a few times with her eyes still rounded.

"Thank you. Then ... yes, would you be so kind as to follow me to the second music room?"

She nods a few times again and follows me.

"Um ... what would you like to talk about?"



While she is waiting for me anxiously, I approach to the piano and sit down on the stool. To my chagrin, I have to admit that I have grown accustomed to this stool.

"How is your wound?" I ask with my gaze turned at her bandage, ignoring her question. I am expected to first worry about her wound.

"Ah ... I was just being stupid ... you don't need to worry about it, Reina-san."

"Please do not say that."

"No, but ... um ... it's not your fault, Reina-san..."

Oh, that is what she worried about? That suits her personality.

"Do not cut yourself anymore, all right?"

".....Yes," she nods hesitantly, which is fully understandable. Every child knows that one should not hurt oneself, and yet Fuyuki-san cut her wrist. She had to.

Fuyuki-san has been suffering enough to find herself in this situation—

—and thus longs for *Reina Kamisu*.

"...I have come here today, Fuyuki-san, to talk to you about yesterday."

Her face darkens as she hears me say so.

"Allow me to be direct ... Mitsui-san forced you to say it, right?"

After a few moments of hesitation, she replies, "Yes..." and adds, "but—"

"I thought so," I interrupt. I will not let her finish that sentence. "I was unable to properly handle your confession yesterday."

"Huh—?" she gasps and raises her face in surprise.

"I was unable to answer you honestly in the presence of a bystander, let alone the culprit who schemed it."

"W-What do you mean by this?"

I smile and say, "Now, please listen to my real reply: We are both girls, so I am afraid that we cannot become a couple."

"Yes ... I understand."

"However, I can accept your feelings nevertheless."

"W-What...?"

"This is quite difficult to express ... it might be more appropriate to say that I can be by your side while acknowledging your feelings for me. Going out with each other does not quite catch the nuance ... I really cannot think of an accurate term."

Fuyuki-san is left flabbergasted, but as the meaning of my words slowly gets through to her, she starts to blush.

"E-Err—"

"Are you unhappy with that?"

"N-No! By no means! I actually ... I wanted to become like this! Just ... feeling the same for each other ... is enough for me ... well, I guess ... I was dreaming of this kind of ... slightly special relationship."

"Is that so? Excellent," I comment with a smile. I can tell that she is charmed by me. "But have to warn you."

"Y-Yes ... what is it?"

"If possible, you should refrain from telling anyone about this. You understand why, right?"

"Y-Yes, of course."

"So why do we not make it our little secret?"

"—Our little secret..." she mutters with flushed cheeks and replies, "Yes!"

Our secret, yes?

Fufu, I am afraid that is not quite true.

It will be your very own secret, Fuyuki-san.

"Please take good care of Reina Kamisu."

Because—

—I will no longer be around later today.

As I explained to Mitsui-san, it is in my current power to control others. It would be child's play to get rid of Mitsui-san by taking advantage of Kawai-san.

But I did not do it.

Not because I thought it would be cruel. I do not possess human emotions anymore. As she correctly stated, I have lost interest in others.

And yet I did not do it. Even worse, I learned from Fuyuki-san that Mitsui-san was in danger and went there to intervene.

"Why ... why did you save me? I mean, I was so impudent as to say that you're 'not human' yesterday."

Why did I save her?

I wonder why?

I am not sure, but probably—I was happy.

I was happy that someone said I was "not human," that someone truly saw me.

"Did I not promise to be on your side? Besides, to be honest, I would like to avoid that cruel stuff even if I am not human," I explain my way out, because that is the answer she wanted to hear.

Aah, I am empty even in front of her. I am just a shell.

If ... If I met her a little earlier, perhaps I would have not turned into what I am now? No, I suppose there never was room for such an if scenario. I was born with this fate, floated all the way here—and will scatter.

"I'm so jealous."

I was not a little surprised to hear that.

Jealous. It is a word that I hear on a regular basis. However—Mitsui-san said so while understanding me.

"Jealous?"

"Yeah, I'm jealous. I could—do without a soul."

I see...

I finally found out. Why has Mitsui-san been able to look properly at me?

It is because to Mitsui-san, *I* was her *Reina Kamisu*.

Everyone sees *Reina Kamisu* through me, the ideal in the view of the observer.

Mitsui-san said she was jealous of me because I have no soul.

Right. Mitsui-san, too, sees *Reina Kamisu* through me. She, too, sees her ideal in me. However, I happen to be her very ideal; her *Reina Kamisu* is practically identical with me. She has no need to see *Reina Kamisu* because I am close enough.

That is why she could directly observe me.

"I want... I want to become like you, Kamisu-san."

"Do you want me to give you a hand?"

"Huh...?"

I was happy.

I felt accepted for the first time in my life.

Because of that, my facial muscles moved on their own. I have no means of knowing what my face looked like because it was an uncontrolled expression.

I am so happy, therefore let me grant your wish.

Luckily, it is in line with both my plan and the means I am going to employ.

"Oh, erasing your soul is not all that hard, really!"

Right, if Mitsui-san views me as her ideal, then she should be able to interpret a special meaning into my words.

My deep words and my death will guide her to the place she wishes to be.

"I will help you get there!"

Just like the others.

Of course, I have not the slightest idea **where** that will be.

I stationed Mitsui-san at the second music room where my body will pass during the fall. The only task that remains is to add the girl who has the strongest tendency of seeing *Reina Kamisu* to my plan.

*Where might she be?*

Just as I thought so—

"Reina-san!"

She, Kawai-san, called my name.

Nobody is as obsessed with *Reina Kamisu* and cleanliness as Kawai-san. She was longing for an unstained, beautiful person, and found it in *Reina Kamisu*.

Ignoring the fact that a person fulfilling her requirements does not exist.

"You have come at the correct time. I was searching for you."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"There is something I wanted to tell you," I explain briefly. Not many words are needed anymore in her case.

"Please take good care of Reina Kamisu."

This will make sure that she will pursue *Reina Kamisu* for the rest of her life. While I do not know where she will find her *Reina Kamisu*, I have a hunch that—

—it is where I am headed now.

I go to the rooftop.

\* \* \*

*Reina Kamisu* is already waiting for me when I arrive at the rooftop. She has broken free from the mirror. Well, she has always been right by my side since the moment I admitted her existence.

"Now you only need to fall down from here, is that right?"

"Yes, that will be the last step."

Fortunately, there is no one else here.

No, perhaps we are not alone. Perhaps I am subconsciously ignoring someone.

I do not mind either way as long as it does not impede my plan.

"I do not understand. How does this result in vengeance?" she asks.

"Well, I doubt that your role includes understanding my plan..."

"Would you mind disclosing some of it to me?"

"Sure."

"I am quite sure of this, but let me ask nonetheless. Having Kawai-san, Fuyuki-san and the others follow you into death is *not* what you consider your vengeance, right?"

"Exactly," I answer while searching for a place where I will fall past the window of the second music room.

"Should I think of your vengeance as something abstract?"

"Abstract...? No, I mean it quite literally. I suppose it can be considered abstract in the sense that it is hard to predict to what degree my plan will prove to be successful."

"...What is your plan, then?"

I shall answer her.

Ah, this tension in my facial muscles—I felt the same tension when talking with Mitsui-san earlier.

Oh, I remember this feeling now.

I am—

"To kill people!"



—laughing.

"Of course, I have no idea how successful my plan will be, but I want to kill people. I want to kill as many of them as possible. But not with ordinary means. I could only kill so many if I built a nuclear bomb. Would it not be a shame if there was no hope to kill more? If possible, I would like to wipe the entire human race from the face of the earth."

"How frightening. But how does falling down from here result in killing people?"

I finally find a good place that can be observed from the second music room. This will make sure that Mitsui-san will also have her soul erased.

"How I am going to kill? It is truly simple," I smile at *Reina Kamisu*. "I will use you!"

"Use me...?"

"Yes. Mind you, I am not talking about my interpretation of *Reina Kamisu*, but about your essence, about 'the phenomenon that can become visible.'"

"You want to use me as a weapon? Don't be silly. I have no power by myself. As you said, I am just a phenomenon that can become visible," she argues.

"That is more than enough."

"Poor thing. It seems like you have gone insane for good."

"I will not deny it. But although I may be insane, I can still think logically."

"Lunatics all say that."

I grab the fence. It seems to be stable enough to support my weight.

"What do you think will my fall from here cause?"

"...Let me think. First and foremost, you will die. After that, the people you *prepared* might end up committing suicide. Some kind of vicious cycle might even ensue ... but eradicating the human race is definitely impossible."

"You are right. I will die, Kawai-san and a few other people will die, and this marks the end of my *preparations*."

I lean against the fence and look *Reina Kamisu* straight in the eyes.

"This will allow me to overwrite your information."

*Reina Kamisu* gazes at me with utter surprise.

"Overwrite my information, you say?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that you are going to redefine me as a phenomenon that kills people?"

"Exactly!"

"Even in the unlikely event that you succeeded in overwriting my information, what you plan to do would be impossible. Again, my sole power lies in 'becoming visible.' You could just as well tell a human to fly!"

"You do not need any new powers. You are fully capable of killing people as you are now."

"What was that...?"

"I just need to pin you!"

"Pin me'?"

"At the moment, your shape is so vague that people refer to you by various names like god, angel, or whatnot. I will thus pin you to a single shape, by adding a new condition required to see you."

"Meaning...?"

"I will give you the fixed name *Reina Kamisu*."

"I do not understand. How does that give me the power to kill?"

"Do you not get my point? If you receive the name *Reina Kamisu*, you will no longer be just a vague concept but a 'person.'"

"That might be true, but what of it?"

"Your nature entails taking on the role your observer needs the most, right? What if you take on that role as a 'person'? Well, you will become the most important person to that observer. However, ultimately you are nothing more than a phenomenon, and once your observer realizes that, he will despair."

"And that is enough to kill people?"

"At least in the case of those who are desperate enough to seek you. Besides, do not forget that you will become *Reina Kamisu*. Do you know what this implicates?"

"...No, I don't."

"*Nomen est omen*. The name is a sign. For example, it is not possible to give you a boy's name because you are the Idea of Female Beauty.

Likewise, it is not possible to give you the name of an object like an air conditioner, goggles or a toilet seat.

"However, it is possible to give you the name *Reina Kamisu*, and the name will bind you to a human appearance.

"And that is not all; there is more to this name. Originally, you are a phenomenon that only has a vague appearance, but you lose this vagueness by receiving the name *Reina Kamisu*. Your appearance will be reminiscent of me, and so will your nature. Right—"

While laughing I say:

"—the very name of *Reina Kamisu* will kill people."

"Fairy tales. As a matter of fact, you have not killed a single—" she pauses. "Wait—is that why you made those 'preparations'?"

"Exactly. I will now lead Kawai-san and the others to death. While I cannot predict how many of them will die, my plan is to make them die. To murder them. To attach an image to the name *Reina Kamisu*."

*Reina Kamisu* is at a loss for words. However, she quickly recovers and points out, "This is a well-thought-out delusion, but I am afraid that the premise is not established. How do you prove that it is even possible to overwrite my information?"

"Sadly, I have no proof."

"As I thought."

"But it makes sense, no? At the very least, the people I 'prepared' will see you. As *Reina Kamisu*, of course. Other students of this school or acquaintances of mine might also become able to see you

and call you by my name. If so many people start to refer to you as *Reina Kamisu*, the odds are not too bad for your information to be changed the way I aspire to, right?"

"...I suppose the chances are not zero."

"That is enough for me to take the risk. I will sacrifice my own blood and that of several young girls and pray to create this curse. If that fails, then so be it."

With these words, I climb on the fence and stand on top of it.

I look down.

All I can see is the vicinity of the Junseiwa School, but that is just fine. Ultimately, my own world was no bigger than this, and yet I loathe the entire world. Unreasonable? Why? Isn't that human nature? Isn't it human nature to judge the whole by a part? The world is not kind to me. It is trying to dispose of me. It is ignoring me. That is why I will scatter, cursing anything and everything that belongs to this scenery.

"...You are a horrible person for dragging me into this."

I hear *Reina Kamisu's* voice behind me.

"Of course. You also belong to the things that I loathe."

"...What?"

"You are also a target of my vengeance, dear *Reina Kamisu*."

"This makes no sense. You said yourself that I am you and you are me."

"And that is exactly why—"

I bite my lips.

"—I hate you."

"I wanted to see myself in the mirror. You were uncalled-for. I wanted to be normal like everyone else. But—I could not! Because of you! Because of me!"

I am surprised by myself.

My voice is rough with anger? I am irritated? At whom? At *Reina Kamisu*?

...No. At myself.

I have not lost my feelings and I am actually turning them against myself.

But—

—I decide not to think about the meaning of this.

"I am going to take revenge on you. You will continue to exist for all time as a curse named *Reina Kamisu*, as a being that torments people."

"...Is that really what you wanted to accomplish?"

I unwittingly turn around to her.

"What do you mean...?"

"You could not see yourself in the mirror, right? You were just as blind to yourself as everyone else, right? Then how on earth would you be able to know what you want?"

"I don't know," I say bluntly and look ahead again, at the world I despise. "All I can do is—loathe this world that shows no understanding for me."

In response, *Reina Kamisu* whispers:

"If only you realized that everyone has to cope with the mundane feeling of not being understood in some way..."

*Shut up.*

*I do not want to hear that nonsense.*

I covered my ears.

And jumped.

\* \* \*

Everything tilts and tilts and tilts—  
The despicable sky is colored dark red.  
You do not change a bit even now.  
I may be able to soar up to you.  
But I am damned to fall.  
I cannot reach so far.  
I can only reach the bottom.  
Oh sky!  
Oh twilit sky!

Just like the sun that dyes you red every passing day,  
I shall continue to dye you red with the blood I spill—

So at least—

—Do not forget me.



## *Epilogue*

I'm not that fond of books.

But whenever I'm reading a book, I can become blank. That feeling is why I like to read books. It also lets me disappear from my surroundings that only look at me as a loose fragment.

That's why I came here to look for a book that will allow me to go blank.

Lots of paperbacks are lined up in the bookcase before me. I open one and find myself confronted with pages that are crammed full with letters. I get a bit gloomy, but this gloominess will save me. I need a story that will absorb me, one that will gently take me into a world of fantasy, one that feels real yet mystic, gentle yet rough, one that runs through me.

"I'll always be by your side."

Suddenly, I hear someone talk to her lover.

This bookstore is quite spacious and has a good selection, but there aren't many customers around because of a large chain store that recently opened by the station. That's also why I like it here.

I instantly notice that something is strange; there was no couple when I walked through the store a moment ago.

Almost as if by reflex, I look in the direction of the voice.

"My dear Reina Kamisu."

The one saying so is a girl from high school ... no, her face looks young, but she might actually be in university judging by the air she has about her. She is dragging her leg along. Maybe it's artificial. Not that I care.

At any rate, there is no man in front of her, nor is she carrying a cell phone. Well, she clearly said a girl's name, so that's not surprising. If that had been all, I would probably have gone back to searching for a book.

However—

—the girl is gazing into space.

Rena Kamizoo?

There seems to be no such person anywhere.

She is just gazing into space with a soft expression on her face. She suddenly glances over to me, so I hurriedly pick up a paperback and pretend to be looking through some books.

However, I keep observing her with sidelong looks. It's hard to describe, but she makes a somewhat fragile impression on me, which might be because of her strange statement or her injured leg, but ... I can't shake off the feeling that she is fragile in a more essential way.

And that feeling resembles me.

A cell phone starts to ring as if to reproach me. I quickly return my gaze to the book. It seems to be hers.

The girl answers the call, shortly after which another girl approaches her while holding a cell phone at her ear. Apparently, they have arranged to meet up here.

They start to chit-chat. And yet ... the girl seems a bit distracted. I mean ... she keeps sneaking peeks at the place where she was looking at until her friend arrived.

I feel unsettled.

"Anna, let's go."

"Mm," nods the girl who is wearing a wristband on her left wrist as she follows her friend and pulls her leg along.

Aah—

—I couldn't overlook it.

The girl, who had been called Anna, smiled into space the moment her friend looked away.

No, that's not right—

—She smiled at Reina Kamisu.

Reina Kamisu.

The invisible friend.

"Ah—"

I drop the book I was holding.

Dizziness. A gentle dizziness.

I quickly pick up the book, but I'm too wobbly on my legs to stand up again. I sit down.

Something is tickling my head.

I see stars floating and sparkling around me.

"———"

|—

\* \* \*

—have an irreplaceable best friend.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?" she says after hurrying to me.

As she takes breath, I answer, "M-mm, not at all."

"Good," she smiles. With an absurdly beautiful expression.

Huh? How long did I wait? It feels like nothing, but it also feels like forever.

Oh, who cares? She's here now. That's what matters.

"Come, let's go."

I give her an assertive nod. My irreplaceable friend smiles and takes my hand.

Yeah, that will do.

I'm okay as long as she's here.

I don't need to know anything else.

I don't want to know anything else.

Right—

Fumi Saito's best friend—

—Reina Kamisu is **here**.

\* \* \*

## Afterword

Hello, this is Eiji Mikage.

This book is the sequel(?) of "Reina Kamisu Is Here." If you start with this volume, you might find it difficult to understand the setting and you will miss out on a few tricks I have hidden in the first volume, so if possible, start with the first one.

To tell the truth, I have never struggled so much writing something in my life as with this book. There are many reasons that range from writer blocks and mental weakness to my neighbors, but the primary reason is that it was just flat out difficult to write. In the beginning I thought I could just take over the structure and the elements from the first volume, but doing so would inevitably lead to an inferior product compared to the first one because of the nature of the setting, so I had to change the protagonist of the first chapter and take a different approach. That in turn made the structure more complex. Hints here, hints there, hints everywhere ... well, a high amount of foreshadowing and hints isn't a bad thing, but it's also important to emphasize the parts that lead to the revelations adequately, and that might require new hints ... It was like filling out an exam where understanding the problems was a problem in itself.

Thanks to that, I lost quite some time with rewriting the entire third chapter and scrapping the epilogue twice, which is a shame because I thought I'd be quicker. I mean, the first volume was almost done by May! Back then I thought even *that* was a slow pace.

By the way, a character mentioned that "words are imperfect and impractical." This is something I always feel when writing.

There are things that can't be worded. Things that sound cheap

when worded. There are many of these things. (Take "love" for example) How do you convey these ideas without words? How can you get them across? How do you express something that your image of it doesn't get lost in the process? These questions are always on my mind. Words feel to me like frames that hold together meanings. If you use them the wrong way, the story will get engulfed by the frame of words and the words will be bound to the story.

And that's not fun, is it?

My stories may be fiction and disconnected from reality, but I would be delighted if some of my words managed to break free in someone.

Of course, that's not all that counts when writing a novel. There are many more things to take into consideration. It's really hard work. The more I write, the more I realize how difficult it is. Really.

All right, I think I will change my direction a little for the continuation (I didn't hear the people asking if there will be one). Well, I don't plan to throw everything over, though. Granted, I can't tell for sure at this point.

Well then, as I take my leave, I would like to thank my two editors in charge, my friend "K" and everyone who helped me with this book. Until we meet again!

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