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The Wrong-Sider Memoirs

Delusional Science ADV

chaos;child

If you were God, and your delusions could become reality, what delusions would you wish for?
A sensual world? A despotic society? Destructive sanctions? Or...

Delusional Science Adventure

Chaos;Child: The Wrong-Sider Memoirs

Six years have passed since the series of grotesque serial murders known as the “New Generation Madness” struck Shibuya. Now, just over half a decade later, people are dying on the very same days that each past incident took place—almost as if the cases of years past are being imitated. A man devours his own arm; a woman slits open her own stomach; and a man twists his own head off from his spine.

Kurusu Nono, the student council president of Hekiko Academy, has her life upended when her adoptive brother, Miyashiro Takuru, begins investigating the string of cases. The deeper her brother gets into the pursuit, the more the two of them find that danger lies in wait around every corner—and that they themselves may be the ones being pursued...

The first official complementary novel for the massively popular visual novel “Chaos;Child” is finally available!



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ConTEXTS

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Ito Shinji

伊藤真二

Kazuki Hana

香月華

Arimura Hinae

有村雛絵

Onoe Serika

尾上世莉架

Kurusu Nono

来栖乃々

Miyashiro Takuru

宮代拓留

Sakuma Wataru
佐久間恒

Takeshi Shinjo

神成岳志

Kawahara Masashi

川原雅司

Gen-san

ゲンさん

Tachibana Yuto

橘結人

Tachibana Yui

橘結衣

Kunosato Mio

久野里渕

Yamazoe Uki

山添うき

CHARACTERS

CHARACTERS

DESIGN

5GAS DESIGN STUDIO

Prologue

November 3rd

The Shibuya sky lies just beyond the window, stained pitch black; it's an overcast night sky, bereft of a single star.

Six years ago, a powerful earthquake struck the city of Shibuya without warning, leaving unprecedented levels of destruction in its wake. The disaster was dubbed the "Shibuya Earthquake" by the media, and in its immediate aftermath, the city's sky was covered by a thick darkness—much like the one before me now.

Not long after the tremors ceased, the reconstruction of the ruined city began. The work to rebuild and restore proceeded at a fervent pace, and now, only a few scars remain of that disaster long past.

One such scar is Hekiho Academy—a school designated as a symbol of the reconstruction effort, built to accommodate both middle and high school students that fell victim to the earthquake. It's an academy so young, even its oldest students are only in their final year; it doesn't have a single alum to its name.

As for myself, I represent the school as its student council president, as well as the vice president of its newspaper club. Right now, I find myself standing alone within the Newspaper Club's clubroom. Since today is a national holiday—Culture Day—the school is otherwise devoid of people. Naturally, this means that neither the club president, nor the club's other members are present, leaving the room feeling far more spacious than usual.

Reflecting on my memories now, I realize that I've never really been alone in this room before. Whenever I've been here, it's always been with others—with people that I feel like I can be myself around. But, when I think back to the Newspaper Club's beginnings... I can

still remember a time when it was just him and myself in this large, spacious room.



My memories of the first time I stepped into the clubroom with him are clear as day, as if it only happened yesterday.

“Were we really supposed to get a room this nice? Are we in the wrong place?”

“This isn’t a room we ‘got,’ Takuru. We’re *borrowing* it,” I scolded. “We’re a newspaper club—nothing more, nothing less—and that means that we represent this high school. Therefore, I fully expect you to behave accordingly.”

“...Don’t go lecturing the club president, *vice president*.”

“You don’t have to think of it as a lecture from your vice president. Think of it as your big sister imparting some knowledge to her *ever-so-precious little brother*.”

Takuru winced. “I’m sorry, Nono, I should’ve considered that, so please just call me by my name...”

Miyashiro Takuru: the president of the Newspaper Club, and my precious little brother. The two of us don’t share the same surname, nor the same parents—but he’s family to me all the same. Something we *do* share is our age, although my birthday comes before his; as a result, I take the older-sibling role in our relationship.

Both of us lost our parents to the earthquake, which left us to be taken in by Aoba Dorm, a local group home in Shibuya. That’s the place where we became a family.

Aoba Dorm and its complement, Aoba Clinic, make up a joint establishment owned by our dad, Wataru Sakuma. Although the building is referred to as a clinic, he’s more of a small-town doctor if any-

thing. He's a good-natured old man, and he's about as brilliant and open-minded as they come.

There are four children at Aoba Dorm: myself, Miyashiro Takuru, and the Tachibana siblings—two other children who were orphaned by the earthquake. Yui is the older of the two, meaning Yuto is her younger brother. Unlike Takuru and I, the two of them are blood-related. Even still, when it comes down to it, the five of us are a family in every way except by blood. There have been times when we've struggled with a sense of distance between us, but even so, we've continued to live together under the same roof as a family—even after Shibuya's reconstruction was completed.

In the beginning, I was the one who'd wanted to start a brand new club at Hekiho Academy—a newspaper club. As Takuru and I were already students of Hekiho Academy at the time, and because I was in the student council, I was more than willing to collaborate with him in order to make the club a reality.

When we first formed the club, we only had the minimum number of members required to do so—two people. The advisor we received for the club, Mr. Wakui, is someone very dear to me, and he also served as the advisor for the student council.

Now, Mr. Wakui may very well be the very *definition* of lazy and noncommittal, but with enough pestering, I eventually managed to convince him to take on the role.

"Huh? I'm the Newspaper Club's advisor now?" he said after the fact. "I know I said I'd help you out best I could, but that wasn't me giving you the go-ahead to sign me up for this." That declaration, which he made at one of the regular student council meetings, was the only time I'd ever seen him shift from "noncommittal" to genuinely wanting to back out.

But I digress. We'd started the club with two leaders, but nobody to lead. That, however, would change soon enough.

On a day not too long afterward, there was a heavy knock at the clubroom's door. Before I could do so much as set down the tea I'd been brewing, our visitor let themselves right in.

"Scuse me, this is the newspaper club, right?"

It was a male student that I was unfamiliar with at the time. Takuru, who was standing closer to him, responded nervously. "Oh, er, yes... this is the place... And, uh, you are...?"

"Huh? Oh, I was just thinking about joining this club," the newcomer said. "My name's Itou Shinji. I'm pretty interested in what you guys are gettin' up to in here. You're supposed to come here if you wanna sign up, yeah?"

"Y-Yeah, that's fine... We're... recruiting," Takuru stammered.

Itou-kun sighed. "Man, you're not really giving me a whole lot to work with here. You sure this is the newspaper club? How're you supposed to get in people's faces for interviews and stuff when you can barely even get a word out?"

Much like a deer in headlights, Takuru had completely frozen up—and his timidity had dampened our new visitor's enthusiasm. Although Takuru was quite talkative with family, he tended to be extremely shy around strangers.

Watching the exchange between him and Itou-kun left me feeling a bit anxious, especially since Itou-kun had come to apply for the club. Fortunately, it wasn't long at all before they loosened up around each other. They had more than a few interests and hobbies in common, and Itou-kun's outspoken nature paired quite well with Takuru's reticent tendencies. Naturally, the two of them became best friends in the blink of an eye.

During the April after the Newspaper Club was established, a newly enrolled student came to visit us—a girl that I now consider my best friend. She would often drop by the clubroom, stars in her eyes as she peered at its every feature. In stark contrast to that, confusion was all that would fill Takuru's eyes as he struggled to keep up with her energy.

“Wooow... So this is a newspaper club?”

“Don’t go acting like you’re new around here,” Takuru chided. “How many times have you ‘nonchalantly’ popped your head in here by now?”

“Those times were different, though. Back then I was just a visitor, but starting today, I’ll be a full-fledged member! It’s a fresh start! Right?”

If it was going to be a fresh start, then I felt it was about time to make it official.

I set a pen and a document down on the desk in front of her. “All right, Serika. I’ve filled out everything you need to apply for this club; just sign your name right here, and you’ll be all set.”

“Thanks, Non-chan!” Serika said, delighted. She took hold of the pen, fiddling with her Gero Froggy strap all the while. Each time she squeezed the strap, it let out the same inane squishing sound. It had always been something of a subconscious habit of hers to do that.

“You must be real exhausted after all that paperwork you didn’t do,” Takuru complained. “Also, enough with the frog already—it’s obnoxious!”

“If the present *you* gave me is so obnoxious, then why’d you give it to me? That’s a contradiction! A contradiction, I say! Objection, your honor!”

In spite of Takuru's clamoring, Serika managed to complete the club admission procedures promptly and without a hitch. Despite how it might seem, Serika and Takuru have been in a close relationship for a long time—even since before the earthquake hit.

When Takuru and I first came to Aoba Dorm—or, to be more precise, Aoba Clinic—Takuru was still unconscious due to an aftereffect caused by the earthquake. When he did finally awaken, he found himself surrounded by people he didn't know, and worse still, he was unable to move his body of his own accord. His rehabilitation period was lengthy, and it would be quite some time before he could begin to attend classes again.

Nonetheless, Takuru did recover, and the one who gave him the strength to do that—the one who eradicated his worries and anxieties—was his one and only childhood friend, Onoe Serika. She would visit Aoba Dorm quite frequently, and she quickly grew to be a face our family looked forward to seeing. She was incredibly friendly to us, and was one of the sweetest girls we'd ever met—it didn't take long for me to fall in love with her.

For these reasons and more, it wouldn't have surprised me if Takuru had been counting down the days until Serika began high school and joined the club. I was just as eager as him—if not more so—to welcome my newfound best friend into the Newspaper Club.

In the spring of the year after Serika showed up at our door, we were joined by a new, fifth member. However, this new member hadn't joined because they were interested in the club itself, like Itou, nor because they were a longtime friend, like Serika.

On that day, I ended up arriving at the clubroom slightly late. When I opened the door, I found both Takuru and Serika standing near the club computer in the corner of the room, looking absolutely

bewildered. The source of their confusion? An outsider who was using the computer as if she had bought it and carried it back to the clubroom herself.

“Hey, Non-chan? Do you know this girl?” Serika asked.

“...Yes, I do. I invited her to join us the other day, so long as she wasn’t active in any other clubs.”

The girl happily clicking away at the computer’s mouse was, indeed, the very same girl I’d spoken to the other day; she had just recently enrolled at Hekiho Academy.

“No, no, no, this isn’t right...” Takuru began to protest. “The goal of a newspaper club is to provide information! But this girl decided to just *stroll up* to the clubroom PC when we weren’t looking, and now she’s using it to play *video games*?! She hasn’t moved an inch from that spot since she showed up! When the hell did this become some hangout spot to play *ESO2*?!” Takuru was both baffled and aggravated at the situation.

Perhaps noticing the anger in his voice, the girl at the computer turned to look at Takuru. “Mmm, hmm?” she mumbled. Then, she held out a lollipop, offering it to him.

The girl in question was Kazuki Hana. She’s a first-year student that, for some reason, never speaks outside of the odd “mmm’s” and “hmm’s”. She’s definitely a bit of a strange girl, though not in the same way that Serika is. From the day she first visited the clubroom, the computer in the corner became her regular base of operations; all she ever does there is play an online game called *ESO2*, which she’s always completely absorbed in.

Whenever I watch her playing, her big glasses all fogged up, I’m always tempted to scold her. *Playing games all the time is bad for your eyes*, I want to say, much like some kind of nagging parent.

Although it might have first seemed like all Kazuki did was sit back and play video games without a care in the world, she does help out with club activities whenever the mood strikes her. She also seems to have grown rather attached to me and Takuru... or at least, it feels like she has. Either way, she became a full-fledged Newspaper Club member in her own right, just like the people who had come before her—and with that, the Hekiko Academy Newspaper Club was able to establish itself as a five-person hierarchy.



The activities we do here as a club are always so incredibly fun... Just looking around the room is all it takes for me to relive the joys we've had here.

I could say the same thing about Aoba Dorm. If I were to look around the living room or my own room there, my memories of scolding Dad for having too much to drink, of searching for the best deals on groceries with Yui and Yuto, of walking in on Takuru while he was in the bath, and of so, so much more... they would all come rushing back.

But those days... those irreplaceable, unforgettable days... will never return.

In the midst of those peaceful times, a series of grotesque serial murders—the “Return of the New Generation Madness”—was about to begin. And though it began to unfold in our hometown, Shibuya, Takuru and I were always quick to dismiss it as someone else’s problem—as something that would never affect us.

It’s because we made those careless decisions that we lost someone incredibly important to us. And whether we’re talking about the Newspaper Club, Aoba Dorm, or the people we’ve lost, the truth is always the same: nothing will ever return to the way it was before.

And right now, at the very end of it all, I find myself face-to-face with certain death. In just a few hours, I will have to choose my fate: to kill, or to be killed.

Chapter 1 — The Impossible Request That Is, “Don’t Look”

I believe it occurred around the time when Kazuki first joined the Newspaper Club; as a result of the fact that we, his own family, had lied to him, Takuru left Aoba Dorm.

We may be family, but we were once strangers in each other’s eyes. When we first came to Aoba Dorm, we had to make a few promises with each other in order to become a proper family. One of those promises was that there would be no secrets between us.

Of course, Takuru and I did everything we could to stay true to that promise. And yet, no matter how committed I was to maintaining it, there was still one truth I could never tell him. Despite how hard I tried to keep that secret, Takuru did eventually discover the truth that I—that we, his entire family, had hidden from him.

“We did it for you.”

I doubt Takuru saw that as anything more than an excuse.

After he ran away from home, Takuru began to live in an RV located within the post-earthquake mecca for Shibuya’s homeless: Miyashita Park. Yui, Yuto, and I were all worried sick about him, but Dad—who’s never been the type to worry about the smaller things—was as composed as ever.

“He’ll come back once he’s ready,” he said to us. “Plus, he’s the diligent, timid type, so I don’t doubt he’ll keep going to school without us nagging him to.”

Dad was right on the mark: from that point forward, Takuru began commuting to school from his RV. Initially, it didn’t feel like anything had changed between us; he certainly wasn’t ignoring me or anything along those lines. In fact, the first time we saw each other at school afterward, he even greeted me—albeit in an awkward way.

“Good morning, Kurusu,” he said to me. Not “Nono”—“Kurusu.” He called me by my last name.

The first time he did that to me, I felt my heart sink. It felt like everything we’d built up until that moment had crumbled away with just a single word. Each and every time he called me “Kurusu,” I could feel our bond as a family weakening, and I felt as though my very being was being eroded, bit by bit.

As if in direct response to this, Takuru began to throw himself into investigating the dangerous incidents happening around Shibuya. He hated being normal; he wanted to be different from everyone else. He wanted to be special. And in distancing himself from his family, he’d shattered the chains that had kept him fettered until that moment.

You don’t need to be special. I don’t want you to get involved in such dangerous things. Those were my true feelings, but every time I considered approaching him with them, the sound of his voice saying “Kurusu” tore at my heart. I was so, so terrified of being alienated even further by him—of losing the connection we shared. And that terror left me paralyzed.

I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be honest with him. All I could muster the courage to say were small, inoffensive things like, “Come back home,” or, “Everyone is worried about you.” In hindsight, if I’d said what I truly wanted to say to him, he would have probably hated me for it... but at least he wouldn’t have taken things any further than he already had.

Not long after Takuru began chasing those gruesome incidents, he pinned a large map onto the Newspaper Club’s bulletin board; on it were a myriad of sticky notes filled with facts and theories about the

Return of the New Generation Madness. At that point, Takuru had already fully immersed himself in the realm of the Return of New Gen.

That is the widely used name for the series of grotesque serial murders that just saw its sixth case. As implied by the word “Return,” the incidents are based on a previous series of murders.

Six years prior to the Return of New Gen, Shibuya faced a string of enigmatic serial killings known as the “New Generation Madness.” Photos of the crime scenes from each of its incidents were tacked onto the club’s map, along with some relevant information.

- The “Group Dive” case, wherein five high schoolers jumped off of a building together.
- The “Manchild” case, wherein a fetus was forced into a male victim’s stomach.
- The “Cruc-affixion” case, wherein a victim was crucified with cross-shaped stakes.
- The “Vampbuyer” case, wherein all of the blood from a victim’s body was drained, and a photo of the corpse was posted on an online auction site.
- The “Numbskull” case, wherein a victim was kept alive with their brain partially removed from their skull for over a week.
- The “Finger Food” case, wherein a victim ingested her own arm and choked to death on it.
- And finally, the “DQN Puzzle” case, wherein three men’s torsos were severed from their bodies and rearranged.

They were incidents so brutal, I couldn’t help but feel as if they were competing with each other in increasingly horrific displays of cruelty and madness—even thinking about them made me feel sick to my stomach.

In the end, the string of murders came to a close without a proper resolution. At the time, many broadcasting restrictions were instated on the incidents due to their sheer brutality, and that only paved the way for rampant censorship. In addition, the Shibuya Earthquake hit immediately after the DQN Puzzle; it was a disaster so great, even the brutalities of New Gen quickly became a low-priority topic in the news.

The day the earthquake hit was also the day I faced the biggest turning point of my entire life.

Amid the many waves of reconstruction, the New Generation Madness slowly faded into obscurity. The bizarre, inexplicable nature of it all was soon buried deep under the debris of pain and suffering caused by the earthquake, which destroyed far more than New Gen ever did.

And yet, despite having not stirred for six long years, that madness had burst forth from its grave once again.

September 7th... Back then, I had yet to understand the true importance of that date. More likely than not, nobody did... nobody knew that it would only be the beginning of something more.

The Return of the New Generation Madness.

On that day, a new series of incidents began with the public suicide of a single man.

■ Ootani Yuuma

September 7th

Before the earthquake hit Shibuya, I would've been in high school. Every time I think about that, I realize that I can never forget what some of my relatives said to my parents at that one memorial service.

“Why did you let him get to this point?!” they all said—among other things.

That isn't to say that what they said was particularly traumatizing or anything—hell, I'd never even met any of them before that. Sure, it was pretty disheartening to realize that basically all of my relatives thought that both me and my future were equally hopeless, but really, that's all it was.

My parents never defended me, nor said anything back to them. Instead, they opted to act like I wasn't even there—like I wasn't standing right next to them.

But that's all in the past. Now, I don't need my parents—I can get back at the naysayers all on my own. I'd even say that it's *because* my parents abandoned me that I've become the fine man I am today.

In the past, I lived with my parents, not a single real life goal in mind. I ended up dropping out of college—because, well, who wouldn't?—and got kicked out of the house as a result. I was a university dropout who couldn't even fill a single page on his résumé.

I knew the truth all too well back then—that there was no hope for me anymore. I remember wishing I could see into the future, because at least seeing how shitty my life would end up would give me enough reason to hurry up and neck myself. And yet, like many others, I was under the baseless assumption that, eventually, everything would

work out—that one day, I'd suddenly be born anew, and my life would change forever. Looking back, I guess that isn't too far off from what ended up happening.

I figured my future would be filled with nothing but failure after failure, but it's actually turned out pretty all right. I found success on a site called "Niconiya Video," and the reason I did was because I completely understood what it was like to be on the other side of the screen. If I have to say what my secret is besides that, it's probably that I can keep myself from feeding any of the trolls that frequent my channel. That, and...

Well, say you work at some big-shot company, or that you're good friends with some rando celebrity. Or maybe you're living off of your parents' multi-billion-dollar inheritance—whatever backstory you want. Regardless of how you got to where you are, going, "Oh, look at me, look at how successful I am!" isn't gonna cut it on Niconiya. Nobody cares about stuff like that—all that's gonna do is feed your ego boner, while your view count and overall popularity go nowhere.

That's the reason why I started acting like I'm poor; I act like I'm just *barely* making ends meet with my struggling streaming career—like I'm pouring my heart and soul into my streams. If you search up "poor person trying to live a normal life," you'll find my livestreams. After all, an act like that gets much better reception.

The reason why the act works is because there are tons of viewers out there who love looking down on people that are struggling in life. Still, a view's a view, whether it's coming from a scumbag or a saint. With that said, I do try to avoid having too many assholes watching my streams—I don't want *total* chaos in the chat.

Now, you might be wondering if it pisses me off that I've got all these snobs deriding me all the time. Yeah, it sort of does, but I'm

pretty much doing the same thing to them anyway. I mean, just think about it: my audience keeps on growing with every passing day, and the money's rolling in along with it. Hell, I'm probably doing better off now than most of the people who think they've got something over me. Like the artist for that one soul reaper manga says, "Those without talent ought to just close their eyes, stick themselves in some corner, and while away, surviving solely off the rain and dust that flows into their gaping maws." Paraphrasing, but still.

Another trade secret of mine: I rarely engage with my viewers. That one's *extremely* important. When it comes to my work, I am the sole distributor, and they, my many recipients. Some netizens say that being all chummy with one's viewers is what keeps a streamer alive, but I'm on the side that prefers to establish a strong set of boundaries.

While he may not be a streamer himself, Watabe, a reporter for Niconiya, plants himself firmly on the other side. I do pity him—I mean, imagine having to act out a character all the time like he does.

As to why I think it's important to maintain distance between yourself and your audience? Well, let me put it this way: information is the lifeblood of the internet. Information is power, and information has value. Thus, the more information you conceal, the better; put another way, the personal information of a celebrity is immensely valuable.

And, as a streamer that's on the verge of surpassing 5,000 viewers, you could say I'm pretty close to becoming a celebrity myself. Take a look at @channel and you'll see threads upon threads about my livestream, which I title "TIL: I Can See The Future." My fans and my haters alike are at each other's throats from dawn till dusk, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Now, to be fair, @channel is essentially the online equivalent of graffiti you'd find sprayed all over a skeevy gas station bathroom—that

is to say, it's filled to the brim with unreliable, uninformed content. While I don't bother checking it every day, I do give it a look occasionally—all while smirking at the sight of the pitiful losers crawling about the site, of course.

Anyway, to get back to the point, that's why keeping your distance from your viewers is ideal. Though I do actively show my face on my livestreams, I haven't really met anyone face-to-face over the few months since I started doing these streams. At worst, I've probably only made actual contact with the Jungle delivery guy, or the clerk at the local supermarket. And when I *do* need to talk to people for work, I can just do it through the privacy of the internet.

At any rate, associating with people is idiotic—I have no need for it. I've forged this path of mine through my own independence, and I'm gonna keep my endless grind going without relying on a single other soul for the rest—

...Whoops. Might be sounding like more of a self-aggrandizing dickwad than I'm meaning to. Truth be told, what I just said isn't quite true. Even *I* have people who are incredibly important to me. They're not worthless like a family member would be, but they're more like... benefactors? Close friends of mine? Hmm... what's the best way to describe them...

Well, whatever—they're just people that I feel like I can always let my guard down around. They also landed me a deal with this agency that's putting out ads for me on this really popular website. To be honest, it's only because of them that I have the life I do right now; I guess people really do need *some* form of company.

"Ootani-san, are you feeling okay?" one of them asks.

"Overwork, perhaps? You've been so busy lately. You shouldn't push yourself too hard," the other suggests, concerned.

Those familiar, ever-so-kind voices soothe the splitting headache that struck me just a second ago.

Man, this is part of why it's worth having people around. In all honesty... the fact that I was able to survive without such friendliness... such kindness... for two whole months is nothing short of a miracle. A true miracle.

This long-awaited reunion, and that calming exchange, have put my mind completely at ease.

"I'm currently streaming and need to head back on camera, so please hold on a sec."

I pile the freshly cut cheese I just finished preparing for the stream on a plate, then sit down in front of my PC.

My eyes are looking directly at the future—a future that I will cut right through myself. From here on out, I want to see how far my potential can stretch when I'm with these guys. And this isn't me being fake or in character like usual.

These are my true feelings, free of all falsehoods.

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

Although the original recording of Ootani Yuuma's death was taken down, copies of it went viral, and before long, it invaded every single corner of the internet. It was a video of a man dying, with a red liquid composed of blood, tears, and drool leaking from his eyes, nostrils, and mouth—each and every orifice on his face. To call it abhorrent and tasteless would be a massive understatement.

The incident occurred at 11 PM on September 7th, just shortly after Ootani's Niconiya livestream, "TIL: I Can See the Future," began. During the period in which he was awaiting requests from his viewers, he stood up from his seat and walked away from the camera. He took an unexpectedly long time to return to the stream, but when he did...

...his right arm was gone.

It had been cut into round slices, all of which were laid out on a plate he held in his left hand.

"So sorry! I bought this cheese on sale and it's just so incredibly hard." After he said that, he put one of his severed, blood-drenched fingers into his mouth, and proceeded to chew on it in delight. It was almost like he was actually eating cheese...

He died soon after.

In the midst of his chewing, he suddenly regained his sanity. Unable to comprehend what was happening to him, he went through an intense bout of pain and suffering; he immediately vomited, expelling his right thumb from his body. Then, only moments later, he died right there at his desk. It all happened so suddenly... It was as if a spell showing him a blissful illusion had abruptly been broken.

This mysterious incident came to be known as “Don’t Look” by the public. I’d assumed that those were the last words spoken by the victim on the livestream, but in actuality, the incident is called that due to its resemblance to a popular piece of ASCII art that goes by the same name. It also seeks to allude to a certain inappropriate cliché in media.

Just as the number of views and the spread of the video indicated, speculation and theories about the case ran rampant. It was clear from the video that there had been a third party at the scene of the crime, but their identity remains a mystery.

Apparently, prior to his final livestream, Ootani had made many accurate predictions about the future on his Niconiya channel—predictions that could only be explained by some form of precognition. The significant popularity of his livestreams further supports that theory.

This leads into what I find strangest about the incident: If Ootani really did have the power to see the future, why wasn’t he aware of the terrible fate he would eventually meet?

After some thought, I had an epiphany: perhaps he didn’t trust what his own future showed him. Or perhaps he didn’t have the courage to look into his future at all. I believe that could apply to anyone—if a person really could see into the future, it would take a lot of courage to gaze into their own.

Perhaps that’s why he looked into others’ futures. If he did that, he would only see information that was risk-free to him.

I don’t think that doing such a thing makes him a particularly cowardly person. No matter who you might be, you need an immense amount of courage to look into your own future.

I myself know that all too well.



Chapter 2 — Audio Bleeds a Stark Red

In the beginning, all I knew of this case was that someone had died a strange death, and that a video of it had been posted online. So, when Takuru first informed me of the details at the Newspaper Club, I found myself absolutely horrified.

Speaking of Takuru, a few days prior to that, I remember noticing that he had skipped school. At first, I was worried that he had been neglecting his health since he was living alone, and that he had gotten sick as a result—or that he had gotten caught up in some kind of incident. But when I came across a picture he had uploaded to the Newspaper Club’s file system, I immediately understood why he hadn’t been at school that day.

The picture in question was of the Don’t Look case’s crime scene, taken from the outside. Judging from the position of the sun in the picture and the time it was uploaded, it was clear to me that Takuru had skipped school in order to take it. Still, I was perplexed as to why he had done such a thing... After all, regardless of how he would act at times, he hadn’t shown much interest in the incident previously.

Later on, during one of the Newspaper Club meetings, Takuru mentioned that he had noticed a commonality between the Don’t Look case and another grotesque case from the past. “The month and day it occurred on,” he said, “is exactly the same as this case from six years ago. While Ootani’s death did appear to be a suicide, the circumstances surrounding it are just as bizarre and grotesque as the murder that took place six years ago.”

Takuru wasn’t merely pursuing the Don’t Look case—he was pursuing the series of grotesque serial killings that had begun with that old case.

By the time the second incident occurred on September 19th, not only had Takuru decided that it had to be related to the Don't Look case, he'd also come to the conclusion that it was related to the New Generation Madness of six years past. The fact that both of the recent murders had been carried out on the same respective days as the New Gen incidents only served to encourage that hypothesis of his.

Fiercely motivated by his piqued interest and his inquisitive mind, Takuru began to break loose from the chains of common sense that bound him—all because he desperately wanted to be special. To be anything but ordinary.

The second case of the Return of the New Generation Madness eventually came to be known as “Audio Bleed.” The victim was a twenty-year-old woman named Takayanagi Momone, a singer on Niconiya Video.

When he heard of her death, Takuru’s first instinct was, apparently, to refer to it as a “huge scoop.” The sheer rage and shame I felt when I heard him refer to a *person’s death* in such a deplorable, demeaning way... If Itou-kun hadn’t been in the clubroom at the time, I might have actually slapped him.

When she was still alive, Takayanagi would frequently upload videos under Niconiya’s “Sang It” category. Because of Sang It’s rising popularity, people like her who enjoy uploading videos of themselves singing—as opposed to holding live performances—are becoming all the more common in recent years.

And yet... just as with the first case, she’d died in a way that no singer—no *person*—should ever have to experience, let alone someone who was as beloved as she was...

■ Takayanagi Momone

July 28th

Today, I am going to sing in front of many, many people. But I won't be doing it in person—no, my concert will be completely online.

I've actually been uploading videos of myself singing to Niconiya for a good while now—Niconiya, by the way, is a website where you can share videos with other people online. It's been exploding in popularity recently, and now, there are tons of people out there that enjoy doing the same thing I do.

When you compare us amateurs to professional singers, the only real difference you'll find is in how we distribute things; amateurs like me don't have nearly as many resources as the pros. Yet, despite that wealth disparity, the gap between the professionals and the amateurs has been closing little by little over time, and nowadays, it's getting harder and harder to tell them apart. In this day and age, albums done by online singers are topping the charts, beating out even the pros. Heck, even those much older, more classical singers are transitioning into singing exclusively online—like, we're talking people from the '50s. Considering that, I doubt there's anyone out there who can clearly define the boundary between the two fields anymore.

As for me... I guess you could say that I'm riding this new online-singing bandwagon as hard as anyone else.

Every once in a while, Niconiya sponsors this event called the “Online Singer Roundup.” They call up some of the most popular singers online, throw them together in a venue they rent out, and put on a huge concert featuring everyone that showed up.

Whenever Niconiya announces these events, there are always people that come crawling out of the woodwork, sneering about how “am-

ateurs” rented out an entire venue. Of course, those same people shut up pretty fast when the tickets sell out within ten minutes.

And among the people invited to the Roundup this time around... are me and my band.



The atmosphere in the waiting room is electric, and my band-mates couldn’t be any more excited if they tried. Everyone is losing their minds—none of them could’ve ever imagined that we’d get the chance to perform like this. But me? I’m sitting paralyzed in a corner, practically in the fetal position.

My heart’s beating so fast, it might just leap out of my throat if I’m not careful... Actually, it’s pounding so hard that I’m more worried about it full-on exploding out of my chest.

I just don’t have the confidence for this. I can’t “revel in the excitement in the air”—I can’t even so much as *look forward* to our performance. I’m just some average nobody—a worthless piece of trash that goes along with the latest trends like everyone else. I’m nothing but a blank slate. No one’s going to remember me after this.

When the Shibuya Earthquake hit, every friend—every *street* I knew was swallowed up in the chaos. And yet, somehow, even after all that, I managed to keep living my life. It was the only thing I hadn’t lost.

During the years of reconstruction following the earthquake, I lived an aimless, average ordinary life. I had no dreams, no goals—nothing. The only thing I knew how to do was keep on living.

One day, while I was still in that slump, a friend approached me, asking if I’d start a band with them. I guess they’d heard about how I’d wanted to be a singer at one point. It was an old dream of mine—I’d

even taken some singing lessons and practiced writing lyrics in pursuit of it. But... when the earthquake hit, I threw that all away.

So at first, I refused. "I don't have what it takes to be a famous singer," I said. "There's nothing special about me or my voice. I'd just drag the group down."

"Oh, c'mon, you'll be fine," my friend replied. "Look, I know you know what Niconiya is, but do you know about online singers on Niconiya?"

Back then, I actually did already know about how online singers had been getting pretty big, and how they differed from traditional singers. How anyone could be a singer as long as they had the equipment for it. Of course, actually getting popular that way would take a ton of effort, but compared to auditioning over and over just to get a debut album out, releasing songs online would be far less painful.

As my friend spoke to me, my long-forgotten dream fought its way back to the surface of my mind. I finally stopped doubting myself and started chasing my calling as an online singer... Or at least, that's what I would say if it were true. It sounds pretty cool when I put it like that, but in reality, I just didn't have the confidence to say no. The second my friend put the slightest amount of pressure on me, I crumbled.

It was then that I realized that, no matter what I did—even if I went to hell and back—I would never be able to get rid of that part of myself. Even now, I doubt I'll ever be able to.

The day arrived when I was to sing in front of a camera for the first time. For the occasion, one of my bandmates handed me this flashy, really revealing outfit with a ton of chains attached to it—they jangled with even the slightest movement.

"You want me to wear *this*? In front of people? There's no way..."

I figured that, if only for a moment, I could actually stand up for myself... but, like always, my bandmates pushed right past my weak resolve.

What I was supposed to sing was the theme song to some anime, and my outfit was based on what one of the show's characters wore. I was worried that there'd be trouble if we covered the song and posted it everywhere without permission from the creators, but everyone else was doing it too, so I figured it would all just work out somehow.

There was a more pressing issue on my mind, anyway: my average, garbage voice—my talentless, middle-of-the-road vocals—were going to be on full display. Everyone, all over the world, was going to hear it.

Well, fine, I ended up thinking to myself. I've already gone this far, so I might as well go all out. I'll put these gaudy clothes on and look like an idiot, just like my bandmates. I'll smear my ugly, disgusting face with makeup, and if I can't "bloom like a flower," then I'll just slap some fake flowers on myself. Might as well just cover my whole body with them.

That was my mindset at the time.

Later on, I learned that there are people out there who are crazy enough to not actually care about the quality of your singing or the songs you sing—they just want to see a bunch of idiots having a great time together. That, and I learned just how prevalent online singers were really becoming.

We all felt good about what we'd initially accomplished as a band, and we continued to post song after song online—with every new song posted, our view counts gradually increased. That was how we eventually ended up getting invited to this event—a gathering of a bunch of popular, famous online singers.

Right now, we're waiting for our turn to go up and perform. Well, all *I'm* doing is sitting in a corner of the room, but even that's enough to make me feel nauseous. My anxiety's eating away at me more and more as the seconds tick by. If we don't get this over with soon, I might just keel over and die from all this stress.

Compared to the videos we upload—which are pretty much garage band material—this is in a completely different league. We're at an *actual live venue*, and tons of people have shown up, hoping to see an *actual live performance*. What's a girl like me, who's not the least bit attractive, and not even *remotely* special, supposed to do here?

I so desperately want to run away... but it's too late now. The announcer just called our band's name.

I frantically try to psych myself up... and then... I step out onto the stage.

Our band isn't very well known yet, so the majority of the crowd is staring at us with cold, judging eyes—it's almost like they're asking who the heck we're supposed to be. And really, bands dedicated to covering anime songs and whatnot are pretty common on Sang It, so there definitely are bands who do the same thing as us, but way better...

Honestly? I don't even want to "leave my mark on society" here or anything like that. I just want to get out of this place alive. Out of all the vocalists here, I probably have the weakest resolve. I barely have the strength, or the will, to achieve anything. But... even so, I don't have a choice but to *try*.

We're performing two songs in total.

I'm gonna do my best to survive this.

Our performance begins with a ballad that's also the ending song to an anime. I try to watch the anime corresponding to the songs I sing at least once, but I wasn't a fan of this one; the characters felt like they

were loud and annoying just for the sake of it, and there was never any payoff. I just... didn't get it. But still, I've already come this far, so I've just gotta do it. No matter the anime it comes from, a song's still a song, and I just have to be sure to sing it to its end.

As I sing the peaceful melody, I begin to notice that something's... off. I only just now realized it, but for some reason, the venue's gone completely silent. Everyone in the audience is just... standing there. Completely still. Listening intently.

They definitely *are* listening, but... for some reason, their eyes are wide open. Everyone I look at seems to be filled with this... crazed passion... this abnormally high enthusiasm. It's not the kind of reaction you'd expect from some normal, everyday ballad.

Bewildered, I look over to my bandmates... only to see that they're acting almost exactly like the audience.

...Well, I've got a song to sing, so I can't let myself get distracted, I decide. I ignore whatever's happening and put all of my focus back into singing.

When the first song ends, we transition right into the fast-paced intro to the second song. The very moment I begin to sing, the entire venue erupts—and I really mean that. It *erupts*. I can't think of any other word to describe it; it's like all the emotions the audience has been holding in during the ballad are being released at once.

As I continue to sing, everything goes exactly as I want it to. The entire venue dances to my tune. When I tell them to jump up in the air, they all do it in perfect sync. The audience is so riled up right now, I'm wondering if the venue is going to collapse from the chaos.

Finally, the song reaches its conclusion, and without even planning on it, I just start to shout out to the crowd.

“Thank you so much! You've been an amazing audience!”

The crowd cheers loud enough to drown out all sound, even from my microphone. Our band exits the stage, with calls for an encore and endless clapping sending us off. As we pass by the band that's up next, I can't help but notice their pale, daunted faces.

"WE DID IT!"

"Great job, guys!"

My fellow bandmates exchange high fives; it sounds as if they weren't even worried for a second about how the performance was going to go. Meanwhile, I soak in the awesome feeling of being, well, soaked in sweat. And everything else, of course.

This is amazing! I feel like I'm on top of the world!

I crash down onto one of the chairs that was set up for us backstage. I'm still in awe of how it felt to be onstage—it was just plain *incredible*. I would love to tell my terrified past self all about how I feel now.

As I bask in this amazing feeling, my gaze pointed at the floor, someone's feet enter my field of view. Whoever it is, though, they don't do anything else. They just... stand there, looking down at me. Curious about who it might be, I look up.

It's a tall, slender woman. And her looks... Her looks embody both a mysterious allure, and a captivating beauty. She's wearing a revealing punk outfit that exposes both her belly button and her shoulders, and... she has this bewitching charm to her that would leave everyone staring. Compared to this woman's appearance, my makeup might as well be some finger painting I smeared onto my face in five minutes, and my outfit no more than mere cosplay.

The woman standing before me is so extremely radiant, I feel as though I can't even lay eyes on her. Her sharp, dazzling eyes... when I see her staring at me with them, any sense of bliss I have from the per-

formance is destroyed in one fell swoop. In its place, those feelings of mediocrity—the ones I had forgotten all about for only a moment—come oozing right back out.

The woman's alluring lips begin to move, dancing to the tune of words I don't understand.

"The voice of a siren," she begins. "A voice that causes the collapse of equilibrium. A voice that cannot be contained by the harmony of song. Acknowledge its existence, quickly. If you do not, not a single soul will be saved."

What on earth is she saying? I ask myself, bewildered. Paying no mind to my confusion, the mysterious beauty exits my sight and heads toward the stage. As she leaves, her gallant form serves as a powerful reminder: all of us backstage are amateurs.

"What's up with you?" asks one of my bandmates, handing me a cold bottle of water. "You've been staring into space for ages. What did you two talk about?"

"That woman... She's..."

"Yeah, she's no online singer—she's a real pro. Sounds like she showed up here for some kinda guest performance. Her songs and looks are on a whole 'nother level, of course, but when you actually talk to her, you get these real *weird* vibes. Oh, yeah, speaking of her, she was actually the vocalist for that RaiNet Kakeru ending song we covered, if I remember right."

My bandmate's words practically go in one ear and out the other—I'm too focused on what that woman said to me.

"The voice of a siren."

Those words echo in my mind over and over, like an endless refrain. For some reason, though I really should be completely ecstatic

about our performance... those words leave a sliver of anxiety in my heart.

But, ultimately, I decide to shrug off the conversation I had with her—if it can even be called that. Instead, I figure that it was just the strange ramblings of a crazy person; I hear that she's pretty famous for her unusual speaking style, anyway. Besides, above all else, I'm too busy feeling absolutely thrilled about how my life's just changed forever.



That concert ended up being a huge turning point for us; right now, we're one of the most viewed bands in the Sang It category. We let the momentum from that success lead us into doing our own concert afterward, and it was an enormous success. Nowadays, whenever we do street performances, we attract crowds of people so big, it's a fire hazard.

But... it was during one of our concerts that I noticed something was wrong. That day, I'd caught a mild cold just before the concert, and my throat wasn't in good shape. I tried to have the concert postponed to a later date, but it was obviously too late to reschedule anymore. In the end, we had no choice but to cut several songs from the performance, and my microphone's volume was raised in order to reduce the strain on my voice.

As you'd probably expect, the performance was awful. The mic adjustment resulted in a lot of horrible audio feedback, the jarring changes from one random song to another led to a ton of mistakes, and we were even forced to end a few songs partway through. Worst of all, my voice was obviously a complete mess—I could barely talk, let alone sing.

And yet... the reactions were the same as ever. The crowd was still intensely emotional and excited throughout the entire performance.

From the perspective of a performer looking to sell tickets and whatnot, I obviously should view that as a good thing—something to be celebrated. But, as an online singer and an artist? I just don't know how to feel. The audience cheered us on the same way they always do during our absolute worst performance. Doesn't that mean that they'd be satisfied with anything we do? We could blast a total mess of random noise at our audiences, and they'd enjoy it anyway; the actual quality of our songs would mean nothing.

But if that's really the case, then why does it only happen at *my* concerts? There are plenty of artists out there that are prettier than me, can sing better than me, can dance better than me... I'm just an average girl with no real talent.

A small tendril of doubt sprouts within me.

"The voice of a siren."

After all this time, I finally understand what that woman backstage was trying to tell me.

In Greek mythology, sirens are songstresses that are half-women, half-bird. It's said that even the holiest of saints and the mightiest of heroes lost their senses and got lost at sea when they heard a siren's voice resounding across the waters. They were based on mermaids that used their songs to lure humans away from their ships. Nowadays, even the logo of a certain famous coffee shop is modeled after them.

My bandmates and my fans aren't being drawn in by my songs, but by a siren's voice. *My* voice. I've been manipulating them.

...When did this start happening? I know I wasn't born with this ability—I don't remember controlling people with my singing when I was a kid or something. Could I have hit my head so hard during the earthquake that some new power awakened within me?

Whatever the case may be, one thing's for certain... there never was any actual value to my voice.

I now finally understand why I get so many comments on my videos that say, “I expected better than this,” or, “This was way better live.” I’m guessing that recording my performances probably weakens the effects of my strange power.

Now that I’ve realized the truth, the enjoyment I’ve felt at concerts... and that feeling like my life has finally begun... all of it starts to fade away. And in its place... comes a deep, all-encompassing fear. Fear that makes singing, being onstage—*everything*... so much more terrifying.

I know that I’m nothing but a fake, but I can’t just throw away everything I have...

Tortured by the endless thoughts screaming at each other in my head, I find myself unable to escape the unending cycle I myself have created.



September 19th

Days, weeks, and even months passed by... and all the while, I still found myself filled to the brim with anxiety and inner turmoil over my dilemma. But... something changed that.

My latest concert had ended a little while ago, and, shortly after, I received an email. That one email... was the glimmer of hope I’ve needed so much. That one email... it... it saved me.

“Good song,” it read. “Keep it up!”

It’d been sent in response to an original song I’d posted on a public site under a pseudonym—a song that I’d created just for my own

sake. Writing and singing that song had given me an outlet—a way to let out all the emotions I'd bottled up from everything else in my life.

The person who'd emailed me their feedback hadn't been enchanted by my voice; they'd heard the song *beyond* my voice, and they'd seen me for the singer-songwriter I really am. That fact alone fills me with enough joy to bring me to tears.

My fingers trembling, I begin to type out a reply thanking them. The effect their email has on me is immense: in a single instant, the cloud of uncertainty that was looming over me has completely cleared. I can finally dump those anime girl costumes I hate so much, yet could never bring myself to throw away. Honestly, when it comes down to it, I probably won't even hesitate to cut ties with my fellow band members, either—it's just a matter of ripping off the Band-Aid.

My confidence is higher than it has been in a long time, and new ideas are starting to flare up inside me because of it. *If my singing is magical if you hear it in person, and I want to avoid that... then why don't I just record myself in advance and play it over a speaker?*

I think that this is probably the first time I've ever been able to face my dream head-on—my dream of becoming a singer. An unknown power wasn't the only thing buried deep within me; there was also a dream I'd thought long dead.

I shakily say my goodbyes to the concert venue, trying my hardest to calm down. Before I got that email, I was completely lost. But now? As I leave the backstage area, my heart's beating so fast, I feel like it's going to burst out of my chest. Actually, it's pounding so hard, I've even got a headache now—and I feel dizzy, too! It's almost unbelievable, really, but the sheer liberation I feel right now is so great, I feel like I'm about to pass out!

This is the moment I've been waiting for my whole life—I'm sure of it. This is *exactly* what I was always meant to do.

You know what? I'm in such a good mood right now, going home is the last thing I wanna do. I'm gonna go do a live street performance instead!

I head outside and quickly start getting ready. “Thanks for watching. Take it easy,” I say, speaking into a tape recorder I have on hand. I have to record a greeting like this to get the performance started, or people might suspect that something’s wrong. Once I’m there, though, I’ll play the guitar directly.

After a few minutes, I’ve finished recording the song, meaning my preparations are complete. I fiddle a bit with a small Bluetooth speaker.

Now, for the finishing touch...

I pick up the box cutter I bought from a convenience store earlier.

“The trick to singing a good song is to sing from your stomach.”

That’s pretty much a fundamental rule when it comes to being a singer, but I actually didn’t know about it until someone else told me. It’s honestly pretty embarrassing.

I *could* just hide the speaker under my clothes, but that’s not thinking big enough—if I did that, I’d be treating this whole thing like a *basic* singer would.

So, how would a professional do this?

With that question driving me, I press the thin blade of the box cutter to my stomach. Then, I push.

You might not believe this, but cutting through flesh is really hard. I imagine it’d be much, much harder if you tried to do it without any help, too.

I twist my body so that I can aim for a thinner area of flesh. Instead of trying to use raw strength to push the blade in, I move it back

and forward against my skin, tearing through it in the same way you'd saw through wood. My friend's helpful, detailed advice is really coming in handy right now.

I continue cutting into my stomach, all while carefully pushing my organs back into my body when they start to slip out. Eventually, there's enough space to stick the speaker inside; now that it's ready for it, I go ahead and shove the speaker into its new home with a single push. I can feel my organs squelching around it, devouring it like quicksand; I revel in the sensation for a few moments, basking in it.

All right—now I'm all ready to go.

But, when I start to get up, I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Take it easy there," my trustworthy friend says, a roll of packing tape in hand. They lift my clothes up and begin to cover the incision in my stomach with the tape.

Oh, I see...! Without the tape, the speaker would come tumbling out—I have to keep it sealed shut! That's really smart. Why didn't I think of that?

"And besides, this'll make things more interesting," my friend says.

I get it. It's gotta be interesting. So this is what having real hair is like, huh? I never even considered worrying about stuff like this... No wonder I've always been an average nobody.

A glimmering smile flashes across my face when I realize this.

Once they finish up, my friend sends me off with a knowing expression on their face. With their blessing, I walk forward, then sit down at the curb where I plan to hold my performance.

It's time to work some magic. Let the debut of "Takayanagi Momone: Reborn"... begin!

The blood on my hand makes it a little difficult, but after fumbling with the speaker a bit, I press “Play.”

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

As I was researching Takayanagi Momone online, I came across some interesting information about her. Apparently, while she was still alive, she had been performing as a singer-songwriter under a pseudonym for some time; there had been rumors to that effect floating around during that time, but they'd never been confirmed.

To me, the information seemed suspect at best, but I still figured it could potentially be a useful clue—so I ended up taking a look at the website mentioned in the rumor. It hadn't seen a single update since the day of her death.

On that website, I listened to what may or may not have been one of her songs. No part of it seemed to lean into modern trends, and there wasn't any engineered flashiness to it to draw people in... But, nonetheless, it was a good song—one that certainly left a deep impression on me.



Chapter 3 — The Revolving Dead Revolves Ad Infinitum

September 29th

- September 7th — Group Dive, Don't Look
- September 19th — Manchild, Audio Bleed

Once Takuru noticed that there was a connection between the days when the past and present cases occurred, he went on to tack pictures and information about them on the clubroom map.

It was this very connection that breathed life back into the Newspaper Club.

After that grand revelation of his, a few days passed. Today, September 29th, Takuru addressed Itou-kun and I—Serika wasn't there at the time—with the clubroom map as his backdrop. Once again, he asserted his claim that, because the two recent incidents had occurred on the same dates as the ones in the past, they had to be connected to the New Generation Madness of six years ago.

Six years prior to today, the Cruc-affixion case had occurred—thus, if another incident were to occur today, it wouldn't be possible to deny the two serial murder cases' supposed connection anymore.

"If something weird happens in Shibuya again, we'll know for sure," Takuru explained. "If a coincidence happens three times, it's not a coincidence anymore."

But I didn't want the cases to be connected. I hoped—no, *prayed* that nothing would happen today. Even just thinking about the incidents of six years ago was enough to overwhelm me as it was.

And yet, in spite of that, Takuru's phone soon began to ring—a phone call from Serika. The sound of her hurried voice as she panted for breath... told me that my prayers were going to go unanswered.

"There's been a murder! Or maybe an accident?" Serika stammered excitedly, her voice plainly audible from Takuru's phone. "Well, either way, I think what you said might've happened!"

What on earth is going on? I wanted to ask, but before I could, Takuru had already flown from the room in a hurry.

"W-Wait up!" Itou-kun shouted after him.

"Takuru?! Wait!" I shouted out in turn.

Itou-kun was the next to leave the room, and I hurriedly followed. Takuru had never run that fast in his life, and I had no doubt that the same could have been said about myself. I had to sprint as if my life depended on it—if I hadn't, I would have lost him long before we reached the love hotel district in Dogenzaka. I'm the furthest thing from an athletic person, so I suppose some instinct of mine must have been urging me forward.

Eventually, Itou-kun and I caught up to Takuru, only to find him standing outside a seedy love hotel by himself, taking pictures. I was too out of breath to say anything, leaving Itou-kun to ask for an explanation.

"So?" he said to Takuru. "Did something happen?"

"I'm not sure, but if something big hasn't happened already, there's no doubt it will soon. The police inside are calling for reinforcements," Takuru explained.

"What? You sure it's not just some couple that had a fight?"

"Would you call reinforcements just for that? And today's the 29th, you know."

In vast contrast to how I felt, I believed that, deep down, Takuru *wanted* the incidents to be connected—that he *wanted* the madness to be reborn.

“I told you, you’re overthinking this,” I ventured.

Besides, we can’t just prowl about in a place like this. It may be daytime, but this is the seedy love hotel district—not to mention that we’re all here in our school uniforms.

“Hm?” Takuru mumbled, clearly not paying me any mind. His unchanged posture told me he had no intention of leaving. Instead, he continued to stare at one specific spot: on the third floor of the building before us, there was a large, open window. Through it, the room’s interior could be seen... and I could faintly hear a calm melody leaking from it as well. It was the sound of a music box; its tune was so gentle, I almost felt as though it was inviting us inside.

The situation was nothing if not suspicious. And yet, to my dismay, Takuru did not falter. Far from it, in fact.

“If we can get inside without them finding us...”

“Wha—” I choked out, too shocked to properly respond. I just couldn’t believe my ears; what Takuru was suggesting was completely and utterly absurd.

“There should be a rear entrance somewhere, so let’s do it before the police reinforcements get here. Itou, go around from that side,” said Takuru, dishing out instructions.

“O-Okay?” replied Itou-kun, bewildered.

“I’ll take this side.”

“Takuru, stop,” I interrupted. “Look at me.” I grabbed his arm, stopping him before he could leave.

In desperation, I began to list off why what he was planning to do was a terrible idea. “This is way beyond what a high school club should

be involved in,” I reasoned. “It’s too dangerous. What if you get expelled?” And then, I put my foot down. “As your big sister, I can’t let you put yourself in danger.”

“*Sister?* We’re not actually family, are we?” Takuru immediately retorted.

Before I knew what I was doing, I’d grabbed Takuru by the collar. My grip was tight, and my face hot with anger. He had blown off all my arguments like they were nothing. I didn’t know what to say—I didn’t even know what I *could* say.

Takuru looked at me, seeming somewhat apologetic. Yet, even so, he didn’t say another word.

If I’d made my true feelings clear to him at that point, Takuru probably would have listened, but... I knew that if I did, our strained relationship wouldn’t have just gotten weaker—it would have fallen to pieces altogether.

My outburst, impulsive as it had been, had likely been a result of me needing an outlet for my anger. Ever since I’d heard about the potential connection between the recent grotesque murders and the New Generation Madness of the past, alarm bells had been going off in my head. And yet, that irrational fear—that *agitation* I felt about Takuru... was all it took to prevent me from doing anything that would hurt our relationship any further.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence among us: “Stop it!”

By the time I realized who the voice belonged to, I found myself torn away from Takuru and flying through the air. It was Serika, who had not been with us until that point. She’d tackled me, and thanks to the momentum, I found myself tumbling to the ground with her. “No fighting, Non-chan!” she scolded. “That goes for you too, Taku! The Newspaper Club’s motto is that the five of us are friends, right?”

“No fighting.”

True enough—I suppose that any bystander who'd spotted us in that moment would've thought we were fighting...

I returned to my feet, thanking Serika internally for saving me from myself. If she hadn't, who knows what I would've said next.

“This is no time for fighting, Taku!” Serika shouted. “The back door is open!”

But with those words, my gratitude swiftly evaporated, and was immediately replaced by a frustrated bitterness. While she'd been away from us, Serika had found a route to sneak into the love hotel.

After thinking for a moment, Takuru spoke. “Let's go together,” he said to Serika. “If we pretend to be a couple, we might be able to fool them if it comes to that.”

“Okay!”

And so, Serika and Takuru began to infiltrate the love hotel without a hint of hesitation. As I watched them go, I could physically feel my legs shaking beneath me—Takuru had blatantly ignored all of my warnings, leaving me feeling absolutely powerless.

“You okay, VP?” asked Itou-kun, concerned.

“Oh... Yes, I'm perfectly fine. Thank you,” I responded, grateful for his consideration.

“Sooo... what's the plan?”

“We wait. We can't just abandon those two and head home right now.” Since there were police officers in the hotel, I figured Takuru and Serika wouldn't be able to sneak inside without getting caught. And, when they inevitably did get caught, they'd be dragged out by the scruffs of their necks. When that happened, there would need to be someone present to explain the situation.

That someone would be me. It didn't matter what had happened—it didn't matter what he'd said to me—I would never abandon my brother.

That will always remain true. No matter what, I will always be there for him. Much like how Serika always encourages him by pushing him onward, I will continue to support him too, in my own way.

■ Arimura Hinae

August 19th

I met Kakita-san back in early August, the hottest time of the year—in terms of the case, it would've been around a month before the murders kicked off.

Thanks to my run-ins with him, I came to understand—well, partially understand—the truth behind the mystery surrounding me.

“Even if she fell in love with someone else, I’d still be happy.”

Lies.

“I tried my hardest, but I still lost. No big deal, though—I think the other team deserved to win.”

Lies.

“I wanna be friends with you forever!”

Lies.

This world is infested with lies. People spout lie after lie endlessly, to the point where it feels like a competition.

Lies sicken me. But it’s not like pointing them out ever does anything. Even if I did start calling lies out for what they are, I’d just end up getting kicked out of my friend group for daring to be honest. It’d pretty much be social suicide.

In other words, even if I know that someone just lied, I can’t do anything about it. All I can really do is plaster a disgusting, fake smile on my face and go along with whatever they say.

To be clear, when I say that I can tell when people are lying, it’s not because of intuition or anything like that. After the earthquake hit, I got the power to see through people’s lies. Problem is, that also means I can no longer fool myself into believing that a lie is true.

After I got my powers, I painstakingly ripped away the façade that was my family—an image my mom had so desperately been trying to maintain. My mom had been lying to my dad by cheating on him. She'd been lying about loving us. She'd been lying about everything she'd ever done.

Everything was a lie. My perfect family? It was nothing but a lie—it had been *built* on lies. The raw truth of that fact resonated within my mind, screaming at me louder than my mother ever had.

Nowadays, I live with my aunt and uncle. As for my school, I go to Hekiho Academy, a place that was built for earthquake victims—it even offers us free tuition.

Whenever I'm not at home, I have to deal with my fake friends that lie every two seconds. Whenever I *am* home, I have to deal with the constant embarrassment that comes with being a useless freeloader. There's no place where I can feel at home, and no person that I can talk to about my freaky powers. The only way I can distract myself from my depression... is to think about—no, *cling to* my past.



Just a minute's walk away from Shibuya Station, there's a place that, despite where it is, still manages to be the most serene place I know. A place that stands out amid the constant chaos of Shibuya.

The Shibuya Earthquake Memorial.

Built to honor the victims of the Shibuya Earthquake, it's a small location marked by a large, white spire in the center. And among the names etched onto it... is my brother's.

As I was visiting the memorial one day, I spotted a familiar face. Passing them by, I gave them a quick nod.

Dirty blond hair, huh? Don't I know a dirty blond? After pondering for a second, I remembered who I was thinking of. *Oh, right, I*

think the Empress was one... Yeah, that's it.

I should mention: I wasn't being rude—the Memorial just isn't really the best place to strike up a conversation with someone, so a light nod was more than fine there. Besides, the two of us might've known each other, but we definitely weren't close. And even if we were, there was someone much, much more important to me that I needed to talk to.

After a bit of searching, I found the name I was looking for among the sea of names scrawled on the monument. But... even though it was right there, right in front of me, there was still a part of me that didn't want to acknowledge it.

Arimura Shingo.

My older brother. The only true family I'd had... that I'd lost. On that horrible day, he'd just been lying there, buried beneath a pile of rubble... abandoned by our fake family.

As I stood there in front of the monument, I closed my eyes and thought about all the times he'd smiled at me. And then... I wished for him to save me.

Save me from this pain... from seeing through everybody's lies...

Save me from this terrifying power I'm stuck with but don't even understand....!

In my head, I vented all the thoughts I could never put into words to my brother. But he didn't say anything back.

As I stood there in silence, suddenly, I heard something fall to the ground behind me with a light *thud*. I instinctively turned around and saw a man dressed in a suit behind me. What he'd dropped was a bouquet of flowers—probably an offering, if I had to guess. The man was staring at me, his face clearly bewildered.

“You're kidding... Is that you, Hinae-chan?”

“Huh?”

I’d never seen the guy before, but he knew my name.

“Er... it’s me! You know me! Or, uh... Well, I... guess you... might not...” he said, his voice starting to falter. After a second, though, he started up again. “Okay, you know your brother, Shingo? I was a friend of his. I think you and I have run into each other at least a couple times.”

I took a closer look at him—his face *did* look vaguely familiar. My brother had died six years ago, so any kids who were born around that time would have been entering elementary school. As for the guy standing there, his looks and general stature had changed quite a bit—probably because of a growth spurt—but some of his characteristics still faintly matched what I remembered.

“Nakata-san?” I said, trying my best to remember his name.

“Nope,” he replied.

“Okay, uh... Is it... Momota-san?”

“Still no. Okay, let’s try this: If you’re real overconfident, people might call you...”

“Uhh... cocky? Oh! Kakita-san, right?”

“*There* you go.”

Now, in my defense, my brother was nice to everyone, so he had tons of friends. But, whatever.

Placing the flowers he’d brought on top of the altar, Kakita-san clapped his hands together in prayer. He took a moment, then after he was done, he started talking to me again. “You’ve got a good memory there, Hinae-chan.”

“Do I, now?” I retorted.

Pfft, a good memory... You recognized me the second you saw me. You’re just being sarcastic, aren’t you? I grumbled inside my head.

Well, whatever. It doesn't surprise me.

"No, really," he said. "Shingo *did* have a couple buddies named Nakata and Momota. Not only did you remember them, but even though the two of us've only met a few times, you remembered my name, too. So, no, I'm not being sarcastic at all."

Well, he doesn't seem to be lying... I considered. Then, the realization hit me. *W-Wait a second!*

"...Come again?" I said, bewildered. Maybe I'd said some of my thoughts out loud or something.

"Do you have it, Hinae-chan?" asked Kakita-san. "Or are you not sure?"

"...I-I'm sorry, what?" I asked, even more confused now. *What is this guy on about?*

"...Hm, guess I was a bit too quick on the draw there." Kakita-san paused for a second before continuing. "Hinae-chan, have you got some free time after this?"

"*What?!*" I yelled. "Is this all just some weird attempt to hit on me or something?!"

"Uh... Oh jeez, I'm sorry—okay, let's just start over here. I only asked if you were free because I want to talk to you about something serious," he tried to explain. "I, uh, I want to talk about your problems. ...Well, I guess it'd be one problem specifically. Y'know, the thing where you're able to tell if people are lying?"

A chill ran down my spine, and I began to tremble. I quickly wrapped my arms around myself.

"You see, I'm actually dealing with a similar problem... So... I'd like to help you out in some way. In Shingo's place."

...Nothing he'd just said was a lie.

◇◇◇

After I'd finished canceling my plans to hang out with my friends over the phone, Kakita-san and I stopped at the Starbucks Coffee near the station.

I guess I should mention what my friend said in response to me canceling last minute.

"That's fine, I don't mind."

That'd been a lie.

I'd probably need to think of a way to patch things up with her later, or else it would just cause problems in the future. Still, I didn't have time to deal with it right then, so I decided to just forget about it for a while and take a seat.

Instead of starting off our conversation talking about our freaky powers, Kakita-san shared a few stories about my brother—something the two of us could connect over.

"...Now, before I say this, let me clarify that I wasn't one of them—but you should know that among Shingo's friend group, there were a few that just couldn't stand you."

"Really?"

"Oh, sorry, that kinda came out wrong—see, it wasn't really because of anything you did, it was just because Shingo was practically glued to you," he hurriedly explained. "What it comes down to is, some of his friends were jealous of you. But whenever those guys saw you and Shingo getting along so well, they'd usually just drop it. Like, 'Eh, forget it. As long as he's happy,' y'know?"

Though Kakita-san had a smile on his face as he talked to me, there was a hint of loneliness hidden behind it. That only made sense, of course—we were talking about someone who had died a long time ago.

It was hard for me to put my finger on it, but for some reason, the fact that my brother had had a friend like Kakita-san made me feel really happy. Maybe it was because... he hadn't told a single lie during any of his stories. And while talking to him definitely felt like I was talking to someone I'd just met, I honestly felt much more comfortable with him than with any of my classmates. With them, I'd always have to pretend that everything was okay—that I wasn't seeing through their bullshit. But not Kakita-san.

I felt like I could get along with people like him a whole lot better than anyone else. That was to say, people who wouldn't lie and just said whatever was on their mind without a filter.

In that moment, I found myself wishing there were someone like him at school, too.

Suddenly, a dull vibrating sound started to ring throughout the café. Kakita-san shot me an apologetic look, then quickly grabbed his phone from his pocket. "Yes? Oh, yeah, of course. Got it. I'll be there soon."

This time, I sensed a number of lies in his words.

After he'd given a few more responses to whoever was calling him, Kakita-san put his phone down.

"Something about work?" I asked him.

"Yeah, pretty much. I'm working part-time right now," he responded. "I might as well confess: I actually do mean *right now*. I'm technically on the clock—just not in the office."

"Won't you get in trouble for wasting your time with me, then?"

"Well, I *am* giving them the results they want, more or less. This might surprise you, but I'm actually one of the top performers at the company," he explained. "But anyway, how about we get into the main reason I wanted to talk?"

We'd finally arrived at the real reason I'd decided to stick with him for so long. Kakita-san's face took on a dark expression, like he was getting ready to talk about something extremely important. I couldn't tell if he was anxious, or just simply tired.

He closed his eyes and began to scratch his head vigorously. Then, he shifted a bit in his seat, opened his eyes, and looked directly at me. I could sense nothing but pure resolve from him. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of crazy topic needed *that* much prep.

"Okay, I'm going to need you to stay calm and listen carefully," he said. Then, he took a deep breath. "...All right. True or false: You could suddenly distinguish truths from lies, letting you see through people completely, immediately after the earthquake."

"...True."

What he'd said was true: it *had* started right after the earthquake had hit. I'd thought his question was a total shot in the dark, but it was entirely accurate. It felt like he was seeing right through me... and that was kinda scary.

"Sorry, I'm sure I'm freaking you out here. To be honest with you, I... also had a strange power awaken in me after the earthquake hit. When I met you back by the memorial, I already knew that we were both dealing with the same thing."

I didn't know how to respond.

"Just like how you're able to see through lies, I can read minds," Kakita-san continued. "And I want to know more about this power I have."

He can read minds...? I thought to myself. Unsurprisingly, nothing he'd said to me was a lie. *So, in that case, is that the real, actual truth? Or does Kakita-san only believe that it is?*

As Kakita-san continued to explain what was going on with him, he looked as though a huge weight was being lifted off his shoulders.

According to his story, immediately after the earthquake had hit, he'd suddenly found himself able to read minds—the minds of both good people and bad people alike.

At first, he'd been thrilled that he'd awokened to such an incredible power. But it wasn't long before this lie-infested world started to terrify him, just like me. After he'd realized that the world wasn't what it seemed, he'd lost his ability to trust people. Still, he'd managed to keep himself together despite that, and eventually, he decided that he wanted to learn more about the power he'd suddenly found himself with.

"So I ended up wondering, 'Where do I start?'" Kakita-san explained.

He'd been stuck on that question for a good while, apparently—but eventually, he'd decided on a whim to read the mind of a random employee he'd come across. The employee had been taking a survey of the local residents, and when Kakita-san looked into his head, he discovered that they actually held a clue related to his powers.

The employee in question worked for a startup company that was helping out with Shibuya's restoration—a company named "Safe-Works." They had approached Kakita-san with a survey, but unfortunately for them, they'd gotten nothing more than a quick, inoffensive answer out of him—he was so taken aback by his sheer luck, that was all he'd been able to manage, really. Regardless, that was the first crucial clue to the mystery he'd found himself wrapped up in.

After that, Kakita-san started working a part-time job at Safe-Works just so he could get in contact with that employee again. "To this day," he explained to me, "I haven't been able to find him. But as

I've wandered around Shibuya for the job, I've found that a lot of people here hold a lot of relevant clues. In essence, the key to this mystery isn't just at SafeWorks—it can be found within this very city itself."

As he continued his investigation, Kakita-san kept on climbing the ranks at SafeWorks. Even though he was just a part-timer, he still managed to become one of the company's top employees—all thanks to his power to read minds. According to him, using it was like playing Old Maid while knowing exactly what your opponent's hand was.

As Kakita-san continued to tell his story, a few parts of it struck a chord with me.

"So, getting back to the present now: When I saw you at the monument, I thought to myself, 'Oh, I know this girl from somewhere,' and after that, I miiight've accidentally peeked into your mind..." Kakita-san admitted sheepishly. "That's when I found out that you and Shingo were related, and that you were there to beg him to save you."

"So that's why you dropped your bouquet? Out of surprise?" I asked.

"Pretty much. I just couldn't believe that Shingo's younger sister was standing *right there*, y'know? And honestly, the reason I said I wanted to talk about our powers wasn't because I actually wanted to—I just figured you wouldn't have bothered talking to me otherwise. After all, the one you actually wanted to talk to was your brother. Not me."

Kakita-san paused for a moment. "...If you think that was pretty underhanded, you can feel free to call me out on it. You can really let me have it, if you want," he said, scratching his head.

Right then, an idea popped into my head. "Oh, I know what you can do," I said to him. "Sorry to ask, but could you prove it?"

"Prove it? What, my powers?"

“Yes. If you want to prove to me that your powers aren’t something you dreamed up, then I need some concrete evidence.”

Also, it’d help assure me that this is what I actually want to do.

I apologized to Kakita-san inside my head—I hadn’t meant to be so blunt on purpose. And I hadn’t meant for my voice to sound so cold, either.

Nevertheless, Kakita-san looked at me with an incredibly solemn expression. “Yeah... I guess that only makes sense...” he said with a sad sigh. “Guessing what card you’re holding or doing some other magic trick isn’t going to be very convincing, I imagine. But if this is what you want, then I might need to uncover some sensitive information about you.”

“That’s fine,” I replied. “I want you to tell me what my brother left behind for me.”

“...Are you sure?”

“I don’t mind.”

I knew that Kakita-san would probably be able to figure out that I’d watched my brother die. But I’d never told anyone the details, and, aside from my brother, I’d been the only one at the scene. In other words, it was something that only I could’ve known—and if Kakita-san really did have the power he claimed he did, he would end up finding out about that moment in my life anyway.

“All right, then. It’d help if you pictured that scene in your head... Hmm...” Kakita-san seemed to be concentrating. “Okay, so, the last thing Shingo... left behind for you... was a lie and a truth... right?”

An expression of pain stretched across Kakita-san’s face as he stared at me. Then, he began to speak.

“It’s impossible, Hina... Just get out of here... this place is going to...”

“What are you talking about? I can’t do that! You’re... You’re all I have! You’re my only brother!”

“I’m sorry, Hina... but you’re wrong... We’re... not exactly brother and sister... You and I aren’t full siblings... Hina... you aren’t Mom and Dad’s daughter... Your father is another man...”

“You’re... lying...”

“I always thought I shouldn’t tell you... That I should hide it until you grew up... But... But I’m... so...”

“It’s too dangerous! Go, Hina!”

“Big Bro...”

“RUN! RUN, HINA!”

Grief filled my throat as I stared at Kakita-san, but I desperately swallowed it back. “You got it right,” I choked out.

During the earthquake, my brother had been left half-buried by rubble. Once he’d confessed to all the lies our family had fed me, he was devoured entirely by the rubble, and... he disappeared forever.

Even though he always used to tell me it was wrong to lie, he’d been lying to me all along. But... despite all that, I know he really did want me to live on. Which meant that, on that fateful day, my brother left me behind with both a lie and a truth.

As I stared at Kakita-san, I knew then that he really *could* read minds. And... if his power was real, that proved that my own powers weren’t just some screwed-up delusion of mine.

Two different people can’t go insane in the exact same way.

After a moment, the phone in Kakita-san’s pocket started to vibrate again.

“I fully intend to uncover the true nature of my powers,” he said to me. “So, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to start exchanging infor-

mation with you from here on out. If you learn anything about this, don't hesitate to contact me."

Kakita-san quickly scrawled his address onto the back of a business card. "Fortunately, there's no shortage of ways to do that," he said. He handed the card to me, and before I knew it, he was leaving the café.

He may be ditching work, but he sure knows how to get serious when he needs to... I thought to myself. And since I now knew he was working hard to achieve an important goal, he seemed especially serious to me. There was no doubt in my mind that the address he'd written on the business card was his own.

With Kakita-san on my side, I figured I might finally be able to understand the power inside me—the power I didn't understand. Still, while curiosity about what the truth was gripped me, at the same time, I was hit with a heavy sense of unease. It was like I'd gotten a lead while ghost hunting, but in the end, all the "ghost" had turned out to be was somebody's sheets hung out to dry.

But it wasn't just some silly ghost we were hunting. I knew that we could very well discover something far, far more horrifying.

Kakita-san had chosen his path—he was going to move forward and discover the true nature of his powers. He was using the strongest flashlight he had—his ability to read people's minds—and he was trying to shine it directly at the ghost.

I, meanwhile, found myself torn: Was it better to cheer him on for being so brave, or would it be better to warn him not to be reckless?

At the time, I had no idea.



August 26th

A week after I'd first met him, Kakita-san gave me a call—he wanted to meet up. After we'd decided on a time, I headed toward the meetup spot: Café LAX, located near Shibuya Station.

Kakita-san had given me directions, and I'd even peeked at the map I had on hand a couple of times, but I still ended up getting pretty lost on the way there. Eventually, though, I managed to find it. I was pretty surprised at the fact that I didn't recognize the place—it was pretty close to my school, so I really should've, honestly.

At the front entrance was a petite waitress who promptly greeted me. "So, you've decided to grace us with your presence, have you? Come, come, make yourself at home," she said, beckoning me farther inside.

Her outfit, attitude, and just her voice in general were all pretty bizarre. If I had to describe how she spoke, I guess I'd say she spoke like an old grandma or something—not just old, though—*old* old.

What's with the... magical girl outfit? I found myself wondering, weirded out. *I don't think this was supposed to be one of those cafés—sure, they've got a lot of manga, but other than that, it looks pretty normal.*

It definitely wasn't the mystery I'd figured I would be running into there, anyway.

"Oh, *my*. Doth mine eyes deceive me? Your hair, young lady—it's certainly a feast for the eyes."

"...Thanks," I replied. The strange waitress and I had matching twintails, so I supposed it only made sense that she'd comment on them.

I told her that I was there to meet up with someone, and then I started to look for that someone. Since I'd gotten lost and ended up getting there a bit late, I suspected that he'd shown up before me.

I eventually found him sitting near the back end of the café, dressed in a casual Oxford shirt and jeans, his nose buried deep in a shojo manga. To be honest, his appearance clashed so hard with what he was reading, I'd accidentally overlooked him twice before I actually spotted him.

"Sorry I'm late," I said once I got to his table.

Kakita-san looked up from his manga. "...Hm? Oh, no worries."

"Do you usually spend your time reading that kinda stuff?"

"What? Oh, you mean this? Well, someone left it lying on this table before I got here, so I figured I'd give it a read," he said, scratching the back of his head. "Though, I guess it'd be pretty weird to see a guy reading a manga for girls, huh..."

"Well, uh, isn't that a horror manga?"

"Wha— It is?!" His eyes went wide.

...Did he seriously not notice until just now? How's that even possible? That cover is so dark and gloomy-looking... I mean, the main guy on the cover has huge, dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks are super sunken in... I guess he's supposed to look tired?

Setting that line of thought aside, I sat down and ordered a drink from the waitress when she stopped by our table. Though she was pretty haughty, at least she would still come and take orders like a normal waitress would. *What a weird café...* I thought to myself.

"I know what you're thinking: This joint's pretty weird, right?" said Kakita-san. "I was caught pretty off guard when I first came here, too."

"Yeah, I definitely wasn't expecting this," I replied. "Seems like this place is pretty popular, though."

"Mhm. It's easy to get comfortable here, and they don't mind if you stay a while. It's a nice little hole-in-the-wall—pretty good spot to

go to if you're a regular," he said. "Anyway, putting that aside for now... I really should apologize, Hinae-chan—work's got me super busy lately. Sorry I haven't had the time to meet up with you until now."

"Oh, no, it's okay. You don't need to apologize for that. It's not like I'm in a huge rush to get all this stuff figured out or anything," I assured him. "Though, couldn't you have just gotten a hold of me while you were at work, like you've been doing?"

"I did consider that, but I figured I probably shouldn't. Y'see, whenever I work, I'm in a suit. And you, you're in a school uniform. What comes to mind when you see two people like that together?"

Oh.

"I mean, I guess I see what you mean, but don't you think you're being too paranoid? You're not *that* much older than me, you know."

"I assure you, I'm being more than reasonable about this," he replied. "There're a lot of people out there that assume the worst about everyone else. Like, say we have a Joe Schmoe out there taking a walk, and he sees me, wearing a suit. Then, next to the guy wearing a suit, he sees a girl in a school uniform. The gears begin to turn in his head, yeah? Then, *poof*, he comes to a conclusion: 'Jesus, grooming much?' he thinks... or something along those lines."

"...I see..."

"I mean, just before there was this high school kid who came in here, right? He spilled this Mountain View that he had just bought, and when the girl he was with went to clean it up, the kid was immediately thrown at a crossroads. He was deadlocked between two different fake scenarios in his head: an incredibly positive one, and a *really* negative one—neither of which I can talk about in public, that's for sure. And just from a soda spill!"

Kakita-san shook his head, then continued his spiel. “Trust me, I realized right then and there that you shouldn’t underestimate the power of people’s delusions. Especially not ones as intense as that. I mean, seriously, that kid was something else... His delusions were so strong, they blew right past my defenses and flowed straight into my head.”

“Oh yeah,” he continued, “there’s also a whole breed of scumbags out there that see a girl and instantly start thinking about her measurements, how she’d look in her underwear, and much, *much* worse. So, this message goes out to you, Hinae-chan: You gotta be careful around men.”

“...Wow. I didn’t realize things were that bad... Must not be easy hearing all that.” I found myself feeling pretty bad for him after everything he’d said, so I ended up voicing that.

Based on what he’d told me, having the power to read minds definitely sounded like a lot, and definitely wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. But, when I thought about the guy he was talking about, I also realized that he wouldn’t have had any way to know that some random guy was peering into his mind, getting an eyeful of his private thoughts.

To be honest, I felt pretty bad for both of them—one didn’t have a choice but to read people’s minds, and the other’d had his mind read without ever realizing it.

Without really thinking, I turned my head to look around the café, wondering if the poor guy was still there.

“Oh, you looking for the kid?” asked Kakita-san. “You just barely missed him, actually—he left right as you came in,” he said, quickly gesturing toward the door.

The next moment, though, his tone turned serious. “But anyway, let me get into what you’re here for. Right off the bat, let me apologize: there’s been so much information to wade through that, to be completely transparent with you, it’s taken a lot of time to whittle things down. So, unfortunately, I’m only about halfway through confirming what’s true and what isn’t.”

“That makes sense. I mean, when you think about it, it’s pretty normal for people to assume something is true when reality’s a different story,” I said, trying my best to reassure him.

That kind of stuff makes things really hard for me, too. When someone believes they’re telling the truth, I can’t tell that what they’re saying is a lie. I guess that means that both his and my powers are actually limited by how the target thinks—their subjective view.

“But, man...” continued Kakita-san. “Whenever I discover something suspicious and look further into it, it always leads back to this ‘Human Domestication Project’ thing. No matter how you slice it, there’s definitely something fishy about it. Oh, and on that note, what the hell is up with this ‘Committee’?”

Kakita-san quickly stopped himself, then apologized. “...Sorry. Sometimes, I start rambling and I just don’t stop. Point is, most of the information I’ve got isn’t relevant, and there’s only two bits that I can say with confidence. As for the first one: it seems like people with powers—like us—are called ‘Gigalomaniacs.’”

“Gigalo... what?” I asked, incredibly confused. “I’ve heard of *megalomania* before, but not... whatever that is.”

Megalomania is a thing, and yeah, megalomaniacs, too. Maybe it’s the same concept? ...And on that note, I think “giga” is greater than “mega” when it comes to information units...

As I tried to reason out what exactly the difference was, Kakitasan continued. “Apparently, Gigalomania goes well beyond delusions of grandeur, and even megalomania in general. I’ve only managed to grasp bits and pieces of the puzzle, but from what I understand, a Gigalomaniac’s delusions exceed the boundaries of their own mind. In other words, they’re not confined to just the person’s head—they interfere with both other people, and even reality itself. Research on this has supposedly been going on for a long time—a *really* long time. Definitely since before the two of us got these powers.”

“But, couldn’t this ‘Gigalo-whatever’ thing just be something a bunch of delusional people made up? Y’know, like that ‘Committee’ you mentioned?” I asked.

“Well, as much as I’d like to believe that, there’s no way that’s the case. This intel comes from multiple people at SafeWorks, and over there, anyone even remotely talented or high-up in the ranks is familiar with the term ‘Gigalomaniac.’ There’s just way too much on it for it to be made up—I know for a fact that Gigalomaniacs exist, and that we’re probably Gigalomaniacs too.”

“Okay... So then, why did we become Gigalomaniacs? Also, while we do have *some* kind of powers, I feel like the stuff you said about ‘delusions gaining form’ or whatever doesn’t really match up with how I think our powers work.”

“Yeah, I have to agree there. I don’t fully understand the details around this yet, but it seems like we might be different compared to those who’re considered ‘pure’ Gigalomaniacs. The people who are well-versed in Gigalomania seem to be particularly concerned about this, actually... Or maybe it’d be more accurate to say that whatever’s going on with us is abnormally unclear, and therefore, it’s really confusing to them.”

Kakita-san turned to me. “So, in order for us to learn more about this, there’s something I want to check with you,” he said. “When you use your powers, do you ever see anything... odd?”

“Odd?” I asked, unsure what exactly he meant. “Could you be a bit more specific?”

“A sword... Or something like that. Well, its shape would be slightly different compared to an ordinary sword, but, still.”

“Hmm... Well, that’s definitely vague...”

“From what I understand, the people in the know don’t seem to have ever seen a real one before. Either way, though, it doesn’t *have* to look like a sword—I’d just like to know if you’ve seen anything close to one before.”

When I thought back on if I’d ever seen anything weird like that, I realized that I actually might have.

In the moment that my brother confessed that he’d been lying to me for years—when I found myself feeling nothing but despair at this lie-infested world, and wished for a world of only truth and truth alone—I felt like I’d seen a large sword.

It’d been shaped like a pair of iridescent wings, like those of an insect. Wings both ephemeral, and unceasingly sharp; it was unclear to me whether they were born from reality, or a dream.

It was... a long pair of wings... and come to think of it, they did look like a sword... Not only that, but... I feel like I've seen those "wings" several times before.

Each and every time I’d seen those “wings,” it was after I’d either overused my powers or sharpened my senses in some way. Maybe I’d just gotten used to seeing them, and as time went on, I’d started writing them off as just some illusion or hallucination or something.

“It appears so close to you that, eventually, you grow accustomed to its presence and lose your awareness of it. The key to seeing it again is to become self-aware.’ That’s what I’ve heard, at least,” Kakita-san explained.

Before he said anything else, he looked around. “Luckily for us, the café’s got a few other customers right now. Why don’t you try using your powers while trying to maintain that self-awareness? If you do, I’m sure you’ll see it.”

I decided to follow his instructions and started focusing on the voices resounding throughout the café.

Lie, truth, lie, lie, truth, lie, lie.

Though there wasn’t much to hear, I caught a number of lies mixed in with a few truths from the nearby tables.

I started to concentrate harder, and the truths and lies grew even stronger. Then, the large wings—the same ones I’d seen back then—began to materialize in my vision.

“If you see it, try to take it,” he said to me as I focused. Following his instructions, I instinctively reached out my hand. I then closed my fingers around the hilt, and the sword stabilized in my grip.

Ceaselessly distorted... endlessly captivating... It was an object, yet at the same time, it was a living being...

I found myself completely baffled by the sword in my hands, as did Kakita-san. He coughed loudly, and then, as if to bring us back to reality, he feigned composure before starting to talk again. “A ‘DI-sword.’ That’s what you’re holding right now, apparently.”

I’d never heard the name before in my life, but for some reason, it felt really fitting for the strange blade I was holding.

“...Wait, crap! What am I supposed to do with this thing? Everyone here’s gonna freak if they see this!” I yelp in sudden realization.

A voice called out from behind me. “Much apologies for the wait.” It was the waitress from before.

She decided to come over now?! I jumped in shock, then immediately put myself on guard. I knew that if she saw the lethal-looking weapon in my hands, I’d be behind bars before I could even say “Huh?”

But, in spite of my freak-out, the waitress just ignored me and silently placed the drink I’d ordered on the table. And if that wasn’t enough already, she nearly thrust her face right into the sword in the process—it was like she couldn’t even see it.

The waitress left our table, which Kakita-san took as his cue to explain. “DI-swords can only be seen by people with powers. I suppose this means we can say that, the waitress included, there aren’t any other Gigalomaniacs here right now.”

None of the other customers had reacted to the giant sword I’d pulled out of nowhere, so he was probably right.

I guess they really can’t see it...

“Kakita-san, can you do this too?” I asked him.

“I’ve tried to countless times in my room before today, but no dice. Unlike with you, there might be special conditions that I’ll need to meet in order to materialize mine. At the very least, I can definitely see mine,” he answered.

“...Huh. Well, while we’re on the topic, you wouldn’t happen to know how to put this thing away, would you?”

“I *did* just say that I’ve never grabbed it before,” he remarked. “Regardless, that sword will always be with you. Even if you were to toss it away somewhere, it’ll come right back to you the moment you need it. ...Though obviously, I hope that time never comes. For either of us.”

I reexamined the DI-sword. It was sharp as could be, and there was this strange lack of weight that didn't make sense considering how big it was. I could easily see how it could be used as a weapon, to say the least.

An invisible sword that only psychics can see... If this were used in a murder, it'd be impossible to solve the case—it'd be the coldest case imaginable.

"From what I've heard, that sword has some kind of role to play in... something. I'm not too clear on the details of that. For the time being, though, all I can definitively say is that having a DI-sword is a sign that someone has powers like we do," Kakita-san explained. "Also, when it comes to what you said about delusions, I might have a rough answer: Remember the moment before you got your powers? Back then, were you wishing that you could tell whether other people's feelings were true or not?"

Just as he'd guessed, I *had* wished for that. Back then, I'd thrown out all my feelings of hatred toward the lie-infested world I lived in. I had lost all sense of reason, and then... everything just exploded.

"In my case," Kakita-san began, "I made a wish—well, a 'wish' might not be completely accurate, but... ever since I was a kid, I'd always wanted to know what other people were thinking. And, on the day of the earthquake, I'd wanted to know what someone else was thinking more than I ever had before."

"Why's that?" I asked him.

"Because I knew that if I couldn't, there would be too many things I wouldn't be able to come back from. I couldn't afford to be fooled by lies, falsehoods, and secrets back then, so... I wished with all my might."

Just as I had, Kakita-san must've experienced something that had made him feel the need to let his desires out—desperately so. The sheer heaviness I sensed in his voice told me that much.

“So, on the day of the earthquake, the two of us both thought, ‘It sure would be nice if I had this power,’ and then we both found ourselves with these *extremely specific* powers. Surely it has to be related, right?” Kakita-san paused for a moment, pondering something. “...But in the end, that’s just a theory. Putting that aside, though, there are probably other Gigalomaniacs like us in Shibuya. I bet that if we can find some of them and hear their stories, it’ll help us get closer to the truth. Even with my powers, it’ll be extremely difficult to get anywhere without some kind of lead.”

“Sure, that makes sense—but in my case, I can’t just go around saying, ‘Hi there, do you have any psychic powers, and if you do, would you mind coming with me and telling me everything about them?’ I might as well be going around trying to recruit people into some shady cult,” I retorted.

“Well, the easiest way to figure this out would be to see who can and can’t see a DI-sword. Sooo, that being said, why don’t you summon yours and take a stroll around town with it?”

“...I don’t think so. I, for one, wouldn’t even *dream* of talking to some incredibly shady person strolling around Shibuya with a sword. I’d just pretend I hadn’t even seen them, if anything.”

“Yeah, I was just messing with you,” Kakita-san said with a smirk. “Besides, it’s far too dangerous to just assume that every Gigalomaniac is a stand-up guy. I mean, let’s say there’s a guy out there who’s got a whole lot of baggage. Malicious desires, delusions... Who knows what they might do to you with their powers?”

He was right—it'd be incredibly naïve to assume that every Gigalomaniac would stick to common sense and never misuse their powers.

“So, knowing that, this is a job for an older guy like me—you don’t have to worry about it. Besides, if anything were to happen to you, I’m sure Shingo’d do a real number on me,” Kakita-san said, chuckling. “I’ll be sure to get us some more accurate information the next time we meet up.”

I could tell he was trying to avoid putting me on edge, but, even so, I could plainly see just how dangerous the path he was on truly was.

The fact that there were people out there who knew about Gigalomaniacs but kept quiet about it was beyond shady to me. After all, it meant that they were hiding the existence of powers that could overturn everything we knew about the world and how it worked. In other words, they were hiding it on purpose.

Before I knew it, I’d opened my mouth to try and stop him. “I don’t think we should dig any deeper into this,” I said.

Yes, I was worried about Kakita-san putting himself in danger, but I was also overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of the truths he’d already uncovered. Who knew what else we’d discover if we went any further?

“I completely understand how dangerous it can be to dig too deep. But, even so, I’d like to get my hands on more intel. That way, we can protect ourselves,” he reasoned. In other words, he wasn’t planning on backing down.

“That’s... fair, I guess. It’s not like I disagree with you on that, at least,” I replied.

“But you still think it could be too dangerous?”

“Yeah. ...Wait, what do you mean you just want to keep the both of us safe? I mean, the way you’ve been talking, I’d have expected you to want to go on the offensive here. Where’d all this ‘protecting’ stuff come from?”

“Who knows?” Kakita-san mused. “Maybe I *am* going on the offensive here. You’re the one with the power to see through lies—shouldn’t you, of all people, know how I feel about this?”

Of course I know how you feel. What exactly you plan to do. But still... I can’t say it. If I do, you might...

Kakita-san didn’t push the issue any further, but it wasn’t because he could read my mind. No... he probably knew what I wanted to do from the very moment I chose not to say anything back.



“*I’d like to exchange information with you again.*”

I got a message from Kakita-san a few days after that, and that was how the message started. When I scanned the rest of it, though, I immediately couldn’t help but freak out. *Wait, is he serious about this...?*

He’d asked me to meet up with him at the love hotel area in Dogenzaka, which wasn’t all that far from my school. But, distance aside, I almost couldn’t believe he’d sent me such a bold request—it was definitely leagues worse than our previous location.

That’s literally the worst place a student could go to, let alone one in a school uniform! There’ll be tons of security cameras, too!

I’d thought he was being considerate, inviting me to Café LAX last time... so what the heck happened to that? If he’d invited me to a love hotel the first time around, I probably would’ve ghosted him right then and there.

I mean, I know he’s not that kinda guy, but still...

In his message, Kakita-san claimed that a love hotel room would provide the best privacy one could possibly get. I definitely understood his reasoning and all, but I wasn't exactly pumped at the idea of going along with his plan.

And yet, when it came down to it, I ended up making my way there anyway.

"Seriously, it's the perfect place," he explained. "And I've got another tidbit of info to give you, so we need the privacy. Besides, if we start using this place often, people are just gonna assume that we're—well, you know—and they'll keep things hush-hush. We really do need to be more careful with our meet-ups, so it only makes sense to do things this way."

"I'd be in big trouble if one of my classmates saw me, though... Yikes..."

I hadn't meant to say that part out loud. But since he'd heard me, Kakita-san started apologizing profusely before eventually just showing me to the room.

Now, just to be clear, we never did anything gross in there. Whenever Kakita-san had a break from work and I had a break from school, we'd go to that room, exchange intel, then leave right after.

Once we'd gotten through our second exchange, we started to meet up more and more often. Then, the Don't Look and Audio Bleed cases happened, and our meet-ups pretty much became a regular thing. Though we weren't entirely certain about it, Kakita-san suspected that the two incidents were, in some way, connected to Gigalomania.

"Think about it. Bizarre murders. Bizarre powers. It isn't that much of a stretch," he reasoned. "What if we're the next targets?"

I'd laughed that idea off as ridiculous at first, but Kakita-san had been completely serious.

With the two murders in hindsight and his theory fresh in his mind, Kakita-san started to push himself to be more proactive about getting information to me. It didn't matter how sick or tired he was, he never blew off a single one of our meet-ups. During one of them, he even went as far as to gulp down some cold medicine right in front of me. Not only that, but he pretty much forced himself to smile as he talked—though if you ask me, it looked far more like a grimace than anything. I practically begged him to go home and get some rest that day, and eventually, he relented.

Now, let me be clear here: I was incredibly grateful that he was going so hard for me. But, to be honest, seeing how aggressive he was getting about finding new information... it was starting to scare me.

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September 29th

After school today, I begged Haruka to sub in for me for cleaning duty. Once I had that dealt with, I headed to the love hotel, acting natural like I'd practiced.

During our last few meet-ups, Kakita-san'd blasted me with nothing but complicated scientific stuff—stuff that was filled to the brim with complex terminology that was really hard to understand. Beyond that, though, we hadn't made any progress on discovering the origins behind Gigalomania. Still, he'd told me this morning that he had big news for me, and I couldn't help but be excited to hear what he'd found out.

I found Kakita-san a short distance from the entrance to the hotel. "Hey there," he called out.

Judging by the suit he was wearing, he'd probably ditched work to come straight to the hotel. Usually, he would go home to get changed

before coming, because as we all know, man in suit + girl in high school uniform + love hotel = a swift call to the nearest police station.

“We obviously can’t talk out here, so let’s go,” Kakita-san said, hurrying inside.

Someone sure is pushy today...

“Well, well, aren’t *you* excited?” I joked. “You’re not planning on finally trying something *indecent* with poor, *innocent* Hinae-chan, are you?”

Once he’d signed in at the reception desk, Kakita-san answered me. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” I could tell that he wasn’t lying.

I was just kidding around, of course, but the fact that he’d been so blunt felt... well, complicated. It wasn’t like I would’ve been jumping for joy if he’d said, “Oh yeah, I can’t wait to finally get in your pants,” but... Oh, whatever. We humans really are insane, self-centered creatures.

Anyway, there we were at Fairy’s Dance—the retro-styled love hotel we’d been going to for our meet-ups. Led by Kakita-san, I stepped into the elevator, and we headed up. It was one of those rare, old-school elevators—completely unlike the fancy modern ones you’d normally see.

As we climbed the floors, I could physically feel the elevator moving upward, its motor chugging away.

Cl-Clunk... clunk... cl-clunk...

I wondered if the elevator’s jerking was why I felt weirdly uncomfortable right then... It had never made me feel that way before.

After a few more seconds, the doors opened, and we exited onto our floor. The carpet beneath our feet was long and soft, and the hallway surrounding us was pretty dim. The room we used was always free, and if I had to guess why that was, I’d probably point to the way

old-fashioned interior... that, and the deteriorating romantic appeal wasn't helping, either.

Luckily for us, nobody passed us on the way to our room—then again, I doubt anyone was dying to use that floor anyway.

For some reason, though... something felt *off*. It was that same uncomfortable feeling I'd had in the elevator, but times ten.

My mind was racing a million miles a minute. I couldn't understand why, but... it almost felt like the dreary corridor we were making our way through was actually the horrifying, squelching bowels of some living creature...

With every single step that I took, I felt like my brain and my body were melting further and further away. All I knew was that I had to get to our room—and as fast as possible.

When we finally reached the room—Room 305—Kakita-san pushed the door open.

I'm saved...

From there, I practically glided into the room. I didn't care about the huge mirror. I didn't care that the door just slammed shut behind me. And I didn't care about that slow melody, nor the music box it was coming from. All I was focused on... was the large, round, rotating bed.

The thing was huge—it practically dominated the room, taking up over half the space in it. I wanted, more than anything, to just *collapse* onto it. I'd messed around on it just the other day, spinning on top of it over and over again until Kakita-san told me to stop.

"Sorry, but would you mind if I took a quick nap on the bed...?" I asked Kakita-san, rubbing my eyes.

"No..." He stopped me from staggering over and collapsing onto it. "I need it more."

You cruel, cruel man... I thought. I can't take it anymore... Actually, y'know what? Here is just fine—I don't care anymore.

I felt something snap within me, and I collapsed on the spot. The fluffy carpet beneath me didn't feel too bad... though the bed would've been way better. It wasn't long before I stopped caring, though.

...But, soon after I'd gone still, some *jerk* started shaking me.

Ugggh, just leave me alone... Can't you see I'm trying to sleep...?

I began to swat my arm at the air around me, and the shaking stopped. But then, instead of letting me sleep, someone started whispering.

AAAAGH! WOULD YOU KNOCK IT OFF ALREADY?!
Screaming that inside my head, I jolted up to face whatever was annoying me. When I did, a loud *thump* resounded through the air, and the room went silent once again.

After that, I heard a voice... then another.

“Let's get out of here... Now!”

“Taku, the door won't open!”

This time, I heard them loud and clear. It was a boy and a girl, and they sounded like they were about my age. Their panic shook me out of my daze, and I sat all the way up. But when I tried to open my eyes to see... all I saw was red. Bright red.

I was still in that familiar hotel room... but this time, there were three people I didn't know there with me: a motionless policeman, a strange, scared-looking high school boy, and a strange high school girl, vomiting a few meters away from him.

Then, I turned my head... and the last person I laid eyes on... was Kakita-san.

He was sitting on the rotating bed.

And his head was twisted the wrong way around.

Red. Bloodred.

In that moment, I finally noticed that blood was pouring out of my eyes. My hands involuntarily reached up to touch my face. Bloody tears lined my eyelids.

Both my eyes and my head were in excruciating pain. Still, I shook my head desperately, doing everything in my power to try and deny what was right in front of me.

It was then that Kakita-san's head twisted off of his neck. It fell to the ground, and it began to roll. And roll. And roll.

Like a ball, it just kept on rolling. I almost let out a raspy laugh—it was like some kind of sick joke.

This is completely insane.

Finally, his head came to a stop in front of me. My red eyes met Kakita-san's dull, stagnant stare. And within his gaze, I saw his final expression. His look of resignation.

So... these are the eyes of someone who's lost everything.

These are the eyes of a dead man.

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Not long after that, I was arrested by the police at the love hotel and taken to the Shibuya Police Station for questioning.

“Would you please just tell me already?” a policewoman demanded angrily. But I said nothing.

“Are you a student, or do you have a job?”

Once again, I said nothing.

“You went to that hotel with that man, Kakita, many times, right? How did you know him? Were you dating?”

She paused for a moment to give me room to speak, but I didn't even so much as open my mouth.

“If you don’t want to talk, feel free to just nod or wave your hand. Just tell me.”

Eventually, the persistent policewoman lost her patience and went quiet, mirroring my own silence.

As the interrogation went on and I was asked more and more questions, I gradually got a better feel for what the situation had been like back at the hotel.

Kakita-san and I hadn’t left our room when we were slated to check out, so the hotel had called the police on us. A police officer had then come over to kick us out, and apparently, I’d attacked them while I was unconscious. After that, two students from Hekiho Academy had showed up too.

I also learned that what I’d witnessed—Kakita-san’s head being twisted off his body—hadn’t been something I’d hallucinated. Despite the fact that I was the most obvious suspect, though, the police hadn’t found any evidence proving I was the one who’d done it.

As to how I’d learned all of that... I’m not as good at using my power as Kakita-san was at using his, but I’m somewhat capable of extracting information from people based on if what they’re telling me is true or false.

Why the hell did things turn out like this? I found myself angrily thinking. In all likelihood, it probably had something to do with the powers we’d been investigating: Gigalomaniacs and DI-swords. With how fantastical those things are, I can only wonder what would’ve happened if I’d tried to explain them to the police—or to anyone at all, really. Kakita-san had died because of those things. Because he’d been pursuing those mysteries.

What the hell do I do now...?

I'd lost my most important ally, and I figured the only way I could protect myself was to not say a word. Still, even as I consistently ignored the policewoman's attempts to get me to talk, I found myself growing more and more anxious. I knew that if I didn't figure something out fast, I would get sent to the kind of hospital they'd usually send you to in times like this. Maybe I was just getting desperate, but I actually started to think that even that would be better than staying at the police station.

Before I realized it, the policewoman had left, and another detective had subbed in for her. A guy this time—though I wasn't planning to talk no matter who was asking me questions.

"I've got a question for you," he said to me. "Do you have it but didn't realize it, or have you never had it? Which is it?"

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest.

It was a question I'd heard before—hell, it hadn't even been all that long ago when I'd been asked it.

Instinctively, I lifted my head to look at the detective.

He looked like an honest guy—like he had a lot of responsibilities weighing down on him... responsibilities he'd taken on himself, even though no one asked him to. In some ways, he felt similar to Kakita-san. But, most importantly, I could tell that he knew something.

Urged on by my curiosity, I asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm a detective here at this station," he responded. "What's your name?"

I understood all too well what he was doing: he was carefully trying to cut down the number of cards in his deck, just like I was. He might have been connected to the police, but I could tell that he knew something about my powers.

To give him my name, or to keep it to myself... I found myself standing at a crossroads. I knew that my response could very well decide my fate from that moment onward. *So... should I play offense? Or defense?*

That thought reminded me of Kakita-san, the man who always chose to go on the offensive... and I made my choice.

"Arimura Hinae. I'm a student at Hekiho Academy."

Although I still felt hesitant about giving up any information, I didn't plan on running away any longer. Kakita-san wasn't the type of person to run away... and because of that, he'd gotten himself killed.

I wasn't planning to become a martyr for his sake or anything like that—I just felt like if I stayed on the defensive forever, a much worse, much more horrific punishment would be in store for me. That was just my gut feeling.

Besides, when Kakita-san had started actively searching for info on those disgusting murders, he'd done it for the sake of our survival. The least I could do was try to follow in his footsteps.

I was sad that he'd died, and it definitely hurt that he was gone... but I wasn't about to burst into tears over it in some dramatic display of raw emotion. In my heart, all I really felt was a sense of... emptiness.

But... even with him gone, I know I can say this: he was one of the nicest guys I'd ever known, and I'm proud I knew him. Just like I'm proud I had Shingo as a brother.

And that's something I can say with absolute certainty.

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

That day, things took a turn for the worse.

When Takuru and Serika were taken from the love hotel, you'd have never believed how lively they had been when they'd first burst into it. Their clothes were stained with what was most likely vomit, and their faces were incredibly distraught; it almost looked like they were the victims themselves.

Holding them up from both sides, the police officers that had arrived at the scene shoved them into a patrol car. Itou-kun and I could do nothing but watch.

"What happened at the love hotel? What did those two see?" I asked them—but I wouldn't learn the answers to those two questions until much later.

Takuru and Serika had witnessed a man's tragic death. The victim was Kakita Hironori—a part-time worker at SafeWorks, a startup company assisting with the reconstruction of Shibuya. Apparently he had taken up a role in marketing there.

The cause of his death was from hanging; he had hung himself using a ceiling light as support. If that was all there had been to it—and excuse my insensitivity—it would have been nothing more than a simple, open-and-shut case of suicide. However, the case went deeper than that.

The wire used for the suicide had been stretched far out from his neck in an "X" shape. The bed Kakita-san had been sitting on was a rotating one, and each time the bed had spun, the wire would cut farther and farther into his neck, before eventually twisting his cervical vertebrae straight off of his spine.

According to the police, there hadn't been anyone else at the scene when the body was discovered. However, I eventually learned that this was not quite correct—the police had deliberately hidden the existence of a certain bystander, and this fact was one that both the mass media and the internet were unaware of.

When the police had hurried over after a call from the hotel staff, they'd discovered the deceased victim and an unconscious girl. When that girl suddenly awoke, she'd attacked the policeman that had been left to watch over the scene. Taken by surprise, the policeman hit his head on the bathroom glass and was knocked unconscious, and after that, the girl lost consciousness once more.

Afterward, Takuru and Serika had snuck into the room and discovered Kakita's horrific corpse, the unconscious girl, and the policeman. It was likely that the only ones who knew about this were the police and the Hekiko Academy Newspaper Club.

That girl was Arimura Hinae, a first year at Hekiko Academy and a member of the Literature Club. Takuru, Serika, and the others didn't know her at the time, but I myself had met her several times before through my position in the student council. In fact, soon after she had been released from questioning, I even met with her to discuss matters regarding the culture festival. However, by sheer coincidence, Takuru and the others bumped into us during that meeting, and both him and Serika went completely pale upon seeing the girl from the incident.

Arimura-san is a living lie detector, and someone who values the truth above all else. After the two of us talked that day, she and I became friends—but she's a friend I can never tell a single lie to. If I ever do, she'll always put on this fake mask of cheerfulness—one that hides her true feelings.

It happened much further along, but as a result of Arimura-san joining our group, we all came to know of the supernatural existences known as Gigalomaniacs—what every victim up until that point had truly been.

I still find myself curious about where exactly Hinae had obtained that information, as well as how she'd come to be aware of her own abilities. A certain woman I know probably taught her the scientific explanation, but even before those two met, Arimura-san'd had a vague understanding of her powers.

I suspect the answer is connected to why she was at the scene of the crime in the love hotel: to exchange information. In that case, Kakita Hironori, a fellow psychic, would've been the person she exchanged information with, and therefore the person who taught her all about her powers. Considering the power he'd had, it would be no surprise to me if he knew all sorts of things.

Kakita Hironori. The most I've heard about him from Arimura-san is that he was a friend of her late brother, but she's never said anything beyond that. It's possible that she may just be struggling to figure out how exactly to talk about him, though I don't know for sure.

Returning to the case—someone managed to record a video of Kakita-san's death through the window, and from there, both it and the case spread like wildfire. The video of the wire twisting his head off was uploaded all over the internet, and no matter how many times it was taken down, another video would pop back up in seconds. When I saw that video for myself, I remember an intense pain running through my chest.

Kakita-san's death was nicknamed the “Revolving Dead”—an absolutely insensitive name derived from “revolving bed,” which was what he'd been sitting on when he'd died. Just like with the Don't Look and

Audio Bleed cases, a great number of people treated those horrific deaths like pure entertainment. They just mindlessly consumed the information, all while refusing to remind themselves that these were real events and real people.

Now, three incidents—Don't Look, Audio Bleed, and Revolving Dead—had matched up to the same days as the first three New Generation Madness cases. The dates matching should have been something to be terrified of, and yet, after being released from police custody, Takuru wasn't frightened by the death he had witnessed... No, he was too distracted by the realization he had come to. The commonality he had seen.

Sumo Stickers.

For several years now, stickers with a disturbing image of overweight men overlapping were being stuck on to various places all over the city. Just looking at them made me feel sick.

The unpleasant stickers had been present at every single one of the crime scenes, almost as if they were watching the cases as they occurred. When Takuru realized this, he dragged Serika and Itou-kun along to begin a full-scale investigation of the Sumo Stickers; I discovered this after I learned he had set up a surveillance camera at a location where many of the stickers had been placed.

There was no time to just sit around and complain—it was time for action. I had to stop them as fast as I could. I knew all too well what those stickers truly were. They weren't just monitoring the cases... they were monitoring the entire city itself, watching as the past that had been buried in rubble six years ago crawled back to life. They were just like the past... nothing more than a curse that should've remained buried forever...

Placing aside my goal of stopping Takuru, I headed straight for the surveillance camera Itou-kun had told me about. But, just as I was about to remove the camera...

I was stabbed.



When Arimura-san had come to the student council room to discuss how the Literature Club would not be participating in the culture festival, Takuru and the others from the Newspaper Club bumped into us. At the time, I'd had no idea about Arimura-san's involvement in the love hotel incident, and thus I had no idea why they were so surprised at her being there.

After a somewhat awkward exchange in the student council room, Arimura-san said this to Takuru right as she left: "You're going to be killed, Miyashiro Takuru-senpai."

Her voice was terrifyingly cold. Even I could feel how bone-chilling it was, despite knowing absolutely nothing about the situation. When I looked at Takuru's face, I saw he'd gone completely pale. Those sharp, icy words had pierced right through his heart, and, although I doubt Arimura-san had noticed, they had also pierced my own.

In that moment, I realized what she'd truly been insinuating. Everything was in some way connected to Arimura-san, and as a result, she was a necessary piece required to solve the puzzle. But at the time, I hadn't wanted to believe it—that the ghosts of Takuru's past were coming back to swallow him whole.

Then, when I saw that the video of the Sumo Stickers from the various crime scenes had been uploaded under the Newspaper Club's name, I knew that my worries had been completely founded. Takuru still hadn't given up.

I tried to force back my hesitation and confront him directly, but to no avail; the hesitation stole all the power from my words, and words without power behind them won't sway anyone—let alone Takuru.

The only thing that saved me from torturing myself about how to face him again was my family. When I sat in Takuru's empty room in Aoba Dorm after dinner, nearly bursting into tears, Dad reminded me of an old thing I'd said about Takuru.

"If anyone bullies him, I'll get them back."

My sister Yui and my brother Yuto both wished from the bottom of their hearts for him to come back. And with them in my heart, my hesitation and fear... turned into confidence and joy. All I needed to do was protect my family, so that someday, we could all live together once more. I would not stop Takuru—I would protect him.

Now invigorated, I immediately called Takuru, but...

...he didn't answer.

I was starting to get a bad feeling. I tried a few more times, but to no avail. Forced to give up, I called Itou-kun instead; he would probably have a good idea of Takuru's current whereabouts. That, and, compared to Serika, he was a lot more... manageable.

"Now tell me, what are the three of you up to?" I probed.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't kill mee...e..." I had Itou-kun profusely apologizing in about three minutes tops. When I heard the story from him, my confidence and joy corroded into pure, unfiltered rage.

According to him, Takuru had deduced that the Sumo Stickers found at the crime scenes were the key to solving the incidents, so he'd gone and installed a surveillance camera below a bridge where a great number of them had been placed. When I asked Itou-kun where he

was then, he said he was probably with Serika investigating something else.

Installing security cameras without permission went well beyond the jurisdiction of the Newspaper Club, and the fact that he was out investigating yet another thing with Serika made him missing my calls feel all the more suspect.

“Itou-kun. You were the one that installed this camera, correct?” I asked coldly.

“Y-Yup! You got me!” he yelped, panicked.

“I wonder... Would you be willing to take down that camera *right this instant*? Actually, no—I’ll be the one to take it down, so how about you tell me *exactly* where it is?”

“Oh...! Of course! Th-Th-Th-Thank you so very much for your consideration, Miss!”

I had to take care of what I knew first, so I decided to start by retrieving the camera. I rushed over to the point below the bridge Itou-kun told me about. There, I saw a wall covered in Sumo Stickers. There were so many, you could barely see the wall behind them.

This is just awful... I remember thinking to myself. They stretched to places I couldn’t reach even if I used the scaffolding. Even if I ignored how they had managed to stick them up there, I was still bewildered by the quantity—how on earth had they gotten their hands on so *many*?

As I stared at them, I tried desperately to keep myself from vomiting. Stomach acid churned in my core as I stared at the disturbing stickers of two overweight faces overlapping. Even then, I couldn’t understand why I felt so intensely repulsed by them, but... it felt just like back then...

Doing my best to avoid looking directly at them, I retrieved the hidden camera. A Sumo Sticker was stuck right by it. Before I knew it, I found myself slamming my fist straight into it.

“Why do you have to exist!?” I screamed. My anger at Takuru... my grudge against the unfairness of everything... I took it all out on the Sumo Sticker.

Why... Why did you have to appear now?!

Suddenly, I sensed a person behind me. Wondering if Takuru had been contacted by Itou-kun and came like I'd ordered, I turned around to check.

“Th’ hell do you think you’re doin’?!”

Behind me stood a strange man. He looked incredibly unhealthy —his skin looked as though it hadn’t seen the sun in days. He wore a jersey overwhelmed by random, tattered fur, but... what truly disturbed me were... his eyes. They looked completely deranged.

Despite speaking directly to me, his eyes were unfocused, his vision darting around erratically to many of the Sumo Stickers situated around us.

“Who th’ fuck you think you ar’ disturbin’ the barrier of this holy place this city can no longer be saved thanks to you you stupid fuckin’ bitch how dare you how dare you there’s one thing I gotta do I’ve gotta I gotta do it I must exorcise this impurity I can still make it in time I can I can I can—”

His speech was fragmented and distorted, and it continued to flow from his mouth without an end in sight.

I was completely overwhelmed, and before I knew it, the man had slipped the cool blade of a knife into my side.

An immediate, searing pain shot through me.

As soon as I realized I had been stabbed, I punched the man as hard as I could and ran with all the strength I could muster.

Fortunately, I was saved by a familiar homeless man—Gen-san—who restrained the man. If it hadn't been for him, I would've met a horrible, tragic end right then and there.

It must've been my punishment for surviving six years ago.

Soon after, the police arrived and arrested the man. I was carried onto an ambulance, and after receiving some brief treatment at the hospital, I was returned to Aoba Dorm. The knife thankfully hadn't reached my internal organs, meaning Aoba Clinic would have the necessary equipment and personnel required to treat it—which was why I was allowed to return home so quickly.

The first ones who came running to my side as I lay in bed were Kawahara-kun—a boy I've known since elementary school and a member of the student council—and the advisor of the student council and the Newspaper Club, Mr. Wakui.

...And then, at long last, the news reached Takuru. By the time he arrived, he was gasping for air.

I only found out about this later, but while I'd been retrieving the camera, Takuru had been sneaking into AH General Hospital after finding out the creator of the Sumo Stickers had been hospitalized there. Not only that, but he'd dropped his phone on accident, and a strange pair—a young girl and a senior citizen—had picked it up. That was the reason why it had taken so long for him to hear what happened to me.

“You...!”

But the moment he finally arrived at Aoba Clinic, Kawahara-kun punched him in the face. “What the hell do you think you're doing

here, asshole?!” he screamed at him, lifting him off the ground by the collar.

“Stop it, Kawahara-kun!” I yelled—but Kawahara-kun’s rage still wasn’t quelled.

“I don’t know if you think you’re Sherlock Holmes or something, but this happened because you decided to do something stupid!”

Takuru didn’t answer.

“She could’ve died, you know?”

“*Kawahara-kun!*” My cry finally stopped Kawahara-kun dead in his tracks. I could tell exactly what he was thinking. *“I won’t let anyone hurt her, not even him.”* And in a way, I was thankful that he felt so strongly about what had happened to me, but I couldn’t bear to see Takuru get hurt because of it.

After a few moments passed, Kawahara-kun clicked his tongue and violently pushed Takuru away. To think he’d gotten that angry for Nono’s sake...

Gen-san had been kindly watching over me the entire time, but it was time for him to leave. I urged Kawahara-kun to show him out, and I also took the opportunity to send Mr. Wakui home before he could make any unnecessary comments.

Takuru’s cheek was slightly swollen from the punch, and his face was full of sadness and regret. The excitement that had been overwhelming him over the past few weeks was completely gone... and I may have been the same.

“Kurusu, I’m sorry. I...”

“Takuru, stay here tonight.”

A simple exchange. So simple, it felt just like we were a family again, even if only temporary.

With Takuru's help, I moved to the bed in my room. "Thank you, Takuru. ...This really feels strange, you know," I said, a sigh escaping my lips.

"Huh?"

"I'm not used to being the one someone else is taking care of. Oh, make sure you put some ice on that." I patted my cheek to alert him; his own cheek—the one Kawahara-kun had punched—was getting redder and redder as it swelled.

"...You shouldn't be worrying about other people right now," he said.

"Listen, Takuru... I want to make sure you know..."

It's not your fault I was injured. I tried to raise my head to say that, but my wound spiked in pain, and I was forced to lie back down on my pillow. "This isn't your fault—I'm the only one responsible. It's my fault I got stabbed."

"But if I hadn't put up that camera..."

Takuru's regret was genuine.

"That certainly wasn't a very good idea," I said. "But this wasn't something you could have predicted, was it?"

With those words, Takuru went silent.

After a moment, I began to explain the details of the stabbing to him. I explained how I'd retrieved the camera, gotten stabbed by the man with bloodshot eyes, and was then saved by Gen-san. I didn't say anything further than that.

I feigned being calm and collected at first, but before I knew it, my voice had started to tremble. The searing pain of being stabbed, and the unhinged expression of that man... What if that insanity had targeted my precious family instead of me? Just imagining the worst-case scenario made my eyes start to sting.

I had been stabbed by a man obsessed with those Sumo Stickers. If Takuru were to become too infatuated with those awful things, he, too, could meet the same fate.

The two of us stared at each other in mutual silence. However, in the end, I finally broke the silence. Not with anything related to the case, but a completely normal question about a completely unrelated topic.

“Yuto said he got a love letter from Konno-san. Do you remember her?”

Takuru looked troubled for a moment, but he didn’t respond.

So he doesn’t remember, I thought to myself. “They’ve been in the same class since fifth grade. Yuto was out sick once and she brought him the day’s handouts. She wears glasses. One of the boys in class made fun of him, he says. And then Yui said...”

I talked and talked about everything Takuru had missed over the past six months, in no particular order. Everything that had happened in our ordinary lives at Aoba Dorm... I wanted him to be a part of it. Even if it was only just a little bit, I wanted to bridge the gap between Takuru and I.

As I spoke, he nodded along to everything I said... and eventually, I fell into a deep sleep, with him by my side.

For that reason alone, I slept better than I had in years.

Chapter 4 — Sumorbidly Obese: A Second Helping

Soon after that night passed, the Hekiho Academy culture festival arrived. The festival is a very important event for us students, and, as the student council president, I always find myself spending a lot of time trying to make it go smoothly.

The festival's long since ended, but even now, there's a small poster from the event affixed to the clubroom wall.

...No, "ended" isn't quite right. The festival didn't simply end... It was suffocated.

Suffocated by the Return of the New Generation Madness.



October 9th

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the culture festival is the biggest event of the year for our school. And yet, right before such an important event, I, the student council president, was simply resting in my room. Some "president" I was.

I didn't sustain any internal injuries from the stabbing, but thanks to the ten stitches I needed, I couldn't do anything even remotely strenuous. There was nothing I could do to get around that, but even so, there was something I needed to do that was far more important than my duties as student council president.

"There we go. Rest of this should be a cinch, and removing the stitches shouldn't leave a scar," said Dad as he examined me. "You don't have a fever, either, so I'd say you're doing pretty well for yourself."

It was already getting dark outside—the perfect time to do what I needed to do. "Thank you, Dad," I said. "On another note, I have

something I need to take care of—would it be all right if I was on my feet for a little while?”

“What, do you have an errand you need to run? You don’t need to do that—Yui and I are at your beck and call right now. Just say the word and we’ll be back before you know it.”

“I appreciate that, but... it has to be me.”

“Oh, I see. *That* kind of errand. Well, as long as you take it easy, you should be fine,” said Dad. “So no pushing yourself too hard, you hear me? That means *no student council work*. If you need it, I expect you to take a taxi. And don’t go complaining that it’s a waste of money, Missy. Are we clear?”

“Okay, Dad. If it gets too much for me, I’ll take one.” As I reassured him of that, I stopped by the kitchen, threw together a light boxed dinner with rolled eggs, sausages, and rice balls, then left for the school.

It was the night before the culture festival, and, despite the time, the school was full of energy. As I roamed the halls, I did my best to remain inconspicuous—I had no intention of doing any of my student council duties at the moment.

Arriving at the school rooftop, I overheard a certain voice. “I wish they’d give me a break...”

It was Takuru; he was right where I had expected him to be, his hand wrapped tightly around a can of his drink of choice—Mountain View.

In my absence, Takuru had been assisting with my duties as student council president. Initially, he’d said he wasn’t going to help with the preparations, yet he had been working ever since this morning. His voice sounded exhausted, but he didn’t seem particularly bitter or upset.

“From what?” I probed.

“Even if it is the culture festival, I shouldn’t have to spend the night...” Takuru responded. After a moment, though, he realized exactly who he was talking to, and he whipped around in shock. “Huh?!”

“Good work today.”

“Kurusu?! What are you doing?! What about your stomach?! Is it okay for you to be up?!” he sputtered.

“Come on, don’t treat me like a hospital patient.” I attempted to respond to him in a cheerful manner, but the shot of pain I felt as I did so led me to wince.

“You *are* a hospital patient! You need to be lying down!”

“Looks like someone’s worried about me.”

My voice had a slight bounce to it; Takuru was worried about me... When I realized this, a surge of warmth ran through my body. “I just came to check on how you were doing, that’s all. And since it looks like you’re doing your job, I feel a little better.”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t skip out on you,” he said, trying to reassure me.

“Even though you were just asking for a break?”

“Th-That’s...” As Takuru choked on his words, I handed him the boxed dinner I’d prepared earlier. Though the silly boy was somewhat embarrassed, he sheepishly accepted the box and took a bite of one of the rice balls.

It wasn’t for very long, but just watching him eat in silence for those few moments was very endearing to me.

After Takuru finished his dinner, I got right to the point. “Hey, Takuru? Can you tell me what happened today?”

“Huh?” he responded, confused.

“I want to know what happened today, starting from this morning. What were you doing?”

“I was helping the student council. Don’t you already know that?”

“Yes, but I want the details, and from you, personally.” I was staring at him intently now; I wanted to hear exactly what happened directly from him.

Slowly, Takuru began to recount his day. “I helped Kazuki.”

“Did you now?”

“Yeah. She wanted me to help carry a part for her class’s display.”

“I see. Did that make her happy?”

“I think so. Oh, come to think of it, she gave me some dried squid.”

Not the usual lollipop? I thought to myself. “Interesting. What else?”

“Arimura-san made me help her with some pamphlets. I don’t know what class they were for.”

“You helped Arimura-san?” I frowned; it was a name I didn’t want to hear. I held no particular grudge against her, but she had threatened Takuru at the student council, and I suspected that she’d been involved in the incident in some way. And... because of that, I couldn’t help but feel that his words were a bad omen—a sign that the case we’d finally been moving away from... had never truly left us.

“D-Don’t worry. All I did was make those pamphlets,” he stammered.

“I see. Is that all?” I hoped with all my heart that he hadn’t done anything else, but I found myself asking nonetheless. “...So, what else?”

“Huh...?” said Takuru, confused.

“What about your class project? ‘Gero Froggy Café,’ wasn’t it?”

Gero Froggy is a certain character that caught on several years ago, though its popularity seems to have died down quite a bit recently. It's sold an awful lot of merchandise over its life span, however, including the cell phone strap Serika is always fiddling with.

"Yeah. It's shaping up okay, I guess," Takuru responded.

"You were in charge of the video, right?"

"Oh, yeah... It's almost done. I'm doing the rest tomorrow morning. The video's done, so all I have to do is add the music."

"Will it be done in time if you wait until tomorrow morning to do it?"

"Th-That's plenty of time."

"But you have to stay here tonight, don't you?"

For some reason, he seemed bewildered at my words. "...Was the culture festival always this busy?" he asked, the exhaustion in his voice becoming even more evident.

"More or less, but this year is special. The Restoration Festival is close, and it's the first culture festival that includes all three grades here."

While I have been assisting with the culture festival for three years now, this year was Takuru's first time helping with the preparations. That was more than likely the reason why my suggestion of staying the night seemed so outrageous to him, even though it had come so naturally to me.

"I was so busy all day, I didn't even have time to think." As he spoke, I couldn't help but notice how full of life he was in that moment... Seeing the usually cynical boy like that was more than enough to make my coming to school entirely worth it.

"And?"

"Huh?"

“And? How did it feel to you?”

He realized I was referring to his experiences today. “It was hard.”

“Is that all?” I pushed further, teasing him a bit.

The two of us stared at each other for a while; eventually, Takuru gave a look of resignation, then hesitantly began to speak. “Well...”

“Yes?”

“In class today... some people were... kind of nice.”

“Were they now?”

“Yeah. They said they’re looking forward to my interview with Watabe tomorrow.”

“...I see.”

Regrettably, though my brother was as excited as could be for that event, I was the exact opposite: even hearing of it proved too much for me.

Following its dangerous activities at the scene of the third case, the Newspaper Club had been given an array of penalties and assignments; one of these assignments was to hold a public interview with the digital reporter, Watabe Tomoaki. He had noticed the connection with the Sumo Stickers shortly after Takuru and the others did, but the amount of attention the club’s video received only came as a result of the article he had penned. For these reasons, he’d gotten in contact with the school in order to request an interview with the Newspaper Club.

Although I acknowledge Takuru can accomplish great things when he puts his mind to it, interviews have never been his strong suit... Granted, that wasn’t what had me concerned. At the end of the day, the interview was going to be related to the murders, and for that reason, I was fully against it. I’d planned to oppose it using my position as student council president, but as I was forced to stay in bed due

to my injury, I was unable to voice my objections. And since the interview had been arranged by the school itself rather than strictly the student council, it had been approved without my consent.

“And the guys calling me ‘camera kid’ started calling me ‘Miyashiro,’” Takuru continued.

“Huh,” I said, surprised. For a moment, the two of us were silent.
“...Well, Takuru?”

“Well what?”

“Don’t you see? You can have fun without trying to solve the case.”

“Th-That’s...”

I wanted Takuru to try to live a normal life for once, and I wished for him to be happy while doing it. The world is still a fun place, even if nothing particularly special happens. Sometimes, the world can be so hard to survive in *because* of how special and unpredictable it can be. Even if it was originally intended as a punishment, I wanted to help him understand that by having him assist with the preparations for the culture festival.

I just wanted him to realize that being normal could make him so much happier than trying so hard to be special...

“Takuru, don’t you feel like coming home by now?” I asked him. “Dad, Yui, and Yuto all want you back—Yui especially. All she ever talks about is how you’re not there to clean the bathtub.”

Takuru gave a warm smile; I’m sure he was picturing Yui with her cheeks puffed out inside his head.

“Takuru, promise me you’ll leave this case behind,” I begged. “Come home. There’s so many things I would like your help with.”

But Takuru simply went silent.

“Takuru?”

“Thanks for the dinner.” With those words, Takuru handed me the boxed meal, then began to walk toward the door to exit the roof.
“...Fine. I’ll think about it.”

While it wasn’t the best possible outcome, it was still promising. Relief washed over me, but the moment I let myself relax, the pain in my side returned in an instant—I immediately yelped out in pain.

“Kurusu? Hey, Kurusu!” shouted Takuru, worried.
“I’m fine. I’m just fine,” I managed to say.
“You’re not fine!”

Supporting me with his shoulder, Takuru silently walked me down to the school entrance and waited with me until the taxi he had called arrived. I’m not much of a big sister at all, am I?

After he’d helped me inside, Takuru went to close the door. I turned to him. “Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For what, I wonder?” I didn’t quite know myself. Was it because he’d helped me down from the roof? Or because he was finally listening to me?

As I pondered what exactly the answer might be, the taxi began to drive off. When I saw Takuru in the side mirror as I departed, I didn’t see the same person I was used to seeing; in my eyes, he looked like a reliable older brother.

As I sit here now, I can’t help but feel a deep sense of melancholy. Festivals are a lot of fun, and assisting with the preparations makes them even better. It’s one of the simple joys in life—it feels good to help out.

The third Hekiho Academy culture festival was soon approaching, and I’d been sure that it would finally help Takuru understand the

joy normal life could hold. Then, once he came to know that, he would finally return to Aoba Dorm.

But that dream was easily shattered, alongside the entirety of the festival itself.

On the day of the culture festival, despite having requested the interview himself, Watabe didn't show at the time it was slated to begin. But it was only moments later that we realized that he *had* actually arrived—for all of a sudden, he walked out onto the stage in the gymnasium... and then...

■ Watabe Tomoaki

All right, listen well. We in the business call the act of imparting and exchanging information to the greater public “mass communication”—the mass media communicates a mass amount of information to the masses, you get it, let’s move on.

The mass media began with newspapers, and evolved further and further as civilization progressed. Eventually, though, the beast known as television began its visual and auditory assault on humanity, claiming hegemony for an age.

But, with the passage of time, a form of media on the same level as—no, with far *greater* potential than television began its rise to power. However, this new form of media was not satisfied with your average dilettante journalist, no, no, no—the bar it set required far greater standards.

The writing prowess of a journalist. The tenacity of a reporter. The artful *articulation* of an announcer.

It is and always will be a state of the art form of mass communication. It ravenously demands the skills required to operate traditional newspapers, radio programs, and television—all at the same time. The name it goes by is this: the internet. And with the advent of the internet, the news was wont to follow; those who author the news in this new realm are known as “digital journalists,” but those who speak it—such as I—are digital reporters.

In this age of the internet, anyone can become a reporter as long as they have a computer, access to the internet, and a camera. Even more impressively, a single person can distribute information without having to go through an entire department of editors.

However, one mustn’t assume that it is a job just anyone can excel at—the bar of entry to becoming a first-rate reporter like myself is ex-

ceedingly high. Becoming a first-rate digital reporter requires not just following trends like all the other sheep do, but *creating* those trends oneself; your goal should always be to have others pursue the truth of the case *for you*.

The few first-rate journalists plucked from the common rabble hold powers that can only be thought to have been bestowed upon them by the gods themselves. They are the chosen ones, and I, Watabe Tomoaki, am among them.



October 9th

Niconiya is the largest video distribution site in all of Japan. On it, comments run across the videos as they play—an idea that had the capacity to undermine the quality of the videos themselves. Yet, despite this, the idea only *bolstered* popularity among the younger generation, and it allowed Niconiya to rise up and assert itself as Japan's industry leader in the medium.

While its expansion has led to the loss of the “anything goes” amateur feel it once had, it has more than made up for it with copious cash flow. And when money gathers, many things become possible—for example, the attainment of miraculously talented individuals such as I.

“Now, my investigations have revealed that it is safe to assume that these cases are a recreation of the New Generation Madness,” I speak to the world. With the spotlight shining upon me, words flow from my mouth like bountiful nectar as I read out the manuscript I penned earlier. A large multi-million-yen camera—one, I might add, that can only be installed with knowledge akin to a specialist’s—feeds detailed, yet concise information to my viewers.

A splendidous studio, and a sizable staff—that is what makes up my show.

“Watabe Tomoaki’s News of Today” is distributed with production quality that rivals that of even the fiercest of television programs. Granted, I may be too humble in my comparison—after all, I, someone who has mastered command over the internet, am the one in charge of it. By this, of course, I mean that you could argue that it actually *surpasses* television in some regards. The riff-raff who appear on TV have not a single soul who understands precisely how the media functions, let alone one who can use that power to captivate the world as I do.

“But did you know that there was another video that noticed the same thing as I did, at almost the exact same time?” I begin again.

To my abject indignation, that is.

“That’s right. The video from the Newspaper Club at Hekiko Academy in Shibuya. It makes me extremely happy to see that there are young people growing up who want to be journalists like me.”

Even though acknowledging the presence of mere insects brings me to retch.

“If you weren’t already in the know, the Restoration Festival is coming up real soon—it’ll be a nice way for us to celebrate our recovery from that terrible event,” I continue. “As that celebration draws near, I’ve learned that there’s going to be a school festival held tomorrow at Hekiko Academy.”

At the time of the Shibuya Earthquake and the New Generation Madness, I had not yet learnt how to properly conduct myself as a journalist. For this reason, I hope these unsavory murders continue until I can avenge my past self.

“Yes, that’s right! You, my listeners, are very clever, so I’m sure you’ve already guessed: I’ll be going to the culture fair to interview the

Newspaper Club!"

Praising one's listeners at the appropriate times is an indispensable technique.

"I want to hear what it's like to be an aspiring journalist these days. And of course, I'm very excited to learn all about how they managed to get their hands on the same information that I did, and how they reached the same hidden secret behind the cases as me! This interview may bring us even closer to finding the person behind these deaths."

God, if only the world were so kind as to let me hear those arrogant little pricks that broke the story before me say, "We're sorry, we actually flagrantly plagiarized Watabe-san!" What a treat that would be. Besides, far be it from me to call attention to how flimsy of a proof timestamps are.

"The pursuit of truth is the one true duty of any journalist."

Those who utter that with a straight face are the very people who ruined this industry.

"That's all for today's broadcast. What will we learn during tomorrow's interview? And what is the truth behind all these cases? Don't miss it!" With these words, I finish my commentary and await the staff's signal.

Though it took me a few sessions to find my bearings, I now feel no pressure when it comes to performing live broadcasts. After all, being a professional newscaster necessitates such bravery—an attribute I carry in spades.

"Good job!" Much like they would if this were a television program, my assistant director from Niconiya approaches me with paltry congratulations.

"The 'one true duty' of any journalist? Hah," I spit.

“Huh?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Oh, okay. Anyway, look at this. Today’s views are a new record. A lot of people are watching us, I guess.”

“Of course they are. Because it’s me.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” I’d accidentally spoken my true thoughts out loud; carefully crafting the impression I give off to others is an important aspect of this job, so that can prove dangerous. Then again... eh, this embellished mask of mine should only be used on those that matter—today’s staff are mere grunts, and that includes this man. He’s going to be stuck as an assistant director for the rest of his life, so why should I bother molding myself to his sensibilities?

“I... see. Well, I’m looking forward to tomorrow’s broadcast,” he says to me.

Has he picked up on how I truly felt? Well, he isn’t in a position in which he could ever criticize me for it—even if he were, he doesn’t have the balls. He’s nothing more than a punching bag whose reactions I can milk and enjoy to my heart’s content; ironic, considering how he is the one suckling from my teat.

“Leave it to me. Tomorrow’s going to get even better numbers!” I announce.

And I’m going to be the one that brings them.

I know not what kind of person this insignificant little brat playing around in his little high school newspaper club is, but I do know this: he is going to be yet another punching bag for me, just like the rest of my staff.

...No, actually, in this case, he’ll make for a handy *stepping stone*.



October 10th

Hekiho Academy. Known by journalists the world over as an impenetrable fortress, it is a newly built high school in Shibuya. That particularly infamous status of theirs can be attributed to their extreme restrictions on information—something that is especially strange considering how they are an academy made to accommodate victims of the earthquake, as well as those orphaned by it. Requests for news coverage are never granted, and trying to sneak in will get you thrown right out by the many security guards. Even getting in during the culture festival—the only time where the school is open to the public—proved to be quite a pain in my rear.

All of this intel was passed down to me by a reporter that taught me a few things as I got into the industry. He's become quite miserable in his inability to keep up with the modern, information-based society. He complained and complained for hours on end about how difficult it is to get anything out of Hekiho—a fact that proves amusing to me, as I myself had practically no trouble at all getting my foot in the door.

I sarcastically apologize to my superior in my head, which beckons a snicker from me. Regardless, it's time to move forward, so I do so, entering through the front gate. All I do is write my name down, and I immediately have the security guards practically begging to spit-shine my shoes.

"Isn't that Watabe-san from Niconiya?" one of them exclaims.

"Whoa, it is!" says the other.

"Um, I have a pen but... is this okay for paper?"

"No, no, no! It's rude to ask him to sign so many things!"

Practically the moment I step into the school, I find myself surrounded by students. In the age of the internet, a digital reporter lands

more of a crowd than even the A-list celebrities.

I was going to get some coverage before the interview, but I've been effectively immobilized now... Par for the course, I suppose.

Led along by both adoring fans and onlookers with mouths agape, I briefly survey the various festivities. I expected an extraneous number of secrets just waiting to be uncovered due to the intense confidentiality of information, but it seems like this is just an ordinary high school hosting an ordinary culture festival. How obnoxiously anticlimactic...

This won't do for coverage, I think to myself. After sifting through my thoughts for a moment, I come to a conclusion. Well, I suppose I could use this opportunity to gain prestige within the industry... Yes, that's exactly what I'll do. Then, my eyes happen upon a certain figure.

...Oh? It won't make the news, but... it seems I've come across something—or someone, to be specific—that would make quite the story if I would be willing to take the necessary steps to grasp it. I know for a fact that's him.

The detective who's been placed in charge of the grotesque serial murder case that has taken Shibuya by storm: Detective Shinjo from the Shibuya Police Station. He's just standing there, in the most inconspicuous location possible.

He only just recently chased me out of the crime scene for the Revolving Dead incident, so seeing him here is certainly a shock. Interestingly enough, he seems to be talking with a female high school student—an older woman in a lab coat. His sister, perhaps...? No, he's definitely looking a bit henpecked there... I bet I could twist this to make them lovers. ...Not that this even requires some form of salacious scandal—the man is hanging about in a school festival despite not having

solved a single one of the cases that have been terrorizing Shibuya. This is *more* than enough for a scoop.

Fortunately, it'll be simple enough to construct some evidence in a location such as this. I could even use it as blackmail, offering him an ultimatum where I delete it if he cooperates, or diffuse it throughout the world if he refuses.

...Mm, as incredibly enticing as it all sounds, I'll opt to let it slide this time. As much as I'd love to establish some *connections* with the police, that detective isn't really the best target for that kind of thing. He's a clever man who once fought fiercely against the common consensus in a serial assault case, shining a light on and condemning the profiling that was occurring in it. As a result of his actions, he even earned himself a medal.

The reason why I'm bothering to recount this is because it's exactly why he's an opponent I need to be careful with—one wrong step, and I'll be the one taking all the fire. It's part of my policy to not involve myself in such high-risk opportunities. After all, "A prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself."

"Oh, hello there. You must be Watabe-san... I'm hoping?" A man with somewhat delicate features wearing a brown suit interrupts my thoughts.

"Yes, that's me," I reply.

"Oh, good. I'm very sorry I wasn't there to welcome you."

The man, who informs me he is a teacher at this high school, offers to lead me to the classroom acting as a waiting room.

"No, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm sorry to take such valuable time away from you."

"No, no, it's completely fine. Believe me—we at Hekiho Academy have all been looking forward to your visit."

Praise from a mediocre nobody. It doesn't matter what he says—I couldn't possibly give any more of a damn.



The classroom I was led to is incredibly quiet, to the point where it feels like I've stepped into a completely different world from the one of the rowdy culture festival.

My talk show is in less than thirty minutes, and while I already have a rough idea of how the interview will go, the big question is: How do I get the Newspaper Club to admit that they ripped me off? Yes, based on the timestamps, it does *appear* like they were first. However, if I can get them to just confess anyway, that will immediately become irrelevant. So how do I force them to do so?

To allow for a moment of complete transparency, I can't help but feel a little bitter at my overwhelming popularity. If I didn't attract the attention of all those students, I might've been able to quietly make contact with the Newspaper Club and tame them prior to the interview. I still have quite a few tricks up my sleeve as things are right now, but I could have brought them to a heel even earlier by offering them positions as my pupils, something no aspiring journalist would turn down. Then, once they'd accepted my offer of tutelage, I'd have been able to make them my own personal lap dogs, servicing me at my every beck and call.

I have no idea how they managed to work out everything with the Sumo Stickers, but needless to say, this school's Newspaper Club does have *some* talent. Such talent does indeed make them worthy of becoming baseline pawns of mine, and as someone that is inevitably going to keep rising in the world, I must always be considering how best to fill my chessboard with those I can use to my full advantage.

Back when I first heard that I had been robbed, my initial plan was to shelve the Sumo Sticker article—the reason for this is because, when you try to jump on a trend rather than foster it yourself, not only do you merely get half the glory, but a whole host of plebeians always come crawling out of the woodwork to call you some “plagiarizing copycat” with “no journalistic integrity.” It doesn’t matter if they purloined it from you first—they’ll get on your case regardless.

Despite the obvious “danger,” however, I released the article anyway. Yes, it attracted a lot of criticism—as well as outright flaming—but from my perspective, it was like lounging next to a crackling fireplace: an unremarkable swirl of flame that I could manipulate and master. After all, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Knock, knock knock.

Someone knocks on the classroom door. I guess whoever’s in charge has finally come to see me. “Yes, come in.”

Knock, knock knock.

The knocking doesn’t stop, and they don’t open the door, nor answer me, either.

For god’s sake—don’t send some tactless buffoon to retrieve me.

Hiding my irritation with a smile, I reluctantly head to open the door. “Is it time already?” I ask as I walk. And when I open the door, I see...

...a familiar face. “It’s me, Watabe-san,” they say.

Oh, right, I remember now—they said they wanted to be there for my big day. It’s not every day you get to see a talk show on something other than a TV or a computer screen, yet they came all this way in order to attend it in person.

“What a nice surprise—I didn’t expect you to go out of your way to come and greet me,” I said. “You could’ve waited until it was over,

you know.”

“I thought you might be too busy afterward,” they reply.

“Oh no, not at all. If anything, I’d love to share a celebratory glass with you once it’s over. After all, an entirely innocent group of young people admitting their ‘guilt’ will be a delicious note that we should savor, don’t you agree?” As I speak to my good friend, I lay my true thoughts completely bare; however, this isn’t me looking down on them as I do with everyone else—I would never dream of doing that. In actuality, it’s because, no matter what I say to them, they will never post it online—they won’t even tell their friends. I don’t need to worry about the vengeful noise of the internet, nor libelous words in response to my actions—with them, I can exist without a filter and present my true feelings. I can’t do that anywhere else—I can only do it with someone I deeply trust. And that’s them.

“...Speaking of, there’s something I need to tell you about your upcoming interview.” As they say that, they place a large sticker in front of me.

“*What...?!*” I shout, dumbfounded.

“It sounds like they’re going to try and ambush you with these stickers onstage.”

It’s a Sumo Sticker—the same creepy sticker that’s been encroaching upon Shibuya over the last few weeks. Stickers thought to be the key to solving the grotesque serial murders.

...However, something’s different about this one. Isn’t this design the very same one I fabricated for the picture of the Revolving Dead case? Something seems different about them, though... Maybe I’m just crazy.

...Okay, no, it’s *definitely* the same as the one I made for the picture! So those little bastards are gonna blast me with this unprompted

when I go out onstage, huh?!

For context, the boon bestowed unto me from the gods above is the power of psychic photography. I can craft any kind of picture or video I desire. I don't remember when it all started—I just suddenly found myself with the ability one day. A little while after I noticed, a number of big shots wanted a very specific type of photo, and my new ability allowed me to get it in no time flat; that was how I got my foot in the door of Niconiya News.

If I remember correctly, they wanted a photo of the very moment a culprit of some incident swallowed the definitive piece of evidence against him—a memory card—when he got cornered by the police. He would have been caught regardless, but because of his futile resistance, the police were having a tough time making a case against him. So, when I forged the photo of that very scene they were looking for, I gained the trust of the higher-ups.

However, I would never dream of creating a forgery from scratch—I only use my powers for cases that are about 90% solved already, or situations where they'll never land definitive proof no matter how hard they try. I would never frame anyone for a crime they didn't commit; I know how to keep things in moderation. After all, if I go too far, some clever bastard—or the police themselves—could notice. Only a total freak who mainlines crack-cocaine on the daily would pick up on my usage as it is now, so I doubt I'll ever get in any actual hot water.

Back when the Revolving Dead happened, I had actually intended on taking pictures at the scene of the crime, but I ended up struggling with that one policeman...

"You're looking a bit pale there—is everything okay?" asks my friend, concerned.

“Oh, no, I’m fine. Sorry, I was just thinking,” I reply, reassuring them. “Anyway, you brought these for me?”

“I did.”

It seems I’ve underestimated the Hekiho Academy Newspaper Club; their aptitude and malice runs far deeper than I expected. If I had stepped onstage an ignorant man and had those fake stickers thrust upon me, I doubt I would’ve been able to maintain my composure. Even if I were able to explain my way out of it, the illustrious name of Watabe Tomoaki would be dragged through the mud; I’d be suspected of fabricating evidence, and with my credibility being thrown into question, my life as a reporter could very well come to an end.

And when the chips fall, the masses tend to not believe in truths, but in what’s most convenient to them.

“You’ve really saved my ass here. I can’t thank you enough,” I tell my friend sincerely.

“Of course,” they respond with a nod. “We clearly need to dispose of these stickers, but how do we go about doing so?”

The optimal course of action would be to rip them up and throw them away, but considering how large they are, they’ll definitely be a bit sturdy. And if that’s the case, they’ll be far too difficult to tear... Besides, where exactly would we dispose of them? If we were to throw them away in a trash can around here, it wouldn’t take very long for the Newspaper Club to discover them. All it would take is for one of their members to snatch up a bunch of scraps, and then, right on the cusp of the interview’s completion, they could scream out “Found ‘em!” If that happened, I could get hit with an especially damning charge: larceny.

Burning them won’t work, either... Any methods that are even remotely destructive will leave evidence.

I'm running out of time here... How the hell can I get myself out of this?

"Wouldn't it be best to just take them onstage yourself?" my friend poses.

"What, and confess?"

"No, that's not what I mean. Listen, Watabe-san—you're worried about leaving these stickers behind. So, what if...?"

I'll be too fraught with anxiety if I leave them behind... but there's no way I can carry them in a bag or something right onto the stage. And I can't hide them under my clothes, either.

"It sure would be nice if there was a place so inconspicuous, nobody would ever think to look inside..." they said.

"Well, I agree with that, but I can't think of anything," I lament.

"Watabe-san, can't a journalist of your caliber find a way? You're so phenomenally experienced—surely you can think of something. From your past, perhaps?"

My friend certainly has a great cache of ideas under their belt. Well, hiding it under my clothes would be hackneyed as all hell, so that definitely wouldn't work.

Suddenly, I'm hit with a divine stroke of genius.

Of course...! Searching through my history, I revisit the event that permanently established me as a force to be reckoned with in the eyes of the higher-ups—the very case that put me on my path as a first-rate journalist. Think, Watabe: How and where did the culprit hide the evidence? Right! A place that's both readily available and no one else has a way into.

That's it! I know exactly where to hide them!

I roll a large sticker into a ball, open my mouth wide, and thrust it directly into my esophagus. I wasn't sure I'd be able to get it down, but

when I forcefully suppress my gag reflex, I barely manage to swallow it.

Inside my stomach!

It doesn't cost a dime to hide something there, and it's somewhere nobody can reach—now *that* is a true hiding spot. I must say, it's genius.

I wipe away the tears and stomach acid dripping from my mouth; a rather small price to pay for avoiding the destruction of my entire career.

"Now that's the Watabe-san I know," says my friend, smiling.

"Y... You know it... I'm... Watabe Tomoaki... and don't you forget it..."

"But evidence still remains."

In the blink of an eye, a large pile of evidence appears in front of me: a profuse bundle of stickers, thick as an encyclopedia.

"Son of a... Being influential is such a bitch..." I bemoan.

To think that not only are they tenacious enough to collect *this* many stickers, but that they'd use that tenacity to try and take me down... But it doesn't matter. I'll smash their plan to pieces, and there's nothing they can do to stop me. I'm about to become a legend.

I've already got one down, so a few more shouldn't be a problem.

I roll up the extremely thick bundle, stick it in my mouth, and swallow it all in one gulp. My esophagus creaks. Fluid leaks from my every orifice, drenching my entire body. However, that means nothing to me—with this, I'll be able to overcome the barrier in my way. You thought you could halt the first-rate journalist who pursues the truth without end—the Watabe Tomoaki? Well, think again, hacks and hackettes!

Slowly, the sourness permeating my mouth joins with the taste of iron.

Hmm, that snapping sensation I just felt... Guess something ripped or tore inside my body. I can still move my hands, though.

My sticker-stuffed belly swells to bursting. I find myself feeling proud that I've managed to hold so much—the sheer volume of my plump stomach impresses even me. The Buddha and Budai come to mind, and I realize that the godliness of their forms is exactly what I've been lacking. I could never ascend to their levels in such a skinny state, after all.

Every time I push another sticker into my mouth, I feel myself drawing closer to perfection. This is no longer a mere temporary solution to a temporary problem—it is a necessary process for Watabe Tomoaki to reach the next stage of evolution.

“Well done,” my friend says with a smile. Then, once I at last take in the final sticker of the pile, they escort me out of the classroom.

Aah, what expressions shall color the faces of the Newspaper Club once they see me, I wonder? Will they break out in sobs and beg for forgiveness? Or will they simply tremble upon witnessing my sheer resolve? Either way, it serves them right.

The moment I step onto the stage of the gymnasium, the eyes of the commonfolk pierce me; a field of the ordinary look upon me.

Aah... All is right with the world.

Commoners gazing up at the talented, forevermore—all is right with the world.

Lambs giving themselves to the shepherds of talent—all is right with the world.

“Uggwoohh... ugaah...!”

The words I spew out cause enthusiastic cheers to erupt throughout the gymnasium. Truly the most magnificent of sights and sounds. Who other than I could possibly unearth such a spectacle?

Watabe Tomoaki.

From this day forward, my name shall live in—

■ ???

“Watabe said he’d set a new record with the views, so why didn’t the stupid bastard move his fat ass in front of the damn cameras? What a waste.”

“If we’d gotten that on camera and held an exclusive broadcast with the footage, we could’ve gone global.”

Under normal circumstances, Niconiya Studio would be filled to bursting with its many staff members, but today, only two were present at the office—and only for the sake of cleaning it. The reason for this mass absence... was because the star reporter had died under mysterious circumstances the noon of that very day.

“I wonder what they’ll do with the open time slot,” one of the two men said. “Have they got a replacement for him yet?”

“That’ll be a tough thing to land,” said the other. “They’d have to find one in Shibuya, and good luck with that.”

“True, true. There’s plenty of journalists like him, but they’d have to be from Shibuya, like you said.”

“Yeah. Besides, even if he was still around, he was sure to crash and burn pretty soon anyway. Even for a reporter, the guy was way too goddamn reckless. Couldn’t plan ahead to save his life.”

“Mhm. Doesn’t help that his writing ‘prowess’ was a total joke. He was a decent reporter, but not much else.”

“It’s absurd. Any announcer worth his salt knows that ‘articulation’ or whatever else doesn’t mean a damn thing. Seeing Watabe try to act all cool and important as he read the news was what made the show interesting. Like a one-man freak show. Crazy that someone so full of himself even exists.”

“I know, right? But, uh, while his personality was definitely a factor, Watabe did have this mysterious power to always end up with the

best scoops.”

“Eh, I guess you could say that. He’s dead now, though, so it’s not like we could ask him how he did it. Buuut, since we’ve got an opening, how about we try and grab the person running Shibuya News? She’s better than Watabe ever was. Doesn’t matter the field, either—gathering information, putting it all together, reporting it—she’s always been just *better*.”

“Oh, man... I’m such a huge fan of her! Her voice alone is pure ASMR. Voice of an angel, I tell ya.”

The two who’d worked to create Watabe’s program along with him did not mourn the man—they only spoke of what was on their minds, and what they sought to do next. The majority of Watabe’s fans were likely no different; they would shrug off the loss of Watabe, then latch on to someone else overnight. On the internet, where information flowed at the speed of sound, those who no longer transmitted information would have great difficulty maintaining their popularity, or even their very presence in the public eye.

In the end, Watabe Tomoaki did, in fact, become a legend. Not as a journalist like he so desperately desired, but as a victim.

He would forever be remembered as a mere piece of the Return of the New Generation Madness—a far greater legend that etched its name in the most famous annals of criminal history.

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

I'd never known what kind of reporting Watabe Tomoaki did, nor the type of journalist he was—all I knew was that while he was alive, his videos were impossible to escape. They were everywhere, and because of that, they were not difficult to find following his death.

Today, I decided to examine his final broadcast along with a few of his other videos. My impression of him after watching the videos was... well, he was a bit of a slimeball.

Whenever he would give his opinion as a journalist, he would always end with, “or so I think,” or, “is what I assume,” or, “might be the case.” It didn’t matter what he was talking about, he would always tack on words of uncertainty. Through avoiding saying anything definitive, he would attempt to avoid potential culpability in anything he spoke about, showing to me that he lacked any sense of a journalist’s sincerity or integrity.

It seemed others online had seen through his façade as well, as I found many others saying similar things as me about how he carried himself. Although I remember hearing that he was very popular, his so-called “followers” quickly disappeared the moment he died.

From what I can gather upon reading the articles he wrote before he died, he seemed to pride himself in his command over the internet; but from my perspective, all I could see was a man being used by the very same internet he claimed mastery over.

Back when Watabe Tomoaki died, the presence of a certain girl surprised me—a girl known as Kunosato Mio. She had already been present at the scene of the crime, almost as if she had known Watabe was going to die.

Despite being a student at Hekiho Academy, she had the knowledge of a brain scientist, and her current occupation seemed to be whipping along Detective Shinjo. It was through her uttering of the term ‘psychics,’ as well as the existence of the suspicious photo that Watabe-san had created via psychic photography, that Takuru and the others came to learn about psychics.

Watabe’s bizarre death then came to be coined “Sumorbidly Obese” by the tasteless, deplorable people of the internet.

As I looked back through the incidents that had happened thus far, I realized something. In Takuru’s case, Don’t Look and Audio Bleed were both murders that he had seen over the internet. Then, the Revolving Dead was a murder he’d encountered himself, when he’d stepped foot into that love hotel. And finally, even the latest case, Sumorbidly Obese, had stemmed from a request to get in contact with Takuru—a request which ultimately led to a man dying right in front of him.

It all brought a thought to rise up in my mind. *Could this series of murders have been designed to punish me?*

I couldn’t help but think it was connected to what had happened six years ago. If that was truly what was going on, I prayed that only I would be punished. That my precious family would be able to continue living their lives in happiness.

But that prayer was shredded to pieces by a single name.

Minamisawa Senri.

Its existence would destroy not just me, a person somehow foolish enough to think they could ever escape that tragedy... but everyone who had ever found themselves connected to it.



Chapter 5 — The Story of a Buried World

I take down the final remaining culture festival poster from the Newspaper Club wall and fold it up neatly. It is utterly meaningless now—a poster for a festival that never took place—and yet, for some strange reason, I can't bring myself to crumple it up and discard it.

But, as I look back... I come to realize why. As I look back... I realize that us preparing for the festival was the last time we were able to find happiness in our normal lives... for after that day, that horrific tragedy slowly drove us to the very edge, and the past that had once been buried was brought back to life once more.



October 10th

With today being the day of the culture festival, I decided to take it easy and rest at home. I'd pushed myself very hard yesterday, and my injury made very sure I knew that—but after a little bit of bedrest, the pain calmed down considerably.

As I was feeling better, I told myself that I'd be able to go to the festival later on, after dark. Dad was off on an errand at the time, so I was able to use my own judgment rather than his.

When she heard my plan, Yui immediately began to pout. “Aww, really? But I wanted to see Big Bro’s big moment! If we go in the evening, it’ll be too late!” she said, puffing out her cheeks. I had promised to bring her and Yuto to the culture festival, and while they could have gone with someone else, they were too worried about me to leave my side. Some big sister I am...

“If there’s anything you need, just tell us, okay?” Both Yui and Yuto had said that to me, albeit in their own special ways.

As for the “big moment” Yui had mentioned, she was referring to Takuru’s interview with Watabe-san. I could understand their excitement and desire to be there for their older brother, but for me, it was less a huge event for me to get invested in, and more an endless source of vague anxiety.

As I lingered in my thoughts, my phone began to vibrate, informing me that someone was calling. The caller was Kawahara-kun, who should have been at school.

“Hel—?”

But my greeting was immediately interrupted. “Kurusu! Something really bad happened! They’re gonna cancel the culture festival!”

“Okay, I need you to calm down, Kawahara-kun. What happened?”

“Miyashiro did it again— Er, okay, sorry, it wasn’t actually his fault this time, but—”

“Did something happen to Takuru?!”

“Calm down, Kurusu! Don’t panic!” he shouted, telling me the same thing I’d told him just a few seconds prior. “I don’t even know how to start...” The moment he’d said Takuru’s name, I’d gone into full alert.

“Then tell him to call me,” I ordered. “Wait, no—he doesn’t have a phone right now. Kawahara-kun, could you let him use yours?”

“S-Sorry, but that’s not gonna happen. Miyashiro was... He just got taken away by the police.”

I started to feel slightly dizzy. *What on earth has he gotten himself into this time...?*

“Is everything okay?!” Yui and Yuto hurried over to me from nearby.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. Everything’s fine,” I reassured them.

“Did something happen to Big Bro?” Yui asked worriedly.

“I don’t know yet. Sorry, you two—it looks like we won’t be able to go to the culture festival today.”

As I spoke these words, the wound on my abdomen—which had been fine up until that moment—started bursting with pain.

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That night, Takuru came to my room after the police released him from custody. I was sitting on the bed when he came in, which seemed to make him think I was angry with him.

“Shouldn’t you be lying down? Your wound’s gonna open back u
—”

Before he could finish his sentence, I started to speak. “I heard you had to go down to the police station again,” I said. Takuru was trying to avoid talking about what had happened by showing concern for me, but I wasn’t going to let him. “That’s correct, isn’t it?”

“Wh-Who told you about that?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? Is it true?” I pressed. “Well?”

“W-Well...”

“Why are you being so quiet? Could you not hear me?” I already knew the truth, so there was no point in him fighting it. “Should I ask again? Is what I just said—”

“I-I can hear you just fine!” Takuru finally relented.

“Then why didn’t you say anything?”

“I... I’m sorry.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” I paused for a moment. “So?”

“Y-Yes. What you said is... It’s true.”

I immediately went silent.

“B-But it’s not my fault! There was a murder! I had no control over it!”

Takuru then told me all about Watabe-san's death. I listened to him recount his day, just as I had done on the rooftop the day before... and yet, this time, it felt very, very different.

After he finished his story, Takuru said something peculiar. "You know, things do seem a little strange lately."

"Strange? How so?" I asked.

"At first, we were pursuing the case because we were interested in it. But now... it feels like the case is pursuing us."

Those words struck a chord with me—I, myself, had a vague feeling to that very same effect. So, if I wasn't alone in feeling that way—if he felt that way too, that just gave us all the more reason to avoid the case... We needed to run far, far away so it wouldn't catch up to us, and we needed to do it quickly.

"Yesterday..." As I spoke, my chest tightened; in my mind, it was as if all the time we had spent on the rooftop yesterday had all been for nothing. "You told me yesterday, didn't you?"

"Huh?" said Takuru, confused.

"You said you'd think about it, didn't you?"

"That's..." After a brief pause, Takuru spoke again. "I meant it. But... a lot of stuff happened today, and there's something new that I learned."

"Oh?"

"When I was talking to everyone in the clubroom, I realized that all the victims had something in common."

I grew silent once more. The Takuru from before our conversation on the rooftop was back; the boy who would chase after murders, dive headfirst into danger, and wished with all his heart to be special.

Watabe-san's death had reawakened Takuru's latent fascination with the murders.

“You see, they all...” Suddenly, Takuru paused. He was clearly searching for how to explain it in a way I would understand... or at least that’s what his hesitation conveyed to me. “All of the victims had something special happen to them. They could see the future, or read minds, or use psychic photography... I guess you could call them psychic powers...”

Takuru was getting closer to the truth.

“Psychic... powers?” I answered. I was feigning ignorance; I’m sure Takuru thought I found his claim utterly ridiculous, but it was actually the complete opposite. I already knew that people with psychic powers—Gigalomaniacs—existed. And I knew that making contact with them could result in the same horrible tragedy as six years ago, or something equally awful.

I was terrified of Takuru involving himself with these murders any longer. He had infiltrated AH General Hospital just the other day, even—a place with deep connections to Gigalomaniacs. It was almost as if... something had lured him into that darkness.

“If I’m right, this is about more than just the case—it may change everything we think we know about the world. Isn’t that amazing—” Suddenly, Takuru stopped talking and looked at me.

“Takuru... Please... Stop this...” I begged. “Don’t do anything else...”

I grasped Takuru’s hand.

“Kurusu...?” His face was one of sheer disbelief. In the past, I had always hidden my weakness. As his sister... as Kurusu Nono, I had to stay strong, but here... I couldn’t stop myself.

“I’m scared... I’m...”

“Huh...?”

“When I think about what could happen if you keep getting involved in this... that something might happen to you... I just don’t know what to do... I’m so scared...”

Takuru fell silent.

“You know what it feels like too, don’t you? To lose someone you care about... I don’t want to lose my family again... I don’t want to lose the people I care about... So please, Takuru... Stop pursuing that horrible case... Please...” I could only plead. Pray. Even if that was something Kurusu Nono would never have done.

Suddenly, I gasped in pain. My wound had decided to interrupt at the worst possible moment, but it wasn’t enough to make me let go of his hand—of my one true desire.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I didn’t realize I’d worried you so much. I...” Takuru’s enthusiasm had left him; his words contained no lies. “But...”

“Huh...?” I said, holding back tears.

“There’s one thing I need to do. Just let me do this one thing.”

“Is it... that important?”

“Yeah.”

“More important than your family?” My voice nearly broke.

“Probably just as important.”

“Just as important? What could possibly be...?”

“I need to... get my phone back...”

His phone? Was a tool just for connecting to the internet... more important than us...? “That’s not...!” I tried to protest.

“I have to. It’s got the Newspaper Club’s data on it. And information about this place, too. If someone sees it...” he explained.

“Data...? You mean our contact information and all of our reporting? But... didn’t you say your phone has a lock on it?”

“I did. But it’s still possible that someone could bypass it somehow...”

At that moment, Takuru stopped speaking and froze, like a vacuum cleaner that had suddenly been unplugged. Then, just as suddenly, he shouted out in anguish. “AAAAAAHHHH!”

“Takuru? What’s wrong, Takuru?!”

“Huh?!” His breathing was ragged; cold sweat dripped from his face.

He tried to tell me it was nothing, but it was obvious that something had happened to him. I still wonder what thought suddenly came to him at that moment.

“Anyway, I need to get it back, no matter what.” With those words, Takuru turned his back to me, and then, he left the room.

It didn’t matter how desperate I had been—my plea hadn’t reached him. No... in my heart, I knew it would never have been able to reach him.

I heard Yui shout at Takuru as he was leaving, but her voice faded soon after. The very next moment, I found myself tumbling off the bed, and the pain in my chest immediately worsened. Takuru was headed to AH General Hospital once again; I knew how dangerous that hospital was—I knew it all too well. And being unable to stop him hurt me far more than the pain in my chest ever could.

When I had fallen off the bed, my phone had come down with me. With my fingers trembling I picked it up... and the moment I saw that name appear on the screen, all my fears came flooding back.

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I hadn’t been able to move for the last few days. The state of my wound hadn’t been wonderful, yes, but that wasn’t the reason why. No, I simply couldn’t bring myself to do anything. I hadn’t been able to

contact not just Takuru, but Serika and Itou-kun, too, for multiple days.

“Hello? Is that you Non-chan?” By the time Serika called me, I was... Well, I had been deluding myself into thinking that them not calling me was actually a *good* thing, as it meant that they weren’t getting into any trouble—but I was at the point where I could no longer trust in that.

“Serika! Thank goodness...!” I happily shouted into the phone. I had missed hearing her voice so much, the sheer joy I felt at hearing it once again was enough to begin to soothe my troubled heart.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Non-chan?” she asked, clearly concerned now.

“Takuru went to AH General Hospital again, didn’t he? Is he safe?”

“Taku? He’s really tired and sleeping in his RV now.”

I was overcome with relief; the worst-case scenario hadn’t happened.

Without missing a beat, I began to press Serika for answers. “So, what exactly happened there?”

“N-Nothing at all!” she said, though judging from how high-pitched her voice was, she was clearly flustered.

“Please, Serika. *Tell me.*” I apologized internally to Serika as I put a strong emphasis on my words, but I knew. Something had happened.

After a short silence, Serika slowly began to speak. “Last night, Taku, Shin-chan, and I all went to the hospital again...”

■ Onoe Serika

So, first, me, Taku, and Shin-chan got into the hospital through the emergency exit. Then, we immediately started looking for that girl that picked up Taku's phone. But, as we walked through the hospital, we noticed there were lots of people coming toward us, so we rushed to the closest room and hid. The room had lots of metal lockers... I think it was called an au...topsy room...? Anyway, there was enough room for two people to hide in the lockers, so I said we should hide there, but the boys didn't want to for some reason. So I said all whispery, "Taku...! There's room for one more in here...!"

And Taku went, "Huh?"

So I said, "I-I'm scared to be by myself...! Please...!"

So Taku turned to Shin-chan and went, "Itou, sorry, but three people can't fit in here. You take the next one."

Shin-chan really didn't like that, and he was like, "WHAT?!"

So Taku yelled in a hushed voice at him and said, "I can't let Onoe be by herself...!"

But Shin-chan yelled back. "I don't want to be alone in one of these, either...!"

In the end though, Taku and I ended up going in one together, and Taku forced Shin-chan into another locker by himself. Then, all these people came into the room, and one of them was the girl that took Taku's phone. I was so scared, but Taku whispered to me that it'd all be okay, so I was able to calm down.

After that, the girl started fiddling with this switchboard thing, and *boom!*—a hidden passage appeared! She then stepped inside with all the other people and went down it.

It took a while, but finally, once everyone was gone, Taku and I came out, then we helped Shin-chan out of the locker he was hiding in.

For some reason though, when he came out, it was like he'd seen a ghost or something. Taku immediately apologized to him, but I don't really know why? Shin-chan said something about there being someone already in there, but I dunno how that's possible.

Anyway, so Taku says, "S-Sorry. It was an emergency."

Then Shin-chan said, "If it wasn't an emergency you'd be dead right now, asshole."

But Taku was serious, so he said it again. "Really, I'm sorry."

Now that we were out though, we saw that the door to the hidden passage was already closed, so we thought: "What should we do about that girl now?" But when we looked really close, we saw that the door was actually still cracked open a little bit! The second we saw that, Taku and Shin-chan went up and pushed on it as hard as they could, and it opened!

The staircase went down and down and down for forever. As we climbed our way down, though, Taku and I realized something: it was the same basement we'd explored back when we were kids! We went in there when we were searching for the urban legend, Ami-chan, a long, long time ago. It was a really weird place—it really freaked me out.

But the past is the past and all that stuff, so anyway, as we went down with Shin-chan we were all really, really scared, and we kinda started to panic a little. But then, suddenly!

"Stay quiet. Don't make any more idiotically loud noises." It was Kunosato-san, who we found out was *also* sneaking into the basement. "If you promise to stay quiet, I'll let you go. But, if you make even a single sound, I'll strangle you until you pass out."

I was happy she helped us, but she didn't listen to a single thing we said, and then she suddenly decided to start yelling at us, going, "Leave! Get out!" and stuff.

She was being so mean to us, I accidentally lost my cool and got really mad. So I started yelling at her. “We’re here because we have something we have to do! We can’t go home just because you tell us to!”

So Kunosato-san got mad too and went, “You brain-dead id—” but before she could say anything else, *I* went, “Come on, Taku. You too, Shin-chan. Let’s hurry and get that phone back,” and then Taku said, “Y-Yeah...”

We were about to stomp off, but then Kunosato-san finally gave up and said we could come as long as we listened to everything she said.

In the end, I’m actually kinda glad Kunosato-san was with us. The hospital basement was way worse than the last time—people were screaming all around us everywhere, a real creepy person walked past us, and I almost screamed too... If she hadn’t been there to keep us from getting lost, Taku and I probably would’ve both completely freaked out.

Kunosato-san was heading to a place called “the surveillance room.” When we got there, I looked around and saw that there were *tons* of computers and screens and stuff. Then, without telling us anything about what she was doing and why we were there, she started fiddling with one of the computers. She did that for a real long time, so I asked, “Um, what are you looking at?” and she said, “What they were really doing here at this facility.” But then she stopped talking and didn’t say anything after that.

So when Taku asked, “Does this facility have something to do with the hospital?” she got super angry and said, “I told you to shut up.” Or I guess she wasn’t really mad, but still, her voice was so cold, I almost shivered.

Her clothes made her look like she went to our school, so I wonder if Taku had said something mean to her at some point to make her be mean back?

Anyway, after that, she spent a while using all these difficult words, like “clinical trials” and “Rorschach” and “event fluctuations” and stuff. I didn’t really get any of it, but it sounded like the hospital basement was secretly being used for them to do science experiments on people. Then, in the middle of her explaining all that complicated stuff, we saw a picture appear on the screen that looked just like those Sumo Stickers. It was called the “11th Rorschach,” and as soon as Taku saw it, he threw up everywhere. It was really bad.

After we cleaned up all his throw-up, we went to start investigating the place. ...Wait, did I ever tell you about the first time we went there, Non-chan? Well, in a nutshell, when Taku and I snuck into the hospital a long time ago, we saw this poor girl having a strange experiment done on her. She asked us to save her, but we ended up running away instead... We didn’t know her name, but we found out it was Minamisawa Senri way later on. Then, when we heard she had gone missing, Taku looked so sad... It was just like he’d just lost a friend, and I’m sure he’d been hoping she was safe somewhere somehow before that.

Anyway, back to what I was talking about before—Taku and I learned that the girl who picked up Taku’s phone was named Yamazoe Uki. She’d been working there almost like a nurse who’s also a janitor, cleaning up and taking care of the other patients in that abandoned place. She’d been doing it ever since the earthquake six years ago.

When we finished investigating the whole place and went to leave, Kunosato-san said, “We’ll be taking Uki-chan with us, so just ask for the phone back later.”

We found out where Uki-chan was from the cameras, but when we all reached the room she was in, she couldn't really talk all that well, and she was busy taking care of all those patients by herself... Then, right in the middle of us staring at her, Kunosato-san said, "Just come with me!" and started trying to take her by force. That really shocked Uki-chan, and she went, "Huh?!" She didn't really understand what was going on at all, but the creepy abandoned hospital definitely wasn't a good place to hang out in, so we knew we had to get her out of there.

As she was trying to drag her off, Kunosato-san said, "Security will find us! Hurry up!" and Uki-chan was really confused, so she started asking all frantic, "Wh-Who are you? What's going on?" and Kunosato-san said, "I'm getting you out of here!"

Uki-chan was definitely freaking out now, and she yelled, "N-No! Don't! Please stop!" She didn't want to go, but Kunosato-san ended up knocking her out and took her away. We followed her outside, and on the way, she gave Uki-chan to this woman she knew, and then Kunosato-san took us to the apartment she lives in.

Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you, but Kunosato-san was actually Kei-san all along! You know—that girl on Shibuya News who Taku really respects and thinks is the ultimate right-sider? Taku was so shocked, he was like, "No way... Are you... Kei-san?" and then Shin-chan went, "What? No way! Seriously? You mean *you're* Kei-san? From Shibuya News?" They were both *super* excited. She's someone they really admire, you know?

But Kunosato-san was veeeery different from the really nice person we'd imagined Kei-san would be. After the guys asked those things, she suddenly called Taku a 'psychic,' saying that he is because he got really sick when he saw the 11th Rorschach Sumo Sticker. Then she tried to force Taku to see that sticker again even though he didn't want

to, so I got really angry again and yelled, “Cut it out! What the heck do you think you’re doing?! Are you seriously calling Taku a psychic like this is an anime or something?! You’re crazy!”

Kunosato-san didn’t like that and said, “Excuse me?” so I went, “Taku’s seen those stickers at places where people have been killed, so of course they make him sick! When I remember what happened at the love hotel, I feel like throwing up too!” Kunosato-san went quiet, so I kept going. “If something that stupid is your proof, that makes me a ‘psychic’ too, doesn’t it?”

Then Kunosato-san stopped being quiet and said, “No, you’re not a psychic,” and that didn’t make any sense to me, so I went, “Oh yeah? And why not?”

Ever since we’d met her, she’d done nothing but look down on Taku, so I just couldn’t keep being nice anymore. But then Taku said, “O-Onoe... Um... thank you, but can you cool it for a little bit?” which stopped me from getting too angry. I was still a little upset, so I said, “What?! But...” but Taku stopped me again, saying, “J-Just back off for a bit. But still, thanks, really.”

Taku probably didn’t want us to fight because of him, but I bet it was mostly because he wanted to hear more about these psychics from Kunosato-san. After all, he’d always guessed that the murders had something to do with psychic powers and stuff.

So, after Kunosato-san finished her call, she said, “We’re leaving again. Well, this time you won’t be in any danger. So don’t worry,” and then she took us to a different place—the coffee shop we usually go to, Café LAX.

A little while after we got there, I heard someone say, “I’ll be leaving as soon as I’m done.” When she heard them, Kunosato-san said, “You’re late,” but then the person said, “Even I have to get ready to go

places.” That’s when I realized who it was, and said, “Huh? It’s Hina-chan!”

Yup! It was a total surprise, but Kunosato-san had called over Hina-chan to Cafè LAX! ...Oh, I guess it might’ve been better to call her Arimura-san here, but we had already met before, and she called me Seri, and I called her Hina-chan... sooo we kinda just ended up calling each other by those names!

Anyway, Kunosato-san was the one who’d called over Hina-chan, but it seemed like Hina-chan wasn’t too happy about it, so she said, “And you know... Kunosato-san, I told you to stop dragging me into things just because you think I’m a useful tool.”

“We offer each other information. That was the deal.” Kunosato-san said back.

“And yet I never get shit from you.” That must’ve annoyed Kunosato-san, so she snapped at Hina-chan and told her to “Just sit down.”

Kunosato-san and Hina-chan didn’t seem to get along very well. Kunosato-san had apparently called her over so she could figure out whether or not Taku was actually a psychic—I know that because she said, “I want proof of whether or not Miyashiro Takuru is a psychic.”

Taku tried to protest, saying, “N-No way. I told you, I’m not—” but Hina-chan cut him off and dealt the fatal blow. “He’s a psychic. No doubt about it.”

She was so blunt about it, and I obviously found it really hard to believe. But as I heard her talk to Taku about it more, I started to think that it might actually be true. What convinced me was a convo that went like this:

“When you want something to happen, something special always does, right? For example, when you snuck into the love hotel. The door

to the room was locked. So how did you get in, Senpai?” said Hina-chan.

“You’re lying. It wasn’t locked,” Taku said back.

“No, it was. But then suddenly, it wasn’t. Am I wrong, Seri?”

I was caught off guard a little when they brought me into it, so I went “Huh?” But then I remember thinking, *Huh, now that I think back on it...* so I said, “Yeah... I did hear a click.”

“Onoe!?” Taku said in a really surprised voice. But it was the truth, so I couldn’t really say anything else. That lock at the love hotel really had made a clicking sound and opened just like that, and it’d happened right before my very eyes.

Kunosato-san then joined in and said, “It’s likely the ability to cause things to move. It’s usually called telekinesis, but its other name, psychokinesis, might be more fitting for you.”

It hadn’t just happened at the love hotel, either—back at the hidden passage in the hospital from before, the door suddenly opened just a little, to the point where it felt way too convenient—maybe even unnatural. So, for those reasons and a couple others, I started to think, *Huh, maybe he really can move stuff with his brain.* Taku, however, definitely didn’t think so, and when Hinae-chan saw this, she started to ask him a bunch of strange questions that went like this:

“Senpai. I’m about to ask you some questions, and I need you to answer them all with the word, ‘No.’”

Taku tried to speak up, saying, “Huh? Wh-What’s this all about?” but Hina-chan said, “Just do it. Okay?”

So Taku gave up, nodded at her real quick, and said “O-Okay...” Then, Hina-chan started firing off the questions.

“You think everyone in your class is an idiot.”

“U-Um... No.”

“But you wish you could fit in with them.”

“No...”

“You’ve gone to karaoke by yourself.”

“No.”

“You went to karaoke by yourself, but didn’t sing a single song.”

“No.”

“When you were living with Kurusu-senpai, you peeked in on her when she was taking a bath.”

“No.”

“I see. I understand.” After she was done listening to Taku’s answers, Hina-chan gave a slightly mischievous smile, which made him all flustered. “Y-You understand what, exactly?” Taku asked.

“Let’s start with the first question. Miyashiro-senpai, you really *do* think everyone in your class is an idiot, don’t you?”

“Th-That’s not true...”

“Next. Despite that, you’re lonely, and you wish you could fit in with them.”

“N-No! I’m not interested in their unproductive conversations —!”

“You went to karaoke by yourself, didn’t you?”

“J-Just to do research for the Newspaper Club! I didn’t sing—”

“That’s a lie.”

“Huh?!”

“You *did* sing.”

“I did *not* sing!”

“Was it just one song?”

“I told you, I didn’t sing!”

“I see. It was just one song, huh?”

“Uhh...”

And that's when Hina-chan stopped. Apparently, the truth was Taku *had* sung there once. Even though he'd said over and over to us that he hadn't sung while he was there, and that he only went in there to take a picture of the Sumo Sticker for the Don't Look case, he'd lied.

...Oh? The thing about the bath? Well, Taku only saw you by accident, so he closed his eyes before he could see anything. Or at least, that's what he said anyway. I guess just try to forget about it, Non-chan.

Anyway, Hina-chan said, "I can tell if what someone says is true or false. That's my power." So yeah, Hina-chan's power is that she can tell if people are lying. But Taku was suspicious that she could've just used this thing called "hot reading" or something while they were talking, but then, something else forced Taku to accept that he's a psychic.

Shin-chan and I were completely lost the whole time, but apparently, Taku could see this 'sword' Hina-chan pulled out—a mysterious sword that only psychics can see. She said it was called a "DI-sword," and that only psychics like Taku and Hina-chan can see it. People like them are called "Gigalomaniacs," and they have the power to make delusions reality... Something to do with "quantum mechanics" or something? Not that I know what repair people have to do with anything...

Either way, the convo from that point on was too hard for me to follow for a really long time, but at the end, Kunosato-san said something really strange with the most sad expression on her face... "The delusions of Gigalomaniacs, and the shared reality they create, are capable of altering the physical world itself. That's what makes them so dangerous."

That's so weird, right? I mean, she couldn't have been saying that to Taku—there's no way Taku could ever be dangerous.

■ Kurusu Nono

A hidden passage in the autopsy room. Their encounter in the basement with fellow intruder Kunosato Mio. The test subjects used for human experiments before the earthquake. The true identity of the Sumo Stickers—the 11th Rorschach. The test subjects abandoned in the basement after the research had finished. The girl taking care of the test subjects, Yamazoe Uki. The existence of powers, Gigalomaniacs, and DI-swords. Takuru being a Gigalomaniac. His ability likely being psychokinesis. And finally, the girl Takuru and Serika had abandoned long before the earthquake when they infiltrated the hospital—Minamisawa Senri.

Though she had skimmed over some parts, Serika had recounted the series of events to me in great detail.

“Thank you, Serika,” I said to her.

“S-Sure. You’re not angry, are you...?” she asked timidly.

“Why would I be angry with you?”

“Oh no, I don’t mean at me—I was just wondering if you were angry at Taku.”

I did not feel any anger toward him. ...No, it was more like I didn’t have the strength to *be* angry. That hospital was still alive... reduced to skin and bones, and buried under piles upon piles of rubble with all of its sins... but it was still alive.

“Serika. I’d like to ask you a favor—no, I’ll need Itou-kun and Kazuki as well, so I’d appreciate it if you passed it on to them as well,” I said.

“What is it?”

“My wound still hasn’t gotten much better. I can’t do much in the way of moving right now... so I would like you all to stay by Takuru’s side in my place.” After asking that of Serika, I ended the call.

At that point in time, I knew all too well about what was being conducted in the basement of AH Tokyo General Hospital—about Gigalomaniacs and DI-swords. I already knew about most of what Serika had told me, but what I hadn't known was that there were still test subjects imprisoned in that basement; I hadn't known about Yamazoe Uki, either. In other words, I'd only lacked recent information.

I already knew that, back when Takuru was in elementary school, before the earthquake, he... and Serika had, by sheer coincidence, gone down into the AH General Hospital basement. They had done so entirely out of curiosity, and once they'd set foot into it, they'd witnessed a girl their age—Minamisawa Senri—undergoing experiments to awaken her latent Gigalomania. I knew that she had been restrained to a chair, and with her eyelids forced open, she was having an image of the 11th Rorschach seared into her eyes. That the girl enduring the torturous experiment had noticed Takuru peering at her from the shadows and pleaded with him for help, but that in the end, he'd run away.

I knew everything. After all, Kurusu Nono and Minamisawa Senri are... they are...

...This is a secret I have kept hidden for a very long time. If I were to reveal it, I could very well lose everything... A secret so big, it would force the entire foundation behind the current Kurusu Nono—student council president of Hekiko Academy, and member of Aoba Dorm—to crumble away.

As I drowned in my anxieties, what managed to pull me from the depths was a visit from Serika; she had sensed the unease in my voice over the phone. "Well, I was just thinking that you were acting kind of weird," she said.

"I was?" I said back.

“Yeah. You sounded pretty down over the phone.”

That girl always stays true to her heart... I thought, letting out a deep sigh. I really am no match for her at all. If anything, I really ought to learn from her. I want to protect Takuru, my family, the Newspaper Club... everyone.

And so, when she said those words to me, I thought to myself... *I'm going to follow through with what I want to do most.*

“Serika... you said you saw information about a girl named... um... Minamisawa Senri in that hospital basement, right...?” I asked, trepidation heavy in my voice.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Look at this...” I showed Serika a picture on my phone, and her eyes opened wide. It was a photo that had been taken six years ago—a photo of a young Kurusu Nono, Kawahara-kun, and Minamisawa Senri, all in their gym clothes. It was one of the few remaining things that proved that Nono and Senri were once friends.

After asking Serika if she could tell Takuru I wanted to see him after school tomorrow, I spent a few hours in bed mulling over the things I should say to him.

“No secrets, huh...” I murmured to myself. The moment those words left my lips, I resolved to confess everything I had been hiding to Takuru.

I will tell him everything.

While we had done so with good intentions, on the day Takuru discovered the secret we'd been hiding from him for so long—that when he had come to Aoba Dorm, his parents hadn't died in an accident from the earthquake, but were killed in a shelter during a burglary—he had been absolutely furious. When I told him this secret... he

might even be more upset than he was back then... No, he definitely would be. But this wasn't something I could hide any longer.

Suddenly, I heard an array of sounds come from downstairs. Yui and Yuto were already asleep, and Dad had already gone upstairs, so I wasn't sure what exactly they were.

Careful not to reopen my wound, I made my way down the stairs and opened the door to the clinic.

"Who's there? Takuru, is that you?" I called out.

"Ah!" My guess was correct: there stood Takuru, looking as if he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Serika had likely told him what I'd asked her to, and he'd come without waiting for tomorrow... though I *had* expected that. What I hadn't expected, however, was how surprised he was—and that, strangely, the person with him seemed even more shocked.

"Huh? Arimura-san?" I said, puzzled.

"U-Um... Hi." The first year who had the Gigalomaniac power to see through lies, and the same girl who had caused me a great deal of anxiety: Arimura-san. The girl who was nothing but a mystery to me. As she looked my way, she sat down on one of the clinic's chairs.

As I inspected them closely, I realized something that greatly worried me. "You're both hurt!" I shouted. They had scratches and burns all over their bodies; it was almost as if they had just escaped from a burning building.

I took the medicine Takuru was trying to administer to himself and began to apply it to the reluctant pair.

When I finished treating their wounds, I immediately asked for an explanation. "So, what happened?"

"Oh, umm..."

“We were attacked.” In contrast to Takuru’s hesitance, Arimura-san answered me in a manner both clear and straightforward.

“*Attacked?*” I asked incredulously.

“Yeah. By a psychic with the power to control fire.”

I went silent. They had been attacked by a psychic...?

“At times like this, if you try to hide things, it just makes it sound like you’re lying, Senpai. And that’ll only make people worry more,” said Arimura-san.

“Huh?”

“And besides, even *without* my power, it’s easy to tell when you’re lying, Miyashiro-senpai.”

She’s not wrong there.

Urged on by Arimura-san, Takuru relented and told me everything.

His day had begun with him planning to talk to me, but when he’d stepped out of his RV to head to Aoba Dorm, a great number of Sumo Stickers were waiting for him outside the door. Every single one of them were the 11th Rorschach that triggers Gigalomaniacs—not the imitation Sumo Stickers, but the real ones. And they weren’t just plastered around his RV—they had been stuck all around the city, completely blindsiding him.

Takuru ran frantically all over the city in a panic, and that’s when he bumped into Arimura-san, who was also being terrorized by the stickers. The two were both at their wits’ end, and with nowhere else to run, they decided to head straight for Aoba Dorm for help.

On the way there, they were attacked by a woman in red clothes; a mysterious woman with only dark flames flickering in her vacant, hollow eyes. From the moment they first laid eyes on her, they knew she was dangerous.

“I fooound youuu...” the girl said to them in a raspy, repulsive voice. Then, when she approached Takuru and Arimura-san, flames burst out of thin air.

The girl was a pyrokinetic—a psychic unlike anything they’d ever encountered before. The danger she posed was on an unprecedented scale, and she attacked them with flames strong enough to melt the very asphalt itself. The two of them were completely helpless when faced with such overwhelming power.

But, right when they had their backs against the wall, Takuru suddenly saw a DI-sword. He didn’t draw the sword, however—instead, he sent out an image of his sword cutting through the flames; when he did so, the flames swirling around them were pushed back, and the girl was sent flying backward. Yet, once the wind stopped, unlike Takuru and Arimura-san, she was still able to move.

Without hiding her utter bloodlust, she slowly dragged herself over to the two, but right when she reached them... she simply walked right past them. Arimura-san and Takuru were unsure of what her true intentions were, but even so, the two had somehow managed to cling onto their lives, and in the end, they made it to Aoba Dorm.

“So we don’t know why, either,” Takuru said. “But she was definitely after us.” The story seemed so outlandish... but judging from their injuries and the current situation, I knew that their insane recount was most likely true.

Suddenly, Arimura-san began to point at something. “Um, Miyashiro-senpai? Can you see that?”

“Huh?” Wondering what she was pointing at, Takuru stared blankly at the empty air, before slowly reaching his hand out.

“Takuru? What are you doing?” I asked.

“There’s a sword right there...” he replied in awe.

“A sword?”

“I figure you’ve learned how to manifest your own DI-sword now,” said Arimura-san. It was then that Takuru and I understood what that sword truly was.

“My own DI-sword...?” he whispered, mystified.

“That’s right. That’s your DI-sword, Senpai.”

A part of what Serika had told me the other day resurfaced in my mind.

“Huh? Did Taku see one? Well, I think he said he could see a DI-sword, but it doesn’t sound like he has his own yet.”

The dots connected in my mind, and I realized that the assault from that mysterious girl had awakened him to the stage where he could materialize a DI-sword. He couldn’t actually take hold of it yet, but even so, Takuru had progressed.

And so, for the very first time, I spoke to Arimura-san not as student council president, but as Kurusu Nono. “Um, Arimura-san?”

“Hm? What is it?” she replied, confused.

“Can you tell me everything you know?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I’m going to find out who’s behind these murders, and why they’re doing this.”

“Wh-What?” said Takuru in shock. I suppose that was only natural—I was flying in the face of everything that I had told him time and time again. “You told me so many times not to get involved.”

“It’s too late for that now. There’s a chance they might come after the two of you,” I reasoned.

Until that moment, I had been going through my life hoping that, if I just continued to pretend I didn’t know anything, it would all eventually go away... But now, the situation had progressed far enough

for two people I knew to be attacked directly. They were in danger, and I could no longer keep turning a blind eye to everything that was happening. It was time for me to stop running.

...But I couldn't do it.

A psychic attacking my family... The injuries him and Arimura-san had sustained... Arimura-san being there... All those things piled up on top of one another in my head, and together, they tore away the resolve I had finally found just moments before.

If only I could've told him everything right then and there...

"Kurusu... Don't worry about me," Takuru said. He had noticed how worried I was; extending a hand to me, Takuru then told me he wasn't the person he was before. When he told me that, I couldn't help but tear up... and once those tears began to fall, I began my story.

...But I didn't have the resolve I needed to tell it in full.

"I'm involved with this case, too." Having just told me not to worry about him, that was likely the last thing Takuru had expected me to say. He was visibly surprised; Arimura-san, meanwhile, looked more suspicious than surprised.

"AH Tokyo General Hospital?" he asked, testing my knowledge.

"Yes. That basement... I knew about it."

"Huh?!" Takuru was shocked—an understandable reaction considering the situation. After all, the case he had been pursuing for so long was intrinsically connected to someone close to him.

"A long time ago, Senri..." When I said that name, I looked to his face for a response... but nothing. Perhaps the first name wouldn't be enough for him to remember...

"...Minamisawa Senri."

"Minamisawa Senri?! H-How do you know about her?"

“That’s because... um... well...” Finding myself lost for words, I tapped a button on my phone, and the commemorative photo of the three of us in elementary school appeared on the screen. “...Because of this.”

“Aaah! Th-That’s right... I remember. I knew I’d heard the name before... Kawahara-kun said you had a friend named Minamisawa...” Takuru recalled. He was right—Kawahara-kun also knew about the connection between Nono and Senri. In fact, he was the only one other than me that knew of it.

“That’s right. The three of us always used to play together—this photo was taken at around that time.” Kurusu Nono, Kawahara Masashi, and Minamisawa Senri; though our relationship had been somewhat complicated, the three of us used to be inseparable. “Senri used to go to that hospital once a week, every Sunday.” As per the records Takuru had seen in the hospital basement, she was part of a dangerous experiment focused on the brain.

“Th-Then you... Then you knew what was going on there?”

“I was just a child... there was nothing I could do. It was so unbelievably frustrating, and it made me so, so sad... But I’m not a child anymore. I can’t keep running away from it. I have to know the truth about what’s going on. Otherwise... I can’t protect anyone...”

I wanted to protect them... but I wanted to stay ignorant, too—no, I wanted to keep *pretending* I was ignorant... but I couldn’t do that anymore. I couldn’t keep living my life that way—feigning ignorance of what I did know, all while knowing nothing of my brother’s life. If I kept doing that, I would just continue sitting around feeling helpless and afraid, unable to do anything to help my family... but that had to end.

No matter what may happen to me... I'd rather it be me than my family.

“I guess... we don't have a choice,” said Arimura-san, accepting my wish. After speaking for a short while, Arimura-san said to Takuru and me: “I'm on your guys' side.”

“Okay,” Takuru said, giving a short response.

Claiming that it was to repay my kindness, Arimura-san swore to be our ally. She's a good person... but I knew that the real reason she'd offered her cooperation was likely because she hadn't sensed any lies in my or Takuru's words. With both her ability and who she is as a person, I doubt she would've been able to bring herself to work with liars.

I'm sorry. I apologized to Takuru and Arimura-san in my heart. I had been carefully choosing my words to avoid detection from her ability, but... mixed in my confession, there were parts I'd deliberately left out, and... one big lie.

Even then, after everything that happened, I was still...



October 15th

A few days have passed since then, and today, I finally returned to school. I apologized to the student council for my absence, and they gave me a report on the school festival. After taking care of some small matters, I made my way to the Newspaper Club room.

In addition to the normal members—Takuru, Serika, Itou-kun, and Kazuki—Arimura-san, our recent collaborator as of a few nights ago, was there.

“Geh, Vice President...” said Itou-kun reflexively. I could almost hear him saying, “*Oh god, she's here!*”

“Have you started already?” I asked.

“Nope! We *definitely* haven’t been talking about the case, no sirree—”

What kind of monster does he think I am...? I remember thinking.

“Kurusu is going to help us solve the case,” said Takuru; the moment those words left his mouth, the room immediately went silent. You could hear a pin drop.

After a few moments, Itou-kun elected to break the silence. “Huh? She is?”

“Yes. I guess you could say it’s my job to keep an eye on you,” I clarified. Although I was still somewhat troubled, seeing the relief on everyone’s faces encouraged my hope that my decision to protect them had been the right one.

Those smiles on their faces... I wonder what they all think of me nowadays?

Perhaps due to my change of heart, despite being faced with the person who would typically put a stop to their efforts, everyone’s ideas came spilling out around me.

“I was just wondering why everybody has different powers,” said Serika.

“I think it’s because of a wish they made,” Arimura-san hypothesized.

Then came Itou-kun. “All the victims were psychics, right? How did the killer find that out?”

Without missing a beat, Takuru responded. “I think the killer’s using the Sumo Stickers to track down their victims. More precisely, the 11th Rorschach test. Any psychic who sees that sticker has a very strong reaction to it.” His reasoning was clear and without bias.

He then went on to tell me and Arimura-san about his, Serika's, and Itou-kun's discovery in the hospital basement; the various bits of information he shared became very helpful for making further deductions. However, the one thing we couldn't come to a conclusion on was, unsurprisingly, the mysterious woman who had attacked Takuru and Arimura-san.

Using her powers of pyrokinesis, she had been involved in several arson cases that had been happening on the same exact dates as the murders. Following that line of logic, the most intriguing theory we came to posited that the only reason she hadn't killed Takuru and Arimura-san was because the proper day had yet to arrive. The murders so far had all overlapped with the dates of the New Generation Madness, and, going off of that, the date of the next murder would be when the Numbskull incident occurred—October 23rd. It is currently the 15th.

Although there is still more than a week left until that date, we all know that the 23rd is sure to be a very important day for us.



Due to the assault from the arsonist, Takuru finally returned to Aoba Dorm; though it may not have been for the reason I had wished for, I was overjoyed to have Takuru back home with us.

As I began to get involved in the Return of New Gen with everyone, I encountered yet another person: the girl Takuru had saved from the AH General Hospital basement, Yamazoe Uki. She had been taken by Kunosato-san—who had extensive knowledge on Gigalomaniacs—to be cared for at a business in Sakuragaokacho known as the Freesia Credit Bureau.

One day, however, Yamazoe-san suddenly disappeared. Detective Shinjo—an acquaintance and collaborator of ours in the police force—

was the one who informed us. Takuru still didn't have a phone, so I was the one who received the call. Shocked by this news, the two of us full-on sprinted to Freesia, and the moment we arrived, Takuru lashed out quite aggressively at Shinjo-san. It struck me as unusually hasty of him, so I quickly told him such and attempted to calm down. He acknowledged that he was indeed going too far and apologized, so I refocused my attention onto the rest of the room.

Aside from Shinjo-san, present in the room was the president of Freesia, Momose-san, as well as Kunosato-san, who I, despite having heard of her many times before, was just meeting for the first time. She wore a Hekiho Academy uniform beneath her lab coat; as student council president, I knew the majority of the students, yet I did not recognize her at all.

Based on Momose-san's vague anecdotes, as well as Kunosato-san's theory that Ms. Yamazoe was a Gigalomaniac, we worked out that she must have escaped due to some kind of ability, and had most likely returned to the AH General Hospital basement. Although it may have appeared hellish to anyone else, it was the place she had lived in for the last several years—it was the only home she knew.

Unfortunately, the hospital wasn't a place the Newspaper Club could easily enter at a moment's notice, so we had no choice but to leave the job to Shinjo-san and the police. And yet, despite this challenge, the moment he set foot outside Freesia, Takuru went straight to AH General Hospital. I followed after him, of course, and the two of us eventually found ourselves hiding in some bushes outside the hospital.

"You have to let them handle this. If amateurs like us screw this up..." I said, attempting to appeal to him using common sense—despite the fact that I had come along myself.

“That’s not happening. I’m finding Yamazoe Uki and taking her back to Aoba Dorm,” declared Takuru. His response was very different from what I had imagined.

“What? Wh-Why?”

“I’m not letting Kunosato-san have her.”

He wasn’t just doing it on a whim—Takuru’s voice teemed with resolve and decisiveness. But, even so, how were we supposed to get Yamazoe-san out of there? And while avoiding the police, at that?

“If I abandoned her here... I’ll be doing the exact same thing I did before. I’d be abandoning someone again in the same exact place.” Takuru was referring to the time he had abandoned Minamisawa Senri in the hospital; he was projecting the girl he hadn’t saved long ago onto another. Not only that, but he was doing something similar with Kunosato-san—he thought her the same as the scientists that had experimented on Senri like a lab rat. I was sure that Kunosato-san using the word “capture” multiple times in reference to Yamazoe-san had only reinforced this idea.

“A long time ago, I abandoned your friend Minamisawa Senri here, and I ran away. I still regret that to this day,” he murmured sadly. Takuru was right—as in, his heart was in the right place. However, he was still wrong about something.

He should just forget about what happened. About being unable to save Minamisawa Senri. I wanted to tell him that so badly, but I just couldn’t put it into words... But of course I couldn’t—he was lacking a very important truth, and the more I tried to say it, the more my chest would tighten.

I really am a coward.

After a short while, a van arrived in front of the hospital, and two figures likely belonging to Shinjo-san and Kunosato-san exited from it.

“Kurusu, they’re on the move. Can you do this?” Takuru whispered to me.

“Huh? Y-Yeah.” I said in return. I was fully prepared to go down into that basement; I couldn’t bear the thought of simply waiting at the entrance while Takuru went into such a dangerous place alone. Additionally, using Takuru’s psychokinesis as a means for our infiltration would require another person to share in that delusion—it would be unable to materialize otherwise.

We bought some time for ourselves by using Takuru’s powers to knock away Shinjo-san’s keys, and, utilizing that window, we began our infiltration. Takuru opened the hidden passage to the autopsy room as if he had done it a hundred times before, and we descended the stairs down to the basement below. If Takuru weren’t with me, I would’ve undoubtedly run away right then and there.

Just thinking about what was ahead made my hands tremble.

Just moving closer to it made my breathing heavy.

Just walking through that corridor made my entire body bead with sweat.

“A-Are you okay?” Takuru asked, concerned.

“I’m fine. We have to hurry.”

The only thing Nono would have to fear in this hospital is the stories she’s heard. Once more, I told myself that affirmatively, and with that, I was able to regain my calm.

“Waah... aah...”

I heard someone crying from deep within the hospital. In an empty room within a now-empty facility, a lone girl was crying her heart out. “Nobody’s here... There’s... nobody here...” the voice said.

It was a small girl with light-purple hair and a terribly sad expression on her face... No, that’s not true—it was a petite girl with a side

ponytail and glasses. Though they had similar body types, they were as different from one another as could be. As I stood there, I came to realize that I, too, had started to cry.

I ran over and embraced the crying girl tightly. “You poor thing... You’ve had to be so strong for so long... but it’s okay now... You’re safe... So let’s go home now... okay...?”

The girl, Yamazoe-san... No, Uki-chan, was another girl like Senri. Due to the earthquake, she had been taking care of all those who had been abandoned along with the facility... and she had been doing it all alone... She alone had painstakingly watched over those who could no longer return to society as they were...

If Senri hadn’t disappeared after the earthquake, what would her life have been like? Would she be just like Uki-chan? Or would she be one of the test subjects she was taking care of? Regardless of which it would be, one thing remains the same: Uki-chan is far too kind for this world. The nobility of her actions... the purity of her soul... they nearly bring me to tears.

I desperately tried to convince Uki-chan to come with us. Takuru took on the burden of being the bad guy, and forced her to face the harsh reality that nobody would be coming back for her. She cried and cried, and when she finally had no more tears to shed, we took her home to Aoba Dorm. Much to my relief, Dad didn’t ask for the details of what had happened and graciously accepted Uki-chan into our home.

Then came something even more surprising.

“What’s Uki-chan doing here?” asked Yui, her adorable face tilted in puzzlement. Much to our disbelief, Yui actually knew her; they had been in the same grade together. But Yui was confused, stating that their time in the same class had been before the earthquake, yet Uki-

chan didn't seem as though she'd grown at all physically. This wasn't a simple mistake on her part, either—Yui still had a photo from her second year of elementary school to prove it; Uki-chan's own testimony also contributed to the hypothesis.

The reason why she had stopped growing was unclear—all that was certain was that, ever since the earthquake, she had spent her entire life in that hospital basement, taking care of the abandoned test subjects. You could say she was yet another victim whose future had been ripped away by the earthquake... no, by Gigalomania.

As we pondered the situation, Yui began to speak to the apprehensive girl. "My name is Tachibana Yui. Do you remember me?"

"Tachibana... Yui-san... Oh..." replied Uki-chan. She still remembered Yui's name... That alone was a huge relief.

"You remember?!"

"Oh... yes... Um... it's been an awfully long time..."

"Aw, come on. We're old classmates. You don't have to be so polite!"

"B-But..."

The ever-unyielding Yui, and the shy-as-can-be Uki-chan; they had good chemistry together. As his sister took the lead, Yuto was also trying his best to get to know her.

◇◇◇

Thanks to the unexpected friendship Yui shared with her, our relationship with Uki-chan improved considerably. However, the relationship we had with Kunosato-san, who I had only just met the day before, became somewhat volatile as a consequence.

"—so now Yamazoe Uki is safe at Aoba Dorm," said Takuru in the Newspaper Club during lunch break. He had been telling everyone

of everything that had happened the day before, and therefore the story behind our current custody of Uki-chan.

“Way to go, Taku!”

“Mmm!”

“Serika, Kazuki, don’t flatter him too much. He’ll do something crazy again,” I rebuked. I didn’t want him to get a big head and do something dangerous once more; the fact that I was warning the group just like I’d used to showed me that I was right back to being the group’s voice of reason.

“It feels good, though. I bet Shinjo-san and Kunosato-san are sooo pissed right about now! Serves them right, though! Hehehe,” said Arimura-san, snickering. I had heard she’d been working with Kunosato-san and Shinjo-san, yet despite that, I can say with absolute certainty that she seemed to be genuinely happy.

But... only a moment later, the peaceful atmosphere surrounding the Newspaper Club was immediately shattered by the sound of the door being slammed open. Before any of us could even blink, Kunosato-san burst into the room, her eyes housing a quiet, burning fury.

“What the hell are you thinking?” she said, her voice boiling with rage. Her glare, cold as a winter sky, yet ferocious as a hawk’s, was more than enough to utterly terrify Takuru.

“Wh-What?” he said shakily.

“She’s important evidence. Don’t you *dare* get in the way of my investigation!” Grabbing Takuru by the collar, Kunosato-san forced him into the air.

“Hey, stop!” I shouted at her.

“Violence is wrong!” followed Serika. The two of us tried to hold her back, but we were no match for her. Takuru groaned in agony as

she pressed against his throat. I still find myself shocked by the sheer strength she displayed then... and a chill runs through me when I wonder if that was as angry as she could get.

Kunosato-san was furious at us for taking away her “evidence,” Uki; Takuru, meanwhile, just wished to treat Uki-chan like a person. Because of this difference in perception, no matter what they would say to one another, the two of them would never agree. Knowing this, Kunosato-san continued to strangle Takuru.

At this rate, she was going to kill him.

“Let me go, damn... it...!” Takuru shouted in agony, and, as he did so, Kunosato-san’s face twisted in pain. However, it wasn’t because she had been taken aback by his rage—it was because her wrists were being pushed by some unseen force. Takuru was using his psychokinesis to attack her.

Deep red marks appeared on her skin, and groans of anguish escaped her mouth; Kunosato-san’s hands must have been in tremendous agony. Even so, she refused to relax her grip around Takuru’s neck. Even Arimura-san, who despised the girl deeply, was desperately trying to stop Takuru. There was something very, very wrong with him. Of course, it was only reasonable for him to be furious with Kunosato-san, but what I felt was far, far stronger than that—a boiling, uncontrollable rage was permeating from him.

At this rate, Takuru was going to become a murderer.

“Stop it right now, Takuru!” Screaming those words in his ear, I slapped him across the cheek. With that act, he returned to his senses, and Serika, Itou-kun, and I were able to pull him away. Arimura-san and Kazuki did the same with Kunosato-san.

We had avoided the worst-case scenario; the violent fury in Takuru’s face had vanished. But... even now, that terrifying fire still

haunts me.

“Please leave. You’re not part of this club, and you’re not welcome here.” The still-enraged girl had pushed away Arimura-san and Kazuki, so I quickly moved to stand in her way. “I don’t know why you’re behaving this way toward Takuru, Uki, and Arimura-san, but I won’t allow it.”

“I don’t need your permission. You saw it for yourself just now. Psychics are dangerous—”

“Leave. Now,” I cut her off. In that moment, she was my enemy. She viewed Takuru and the others as “evidence.” Subjects for her to experiment on. And if that weren’t enough, it wasn’t as if she merely didn’t care about the people she was reducing to objects—she treated them all as if they were outright detestable.

Was she hunting for the truth behind the murders, or something else entirely? I didn’t know. But if she was going to treat people like objects, she and I would never see eye to eye, let alone come to understand one another. Just like Takuru had started to see her as the day before, in my eyes, she was no different than the researchers in the hospital basement that did whatever they wanted with their subjects.

“Oh, wait, what?! Stop! Stop!” Shinjo-san’s voice came from the door. If he hadn’t rushed in at that moment, I don’t know what would have happened next.

Kunosato-san exited the room in a fit of rage, and Shinjo-san immediately apologized for her rudeness. He didn’t ask us about how we had taken Uki-chan and given her a different home; instead, he once again suggested that Takuru, Arimura-san, and Uki-chan have their brains examined in order to evaluate them as Gigalomaniacs.

“We actually just spoke to Dr. Sakuma,” said Shinjo-san. He went on to say that if we couldn’t trust Kunosato-san, they could all get ex-

amined at a hospital run by one of Dad's friends. According to Shinjo-san, Dad had once been an assistant professor at a university, and he had a large number of connections.

"Dad was an assistant professor?" I asked, surprised.

"I didn't know that," said Takuru. Neither I nor Takuru had heard much about Dad's background before that moment.

"I thought he was just a weird old guy," Serika chimed in.

While her innocent remark was quite rude, Shinjo-san's certainly wasn't much better. "Hey... I mean, with the way he looks, I can see where you'd get that idea, but..."

Regardless, I let both of their comments slide and allowed the detective to continue. He told us that Kunosato-san would have to be present for the examination, but he assured us that he would keep a close eye on her. The man made for an impressive mediator, presenting us with an option complete with a number of compromises. And considering Uki-chan's abnormal lack of growth, getting her examined was of the utmost concern.

In the end, Arimura-san and Takuru consented to the examination, but Takuru had something left to say. "If Dad says I need an exam, I'll get one. But if Kunosato-san starts... uh... treating Yamazoe or Arimura like guinea pigs in the middle of it... I... I'll lose it. I'll use my powers and... I'll wreck everything. I'll wreck everything so bad that you won't be able to do even a single exam. A-And I mean it."

This was an incredibly dangerous thing to say to the detective. There had been signs of it prior to that moment, but after Kunosato-san's attack, he seemed to be growing more and more confident in his powers—something that proved somewhat troubling to me. Regardless, Shinjo-san agreed to his stipulations, then went to leave the room.

But... before he left, he turned around and gave us some shocking information.

Yesterday, two police officers had been assaulted by a woman similar to the one who had attacked Takuru and Arimura-san. Thinking she was a wanted figure, they had tried to question her, only for her to use her powers to badly burn them. She was very likely the same pyrokinetic.

However, what really shocked us was what came next: when the girl ran away, she had dropped her ID. And when they inspected it, they found the name of the girl to be... Minamisawa Senri.

“Does that mean she’s the one who attacked Miyashiro?” The moment Itou-kun said those words, I felt all the blood drain from my body. I somehow managed to keep myself upright by placing all my weight on the table, but the teacup I had been keeping on it fell to the floor and shattered into a million pieces.

That’s impossible... Everything about this is wrong... Thoughts overwhelmed my mind. There’s no way she’s Senri... She doesn’t exist anymore... What kind of sick joke is this...?

“Kurusu-san? Do you know something about Minamisawa Senri?” Shinjo-san had undergone a noticeable change; he had likely noticed my unusual behavior, and now, the keen eyes of a detective were trained on me.

“Um, Shinjo-san, that’s not—”

“I’m fine, Takuru.” Takuru tried to protect me, but I stopped him.

I then told Shinjo-san of the relationship between Nono and Senri. As I explained it to him, I began to think logically once more. Yes... *There’s no way it could be true. Why did I ever doubt that?*

“But her name’s on the memorial for the victims of the Shibuya Earthquake. It can’t be her,” I said, finishing my story.

“Th-That’s right. Kunosato-san said she probably died in the earthquake, too,” Takuru backed me up.

“Kurusu-san, thank you for telling me this,” said Shinjo-san. “The police are investigating whether the records of her death are accurate. Depending on what we find, I’m afraid I may have to ask you to come down to the station to talk to us,” He spoke gently; I imagine he was being considerate to me.

“That’s fine, though I do believe it’s some kind of mistake,” I told him. I knew for a fact that Minamisawa Senri hadn’t attacked Takuru —it was absolutely impossible.

And so, after he had promised us he would investigate Minamisawa Senri, keep everything we’d spoken about confidential, and warned us to be vigilant of further attacks, Shinjo-san left the Newspaper Club. Steeped within the delicate atmosphere of the room, every one of us hesitated to add everything we had just learned to the map on the clubroom wall.

In the end, I was the first to reach for a pen.

“Kurusu... Are you sure?” Fully understanding what I was about to do, Takuru’s voice was full of sympathy.

“Yes. I am sure. We should write down all possibilities, and this is something only I can do,” I said to him. Then, as I struggled to calm my trembling hand, I wrote down everything we had just learned on a few sticky notes.

- Pyrokinetic Found. Had Senri’s ID Card
- Pyrokinetic = Killer → Killer Might Be Senri

Just looking at what I’d written sent a wave of nausea through me; I knew it was something only I could have done, but I knew just as well that I shouldn’t have done it.

Desperately suppressing my self-hatred, I silently exited the room.

◇◇◇

“Really?! Really, really, really?!” Yui said happily.

“Yup. Just leave it to me.” The reliability Dad showed in that moment was far more fatherly than usual; certainly a surprise, but a welcome one nonetheless.

“Yay! Isn’t that great, Uki-chan? He said you can stay here!” Yui grasped Uki-chan’s hands and jumped for joy.

“Y-Yes. Thank you very much, sir,” Uki-chan said to Dad, bowing her head.

“Aw, I told you, you don’t need to be so polite!” rebuked Yui.

From that moment onward, Uki-chan was formally taken in by the Aoba Dormitory. Yui was thrilled, and everyone welcomed our new addition to the family with open arms. Once that was established, Takuru, Arimura-san, and Uki-chan all received a thorough examination at a clinic owned by one of Dad’s friends, and no abnormalities were detected in any of them. Concerns about there being negative effects on the brain as a result of Gigalomania were also addressed, and, fortunately, this was found to not be the case.

A few days later, just as Takuru had predicted, the next incident occurred on the same day as the Numbskull case six years ago—the 23rd of October. Nothing of note happened prior to that day; no more serial arsons were reported, and the woman thought to be Minamisawa Senri had not been found, either. As for me, I simply continued to fulfill my duties at the student council, waving aside Kawahara-kun whenever he protested that I was spending far too much time worrying about Takuru. Each day felt more ordinary than the last, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

Fearing the horrors looming in the distance, we all escaped into our normal, everyday lives.



October 23rd

At the beginning of the day, all of us swore to protect each other, and we were careful to never be alone at any point. I don't know if that genuinely helped us in any way, but regardless of if it did, we were able to make it through the school day without any issue.

Based on the trend we had observed, it was clear that a psychic would be the next target; in the Newspaper Club, that could be Takuru, Arimura-san, or Uki-chan. No matter what, we had to protect them at all costs.

Once we'd all gathered in the morning, we brought Uki-chan with us to the clubroom, and once the school got less crowded, we moved to Café LAX. Café LAX didn't close until late at night, and it didn't tend to be particularly busy. Moreover, if you sat by a window, you could easily see anyone approaching the building's entrance.

"You know what? Arimura, forget the other members—you and I'll split the bill," said Takuru.

"What? Senpai, you jerk! Demon! Absolute fiend!" she shouted in protest.

Aside from Takuru and Arimura-san fighting over who would pay for our refreshments, I found it a nice, quiet place to stay. We decided to camp out there until right before closing time. Fortunately, as I said before, Café LAX stays open until late at night. Time slowly passed by without anything happening, and, while we were regulars, the waitress was unsurprisingly shooting us irritated looks. However, as we all sat there letting the time pass, something incredibly bizarre happened.

“AAAAHHHHH!”

Suddenly, Takuru screamed from the other side of the table, then pinned Serika to the floor.

“Eeyah?!” Serika yelled in surprise.

“What are you doing, Takuru?!” I yelled, immediately trying to pull him off of her.

“Kuru...su...?” Fortunately, Takuru quickly came back to himself. But... the sheer strength he had displayed in that moment was terrifying. Our nearly deadly encounter with Kunosato-san resurfaced in my mind. The true strength that people held within them... it disturbed me greatly.

“Wh-Where'd she go?” Takuru asked frantically.

“Where'd who go?” I said, confused. My eyes scrolled to all the faces in the café. According to Takuru, we had all suddenly disappeared, and a girl—most likely the pyrokinesis user still targeting us—had come incredibly close to killing him. But that didn't make any sense, as we—Takuru included—had been sitting on the sofa the entire time, and nobody suspicious had entered the café. Kazuki, who had been on watch duty at the time, affirmed this with a resounding “Mmm!”

However, his strength from before, as well as the awful amount of sweat trickling down his face suggested that this was no prank, nor some odd mistake he had made. As well as that, I felt like I'd witnessed that same sudden change in Takuru just the other day...

I went to wipe the cold sweat off his face with a handkerchief, but... that's when I noticed that something was very, very wrong.

“T-Takuru, there's blood coming out of your eyes!” I exclaimed. Red blood was spilling from both of his eyes and trickling down his cheeks.

Who on earth did this to Takuru while we weren't looking?! I panicked. If it was just a broken blood vessel, then he would've been all right for a while, but if it was the result of a damaged cornea or some kind of neurological spasm, he would need to be examined immediately. “We need to have Dad take a look at this!”

“Let's go, Taku!” Serika and I both quickly grabbed Takuru's hands and moved to take him with us to the clinic.

“Itou, Arimura, Kazuki, and Yamazoe—all of you should come too,” said Takuru; despite being injured, he was a lot calmer than the rest of us.

We left Café LAX and made our way to Aoba Clinic. As big as Shibuya was, the only person who would examine Takuru without asking about what had happened would be Dad.



“Hmm... no problems with your eyes. Retinas look good, and blood pressure's normal,” Dad reported. According to his examination, the bleeding was caused by a number of burst blood vessels located on the back of Takuru's eyelids. He declared this practically in an instant, without even so much as suggesting a brain scan—something that left me somewhat perturbed. “Come on, Nono. Don't glare at me like that.”

“What if something happens to him?” I said in protest.

“Fine, fine,” Dad stopped typing on his computer and opened another page on the chart. “Takuru, I'll write you a referral so you can go and get some brain scans done tomorrow.” He graciously wrote a referral to a hospital with the proper equipment, and I felt my anxieties ease. I promised myself that, once everything was finally past us, I'd cook him one of his favorite meals.

We made our way up to the second floor and gathered in the Aoba Dorm dining room. It was 11 PM—only an hour left until Octo-

ber 23rd was over.

“So, can you tell us what happened back there, Miyashiro-senpai?” said Arimura-san, asking Takuru to explain once more.

“...All right, I’ll tell you. It was that pyrokinetic.”

“Minamisawa Senri?”

“Y-Yeah...” Takuru glanced at me for a second; my close friend was being accused of a grotesque serial murder, so I knew he was concerned about how I was feeling.

“I want to hear it. That’s why I’m here,” I reassured him, staying in the room to listen to what he had to say.

Now that he had my consent, Takuru repeated the same story he’d told at Café LAX. He had suddenly found himself alone, and was soon cornered by Senri in one of the bathrooms. But, when he had prepared himself for the worst and leapt through the door, he found himself pinning down Serika. For some reason, he hadn’t been able to use his powers.

His voice was shaking. Even though it wasn’t a real experience, what had happened had still left him terrified. How was I supposed to interpret the hallucination he’d seen? Everyone was very worried, but not one of us could find a word to say.

In a voice even colder than she’d used back in the student council room, Arimura-san muttered, “I’m not letting her kill me,” and called her DI-sword. Uki-chan and Takuru backed away, the sword being visible to the two psychics.

“What are you doing?” asked Takuru, distressed.

“What does it look like? Getting a weapon.” Faced with the oncoming horrors, Arimura-san had resolved to fight. Urged on by her, Uki-chan reached into the air and retrieved her own DI-sword. Arimura-san told Takuru to draw his sword as well, but he wasn’t at

the stage where he could do so yet. In response to this, she clicked her tongue, and with a voice as cold as ice, she called him useless. While her words were cold, her eyes shone with the fire of a hunter. “We were attacked by Minamisawa Senri once already. And today, you... I can’t take this anymore... so... I’m going to end this case myself. I’m gonna kill Minamisawa Senri.”

“W-Wait a minute!” Before I could tell myself what a horrible idea it was, my mouth moved on its own, and I immediately drew attention to myself.

They’re wrong... Everyone is fundamentally wrong... But I couldn’t bring myself to say why.

“U-Um... are we absolutely sure... that Senri is the killer?” I said out of desperation, but even I could tell my arguments were weak. Although it was true that there was no way to be certain, the others looked at me with nothing but pity—pity you would show a poor fool trying to defend their friend from the crimes they had undoubtedly committed. “But I saw... I saw it myself. Senri was crushed by rubble right in front of me...”

“Kurusu-senpai. Why are you lying?” With her ability, Arimura-san knew instantly that I wasn’t telling the truth.

“I’m not lying.”

“No, you didn’t see Minamisawa Senri die, Senpai.”

Senri really had stopped existing on that day—those words were unmistakably true. But...

“I don’t know how accurate that ‘power’ of yours is, but she’s gone,” I said definitively.

“That’s just what you want to believe, isn’t it? Or, maybe you know she’s alive after all,” Arimura-san prodded.

“...If... just hypothetically... Even *if* she survived... she could never kill anyone. There’s no way,” I said, desperately trying to defend myself. “Senri... was a very cowardly girl. She was so timid, she couldn’t even hurt a fly.” As I spoke those words, Senri appeared in my mind.

Senri was a very weak person. Weak enough that, if faced with a situation where she would have to kill someone, she would wish for her own death instead. However, this wasn’t because she would be willing to die herself—she was simply too afraid to kill anyone. And I couldn’t help it when some of her weakness seeped into my voice. “I just can’t imagine she’d ever kill someone. It’s impossible.”

“...Seems like you’re telling the truth this time.”

“That’s why—!” Before I could say anything further, I cut myself short; I knew from that confrontation that Arimura-san’s ability was trouble. It treated simple hesitation as a lie, saw through lies even the person themselves didn’t know they were telling, and it had the power to drive them into a corner there was no escaping from.

For Arimura-san, a distrusting person who doubted everything, that ability was far too dangerous. Her eyes would sharpen, she would immediately render hesitation as nothing more than a front for lies, and she would entirely sever the path that would allow her to run away from the truth. There was nothing I could say to her while she was in such a state. If I were to make even the slightest mistake, I could find the tip of her DI-sword pointed at me.

So, in order to protect myself, I directed the argument toward Takuru. “...The point is, if Senri isn’t the killer, then your hypothesis is completely wrong. What if someone else is the real killer?”

A multiple culprit theory had been proposed a few days ago when the Newspaper Club was looking over the incidents: What if Senri was

working with another psychic—one who had an ability more closely related to the grotesque murders?

As I tried my best to think, Takuru spoke up. “Even if that is the case, as long as we can make it to the end of the day, we win—”

“Eeyaaaaaaaaah!” Suddenly, a scream erupted from downstairs, suggesting something terrible had happened. And that voice was—

“*Yui!*” Screaming my sister’s name, I bolted down the hallway. When I arrived at the bottom of the stairs, I saw Yui collapsed by the reception desk. Yuto and Dad had also run over and were frantically trying to calm her down.

“What happened, Yui?!” I shouted.

“Aah... Big Sis...” Yui said weakly. Yui, who was always so courageous, was now consumed by an all-encompassing terror.

“Get a hold of yourself, Yui!” I yelled, grabbing her face with both hands. I could feel her trembling.

As I held her, Yui told us what she had seen. When she had come to say good night to Dad, she’d heard a knock at the door. She then went to check who was outside, but no matter how much she called out to them, the knocking wouldn’t stop. Frustrated, she eventually gave up and looked outside. That’s when...

“*Eeyaah!*”

Yui’s scream echoed in my mind. She clung to me desperately; all I could do was try to calm her down, stroking her head as she cried and cried. But Yui was far from the only one terrified—everyone’s faces were completely pale.

Takuru then told us that... the knocking sound she’d described... it was the same sound that he and Serika had encountered in the love hotel... the sound of terror approaching. He had heard that same sound

in his hallucination as well—something that had happened not that long ago.

Someone had pursued us all this way.

And yet, despite the fact that Takuru was the one who had experienced that horror up close, someone else was the first to break.

“AAAAAAHHHHH!” Arimura-san screamed; with her DI-sword in hand, she flew out into the street and started swinging her sword wildly. “Minamisawa Senri! I’m right here! Stop fucking around and come get me!” Takuru chased after her, and for several minutes, all I could hear was her shrieks and his desperate attempts to stop her.

“Why did this have to happen to me?! I never wanted this power! If only I didn’t have it...!” she wailed into the night. Her voice was neither composed nor calm. Until that moment, she had desperately been trying to act composed in order to keep herself sane. She had seen her one true ally, Kakita-san, murdered right before her very eyes. The desperation that came from witnessing such a cruel death, coupled with fighting to stay alive herself... it had all finally become too much for her. She had reached her breaking point.

Somewhat paradoxically, her crazed shouts had allowed me to regain my composure. Aside from the wide-open door, everything appeared normal at Aoba Clinic—

“Everyone, *look!*” The moment I realized it, I shouted as loudly as I could. Everyone’s heads immediately looked to where I was staring: the complete opposite direction than we were looking prior. It took everyone a moment to understand what I was trying to say—what had just happened.

“Hey, Miyashiro! Arimura!” Itou-kun immediately flew out the door, followed by Serika, Kazuki, and Uki-chan. However, I stayed behind—there was no way I could leave Yui as she continued to sob.

“Everything’s going to be just fine... It’s over now... It’s finally over...”

My gaze had been directed at one single spot on the clinic wall: a spot adorned by a single clock.



October 24th

When the hour reached zero, the date moved to October 24th. Having endured a night of terror brought on by a mysterious woman, the 23rd had passed.

The day of what should’ve been the fifth murder of the Return of the New Generation Madness had gone by without a single death.

Chapter 6 — Spitroasted to Perfection

That night for me—and likely for everyone else—was something I would never be able to forget. The terror of being cornered in the clinic with no escape, and the immense relief upon being saved from that nightmare—it was like being forced to ride a violent roller coaster without even the ghost of a lap bar. If the change in dates had taken any longer, then I believe that I, just like Arimura-san, might not have been able to stay sane.

We had made it safely through the 23rd, and the sheer feeling of relief that washed over us put us at incredible ease... ease that would only be further strengthened by a certain event—one that I would not hesitate to call good news.



October 28th

It has been several days since that night, but it was only just today that Takuru informed me of the death of the woman pretending to be Senri. She took her own life in her apartment.

When I heard the news, I was overcome with relief. With her gone, nobody would target my precious family anymore. I don't feel even a hint of sadness at her death; she was an impostor, after all—she wasn't the real Senri. I already told Arimura-san as much a few days ago, and it wasn't as much of a lie as she'd assumed.

The name of the deceased woman was Haida Riko. At first, we had assumed that to be a pseudonym, but it turned out to be her real name. She had been found dead in her apartment, and the estimated time of death was between early dawn and mid-afternoon on October 23rd. The cause of death was said to be self-immolation, but the cir-

cumstances surrounding it were suspicious; for this reason, it was also being investigated as an accident or a potential homicide.

In other words, the incident, which later came to be known as “Spitroasted,” still took place on October 23rd; on that very afternoon, Haida Riko had already been dead. But if that was true, who on earth had Takuru and Yui seen when they’d supposedly witnessed her that night?

I have one theory that could explain it: What if there is another psychic we don’t know about—one with the ability to influence the thoughts of others as they see fit? If we assume that’s the case, is it not possible that they showed Takuru and Yui delusions of Haida Riko? And, continuing on that line of thinking, wouldn’t it be possible that Haida Riko genuinely believed she was Minamisawa Senri—as she was made to do so? Living as Minamisawa Senri, holding a grudge against Takuru for abandoning her in the hospital basement... all of that could have been imprinted on her.

As the days passed since her death, pictures of Haida Riko began to spread all across the internet. In the older photos—ones from when she’d lived in another city before the earthquake—she was a young lady with tidy black hair. However, a far more recent photo showed her roaming Shibuya with drab, disheveled hair. Together with her unfocused, vacant eyes, she embodied the very image of a person living on through pure resentment alone. Her badly burnt skin and clouded eyes could easily be assumed to be the effects of human experimentation.

She had been kept alive as a different person... and died as one, too. I pray that her mind was deep in delusion as she passed. Otherwise, if even a single brain cell had comprehended the reality of her death... the tragedy would be too much to bear.

■ ???

When Kunosato looked down at the bundle of papers Shinjo had passed her, she reacted with a fervent mix of shock and hatred. “What the— What the hell is this?” she spat out.

“Don’t start glaring at me. All I can say is that, whatever you think it is, it probably is,” Shinjo said in response. Etched on the pages were several strings of numbers—exactly the information Kunosato had been seeking in regard to Haida Riko.

The thin papers crumpled slightly in Kunosato’s hands as she held them. To her, the evidence revealed a fundamental mistake she had made, and so she resented it. It also served as the blade that sliced straight through the thin, frail thread she had been clinging on to for so long.

“I honestly couldn’t believe it at first,” said Shinjo. “But it’s really all true. What do you make of it?”

“Of what?”

“Well, when do you think she started believing she was Minamisawa Senri?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass,” Kunosato said coldly. There was nothing Shinjo could do to appeal to her; in her mind, Haida was no longer of interest, let alone someone worth pursuing.

And so, Shinjo was left to muse alone. “It would be different if she was alive... but since she’s no longer among us, there’s nothing more we can learn from her. If only that wasn’t the case, then maybe we would have been able to...”

■ Haida Riko

Not much is known about Haida Riko's past. Her father's business in the country failed, and thus, the man ran away with his wife and daughter to Tokyo. Despite this grave misfortune, the man hadn't yet given up on life; by using the savings he had amassed as capital, and borrowing great sums of money from many people around him, he was able to purchase a cleaning store in Shibuya.

The family tidied up the shop and prepared to begin operations; they didn't intend to simply scrape on by, living from paycheck to paycheck—they were going to do everything they could to make new lives for themselves and live them to the fullest. The store was set to open on November 10th, 2009... but their optimism was swiftly trampled upon by the disaster known as the Shibuya Earthquake.

Fortunately, on the day of the earthquake, Riko managed to escape unharmed. She pushed through waves upon waves of screaming people, and climbed over miles and miles of collapsed roads. With the girl having only just come to Shibuya, the sole thing on her mind was her parents.

When she finally arrived before the shop, she was horrified to find the building consumed by a furious blaze. Her father was right outside... but he was not simply standing there in despair. No—he was casting everything he could into the flames in a violent desperation; their brand-new office supplies, their chairs, their desks, and clothes hanger after clothes hanger. He was throwing everything that he must've frantically taken out of the shop right back into the fire.

When faced with this, Riko panicked and clung to her father. But, instead of returning her embrace, the man ripped his daughter off of him, and immediately went to cast her into the flames.

But the man could not throw the young girl as easily as he had thrown everything else, leaving Haida to fall to the ground in front of the building. Her father ran up to her and tried once more to toss her into the flames; not knowing what else to do or why her father was doing this, Haida did her best to resist.

Then, right at that very moment, Haida saw a glimpse of a black hand sticking out from within the flames. On its charred ring finger... was a single, shining gold light. It was a ring. The same one her mother wore.

Having given up on throwing her, her father now resorted to violently kicking her instead. She clung to his feet, trying desperately to hold on. She screamed and shouted, begging him to stop, but no matter how much she pleaded, her father's eyes would never see her. He simply repeated the same sorrowful words again and again, like a curse: "It happened again... It's not my fault...!"

How far was the man willing to fall? In truth, his previous business had been destroyed not because it had fallen into bankruptcy, but because of a fire that he had accidentally caused. Haida remembered seeing her father standing in front of the brightly burning building. Staring into the flames, he'd simply repeated the same words again and again.

"It's not my fault."

He'd tried to force the blame onto the rest of the family, his employees—anyone he could possibly blame for the clearly unnatural flames. And now, he was doing the same thing once again.

I don't want to burn... but if someone has to... then the one who should burn... no, the one who should've burned in that fire... is him.

Confusion and anger burned in Haida's mind... only for her to realize it wasn't her rage that was burning, but her own left arm—the

arm that was holding on to her father. The burning then began to spread, and her father let out a bloodcurdling scream. Haida screamed as well, for the entire left side of her body was on fire.

Before long, Haida would reach her limit; but the moment before she lost consciousness, she saw her father—reduced to a jet-black charcoal—crumble away.



When a group of firefighters found Haida later that day, their first reaction was to assume she was dead. Half of her body was still smoldering, and just beside her was a corpse that had been burnt completely black. If it hadn't been for the moan she'd let out, she would have more than likely been left there to die.

After hurriedly putting out the fire, they transported her to a nearby hospital. Victims of the earthquake glared daggers as she was carried to the front of the line, but when they caught a glimpse of the broken half of her body, their looks of fury were swiftly replaced with ones of sheer pity.

As the hospital was not yet operating at full capacity, her surgery lasted into the night. Fortunately, the surgeon attending to her was very skilled, and Haida was somehow able to cling on to her life. However, due to a lack of medical supplies, as well as there being no available donors for skin grafts, she was left with severe permanent injuries. She could barely move her left leg, and though she could still move her arms and the rest of her body, it was all severely burnt. Her face had also been damaged; her left ear and left cheek were charred black, leaving a third of her face warped beyond repair—melted, even. And though she could still open her left eye, she could not move the eye itself—it had clouded over, and now, it only pointed left. Barely any of her bodily functions remained.

Regrettably, though her body had been saved, all information about her had been lost in the flames. Her parents, her house—all of it had burned to cinders. Her connection to her hometown was completely severed, and, due to her horrific disfigurement, she was unrecognizable to all those who could possibly identify her. She could have spoken to them, but, after regaining consciousness, Haida did not say a single word. The doctors were certain it was some kind of psychological issue—likely a form of the PTSD that originated in Shibuya, Chaos Child Syndrome.

Damaged heavily in both body and mind, she could not be sent to Hekiko Academy. Instead, following her CCS diagnosis, the girl was sent without a name to a newly built special facility in Shibuya, and continued her life there.

One day, someone knocked on the door to Haida's room—a place that only the facility's staff would visit.

Knock, knock knock, knock.

Back when she had first arrived at the facility, the staff would knock prior to entering, but after a while, they all stopped bothering. In their minds, the seemingly emotionless girl was likely no different to some ornamental doll.

Who is it? Haida wondered. Curious, she awoke from her slumber, but she did not walk over to answer the door.

Knock, knock knock.

Knock, knock knock.

Knock, knock knock.

The knocking continued as Haida remained still; it was almost as if it was some kind of test of endurance for her and the person behind the door.

In the end, the first to move was Haida. However, this was not because she had grown tired of the persistent knocking—it was because she had something she needed to do. For some reason, she'd had a headache that day and decided she needed medicine. She had pushed the button to call the staff many times, but there had never been any response; she would have to take matters into her own hands.

Haida slowly stood up, then moved along the wall, using both it and the handrail to support her. As she sluggishly made her way over to the door, the knocking continued ceaselessly. Once she finally reached the door, she slowly opened it.

The face on the other side showed a mix of shock and resignation, before gathering their composure and greeting her with a simple, “Hello there.”

The first emotion Haida felt upon seeing the person... was sympathy.

They're so... empty...

If Haida herself was an empty soul, one that burnt all she came in contact with, then this person was nothing more than an empty vessel. A being encapsulated by nothing but false emotions—someone who had never had anything real in their life to begin with.

“I’ve come to ask for a favor today,” they said.

A favor is what you ask of someone who has something to give. And I doubt you’re here to ask for the one thing I have left—my life. ...Then again, if you were, I don’t know if I’d even say no.

“Hm? Of course you still have something to give. You should know that.”

That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.

Perhaps due to her irritation, the headache she had been feeling flared up even further. Her head throbbed with pain, and the room she

had been whiling away in began to manifest a great sadness—one that was far too much for her to bear. The instinctive desire to paint the white room another color took hold of her.

And then, the white was dyed a bright red.

The bedsheets roared in flames. Fire licked the air, yet neither the sprinklers nor the fire alarm responded. To Haida, it felt almost as if it was all prearranged.

The safety valve of the facility crackled and smoldered, before eventually falling to the ground.

“You still have something to give. *Don’t you?*” The visitor stood before the flames, their smile not wavering even in the face of such an inferno. Without even taking a moment to think, Haida nodded.

When the girl left the facility that day, she was offered a new residence—one she did not even have to fill out any tedious paperwork for. Once everything calmed down, she headed straight there—for the overpowering urge to go to that location had been burned into her brain.



The Shibuya Earthquake Memorial. A monument unique to Shibuya, built to mourn the victims of the earthquake. Yet, to those such as her, it served only as a symbol of those that had been left behind, just as she had been.

With unsteady footsteps, Haida arrived before the stone monument. Ensuring that she did not miss even a single stroke of a single character, she traced over the many people inscribed upon it, before finally landing upon a single name. Every time she gazed upon that one name, a new memory encroached upon her mind.

A bright, artificial, clinical light. Herself, dressed in a straight-jacket and strapped to a chair. Surrounded by a number of people who

viewed her not as a person, but as nothing more than a guinea pig to experiment on.

For many years, the girl was never treated as a human being. And no one ever came to save her.

...No.

There was one time. One time when she could have been saved.

The eyes of a terrified boy watched her as she was being experimented on. She didn't know who he was, nor why he was there. She begged and begged for the boy to help her, her words and eyes pleading desperately... yet, in the end, he ran away.

The boy had abandoned her. And the experiments never ended.

Each time she remembered it, rage and resentment boiled within her. The boy in question had grown considerably and currently resided in Shibuya. And, armed with that knowledge, the girl only had one carnal desire: retribution.

She stared at the boy's name until she grew tired of doing so; only then did she at last leave the memorial.

“Minamisawa Senri.” That name was inscribed on the monument, yet Haida Riko's was not. As if to prove that the person whose name she had been staring at on the monument was still alive, the girl who had become Minamisawa Senri took the grudge Minamisawa had held against the boy... and kneaded it into her psyche.

From that day onward, the girl spent her days as Senri. Yet, despite her new identity, the girl felt just as empty as she had felt ever since the earthquake struck. All she would do was devote every spare moment she had attempting to find “them,” until one day, she finally did.

“Foooound... you...” Minamisawa murmured. Stumbling back on all fours before her was a male high schooler with similar features to

what the girl had seen several years ago. He was, without a doubt, the boy who had abandoned her. An overjoyed grin stretched across her face—she had finally been able to meet the boy she had seen so many years ago. In that moment, Minamisawa knew that the only method to deliver retribution for Senri... was his death.

Likely due to the experience she had gained from manipulating her powers prior to then, she could easily direct her flames wherever she wished. With that newfound control, she attacked the target of her grudge.

An image of the boy and the high school girl accompanying him turning to ashes in mere seconds appeared in her mind, and with that, Minamisawa's flames flared brightly. And yet, for some inconceivable reason, every time she thought for sure she had burnt them to cinders, the flames would avoid them right before they were sure to connect. Her frustration at not being able to control her flames morphed into an even stronger hatred, which soon began to spill forth from her mouth.

As she continued her assault, suddenly, Minamisawa saw something—an object she had never seen before; an existence she had no memory of; a shape that should never have appeared.

A sword.

It floated between her and the boy, almost as if it was attempting to shield him from her. Then, just as suddenly, the flames she had brought forth rebelled against their master and surrounded her. Overwhelmed by her own flames, Minamisawa was then blown backward by an unexpected gust of wind. A thin layer of flames coated her body upon landing, but to her, this level of heat was akin only to a gentle rest beside the fireplace.

Minamisawa rose to her feet. They had now wasted their last chance to escape—the boy, who must have done something, and the

terrified girl by his side, who could do nothing but tremble in fear. Grinning maniacally, Minamisawa drew close to her targets—targets that looked as if they could simply die from sheer terror at any moment.

The time to get her revenge had finally arrived. And yet, right before she could finally claim it, Minamisawa's legs went against her will and walked straight past the boy. But it wasn't just her legs—her entire body rejected her desire to end the boy's life. There was a disconnect between the girl's thoughts and her will.

She walked and walked, until eventually, their forms had completely disappeared from sight, and she heard them flee behind her. And with that, Minamisawa collapsed on the spot—for the headache that had been assaulting her for all this time had reached a severity she could no longer bear.



Despite having let her sworn enemy go, Minamisawa continued to wander Shibuya every day. But this was not so she could continue pursuing the boy—she simply continued to drag her body across the street.

Why am I doing this?

She couldn't understand her own motivations. Her thoughts. All she knew was that a strange sense of purpose was subconsciously urging her body onward.

The next time she became fully conscious was when two police officers called out to her. But, when she turned around to respond to their call, one of the police officers was already ablaze. It was no longer a simple divide between her thoughts and her will this time—something else had taken control and forced her to act.

What the hell am I doing?! her mind cried out. But before she could question herself any further, the other police officer attempted to apprehend her. In the brief struggle that ensued, a card fell from Minamisawa's pocket, before she at last managed to blow the officer off of her with her flames.

With the two men burning alive behind her, Minamisawa left to go elsewhere; the two men's haunting screams of suffering did not reach her.

She had not even realized that Minamisawa's ID had been in her pocket. Yet, the moment she had dropped it in the struggle, it was like some kind of switch had gone off inside her brain. To her, it was like *something* was moving her, but the sensation was much stronger than what she had felt during her encounter with the boy the other day. She didn't have a clue what it was.

All she knew was that the end was near.



October 23rd

Carrying a long iron rod she stole from a construction site, Minamisawa returns to the apartment that was provided to her along with her clothes. The room only has the bare necessities required to survive, but the life she's lived within it has still been quite vibrant. An image of a pure-white room with nothing but a bed occasionally flashes into her mind, but nothing ever comes of it.

It has only been a few months since she first came to live here, but the room has become very much lived in. Standing in the center of it, Minamisawa raises the iron rod—one that is even taller than she is—with trembling hands.

With this, I will be complete.

She is a vengeful spirit, and yet, despite her sole desire remaining unfulfilled, she is choosing death. Despite the presence of such a contradiction, she will soon swallow that very contradiction whole—nullifying it—along with the iron pole she carries.

For the first time in a very long while, she catches a glimpse of *that person*. They are standing in a building across the street, staring through a window in order to ensure that the conclusion to Minamisawa's story is reached.

Minamisawa smiles back at them, and her mouth, widened by her smile, begins to stretch even further. Using all of her strength, she pushes the iron pole into her mouth, down her throat, and through her esophagus. It does not travel through her perfectly, as it has the habit of scraping against the esophagus's flesh, but it is not enough to stop her from continuing. Her large, nebulous headache—one that has been a daily obstacle for her—is soon overtaken by an intense pain that is sharp, yet dull at the same time.

The moment she feels the rod pierce through something that is either her lungs, her stomach, or her heart, the girl remembers that she is not Minamisawa Senri, but Haida Riko. She was forced to play the role of someone else—used until she was ready to be thrown away. And now, she is going to die in one of the most horrific ways possible.

In the face of this monstrous reality, the emotion Haida feels toward the person who is watching her death... is gratitude.

Ever since this terrifying, cursed power manifested within her, she had been slowly rotting away in a corner of Shibuya as nothing more than a nameless nobody. And yet, *that person* granted her a name, opportunities, and a role to fulfill. Because of her, Haida bought lunch one day at a convenience store. To an ordinary person, this

would mean nothing—but for a girl that had given up on everything, it finally felt like she was alive again.

Living on her own in Shibuya, taking action with a goal in mind, and wielding her pyrokinesis to her heart's content—that is everything Haida ever wished for. After all, her father was not burnt to cinders by accident—he simply loved setting things aflame. And his daughter is no different.

Haida confined herself to that hospital room without the courage to step out into the world ever again, and now, she can feel nothing but gratitude toward the person that found her and offered her a second chance at life.

"Ahaha... AHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Her throat has already been torn to shreds, and layers upon layers of her intestines have been penetrated. Yet, though she should have long since lost her voice, Haida, Minamisawa—she no longer knows which—laughs happily through her tears.

And then, with her final gasp of air, flames pour from her hands, engulfing her entire body in a blazing inferno. She rejected this end for herself six years ago, but now, she welcomes her death with open arms.

For Haida Riko, being Minamisawa Senri was nothing but a blessing.

■ ???

At last, Kunosato finished checking all the names and companies that had been written on the stack of papers. As she surveyed it all, she came to realize that the list was entirely real, and that she had been defeated. “Who could have guessed...” she murmured.

“I can’t believe it either,” agreed Shinjo, having already checked the papers prior to her.

“To think Haida Riko was actually earning her own living expenses...”

The source of the funds Haida had been using to live alone—Kunosato had believed she could trace the mysterious source of money back to the Committee, whom she had been hunting for so long. However, this plan of hers had been swiftly trampled upon in the face of a very intriguing truth.

“There’s a lot of jobs you can do from home these days,” said Shinjo. “The company on that receipt is an agency that’ll get you set up with a job you can work from home.”

“You’re telling me they gave a job to someone of not just unknown origins, but who wasn’t even sure of their own identity? That’s asinine.”

“There’s nothing bizarre about that—there’s plenty of companies out there that simply don’t care about who they’re hiring. Then again, I suppose I should tell you that I *did* report this to another department.”

“Fair enough,” Kunosato admitted. “But I don’t understand—what’s with the part about the cold-calling? That room showed no signs of a telephone, and we definitely didn’t recover one.”

“Maybe the company lent her a cell phone. Or maybe she commuted to an office during the day,” Shinjo theorized.

“It’s a minor thing, but it still bothers me. This is such a pain in the ass...”

Their irritations weren’t because they lacked the manpower to investigate, but because it didn’t seem like there was anything that would lead them to the truth behind the case. Wondering whether he should simply go in and do it himself, Shinjo found himself sighing. “Come to think of it, you said something that piqued my interest earlier: Is there really a way to check when Haida Riko became Minamisawa Senri?”

“You’re the one who hung up,” said Kunosato.

“What was I supposed to do? Someone called me out of the blue—I didn’t know who it was.”

Kunosato snorted. *Someone’s great at their job. You’d make for a great mediator*, she thought to herself. *It probably wasn’t even anyone important.* Regardless of who had interrupted them, Kunosato had only been able to make irritating guesses in the meantime.

“Those eyes are God’s eyes.”

As he tried to ignore Kunosato, Shinjo’s ears picked up on her whisper. “Isn’t that...”

“Yeah. Comes from the ‘Whose eyes are those eyes?’ thing people said back during the New Generation Madness. You could say it’s the Return of New Gen’s version of it.”

A trendy phrase that had become popular along with the Sumo Stickers. However, unlike the ‘Whose eyes are those eyes?’ phrase that had led to the truth of the original New Gen, the new phrase was a mere imitation. It held no actual meaning; it was a fad and nothing more.

“Even if she was still alive, after having her brain influenced over such a long period of time, there’s a very high chance that the implanted personality of Minamisawa fused with Haida’s own,” said

Kunosato. “The chance of us finding *any* third party that can answer all our questions is basically zero. As long as Haida moved according to their objectives, the person who implanted the Minamisawa personality wouldn’t have cared whether she was acting as Minamisawa or Haida. That’s why I doubt that even they fully grasped what that girl had become.”

“So what you’re saying is, nobody would know?”

“I told you already: ‘Those eyes are God’s eyes.’ Only someone who can look down on the world from God’s perspective would know.” Mio paused for a moment, before sneering. “...No, maybe even God doesn’t know the truth here.”

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

When I heard of the death of the Senri who had attacked Takuru and terrified Yui, I was relieved. I had already known she wasn't the real Senri, and while the mystery of her true identity still remained, at least there was no longer anyone who would lay a hand on my family. And that, I was grateful for.

Back then, I should have proved that she wasn't the real Senri. Then, we and the police would have immediately suspected the existence of an accomplice—one who had turned Haida Riko into an imitation of Senri. But... I failed to do so.

In regards to the fake Senri, I don't think it would be wrong to say that I might have even been glad she was dead—that Senri was no longer of this world. Because of both the fake Senri and Arimura-san's ability, her supposed death had been growing more and more suspicious. However, with Haida Riko committing suicide while acting as Senri, the threat immediately in front of us disappeared, and, beginning with Arimura-san, the others stopped pursuing her.

Haida Riko had exposed Senri's death to the world. I clung to that as truth, and in the process, escaped into a comfortable lie—one that would be free of any pain.

But... as a result of that lie, we—my family—would suffer the greatest tragedy of all: the sixth incident of the Return of the New Generation Madness.

And in that incident, I lost something very important to me.

Chapter 7 — A Major View into Minor Indiscretion

A scrunched-up sticky note is lying in the corner of the clubroom, next to the trash can. I assume someone tried to put it on the board, but then went to throw it away instead. I don't know who.

I retrieve the note and throw it into the trash can. But, before it can leave my hand, I see what was written on it.

“Minor Indiscretion.”

The popular name of the incident that occurred after Haida Riko's death, as well as the latest one pertaining to the Return of New Gen. That case happened very recently, and the perpetrator has already been arrested. I suspect that it may be the closest incident to the truth behind the Return of the New Generation Madness.

But... when it comes to this case, every time I see the disgusting, irresponsible spread of information on the internet... it feels like my heart might break. All the cases before now were also teeming with slander, horrible jokes, people spreading theories for clout, and whatever else made up the worst of humanity. All those times, I'd feel this awful pang in my chest, but...

...this time...



October 24th

Today, I decided to take a break from school and stayed home. Aside from Arimura-san, I was the only one to do so, even though everyone had stayed up very late the night prior. We were all still struggling to recover from the failed attack by Senri, so no one had been able to get a good night's rest. Arimura-san had been pushed to her limit, and Yui was consumed by terror from having seen the attacker directly. That's why I stayed home—to look after them.

The two girls were both physically and mentally exhausted, but with the relief that came from having survived, as well as having Uki-chan around to comfort them, it was nothing they wouldn't be able to recover from.

The fake Senri still hadn't been caught, but there was still plenty of time until October 28th, the day when the next case would likely occur. Even though I knew we were simply delaying the inevitable, I was able to relax for the first time in a while.

...Which is why I was at a complete loss when Takuru said this to Yui:

"Hey, Yui?" he called out to her, having come home from school early.

"Hm?" she responded inquisitively.

"I know you probably don't want to remember a lot about last night, but... did you see Arimura and Yamazoe holding something in their hands?"

What on earth is he talking about? I remember thinking.

"Did you see them holding things that looked like swords?" he rephrased.

"Swords..."

"Takuru?! What are you saying?!" I asked incredulously. "Yui? You didn't see anything like that, right?" I was so agitated, I realized I was choking on my words.

"N-Nope. I didn't see anything. Not at all."

Yui was lying.

Takuru turned to Uki-chan and asked her to draw her DI-sword in order to make sure. I immediately shouted at them to stop as I pulled Yui in close to me, hugging her tightly. I didn't want her to see it—no, I *couldn't* let her see it.

But I couldn't stop it.

The sword appeared from empty air, and... Yui's eyes were drawn to it. Her eyes went straight to the DI-sword Uki-chan had retrieved from the Dirac sea.

"Y-You can see it, Yui?" I asked her in despair, and Yui fell silent. I asked again, "Can you see it?" but I already knew the answer. And no matter how many times I asked, I would never be able to change it. But... even still, I...

Tears began to flow from Yui's eyes, and then... she nodded.

"Th-This... This can't be happening..." I choked out, trying my best not to burst into tears.

Takuru had likely realized it at school. Why Yui had been attacked the night before. The culprit behind the murders was targeting psychics—that was the easiest conclusion to reach based on everything we knew. And Yui had been targeted by the assailant last night.

Yui was a psychic.

The peace I had felt for only a fleeting moment was instantly replaced with an intense anxiety. But instead of letting it show, I quickly put a smile on my face and acted as cheerful as I could. I didn't want Yui to be scared.

Eventually, this approach seemed to finally work on her, and she gradually began to calm down. Yui was a much more mature, strong, and brave young girl than any of us had ever realized.

We spoke briefly to her about psychics and their abilities, and we listened to what Yui had to say in response. As she detailed her experiences, there were two things I came to be grateful for. The first was what her ability turned out to be: in all likelihood, it was the power to communicate telepathically with Yuto.

“When he’s in trouble, I can hear his voice,” she told us. Whenever she heard Yuto’s voice screaming out for her, she would always run over and find that he actually was in some kind of peril. It was a fitting ability for Yui, a girl who never strayed far from her little brother and never stopped thinking about him. It did not bring any suffering onto her like Arimura-san’s ability did, nor was it dangerous like the self-proclaimed Senri’s ability. It was an entirely safe power to have.

But, if that was true, that would mean that *Yuto* was the sender, not Yui. Realizing this oddity, we checked to see if he would react to being shown a DI-sword, but he wasn’t able to see it. With that, a great deal of weight was lifted off of my chest.

Yuto wouldn’t be targeted... For Takuru and I, and most of all, Yui, that was the ray of hope shining through the darkness.

However, not long after, we learned of something else—something that was not necessarily *fortunate* like the previous thing, though it at least meant my family wouldn’t be exposed to danger any longer.

We learned that Minamisawa Senri had died.

She had burned to death in her own apartment, and it had been by her own hand. The moment I heard that, I felt a great number of things: joy that my family had been saved, a slight misery at how it had ended, and sympathy toward the woman who had been forced to die as Senri. All those feelings mixed together inside my heart, and I had no idea what emotion I truly should have been feeling.

In the end, for a reason that not even I know, I chose the path that took advantage of others’ sympathy. From that day onward, I would live out my day-to-day life waiting for the cases to fade away, all while averting my eyes from the truth.



October 28th

After listening to Kawahara-kun's pleas—though they were more akin to blubbering than anything convincing—I decided to spend some time away from the Newspaper Club, instead choosing to attend to my duties as student council president in the student council room.

My life had changed quite a lot over the past several days. I had a mountain's worth of work to do, yet, for some reason, I found that more amusing than intimidating.

Today is October 28th, meaning five days have passed since that night of terror. I have been taking a lot of time off even before my life was upended, however, so it was only natural that I had so much work to get through. Because of that, I had to go well beyond what my usual quota would be for the day; if I can keep up such a pace over the next few weeks, I might even be able to go back to visiting the Newspaper Club.

Before long, the sun shining upon the winter day set. With the night descending, I gathered up my things and went to check to see if anyone was still in the Newspaper Club room. Arriving there shortly, I looked around. At first, I thought no one was there, but...

"Kazuki," I said toward the single light shining in the darkness.

"Mmm?"

"I won't tell you to quit your game right this instant and go home, but at least turn the lights on when it gets dark outside."

"Mmm."

She was playing the online game *ESO2* on the clubroom computer. As for why I was so lenient... Kazuki rarely spoke, and she tended to be very difficult to understand... yet she had stuck by us all this time, even as our lives were thrown into disarray by the Return of

New Gen. Knowing all the support she had given us, it would be ungrateful of me to act like a nagging mother telling her she should only play games for an hour a day. ...Then again, maybe I should've been—while Kazuki might contribute to our club on occasion, she's always back to playing her games the moment she has the opportunity.

As I stood in the clubroom, I mused that nothing in it had changed since the club's inception... but I was wrong. One thing *had* changed: the map of Shibuya that had been covering the entirety of the bulletin board was now gone.

Covered from top to bottom with sticky notes and photographs, it'd first been used out of mere curiosity, until eventually it became a tool for self-defense out of sheer necessity. Everyone had contributed their own theories on the Return of New Gen in this clubroom, and they had all been tacked onto that map. I'm sure they had removed it out of consideration for me since my best friend had passed, but, above all else, the removal of that map symbolized the fact that it was finally all over, and a great feeling of relief accompanied that fact.

When I went to leave the room, instead of turning the lights off, I flicked them on instead. "Be safe now, Kazuki," I told her on my way out.

"Mm," she mumbled back; without taking her eyes off of the computer, she gave me a slight wave. I knew that was simply the kind of girl she was, so I was satisfied with that simple goodbye.

But, right as I placed my hand on the doorknob, it suddenly burst open with enough force to almost break it.

"Kurusu?! Are you all right?! Kurusu!"

"Kawahara-kun?!" I shouted in shock. Kawahara-kun, whom I should have already parted with for the day in the student council

room, frantically entered the clubroom. “Wh-What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Don’t worry about me! Just look! It’s bad—real bad!” With an incredibly agitated expression, he showed me his PokeCom.

“What are you trying to—” But when I saw what he was trying to show me, I couldn’t help but gasp.

The names of Minamisawa Senri and Haida Riko, which the police hadn’t yet publicly announced, were spreading online like wildfire. Pictures taken from the apartment’s surveillance camera had also been uploaded—pictures that even I, someone who is very much connected to everything, hadn’t seen.

Various details about the crimes accompanied the images and names, but I only recognized a few of the things I saw as truths, while the rest was nothing but flagrant misinformation. If @channel was to be believed, Kurusu Nono was guilty of aiding and abetting homicide, and was currently detained at the Shibuya Police Station.

“Mmm!?” Having been shaken by Kawahara-kun’s angry glare, Kazuki had stopped playing ESO2 and was searching online for any other related pieces of information. But it wasn’t his glare that had made her mumble in shock—no, it was what she had found.

The address and phone number of Aoba Dorm, along with my own personal number, had been posted all over a message board that people used for targeted telephone harassment. The moment I saw this, a chill ran down my spine; Takuru had spoken again and again about what happened to wrong-siders that were stupid enough to leak their personal information.

“Mmm, mmmmm!” Kazuki waved her hands at me, likely urging me to shut off my phone. I quickly moved to do so, and calls from vari-

ous restricted numbers started to arrive as soon as my phone began to turn off.

“I don’t know who the hell leaked all this, but it was probably someone in our year. I wouldn’t give a damn if it was just me, but how *dare* they do this to you, Kurusu!” Kawahara-kun swore. The picture from our yearbook—the one of Kurusu, Kawahara-kun, and Minamisawa on a field trip—was spreading like wildfire. The only way someone could’ve uploaded that image was if they were a student in the same school year as us.

“Why is this shit happening to us?!” Kawahara-kun continued. “Minamisawa died years ago! Dammit... Leave it to her to still be a massive pain in the ass even when she’s six feet under!”

“That’s enough, Kawahara-kun... Senri was... She was my friend...” I choked out.

The person who uploaded the picture had captioned it with, “The three were best friends. An absolutely inseparable trio...” But they were wrong. Nono and Senri were best friends, and saying Kawahara-kun and Nono were friends would certainly be correct, but... Kawahara-kun and Senri... that couldn’t be further from the truth. To him, Senri was nothing but a nuisance that got in the way of him and Nono.

In that moment, his true feelings had come out... and, combined with everything I was already going through, it couldn’t have made me any more sad.

After refusing Kawahara-kun’s offer to go find somewhere to hide out together, I decided to return to my family at Aoba Dorm. Keeping my head low, I exited the school, walking as fast as I could. Much to my irritation, I could hear everyone on the street whispering about me, until at last I reached Aoba Dorm.

But, right before I could enter, a microphone was stuck in my face. “Heya, excuse me, but mind if—”

“I’m in a hurry.” I said, cutting off the reporter; the mass media had already set themselves up around Aoba Dorm. Living up to their titles as professionals, I suppose.

“Big Sis!” When I entered Aoba Clinic, Yui rushed in to hug me.

“Yui! Thank goodness!” I exclaimed, letting out a sigh of relief.

“That’s what I was gonna say! Are you okay?! Did the bad people outside bully you?!”

Before I could respond, another voice spoke up first. “They might all call themselves real ‘virtuosos,’ but I know for a fact that there’s no one out there strong enough to bully the Empress, Yui—not even them.”

“Dad?” I said, trying to compose myself.

“I’m just kidding around. Welcome home, Nono,” he said with a big smile.

“Th-Thank you.”

“Oh...” said another voice. Behind Yui was Dad, Yuto, and Uki-chan. It seemed that everyone had managed to evade the mass media that was stationed outside; Takuru was most likely in his RV. With the case finally being over, Takuru had sadly returned to Miyashita Park, but today, that turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

“They say people forget about stuff like this in a week, but I might start hitting people with my stethoscope if this lasts more than a couple days,” said Dad angrily.

“I’m so sorry...” I apologized deeply.

“Hm? Oh no, don’t worry about it. I know it’s not your fault, Nono. I cut the phone line since dealing with all those calls was start-

ing to drive me nuts, so we can't contact anyone. But I'm sure Takuru will find his way here sooner or later."

"Big Bro is a 'right-sider,' right? So I'm sure he'll hear about this and come running over real soon!" Yui said gleefully.

"I wonder about that..." I replied. "That boy has a few *very important* screws loose, to say the least."

"You're not wrong there," Dad chimed in.

"*Aaa-greed!*" Yui said with a nod of assent. Everyone laughed happily except for Uki-chan; she wasn't quite used to such a cheery atmosphere, so she instead chose to timidly remain in the back.

Despite their playful jabs, everyone believed from the bottom of their hearts that Takuru would come home. They were all putting on brave faces, but being able to be so cheerful together even in the face of great hardship is a sign of a good, strong family. But... I had put that wonderful family of mine in danger.

I didn't know why, but as I stood there surrounded by family, it felt like my past mistakes had come back to haunt me.

And never before had I felt such a heavy weight upon my back.



Just as Dad and the rest of the family predicted, Takuru came to Aoba Dorm with Serika in tow. "You okay, Kurusu?" he said.

"Yes, I'm all right," I replied. "Did you rush over here because you were worried about me? Thank you."

"Yeah. Itou says he's on his way, too." When the going got tough, Serika and Itou-kun would always be there for us. Because of that, the two of them were familiar faces to everyone at Aoba Dorm. On a night like this, when my family and I had an innumerable number of eyes peeking in on our lives out of nothing but selfish curiosity, I was incredibly grateful to have people that I could put my full trust in.

Takuru tried to reassure me; he said something similar to Dad—that it wouldn’t take people long to move on. However, what he didn’t realize was that I wasn’t worried about harm coming to myself. “I just... I can’t let them get away with doing this to the people I care about... to Aoba Dorm...” I said in reference to the leakers.

“It’s fine, Big Sis! *I’m* fine! I promise!” Yui protested.

“I... I’m fine, too!” said Yuto in turn.

Hearing my troubled voice coming from the living room, Yui and Yuto came flying out of the kitchen and quickly attached themselves to both of my hips. I would’ve expected Yui to do something like this, given her courageous nature, but Yuto surprised me—he always used to hide away in times like this.

As I heard their supportive voices, tears began to fall from my eyes. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing?” asked Yui, distressed.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Yuto quickly followed.

“She’s right. You don’t have anything to apologize for, Non-chan.” Not just those two, but even Serika was trying to reassure them. In fierce contrast to them, however, Takuru seemed oddly tense.

“Aah, damn it! It doesn’t make any sense!” he yelled. His sudden outburst surprised not just us, but even Uki-chan, who was all the way in the kitchen.

“Taku?” asked Serika, concerned.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Yui asked right after.

Motioning for us to be quiet, Takuru exited into the corridor, his eyes glued to his phone. It seemed he was going to call someone.

“...It’s not good for us to just stay cooped up in here doing nothing,” I said. “I think I’ll fold some laundry.”

“Ooh, can I help, Non-chan?” Serika offered.

“Oh, I know! Yuu and I’ll clean up downstairs!” Yui chimed in, almost as if it was instinctual.

“Why me?” grumbled Yuto, looking a little disappointed.

“Yuu? Is it just me, or is a certain little boy saying he wants to see Nono’s and Uki-chan’s underwear?”

“F-Fine... I’ll go with you...” Yuto swiftly surrendered to his sister’s attack.

“I’ll go too,” said Uki-chan, following after the two.

Everyone split into groups of two and three to help with the household chores. After all, if we all sat around, we would be left with nothing to do but wallow in our sadness and anxiety.

With Serika’s help, I began working on the clothes. After a few minutes, I folded up Dad’s massive white coat, but, right as we were about to move on to the next article, Takuru came into the room.

“If I don’t keep myself occupied, I just start thinking bad things...” I said to him with a small chuckle, forcing a smile. But, when I saw the pale look on his face, it was enough to make my anxiety from earlier seem trivial in comparison. Enough to make my smile fade instantly. “What’s wrong?”

“Where are Yui and the others?” he forced out.

“They’re helping Dr. Sakuma,” Serika responded. “The clinic’s closing for today, so they went downstairs to clean.”

“I... I see.” Upon hearing that, Takuru’s complexion slightly returned to him. At the time, I knew his condition was likely because of the phone call he had just made, but I still had no idea who he had been speaking with. “Onoe, take care of Kurusu. Don’t leave her side for a second. No matter what.”

“Huh? Oh, okay!” she replied in confusion.

“Takuru? If something happened, tell me—”

But before I could finish, Takuru interrupted me. “I will in a bit. I’m counting on you, Onoe.”

“Okay!”

Without explaining any further, Takuru gave us all those specific instructions, then headed straight downstairs.

“What do you think’s up with Taku?” Serika asked me.

“No idea...” As Serika and I briefly shared in our confusion, I heard footsteps running around the dormitory; Takuru was calling Yui’s name in a panic.

Did something happen to her? I thought, worry immediately building within me; before I knew it, Serika and I were already heading downstairs. When we arrived on the first floor, we found Takuru—acting significantly more quiet than before—calling someone on the phone.

“What’s going on?” I asked him, concerned.

“Well...” Uki-chan began. According to her, Yui had left the dormitory and gone outside with Itou-kun accompanying her; apparently he had arrived while Serika and I were upstairs.

“You’re saying the two of them are together?” I questioned. *Where on earth would they go now of all times?*

Serika’s question was the same as my own. “Where did they go?” she asked.

“Hello? Itou?” Takuru said into the receiver.

The call went through without a hitch; in other words, Takuru’s worries had been completely unfou—

■ Tachibana Yui

Yuu and I lost everyone in the earthquake. On the day it happened, we got separated, and something really awful happened to both of us. After that, I became scared of men, and Yuu became scared of being alone and the dark. We found each other again when a bunch of police officers and firefighters saved us, and, as soon as he could, Yuu grabbed my hand without saying a word. ...Actually, it might've been because I'd reached out for his hand, not because he'd reached out for mine. He was crying. But I was crying too.

From that day forward, the two of us have never let go of each other's hands. We're siblings, and we're all we have left—Mom and Dad were gone, and we have no other family members. With nowhere else to go, we were sent to Aoba Dorm—a place that takes in kids like us.

It had been a little over a month since the earthquake in November, but that day still gave me nightmares all the time, which made it really hard for me to sleep.

“Well, this is the place,” said a large old man, hiding his shyness with a smile. “I know, it’s not exactly the ritz, but it shouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

I’m scared of men, but for some reason, I was okay around him. He felt like a big teddy bear more than anything, so in my mind, he wasn’t scary. His name was Dr. Sakuma, and he was the head of Aoba Dorm and a doctor at Aoba Clinic.

While it didn’t outright scare me, his loud voice did surprise me a little. Yuu, meanwhile, hid behind me instinctively. To us, his voice was as big as he was.

“Dad? Would you mind being a little quieter? The poor things look terrified.”

“O-Oh, of course. Sorry,” Dr. Sakuma said apologetically. He had been scolded by a girl in a school uniform. She looked older than me, but she didn’t look like a high schooler, so I guessed that she was in middle school. She had chestnut-colored hair, and she was really pretty. And not only was she pretty, but she had a really nice smile, too.

...It also looked like she would get really big in those places when she got older. So unfair...

“Yuu?” I asked, noticing how quiet he was.

“I-It’s nothing,” he quickly said back, his face beet-red.

That silly boy... It made me happy to see some life on his face for once, but as his big sister, I felt a little... conflicted.

Anyway, I turned back to the girl. “Excuse me?”

“Yes?”

“Is Dr. Sakuma your dad?”

“Hmm... I suppose that’s somewhat true,” she said, smiling. “But no, not quite.”

I found that a bit weird, especially since she’d just called him “Dad.”

“My name is Nono—Kurusu Nono. Just like you two, I was taken in by Aoba Dorm. That’s why, even though I call him my dad, our blood doesn’t exactly tell the same story.”

“...That explains a lot,” I said. A lot of things clicked into place inside my head.

“Hey, now—don’t you go comparing me and Nono already, young lady,” Dr. Sakuma protested.

“Hehe,” she giggled. “Well... you *could* call him ‘Dr. Sakuma’ or ‘Sakuma-san,’ but I think you should call him Dad too. We’ll be family from now on, after all.”

“Family...?” I whispered. The thing we’d lost. For so long, it’d only been me and Yuu. That girl had probably lost her family too. But, despite all that, she was offering us the chance to stay with her. To try again at a family.

“A-Are you sure you want us?” Yuu asked in shock.

“Of course.” Even when she saw how shocked Yuu was, the girl... no, my new big sister, answered him almost instantly, her smile shining as bright as could be.

From there, we were both taken into Aoba Dorm not as orphans, but as family. But then, just when I thought we were gonna start our new life as a family of four, another person arrived—a boy a little older than me. Though, to be more specific, he didn’t come to Aoba Dorm, but to Aoba Clinic below Aoba Dorm. He was a patient there.

His name was Miyashiro Takuru. Like us, he had lost his family in the earthquake. When he first came to Aoba Clinic, I was really scared of him. Unlike Dad, he was almost Nono’s age, which meant he was almost the same age as those really scary men. But I was only scared the first time I saw him—it was hard to stay scared when he never even opened his eyes, let alone move an inch.

He was stuck in a coma. Because of that, he couldn’t eat or go to the bathroom, so Nono had to take care of him. She was already helping Dad out in the clinic by then, so she did her best to take care of Takuru-san too. She even took over the chores that needed to be done around the house, since Dad is really bad at those.

That’s when I realized: Nono wasn’t just a big sister to us, but she was a mom, too. “How can you work so hard like this?” I once asked her. But her answer was really simple.

“Well, I can’t leave all these things as they are, now can I?”

It's crazy to me that she can work so hard for something so simple. She really is an amazing person.

There's also this one other amazing person I wanna talk about—though she's not amazing in exactly the same way.

"Hey, is Taku doing okay?"

"He is, but he still hasn't woken up."

"Aww, okay..."

That conversation would happen almost every day—that was how often she came to check in on my older brother. Her name is Serika-san, and she's his childhood friend. Ever since she first carried Takuru-san's motionless body to Aoba Clinic, she'd been coming back to the clinic more often than even Dad's patients did. She would sit by his side, talk to him about a whole bunch of random things, and occasionally stroke his cheek.

"Taku's my childhood friend, and I owe a lot to him."

When I asked Serika-san about her relationship with Takuru-san, that was the answer I got. Before that, I'd assumed that there was something deeper going on, but I was wrong. Apparently, on the day of the earthquake, she'd only survived thanks to him. Even then, though, coming to the clinic *every day* for that was really amazing to me. The earthquake had happened more than a year ago at that point, and everyone was trying really hard to forget about it. But not her. That's why her coming to visit Takuru-san so often without forgetting even once was really amazing.

Every time she came over, she and Nono would get to know each other more and more. It didn't take long for them to become really good friends.

One day, I came downstairs to work on some chores, and Serika-san was there. "Taku really isn't waking up, huh?" she said sadly. Then,

she looked at me.

“H-Huh?” I said—I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Hmm... I wonder if this is like that equivalent exchange thing?”

“Equivalent exchange? What’s that?”

“Taku told me about it a long time ago... Umm, so it’s like... when you swap out something... for something else that’s worth about the same, I think,” she tried to explain. “Before the earthquake, Taku... didn’t have a very good family. But, when he wakes up, he’s gonna find a really cute big sister, an adorable little sister, and even a little brother waiting for him. So I guess I’m wondering... if he’s not waking up because that’s all really expensive?”

A cute big sister, an adorable little sister, and even a little brother... I didn’t fully understand what she was saying, but when I heard her say that, I began to wonder what it would be like to have an older brother in our family.

Big Bro...

“Big Bro...” I didn’t mean to say it, but that nickname slipped out of my mouth.

“Oh, whoa! That’s so good! I’m sure Taku’ll love being called that!” Serika-san said excitedly.

“Will he really?”

“He will—I know it!”

I don’t know why, but, when Serika-san said that, I felt like everything was going to be okay. Though, there was something about her... If I had to put my finger on it, I’d say that, despite what I said earlier about her being really amazing, she’s more mysterious than anything.

Anyway, a few days later, my new big brother finally opened his eyes. I could never forget the look of pure joy on Nono’s face when she saw him wake up. Serika-san was also really happy, and she immedi-

ately ran over to see him—but she seemed a bit sad that she hadn’t been there when he woke up.

At first, he reacted pretty badly to the nickname. “Did you really just call me that...? You don’t even know me...” he said.

Sure doesn’t seem like he likes being called that, Serika-san... I complained inside my head. But it wasn’t a big deal—after all, he had finally opened his eyes. However, since he’d slept for such a long time, his body had forgotten how to move properly. He couldn’t move at all, and he couldn’t get up from his bed. He couldn’t even lift a single finger.

I remember on the night after he woke up, we could hear him crying out in pain all throughout the dorm. It was bad enough that me and Yuu—who share a room together—ran over to Nono’s room before we realized what we were doing. It was the first time in a very long time that I’d heard such a scary cry. It was like he was letting out every single emotion he had inside him.

As soon as we got to her room, Nono hugged us super tight. Once our trembling stopped, she spoke to us very gently. “That voice is nothing to be scared of. It’s just Miyashiro-kun... sorry, I mean, Takuru.”

“Is he trying to scare us?” Yuu asked with tears in his eyes.

“Not at all. Takuru is just so frustrated that he can’t help it. Even though he’s finally woken up, he can’t move his body at all,” she explained. “It’s also really hard for him because a lot changed while he was asleep, so he’s very confused. If it weren’t for Serika being here for him—someone he’s known since before he went to sleep—I’m sure he’d be panicking even more.”

Everyone was trying to forget about everything before the earthquake, and while that was happening, Takuru woke up in the post-

earthquake world himself for the first time. Just like how Rip Van Winkle felt when he came back after falling asleep for a really long time in the mountains, he was really shocked and scared when he saw how much the world had changed while he was away... When he found out that so many people he cared about had died.

"I'm really sorry he's scaring you two, but would you be able to be strong for me for just a little bit longer? He should be able to move again after some rehab... Dad said so, too. So in the meantime, I'll keep taking care of him like I have been," Nono said.

I'm really not good at being around men, and Yuu was still afraid of Takuru, who he saw as a complete stranger. So that meant that, with Dad being too busy with his work to take care of Takuru, Nono had to be the one to do it.

"I'm sorry, Big Sis..." I said when I realized that.

"You have nothing to apologize for. Takuru is a part of the family from now on, and a big sister always takes care of her little brother. You're the one who taught me that, Yui."

"I did?"

"I was an only child, after all. That means that you're my role model on how to be a wonderful big sister, and, needless to say, I have a lot to learn," she said with a big smile. "I need all the help I can get, so be sure to give me some pointers, okay, Miss Yui?" Her voice was ever-so-slightly playful, but it still made me happy—if not a little bit embarrassed—when she told me all that stuff.

However, it only took a day for it to become pretty clear to me that she had already gotten much better than me when it came to being a good big sister. Takuru was a person with very big emotions, and very big mood swings to go along with them. When things didn't go his way, he'd get really frustrated and sad, and he'd take it out on ev-

eryone. Even when he wasn't like that, though, he still talked a whole lot. That boy's mouth never stopped moving.

It always looked like it was really hard on Nono whenever she helped him with his rehab. Back then, he couldn't even switch sides in bed, so he couldn't turn onto his tummy either. Feeding him and helping him go to the bathroom was also a lot more difficult now that he was awake—I guess it was probably hard for him to accept that a girl his age had to help him eat, let alone go to the bathroom. Even I have times where I get annoyed at how selfish Yuu can be... but that's just part of being a family. You grow up together, so you have to learn to deal with the worst parts of each other. But I definitely won't ever be able to do the things Nono did back then.

At first, me and Yuu tried our best to avoid getting too close to Takuru. It wasn't that he was a bad person or anything, but he was... difficult? We just... didn't really know how to talk to him.

But one day, something happened—I think it was while me and Yuu were washing the dishes. I was on washing duty, and Yuu was drying. Just as we were starting to get a good rhythm going, though, I heard a sound.

Bang, smash, crash!

“Aah!” Yuu shouted, dropping the plate he was holding. I was just as shocked, and the sponge I was using flew out of my hands. In that split second, I somehow managed to catch the plate Yuu dropped, so though the kitchen had turned into a city of bubbles, I managed to keep any dishes from breaking. If I hadn't, we couldn't have fixed that as easily as a few bubbles on the floor.

As for the noise we'd heard, it sounded like something had fallen crashing down to the ground.

“That was close!” I said, still trying to catch my breath.

“What was that...?” Yuu asked, struggling to do the same. The noise had most likely come from Takuru’s room, so we went over to it as fast as we could. His room had a whole bunch of things in it that he could’ve hurt himself on, so Dad and Nono told us that if anything bad happened, we should tell them immediately.

I peeked into the room through the half-open door.

“Big Sis...?”

“Shhhh,” I quieted Yuu, who was sticking close behind me.

Nono was already in the room. “You finally moved...” she said as she cradled Takuru in her arms. It looked like he had fallen off his bed. His head was buried in her chest, and his shoulders were trembling.

He’d fallen.

Out of his bed.

That meant he’d turned over in his sleep.

All on his own.

In other words... he’d managed to move! All that work that Nono had put in had paid off, and he’d finally gotten strong enough to do it! ...No, it went even further than that—Takuru had only been able to do it *because* his new big sister was there to help him.

I didn’t know exactly how to react right then—all I knew was that it would be a bad idea to disturb them, so me and Yuu just stayed by the door. Neither of us told each other to stay there—we just kind of did it instinctually.

As we stood there, Yuu was reaching to try to hold my hand. Once I realized that, I grabbed his hand with both of mine and squeezed it tight. That was different to how I usually did it, which surprised him. “I don’t think we can stay like this, Yuu,” I said.

“In the door?”

“No, silly... When I go up a grade, I’ll be in middle school, but you’ll still be in elementary school. We won’t be together like we’ve always been anymore. I won’t be able to come rescue you if someone starts bullying you.”

“I... don’t think I’m ready...” he said meekly. I wasn’t sure if I was ready either. I was still really worried about him, and, honestly, I was just as scared as he was. After all, as strong as people thought I was, I was relying on Yuu just as much as he was relying on me.

“I know, but... we have to take a step forward... because if we don’t, we’ll be stuck like this forever,” I said, looking at my two older siblings. As I stared at them, Yuu looked into my eyes and realized what I really meant: We had to be like them. Always looking forward, and always believing that things would get better. And, as his big sister, I had to be someone who would always help him remember that. I had to be someone he could always look up to.

Yuu squeezed my hand tighter. The boy inside him—the boy he was trying really hard to be—was trying his hardest to be strong.

“Uhh, did I miss something?! Which one of you tykes was taking a bubble bath in the kitchen!?” Dad’s carefree voice suddenly came from the kitchen—the timing made me a little annoyed, honestly. “Helloooo? Is anyone theeeeere!?”

In the end, once he was able to move, Takuru’s recovery took almost no time at all. It took about a year, but after that, he could move just like normal again. Although he did all of his schoolwork in the school nurse’s office instead of an actual classroom, he was able to graduate from middle school all the same. Then, from there, he was able to become a normal—if not a little argumentative—high schooler.

Me and Yuu also grew a little: I was finally able to walk around the city by myself again, and while Yuu still had trouble with night-

time and sleeping, he got much better at spending time alone without me. We all also got to know each other better, and Takuru became a real part of the family. After that, I started middle school at Hekiko Academy, and from there, I quickly became friends with the people in the Newspaper Club that my big brother and big sister had started.

Together, everyone in my family, and all my friends... we all walked hand in hand toward the future, facing forward all the way.



October 28th

I'd always thought our time together as a family would last forever... but after Takuru fought with Nono and Dad, he left Aoba Dorm, and our relationship as a family changed a little. In the half a year since then, I did all of his chores.

Recently, Nono got stabbed by a really bad person, and Takuru came back to Aoba Dorm because of that, but... he'd changed. It didn't feel like he'd come back because he wanted to—it even felt like he didn't think we were a family anymore. Honestly, it was hard for me not to feel a little hurt by it...

A little bit after that, Uki-chan, who I hadn't seen in six years, became a part of our family. She hadn't changed a bit—she was and still is just like she used to be.

Having a new sister made me really, really happy. But then, only a little bit after that, I almost got attacked by this strange lady I didn't know.

I've really been through a lot... So many memories are flashing through my head right now.

"Big Sis! Big Sis! Where are you?! Where are you, Big Sis?!"

It's been a while since I last heard Yuu's voice while not actually being around him. For a really long time, I was able to hear his voice no matter where I was, even when he was somewhere far away. They told me that's my power... but I don't really hear his voice that much anymore. I think that's because he's been trying his best not to rely on me too much—something I've always known he can do. I've never stopped believing that he can stand on his own without me.

I wonder why it only goes one way. I just wish I could send him one message right now, just before the end...

I don't have any legs to move forward with anymore, and I don't have any hands I can use to hold anyone anymore. Even my energy to scream, and the future I wish for so badly... they've all gone somewhere far, far away.

The person pushes a little harder, and the dull, dull knife crushes my throat... Just like that, all of my memories fade to black.

■ Kurusu Nono

“I’m glad you’re okay, but why the hell did you choose *now* to go grocery shopping!?” Takuru shouted into the phone. He was angry, but the relieved look on his face was palpable, which helped ease the tense atmosphere of the room.

...But that didn’t last long.

Takuru kept calling Yui’s name over and over while he pressed Itou-kun for answers. Every now and then, I would hear screams coming from his phone, until eventually, all sound abruptly stopped. Takuru hadn’t been the one to hang up, however—Itou-kun had. Takuru tried to call back again and again, but Itou-kun didn’t pick up even once.

“T-Takuru? What happened to Yui?” I asked, extremely concerned now. But, even so, Takuru did not answer. Without saying a word, he threw his head over the sink and vomited. He continued to vomit for a long, long time, to the point where I was worried his stomach itself was going to come up next.

“...K-Kurusu... the phone... Call Shinjo-san... *now...!*” sputtered Takuru.

“Huh?” I said, confused as can be.

“Yui’s going to be killed!”

With those words, all the blood drained from my body. In that moment, I realized why Takuru was so upset. Why Yui was gone. Both of those things coalesced into a revelation that terrified me to my very core.

Without waiting for my response, Takuru flew outside. We were all left paralyzed as we imagined the worst possible scenario.

“Big Sis? What’s wrong?” Yuto’s confused voice brought me back to reality. At that point, it was nothing more than a guess—a predi-

tion. In other words, we might have been able to stop it from happening.

We can still make it in time!

“W-We need to hurry after Miyashiro-san...!” shouted Uki-chan. Before she could run out the door, however, I grabbed her by the shoulder and forced the phone that was already dialing Shinjo-san into her hand.

“Uki-chan, I need you to get a hold of Shinjo-san. Once you do, I need you to *stay here* and keep your brother safe,” I told her.

“B-But...”

“I’m counting on you, Uki-chan.”

After a moment of uncertainty passed, she nodded. In that time of crisis, I had instinctively used her inability to say no to others—her innate kindness—against her. But I knew that there was no way I could let Uki-chan, a psychic, go outside in those circumstances. If I let her come with us, it might lead to an even greater tragedy; for some reason I couldn’t explain, I knew that to be true.

“Serika, keep a close eye on these two,” I ordered.

“G-Got it! But what about you?”

“I’m going to try chasing after Takuru.”

“I’ll come too!”

“I’m sorry, Serika, but please just stay here! At least until Dad gets back!” With an amount of force that might have even been stronger than what Takuru had shown, I burst through the emergency exit and rushed outside.

“Nono?! What’s going on?” Dad, who had gone outside to yell at the persistent reporters, was blocking my way. The crowd of people were bewildered for some reason—Takuru had likely knocked them aside when he’d run off.

“Dad, please go back inside!” I pleaded with him.

“A-All right. But what about you?” But, instead of responding to him, I immediately took off running; I had noticed a gap in the crowd of reporters, and I guessed that Takuru had gone that way.

I ran and ran and ran. My lungs were exploding, and my heart felt like it was about to burst. Forcefully swallowing back all the pain, I continued to run with everything I had.

I just wanted it all to end—that’s why I had been pretending it was all over. Why I plastered on a fake smile—a lie—right over the top of the lies upon lies that I was telling every single day. The lies I was telling both to myself, and to everyone I cared about. The lie that I was.

“YUI! ITOU! WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Right then, I heard Takuru scream. He had likely taken a detour as he ran, as he sounded surprisingly close. The very moment I heard him, a single goal in my mind was born, lighting the path that had been aimless only a second before.

It was an area not far from Aoba Dorm, with many vacant houses—a place left abandoned following Shibuya’s rapid reconstruction, and, because of that, it serves as a grim reminder of the earthquake for all those who are trying their best to forget it. Many avoid it for that reason alone, and there are many absurd stories about the area, such as vengeful spirits gathering, or people getting kidnapped while walking alone at night.

It was there that Takuru stood still as could be. And before him... was Itou, whose eyes were equally... no... even more hollow.

“I-Itou-kun? What are you doing...?” I asked as I tried to catch my breath. I knew something was wrong... but when I took another look at the boy I was speaking to, I realized exactly what it was.

He was completely covered in blood. His uniform, his face—blood stained every inch of his body. And... in his hand... was a knife. Covered in a frightening amount of dark-red blood.

I have to protect him.

My legs instinctively moved between Takuru and Itou, and, in the process, I stepped in a sticky puddle of liquid. The puddle gave off a putrid smell, and I was immediately hit with a wave of nausea.

That's when I saw the boxes; there were multiple of them, all covered in beautiful wrapping paper. The puddle... the... red... puddle... was coming from the many rectangular boxes, which all neatly came together to form the shape of a person. Squares and rectangles covered the ground, almost like the parts of a person had been cut up, then immediately wrapped up like a number of presents.

“Wh-What... What is this...? Takuru...?” I choked out in disbelief. But Takuru did not answer. “Y-Yui... What happened to Yui?” My panic grew and grew. “Tell me! Where’s Yui!?”

“Ugh... aah...!” After being silent for so long, a weak cry finally seeped from Takuru’s mouth... and then, in place of words, tears began to fall down his cheeks. I wanted those tears to stop... So badly I wanted them to stop...

Just tell me I’m wrong! Please...! I begged.

“Be careful, Vice President. Step on one of those boxes, and you won’t be able to put Yui back together again.” With the same cheerfulness he always carried, Itou gave me the answer I least wanted to hear. With just those simple words, he told me exactly what was in those boxes.

Desperately wishing that it was all just some sick joke, I picked up the nearest box to me. Immediately after I took hold of it, I knew

exactly what had been forced inside. I had held it tightly many times, after all. I had felt every emotion in the world through it.

What I was looking at... was Yui's hand.

It wasn't a sick joke. Nor was it an illusion.

It was the truth.

It was despair.

And nothing else remained.

Words of sorrow leaked from my mouth. "Wh... Why...? Why...?!"

"It's all Miyashiro's fault. He left Minamisawa Senri in agony, so I'm getting my revenge," said Itou.

"Revenge for... Senri...?" I didn't know what he was talking about.

"That's right. It must've hurt even worse for her. She SUFFERED. And even if she *wanted* to die from the pain of the experiments, she couldn't. Yui-chan was lucky. She got to die quick."

"YOU MOTHERFUCKER!" Takuru screamed, and before Itou could say anything more, Takuru threw himself at him. However, this was something Itou had expected him to do, and he simply aimed his knife at Takuru's neck as he flew toward him.

If I don't do something, Takuru... Takuru's going to die, too...!

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" I screamed, fueled entirely by emotion as I dove toward Itou.

"Kurusu!" Takuru shouted in horror.

"I won't let you kill him! I won't let you kill Takuru!"

This is revenge for Minamisawa Senri? Because she suffered? Because she held a grudge against Takuru before she died?! You won't kill any more of my family because of that complete and utter bullshit!

Unlike with Takuru, I doubt he had expected me to fly into a rage.

Itou and I tumbled to the ground, grappling with each other in the puddle of Yui's blood. I held on to him as tightly as I could, clinging to him through nothing but sheer instinct alone. He tried to shake me off, ramming his fist into the still-healing wound in my side. I cried out in agony, but I quickly bit it back. This much pain was nothing.

Nothing... Even if you thrust your hand into my wound and ripped out my organs, it still wouldn't be enough. No—nothing could ever be enough.

"YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!" Takuru exploded, tackling Itou. Together, the two of us managed to violently force him to the ground; the bones in his fingers shattered into pieces with a sickening crack, and the knife flew out of his hand and onto the pavement. Takuru immediately kicked it away as far as he could, screamed at me to get off of Itou, then pinned him to the ground.

The moment I let go of him, the pain and fatigue came all at once. I was having so much trouble breathing, I couldn't even respond when Takuru asked me if I was all right.

The rage and adrenaline faded away, only to be replaced by sheer, immeasurable grief. But my grief wasn't just over Yui's death... My grief in that moment was far greater than what I would have felt with that alone.

"Vice President, if you want to blame somebody, blame Miyashiro. If he hadn't abandoned Senri back then, I never would've done this," Itou spat out. "This whole case was Miyashiro's fault!" He laughed and laughed as he talked, confessing that he had caused the Return of the New Generation Madness, and that it had all been for Senri's sake.

But I knew right then.

"You're lying," I said.

“Huh?”

“Kurusu?” said Takuru, just as confused.

“You’re lying. Everything you’re saying is a lie, Itou-kun.” My rage pushed away all my pain—even the agony of my stomach wound re-opening—and I began to scream out into the sky. “Who are you?! Why did you make Itou-kun do this?! Whoever you are that’s out there laughing at us, who are you?! I know you’re watching! Whoever did this to my precious little sister, who are you?!”

“Wh-What are you saying, Kurusu?!” shouted Takuru.

“Itou-kun never knew Senri! Somebody just made him think he did!”

“Huh?!” screamed Itou. “What are you talking about? I loved Senri, and this is my revenge—”

That wasn’t, and could *never* be true. He’d *loved* her? No—he had never even *met* her. I could only imagine what a saving grace it would have been for her if someone had *ever* felt so strongly for her.

He continued to scream nonsense about memories and love, and I continued to deny every single lie from my position as Senri’s close friend.

“No! No! No no no! NO! NO NO NOOOO!” In a craze, Itou screamed like a madman, flailing about in front of Takuru. Suddenly, blood began to appear on his face—but it wasn’t from his victim; blood was dripping from his eyes. Bubbles foamed at his mouth, and his eyeballs were so swollen, they looked like they would burst from their sockets.

“AAAAAAH! IT HURTS! IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!” He tore at his head fiercely enough to draw blood, before smashing it down onto the asphalt over and over again. His skull

cracked, and the blood that spurted from the newly gaping wound spurted out and splattered all over the ground.

“S-Stop it!” screamed Takuru.

“No, Itou-kun!” I screamed in turn. Before he could get any further out of control and do the unthinkable, Takuru and I restrained him; not as the culprit, but as a victim, and as our friend.

“Let me go, Miyashiro! I’ll make you pay for abandoning Senri! Because I loved... Senri?! Who the hell is Senri?! Minamisawa Senri? That’s right! She’s the killer! The one who went after Miyashiro!” Itou continued to scream incoherently in between bouts of laughter; the lies that had been implanted in him were trying to kill him. He screamed about his love for Senri while simultaneously voicing resentment for her, blamed Takuru for her death while also saying it was his own fault, and showed both pride and regret at killing Yui.

After laughing and screaming for a little while longer, he suddenly fainted, like an appliance that’d had its power source suddenly torn from the socket. Takuru and I, who had both been holding him back, suddenly found ourselves dragged down to the ground by him, his body having become deadweight.

It was like I was having a nightmare—no, it *had* to have been a nightmare. It couldn’t be possible. Any moment now, I would wake up, Yui and Yuto would drag me out of bed, and I would go to school to find Takuru and Itou messing around in the clubroom. Like normal.

But no matter how many times I rubbed my eyes, the boxes Yui had been stuffed into didn’t disappear. They wouldn’t let me look away—to escape into the convenient lie that said it was all a dream.

“Y... Yui... Yu...i...” I cried out in disbelief. And in that moment... I could no longer hold it in anymore. “Waaahhh... Waaaah! AAAAH-

HHH!" I wailed. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I couldn't stop crying no matter how hard I tried.

"Oh, Big Sis... It's okay to let other people help you, you know. If you need someone to rely on, don't be afraid to ask. Big Bro is more of an adult than you think."

When I opened my eyes and looked past my tears... for just a moment, I almost thought I could see Yui smiling at me.



November 3rd

Before I knew it, large tears began to stream down my cheeks. All I had done was find a photo of Yui in the clubroom, but seeing it was enough to make my heart feel like it would shatter from sheer grief.

Ever since the day we lost Yui, I've kept searching and searching for her. Every night, I dream of running around Shibuya, and it always, always ends with my hands grasping that box. Though the events that happen within each dream differ to an extent, the ending never changes. My precious sister is killed by a dear friend of mine. Even in my dreams, I can't avoid that tragedy. And when I wake up, I realize just how broken my heart truly is, and then, I wait to face the next night.

I'm trapped in a labyrinth, with walls made from grief and regret. A labyrinth I can never escape from. In all likelihood, it's not a fate I suffer alone—I'm sure Dad, Takuru, Yuto, and Uki-chan are all trapped in that same labyrinth too, never to find their way into the light again.

And... in my heart, I know I'll continue wandering it for as long as I live... and that the tears will never, ever stop.

Chapter 8 — The Pain That Comes with Reaching the Truth

November 1st

It's been four days since the death of my sister, Tachibana Yui. White smoke billowed from the crematory, ascending higher and higher into the sky. Growing whiter as it rose, I was sure its destination was the heavens above.

Takuru and I stood outside the funeral hall, saying our farewells to Yui as we watched her cremation—the freeing of her soul. We had to endure many things prior to that moment; we were questioned by the police, an autopsy was performed on her body, we sat through various sessions with the funeral company, and were faced with endless paperwork issued by the government.

Back during the aftermath of the Shibuya Earthquake, the funerals had been effectively automatic, proceeding through countless people like clockwork. Before I'd experienced that, I had never known what it was like to not only try to keep yourself busy, but to do so with work that made you feel so... empty. But it was because I had come to know that feeling so long ago that I was able to distance myself from the real grief I was feeling, standing before that billowing smoke.

All the crying I did would be saved for before I slept each night.

I turned to Takuru and began to speak. I told him about how I had been so sad before, but now, all I could think about were the funeral costs and other arrangements. "I suppose that makes me a bit heartless, doesn't it?" I said.

"No, there's no one else who can do that stuff but you. Dad looks so out of it these days," Takuru tried to reassure me. As much as I wish

I could've agreed with him, though, I knew the truth: in reality, Takuru had been supporting me throughout the entire process. Instead of going back to living in his RV, he had been staying with me at Aoba Dorm. It was only because he was there that I had managed to stay together—I couldn't have done it alone. And... even beyond that, I don't know if I would've been able to bear living without not just Yui, but Takuru, too.

It was possible that Takuru was only staying at Aoba Dorm because he couldn't bear living alone himself. However, even if that was all it was, him being home was more than enough. We're a family, and that means that we always support each other when we can't stand on our own.

But, because of our immense exhaustion, there was one person who was doing everything in her power to support us, too.

"Listen, Takuru. About Uki-chan..." I began.

"Huh?"

"If you don't mind... could you start calling her by her first name?"

Yuto had been completely lost after Yui's death, so confronting it at the funeral would've been too difficult for him to bear; Uki-chan knew this, so she and Dad had taken him back home early. Before long, the rest of us had left, too. Once Takuru and I had parted ways with Serika, Arimura-san, and Kazuki, I spoke to him about something I had been thinking about for a long time.

Takuru had always called her by her last name, Yamazoe. That was likely his way of setting boundaries, and Uki-chan had always called him Miyashiro-san in return. But I knew in my heart that Uki-chan didn't want there to be such a sense of distance between them. She was happy that Dad, Yuto, and I called her by her first name—it

made her feel like she was a part of the family, and I know that brought her a great amount of joy. But I didn't just want her to *feel* like she was a part of the family—I wanted her to *be* a part of the family, in the truest sense of the word. That was why I wanted Takuru and Uki-chan to start calling each other by their first names.

"All right. You want me to call her Uki, not Yamazoe, right? ...I can do that." Takuru conceded, a light smile showing on his face.

I was sure that now, the distance between them would close in no time. And, while I was on the topic of names, I wanted him to start calling me Nono again, instead of Kurusu. I was fully planning on asking him to do that, but I hesitated upon trying to say it out loud.

"Miyashiro? Kurusu?" Right then, our conversation was interrupted by a familiar face. "I'm sorry. I wanted to go to the funeral, but I guess I didn't make it." We bowed our heads to the weary man, Shinjo-san. Despite the heavy toll his investigations took on him daily, he always managed to maintain a positive attitude... but it seemed he didn't have the strength to do so today. I imagine he felt responsible for Yui's death.

The reason Shinjo-san hadn't been able to make it to the funeral was because he'd had to attend an examination at the hospital. Of course, Shinjo-san hadn't been the one being examined—he was simply overseeing Itou-kun's.

Itou-kun had fallen into a coma immediately following the events of that night and was transported straight to the hospital. His brain seemed to have undergone an extreme amount of swelling, which served as proof that he had been subjected to mind control by a third party for a significant period of time. In other words, Itou-kun hadn't killed Yui of his own volition, let alone out of a grudge against Takuru.

"Then he's innocent, right?" Takuru asked Shinjo-san.

“Right. There was someone else who was controlling him,” he replied, though he admitted it would be unbelievably difficult to prove that, however.

While Shinjo-san might have been aware of the existence of Gigalomaniacs and psychics, getting the other members of the law—the prosecution and the jury—to accept such things would be a tremendous challenge. This case had gone well beyond the realms of common sense and the law.

Moreover, incriminating evidence kept on appearing around Itou-kun. To begin, late in the night before the culture festival, Itou-kun had received a threatening phone call from Takuru’s lost phone. This silent call—the same one which had driven Takuru into a frenzy and caused him to start acting recklessly—was something Itou-kun had done himself using an app.

After that, a chat log was found on his computer containing messages related to the case, as well as conspiracy to spy on and even kill Takuru. However, the messages had no recipient—Itou-kun, having lost his mind, had been running the conversation entirely by himself each and every session. Thus, the log showed that he had held both the intent to kill, and the motive to do so. Even from my own amateur understanding of the law, it was clear that Itou-kun didn’t stand a chance at avoiding a guilty verdict.

Almost as if he was pleading with him, Takuru started asking Shinjo-san more questions. “But that would change if the real killer’s caught, right? They could lessen the charges, then—”

“No! You just focus on protecting yourselves. I’ll find the killer,” Shinjo-san shouted, interrupting him.

“Find him? Where are you even going to start looking?” And even if you *do* find the killer, what can you do against a Gigalomaniac? You

haven't been able to do anything so far! That's why Yui and Itou—!"

"Takuru," I interjected, stopping him; he was going too far, and Shinjo-san had been rendered speechless. "Shinjo-san's doing everything he can. It's not right to blame him for any of this."

Despite not understanding, nor being experienced with these specific circumstances, Shinjo-san was trying desperately to do everything in his power to unravel the truth and prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. He could have easily made any number of excuses to get out of such a thing, and yet, he was still fighting.

Our opponent was a psychic that wouldn't consider even the police a deterrent. They could easily tamper with the brains of Shinjo-san's trusted colleagues or trainees, and one day, he could find himself on the receiving end of a knife. Even a policeman as good as him could be in danger.

These extreme circumstances made Shinjo-san realize that there were many people that he couldn't protect anymore. Ever since then, he had been well aware of how powerless he truly was. That was why he couldn't bring himself to be angry when Takuru took out all of his anger on him; he simply stood there with a deeply pained look on his face.

After calming down, Takuru saw Shinjo-san's face and quickly realized that he had indeed gone too far. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean..."

"No, you're absolutely right. I still don't know how to apologize to all of you. But please... don't put your lives in danger. Especially you, Miyashiro. If you're thinking about doing something on November 4th..."

"November 4th?" I quickly asked; I didn't have a clue why a date that was three days away was suddenly being brought up.

“The day of the last New Generation Madness incident. That means that the killer will do something on that day,” Takuru said, his eyes turning serious. He was going to avenge Yui and Itou-kun; while that didn’t show through in his words, he could not hide his clear resolve. However, him putting his life in danger wasn’t even the worst thing that could happen in this situation—as he was now, he might even use his own life as bait to lure out the true culprit. He was a psychic, after all, and that was what the New Gen killer was targeting.

Shinjo-san had also noticed Takuru’s resolve. He had been trying desperately to keep him from doing anything irrational, but he was too late—Takuru had made up his mind, and now, he refused to say another word.

“Kurusu?” said Shinjo-san.

“Yes?”

“It looks like he’s not going to listen to me. Can you keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t do anything? I don’t want any more victims...”

“If you want to shoot the general, first shoot the horse.” That old proverb came to mind as I pondered what he had said. He was remarkably composed; Takuru, meanwhile... well, I imagine even I looked more calm than that stubborn boy did.

“I understand. I’ll watch Takuru until the end of November 4th and make sure he doesn’t do anything dangerous,” I told Shinjo-san, giving him a nod and a bow. And with that, I began to walk away, leaving the detective behind. Even if it was only slight, he looked relieved upon hearing my words.

Despite looking a bit confused, Takuru soon followed after me. As I walked with him, I wondered if he had noticed my strange wording before. I had said that I would make sure Takuru didn’t do anything

dangerous, and that was a promise that I intended to keep—I would have done so even without the detective telling me to. His other wish, however... I didn't know if I would be able to grant that.

His wish that no more people would die.

I informed Takuru that I would be busy with student council duties for the rest of the day, and then I told Kawahara-kun that I would be unable to take time away from my household duties. Before I knew it, I had become a master of duplicity. That being said, I still attended my usual classes, and spent lunch doing my student council duties to the brink of exhaustion.

Now that I had done my best to prevent any interruptions, I was ready to do what I had to do. After ignoring the mass media gathered outside and returning to Aoba Dorm, I asked Uki-chan to take care of the household chores, then made my way to the clinic.

Yuto was lying on the clinic bed. He was doing a lot better than he was when the incident had happened, but he still hadn't completely recovered. His facial expressions and responses when other people spoke to him were especially languid.

Careful not to wake him from his medically assisted slumber, I stood before the computer Dad always used for work. It was the only one I could freely use that was connected to the internet.

I typed "Return of the New Generation Madness" into the search bar and hit enter. News and aggregator sites lined the results. Using these resources, a right-sider would sift through this disorganized information, choose what and what not to believe, and, using their own judgment, make the best possible decision. That was what Takuru always said, and today, I had to be on the right side of the information divide.

I took out the notebook I had just bought. The white pages were already covered from top to bottom in words; this primarily involved records of the incidents I had gathered from various newspapers, but I had also written down as much of the data as I could remember from the Newspaper Club map.

As I surveyed all the data I had, I found myself regretting keeping my distance from the initial incidents, as I had very little memory of them. Because of that, I had no choice but to learn everything about them from scratch, pursuing them with all I had.

To begin, I started researching the initial incident, the “Don’t Look” case. I began by playing the livestream of the victim, Ootani Yumia’s death—though, to be more specific, it was only a video recording. The original recording had been taken down, but a copy of it had gone on to be reposted again and again without end.

“Don’t go clicking links willy-nilly. Do you want to get a virus?”

I remembered Takuru’s warning from long ago, and a smile found its way onto my face. Even if I myself didn’t care, the computer was going to be used for a long time after me, so I knew I ought to be mindful of viruses.

I knew that Takuru was continuing to pursue the incidents. However, it was no longer curiosity or fear that drove him now, but a fierce desire for vengeance. A desire to avenge the death of Yui, and the mutilation of Itou-kun. These desires pooled together with his feelings of responsibility, and with them urging him forward, he was fully prepared to act as bait. But I would never let that happen. *I* would be the one to settle this.

As I sat before that computer, I knew I was finally ready to face the Return of the New Generation Madness, which had endangered

my friends, and my precious family—the string of incidents that had stolen so much from me.

For the first time in my life, I would face it head-on.



Sensing someone's gaze, I suddenly awoke from my slumber. As I sifted through my foggy consciousness, it felt almost as if I had continued pursuing the cases even in my very dreams. Although I suppose I was still half-asleep.

With sleepy eyes, I looked over the notes I had taken.

- Incident 2: Why didn't the victim put on makeup for her last street performance? → The mind controller is male? He didn't consider that a girl would need to put on makeup?
- Senri's ID → No one but me knew that I buried it under the memorial in remembrance of her → The killer had to read my mind to dig it up? → The killer(s) can read minds? → Which means there are two killers, one who can read minds and one who can control minds? Supports Takuru's 'multiple killers' theory.

Thank goodness... I thought to myself. I had managed to properly note down what I still needed to find the answers to, as well as the conclusions I hadn't reached in my dreams.

While I'd been pursuing the cases on the computer, I had accidentally fallen asleep; in my dreams, time itself had rewound, and I'd found myself doing the exact same research I had already been doing in the waking world. It was almost like some kind of delusional time leap.

But... if I really could turn back time, I'd rather go back to before the Return of New Gen even happened. That way, I might even be able

to save Yui...

“Oh...”

I turned around to the sound of a familiar voice, only to find Takuru with a blanket in hand. He must’ve seen me asleep at the clinic PC and was bringing over a blanket for me. Taking a closer look, I saw Yuto awake and looking at me as well.

I must have slept for longer than I thought...

“Oh no, did I fall asleep? Than—” That’s when I realized Takuru’s gaze was not directed at me, but at the computer screen. My drowsiness vanished in an instant; the Don’t Look video was still on the screen. I hurriedly reached to try and turn off the monitor, but Takuru’s hand stopped me.

“What are you doing, Takuru?” I asked, panicking.

“That’s what I should be asking you,” he responded. I tried to resist, but Takuru refused to budge; his grip remained strong. That was the opposite of how our interactions would typically go. I remembered what I usually did in these situations and immediately glared back at him, but he didn’t even flinch—he simply continued to glare at me sharply.

Only when Yuto turned away and went to leave the room did I finally give in. “I’m... sorry. Just let me go...”

Takuru roughly let go of me, but he still didn’t look the least bit satisfied. “You’re... You’re not thinking of finding the real killer on your own, are you? And you’re trying to keep the rest of us out of it too?” he accused.

“Th-That’s...” I stammered.

“You’d get mad if I did that, but *you’re* allowed to? Is that what this is?” It felt like our usual positions had been completely reversed: Takuru had always been the one pursuing the incidents, and I, the one

who scolded him for it. It hadn't been all that long ago when things were like that.

"What if the killer comes after you, and you end up like Yui? I don't want that to happen..." he said sadly.

Though his words were harsh, above all else, Takuru was worried about me. If I had tried to keep deceiving him there, he might have used more forceful methods to keep me away. I don't know what exactly that might have entailed, but I doubt it would have been anything good.

So, I spoke. "Remember what you said before? That it was like the case was pursuing you now?"

"Yeah?" he responded, perplexed.

"It's the same for me. Ever since I learned that Senri was involved, she's been pursuing me."

"Huh?"

He was very confused, though that was only understandable. My lie that Arimura-san exposed, as well as an impostor existing... there's a lot about Senri that would be confusing for him. Takuru—and everyone else for that matter—is likely under the assumption that I've told them all I know about Senri, but they're wrong. There's still many things I'm hiding about her... and those secrets are threatening to crush me.

"Senri died in the earthquake—I know that for a fact. And yet, somehow, it feels like she's still pursuing me. I don't know quite how to describe it, but... it's her ghost," I tried to articulate. His mouth hung open, dumbfounded—though I suppose that was only natural. No matter how many strange things—such as psychics—have appeared over the course of this case, even I would be taken aback if someone attempted to suddenly bring up ghosts. Even so, I couldn't

think of any other way to describe what had been chasing after me for so long.

I was being pursued by something that should have been buried a long, long time ago.

“I see... Even after everything, there’s still so much you won’t tell me... Nothing’s changed, huh, Kurusu?”

His words cut deep, causing my chest to ache. I lacked the courage to explain what I’d meant by “ghost”—it was an excuse to cover up the truth, and he knew that.

The sadness of the day when Takuru had stopped calling me Nono joined with the sadness I was feeling now, pooling together into a deep sorrow.

“K-Kurusu, no. I didn’t mean that,” he stammered.

“But...”

Takuru wasn’t wrong—quite the opposite. And yet, he still went on to say how him being there at Aoba Dorm was proof of the trust he had in me. He was doing his best not to hurt me. I was grateful to him for being so considerate... but it just made my heart ache all the more.

Before I knew it, I was sinking down onto the bed where Yuto had been just moments prior. “Someday...” I began.

“Huh?”

“Someday, I’m going to tell you all the things that I haven’t been able to say. It might make you hate me again, but... I still have to say it. ...When that time comes, will you let me say everything I need to?” I mustered up every ounce of the courage I still held to ask that question—to make that promise to Takuru.

“...Yeah,” he said softly.

“Thank you.”

It's not just a simple "might"... When I tell him the truth, I know... I know that Takuru will...

Even in the face of it all, I somehow managed to smile... but I'm sure it was an incredibly frail one.



November 3rd

Daybreak arrived on November 3rd. Only one day remained until the time limit was up; today was the last day I had to find the culprit, or else Arimura-san, Uki-chan, Takuru, or even...

...Regardless, someone close to me could very well be killed. Shinjo-san was naturally on high alert, and, to make sure that what had happened last time didn't happen again, Arimura-san was going to come to Aoba Dorm for protection once night fell. Takuru had been gone since earlier in the day; I had little doubt he was still pursuing the case somewhere. And I was no different.

After I'd made that promise yesterday, we talked about many things. About the day Takuru woke up. About how we were a family.

"So please... don't do this. Don't try to find the killer on your own. If something happened to you... If what happened to Yui happened to you..." Takuru choked out.

"Then you promise me too, Takuru. Promise me you won't leave me behind. That you won't disappear on me," I choked out in turn.

As the two of us cried, we made those promises to each other. And yet, even after all that we said, I found myself sitting in front of the computer once again, pursuing the very case I had promised to abandon. In all likelihood, Takuru was pursuing it as well.

We'd broken our promises not because we didn't care for each other... but because we wanted to stop each other. Neither of us wanted

the other to meet an awful fate. A truly cruel contradiction.

Doing everything I could to restrain my guilty conscience, I reviewed each and every one of the incidents, and came to a number of conclusions.

1. The Return of the New Gen Madness is far from indiscriminate—it targets us specifically. Takuru in particular found himself spontaneously dragged into the incidents the moment he stepped onto the playing field. Their goal can't be to pursue and kill him, however—they could have done so weeks ago, before we even began to catch on to what was going on.
2. Despite the fact that they have the power to manipulate others—to deeply influence thoughts—the culprit isn't committing perfect crimes. For example, they could have easily used Kawahara-kun, a person who actually knew Senri, instead of Itou-kun in order to make the vengeance story more believable.
3. The true culprit has to be someone I've met before. I vaguely suspected this back when Haida Riko was found to have Senri's ID. I buried that ID myself, after all, and all of Senri's family died in the earthquake. Not even Kawahara-kun knows that I did that—I'm the only one who does. Gaining knowledge of those two secrets would require some form of telepathy—like Kakita-san's ability—and, more importantly, the culprit would have had to make contact with me.

However, that was as far as my deductions led me; pinning down the culprit would be impossible with only those few clues. In times such as these, it's vital to go back to the basics and think everything through once more. So, I went to replay the Don't Look video once more, but before I did, I plugged in some headphones and placed them

on my head. The sounds were awfully unpleasant, and I didn't want to wake up Yuto, who was sleeping right behind me.

But then, right when I hit play, the headphones blasted out sound at a tremendously high volume.

"Agh!"

I hurriedly yanked them off of one ear and quickly looked for the volume key. In my drowsiness, I found myself carelessly hitting the wrong key, and the volume seemed to rise to the maximum. At the rate I was going, I would permanently damage my eardrums *and* wake up Yuto.

Squish, squish.

Just as I located the button and was about to lower the volume, however, I heard a familiar, almost cartoonish-sounding noise. I looked around to see if she had just come into the room I was in, but there was nobody there but myself.

With a trembling hand, I clicked the mouse, and replayed the section where I had heard the sound.

Squish, squish.

Click.

Squish, squish.

Click!

I clicked the mouse harder and harder each time I replayed it, but no matter how many times I did so, I heard that same sound from my headphones—from the scene of Ootani Yuuma's murder. During the moment of silence when he left the camera's view, I could hear it coming from somewhere in the room.

The moment I knew I couldn't possibly be mistaken anymore, a fierce rage came over me. But it was not a rage that was directed at any-

one else—no, I was furious at myself for even coming up with such an idea.

I shot up from my chair. “This is a mistake... It can’t be true...” I said in despair.

“Eek!”

A frail shriek came from behind me, and I quickly turned around to see Uki-chan holding a vacuum cleaner. She looked terrified.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Something just surprised me, that’s all,” I said, frantically trying to act normal and sitting back down as if nothing had happened.

“O-Oh...” Uki-chan seemed unconvinced, but eventually returned to her chores. After confirming she had left, I went back to listening to the video. I listened to it over and over again, but the damning sound refused to disappear. It could never have been so easy.

When I applied everything that I’d learned so far about the case, everything clicked into place. As much as I didn’t want it to be true... I had, to my despair, solved everything.

“Huh? Was I squeezing it again? My bad!”

The identity of that cartoonish sound was the squeezing of a worn-out plush toy—a Gero Froggy cell phone strap. Wherever she went, she would subconsciously squeeze it, and she would only realize she was doing it after we told her. It was a constant habit of hers.

“Huh? Makeup...? I dunno, I don’t think I’m a real good fit for that stuff... But if you really want me to, Non-chan, I guess I can give it a shot...”

She hadn’t really bothered with makeup until I’d first spoken to her about it, and even after that, she’d never gotten too into it.

The one who had killed Takayanagi Momone didn’t pay attention to her makeup.

"I dunno. I passed by Gen-san near 107, and he told me something was up here."

The one who had called Takuru over to the scene of the Revolving Dead was her.

"Well, uh, me and Shin-chan just barely missed Watabe-san, so we didn't see the part where he threw up all those Sumo Stickers..."

Along with Itou-kun, the one who had gone to call Watabe Tomoaki when he was late for the interview... was her.

"No fighting, Non-chan! That goes for you too, Taku! The motto of the Newspaper Club is that all five of us are friends, isn't it?"

She had always been close enough to me to read my thoughts.

She could have easily made contact with Itou-kun, and nobody would've suspected a thing. After all, everyone in the Newspaper Club, myself included, loved her to death.

Don't Look, Audio Bleed, Revolving Dead, Sumorbidly Obese, Spitroasted, and Minor Indiscretion. It all fit. I had managed to connect all the Return of the New Generation Madness incidents that had happened thus far.

Come to think of it, she had always appeared *just* when Takuru was about to stop investigating something. For example, when he and I had fought in front of the love hotel, she had been the one to tell us to get along, before encouraging Takuru to go into the building. It had all been in order to shut me up.

Even though I'd been so desperately hunting for the truth only moments prior, I found myself trying just as desperately to deny the truth I had reached. Yet, the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became... and before long, the innocent, carefree girl I knew... had transformed into a horrifying monster.

Ever since we'd first met, there had always been one doubt in mind—one that was my greatest doubt of all. And when that doubt of mine resurfaced in my mind before that computer screen, my conviction against her finally solidified.

Eight years ago, Takuru had witnessed Senri being experimented on in the basement of AH General Hospital. He also said that *she*, too, had witnessed it, and she herself attested to that. But I knew all too well. The only one who had seen Senri that day was a lone, little boy. Nobody had been with him; he had come to the basement alone.

When she said that, I had simply assumed that one of us was mistaken. I would tell myself that endlessly, refusing to pursue it any further than that. I didn't want to doubt the girl I love so much. My best friend.

But that had been, without a doubt, the biggest mistake of my life.

Who are you, Serika...?

Onoe Serika. Takuru's childhood friend. My best friend. A member of the Newspaper Club. In that moment, I knew... that the friend I had trusted until only yesterday—no, until only a few moments prior—was an unfathomable monster.

Chapter 9 — Her Truth

■ Onoe Serika

September 1st

Today, Miyashiro Takuru left school in a hurry in order to deal with some paperwork regarding his RV. Kurusu Nono was out performing her student council duties, and after she was done with that, she planned to head home. Empire Sweeper Online 2 was undergoing maintenance, so Kazuki Hana had no reason to come to the clubroom. All told, the only person in the Newspaper Club room was Itou Shinji, who ignorantly believed that the others were going to come. I alone had been given the message that club activities wouldn't be happening today, and as such, he'd had no way of knowing that.

"Man, and here I thought I'd been abandoned. Hey Onoe, you know where Takuru and the others are?" he asked me when I arrived. He spoke to me like he wished that anyone other than me would've come in.

"Hmm, I dunno. I wonder where they ran off to," I replied, walking up to him. He was slouched down in a chair, so I naturally found myself looking down on him from above.

"Wish they'd at least *tell us* if they were gonna skip out. Like, what are we, chopped liver?" he joked. "But, eh, it's not like I don't get it. Ever since Miyashiro left home, he and the vice president have been weirdly distant. Did you notice that? I bet they're fighting."

"Hmm, I sure hope not. It would be really nice if Taku and Non-chan got along, I think." As I said that, I took out my phone as if someone were calling me. But, instead of taking a call, I pulled up a picture and immediately thrust it before the boy.

“Hm? What’s this?” he said as he looked at it. “Oh, wow...” In all likelihood, he was just surprised that Miyashiro had once looked like that.

The picture I showed him was a group photo of everyone in Aoba Dorm from back when Miyashiro Takuru had still been living there. Despite the hopeless filth mingling with him, he had the biggest smile on his face. In contrast to that smile, I cast off the harmless one I had been wearing until that very moment, and twisted the edges of my mouth into a wide smile. ...No, it was no smile—it was a nasty grin.

“Kill this one,” I said, tapping the photo with my fingertip. Itou Shinji’s target was Tachibana Yui; when the 28th of October arrived, I would have him slaughter her.

He looked back and forth between me and the photo again and again.

“You’re joking, right? That’s insane!”

Though he didn’t say those words aloud, those thoughts moved through his mind all the same. And that was no assumption, nor a prediction—I can read the thoughts of others.

My sneer grew nastier. Itou Shinji looked at me in shock, but said nothing. He was too scared—terrified that he was seeing the other side of me.

“Aaaaahhh!” Having reached his limit, he fell down from his chair, and tried desperately to escape the room. Unfortunately for him, my accomplice was waiting for him.

And in that moment, the last remaining thread of his sanity snapped.



September 7th

Today was the day that kicked off everything. With my actions, a string of incidents that would not be outdone by the New Generation Madness would begin. Naturally, if the madness of six years past was going to return, it would need stakes, intrigue—and thus required many conditions to be fulfilled. Making the murders happen on the same dates was par for the course.

The apartment building where the first victim lived had an auto-locking system, so I had a random tenant open the door from the inside. Once that was done, we entered the building, and, with nothing else to get in our way, arrived at our destination.

Knock, knock knock, knock...

“Ootani-san, it’s me. Sorry to come by so suddenly,” I said, using a similar voice to the one Onoe Serika uses whenever she’s with Miyashiro Takuru. I had never met the man inside the apartment in my life, but that voice is more desirable to others than my normal, emotionless voice.

The man gave a dismissive response, but I ignored it; I just kept on knocking and talking through the door, and I wasn’t going to stop until he finally relented and opened the door for us.

A few moments later, I sensed him approaching the door.

Just one more push.

“It’s me. Sorry to bother you when it’s this late,” I said to him.

“Right, right. I’ll open it now. Who is it?” As he said that, the door began to open, and Ootani Yuuma’s face peeked through.

“It’s me. Don’t you remember?” I said.

He knitted his brow, examining us with suspicion. But of course he would do that—he had no reason to remember us. That was the first time we’d met, after all.

“Who are you guys—” Suddenly, the power of the artificial sword activated, cutting his words short. His hands then shot up to grab his temples, and he immediately collapsed on the spot.

Overwriting memories has a direct effect on the brain. Haida Riko, Watabe Tomoaki, and Itou Shinji—who all now consider everything around them perfectly normal—suffered like that at first. Though, unlike with them, our plan only involved mind controlling Ootani Yuuma once.

“Ootani-san, are you feeling okay?” Feigning concern, I peered into the groaning man’s face.

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine. This just happens sometimes lately,” he responded.

“Overwork, perhaps? You’ve been so busy lately... You shouldn’t push yourself so hard.”

“You’re always such a worrier. I’m fine. Come in.” In Ootani’s Yuuma’s mind, from that moment on, we were old friends. Led in by him, I entered the room. “Oh, right. It was nice of you to come by, but I’m streaming,” he said.

“Oh, don’t worry about us,” I replied.

Taking hold of the kitchen knife, he began to cut off his right arm; in his eyes, his arm appeared like a block of cheese. When it reached the bone, he tried to draw it back and forth like a saw, became irritated with how it refused to cut, then tried hitting it with the blade over and over again. Even in that moment, it still looked like cheese to him. Obviously, he did not feel pain.

Fiddling with my Gero Froggy strap, I watched over the pitiful man as he grappled with his bloody arm.

“God damn it!” he shouted in frustration, still unable to cut through it properly.

“Let me help you,” I said as I approached him. At the rate it was going, it was going to interfere with the livestream. To move along the process, I retrieved my own specialized “kitchen knife”—one I was deeply familiar with using—from nothingness, and began slicing his cheese for him. “There’s a trick to cutting it.”

It wasn’t about simply applying more force—it was a multistep process. You had to saw through the flesh, break the bones with a great deal of force, then slice through the tender joints. This was something you only learned by doing it many, many times, and, fortunately, I knew the trick.

“It sounds like your work is going well,” I said, pretending to be a friend engaging in small talk with him. In response, he began to talk about his dreams and aspirations, even going beyond what I already knew. He divulged even more than he had ever said on his Niconiya Live broadcasts; it seemed that when he was speaking to someone he trusted rather than the masses, he was far more willing to talk about himself. In that conversation, I heard his true thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately for him, the trust he felt toward me was nothing more than the product of a delusion.

“And... done,” I said upon completion.

“Sorry to make you help like that.” With those words, Ootani Yuuma piled his mangled arm onto a plate, and headed over to what served as his workplace, as well as his own personal stage: his computer. He was unlikely to be in any pain quite yet, but if anything obstructed his biological function, the effects of the mind control would be cut off. But, judging from the blood loss, he was only going to last a few minutes anyway, so that shouldn’t be much of an issue.

“So sorry! I bought this cheese on sale and it’s just so incredibly hard.” Returning to his absurdist facade, Ootani Yuuma resumed

streaming. After saying a word or two, he placed a hunk of flesh he'd referred to as "cheese" into his mouth, and the sea of agony began. He died only a few moments later, perhaps even of shock rather than blood loss.

After letting the public bear witness to his death through the camera, Ootani Yuuma fulfilled his role, and quickly stopped moving.

Being careful not to make a sound, I headed toward the door.

"Goodbye," I said to the corpse. Leaving behind what seemed to be nothing more than a routine performance for us, we exited the room. Then, we departed from the apartment building; dealing with the auto lock was as easy as when we had come in.

"Well, well, that went just swimmingly," my accomplice said cheerily. He had been with me the entire time, watching over Ootani Yuuma's death just like I had.

Despite his age, he carried a strange piece of machinery on his back, together with a cartoonishly large sword that felt as if it had been ripped out of some ridiculous comic book. My plan required him to carry around all of that—or, more specifically, it required the machinery that made mind control possible.

"It's a livestream. I bet that internet-obsessed poindexter is *really* gonna get the ball rolling here. Oh, but we gotta kill at least one more. Otherwise this'll end up being pretty boring." Sakuma Wataru, former Gigalomaniac researcher and current head of Aoba Clinic, spoke excitedly about the plans we had in place for that moment forward.

Up until six years ago, Sakuma had worked in the outer rings of a powerful organization known as "The Committee." However, his research had come to an end during the final experiment, the "Third Melt"—referred to publicly as the "Shibuya Earthquake"—where one lone Gigalomaniac had stood against the threat, crushing all ambition

that had been born from it, and thwarting the experiment in its entirety. Following that critical failure, the Committee had washed their hands of Gigalomaniacs, and abandoned Sakuma's entire organization. However, the man still clung to the research that he and his colleagues had just barely managed to finish in time.

For the sake of my plans, I'd made contact with him, and he'd joined me in my efforts. The man's true nature is that of a hedonist; he cooperated with my plan simply because it sounded fun. He devised grotesque ways for his victims to die purely because it sounded fun. He didn't even hesitate to drag the children of Aoba Dorm that adored him as their father into it—because it sounded fun.

If I'm being frank, the man is scum. But his utter depravity was a necessary touch for my plan—my plan to create a grotesque performance worthy enough to captivate Miyashiro Takuru, and to have a villain that must be defeated at the end.

The Return of the New Generation Madness that began with Ootani Yuuma's death, and will continue from that point onward *must* be solvable. The player will pursue the incidents, get driven to the very edge by an unforeseen enemy, suffer horrible disgrace, and then, when all hope is seemingly lost, defeat the final boss in an unprecedented reversal of fortune.

That is the plot I have prepared for Miyashiro Takuru—a great event to fulfill his heroic ambitions. The lone young man who was driven to the very edge by the New Generation Madness six years ago and suffered unimaginable disgrace, yet still managed to restore his honor in the end... Miyashiro Takuru wishes to be a truly special young man like him. And if he desires something, I have no choice but to fulfill it.

I have been by Miyashiro Takuru's side ever since he was a child. I'm someone who has endured an even more miserable upbringing than his own, in which he was abandoned by his parents. Someone who knows less than him, and is always ever-so-eager to talk. Someone who has far less courage than him, yet still holds the strength to reach out a hand whenever he is in need. A convenient imaginary friend. That is Onoe Serika. My true nature.

His simple, unremarkable imaginary friend gained flesh and blood six years ago. In the earthquake, he learned that the people he had previously looked down upon were no less right than he was, and he learned how truly powerless he was. Driven to the very edge by this, Takuru used his power as a Gigalomaniac to turn me from delusion into reality. Unlike seeing the future, controlling emotions, and seeing through lies, the ability of a true Gigalomaniac is nothing so simple. They step foot into the realm of God—they are omnipotent.

In the end, psychics other than Miyashiro Takuru are nothing more than—

“When’re we doing the next one again?” Just before we parted, Sakuma asked me a foolish question, interrupting my thoughts.

“September 19th,” I replied.

“That’s a good while away. Gotta do my best not to miss it. When you get old like me, your memory starts to slip, y’know?”

Spare me the window dressing. Like you could ever forget about anything “fun.”

“Oh, right. There was one thing I’ve been meaning to ask you about,” he spoke up once again.

“What is it?”

“I know you plan to rope in Itou, Yui, and Nono, but I’m not too sure how well that’s gonna work out for you. If you push that kid too

far with all that, he might crack.”

Sakuma was not worried about his sons, daughters, or their friend—he simply was afraid of his toy breaking.

“Even though you play the role of his foster parent, it’s impressive to me how naïve you are. Miyashiro Takuru can surpass any and all obstacles. If anything, not preparing *at least* this level of tragedy would be completely insufficient,” I explained coldly.

“Pfft. Naïve... You’re just mad because the person you’ve been making goo-goo eyes at for so long got nabbed out from under you.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“All right, all right, I got it loud and clear. I’ll think of something more fun for next time—something that’ll be more than enough to satisfy your *boyfriend*.” With a wave of his hand, the lowlife finally departed.

Ootani Yuuma’s death marked the beginning of the game. A game “he” wants to play, he wishes for, and he will enjoy. No matter where the pieces fall, Miyashiro Takuru’s wish will be granted: He—Taku—will become someone very, very special.

Chapter 10 — Their Collapse

■ Kurusu Nono

November 3rd

Once I learned who the culprit truly was, I began writing a letter in my room; in it, I weaved together all the truths I'd so badly wanted to tell. At the end, when the letter came to a close, it felt like all my worrying had been for nothing.

If only I had felt that way from the beginning... If I had just gotten it over with sooner, then...

When everything is finally over, Takuru can read that letter, which I had addressed to the entire family. But I really hope that it won't have to come to that. I don't want them to have to read my farewells.

I glanced around my room. I've slept inside its walls for years and years now, and, after so much time, many of the things housed within it are precious to me. My life at Aoba Dormitory began from nothing, so the furniture, the decorations, and how it was all arranged—all of it had been decided by me. I wouldn't change a thing about it. If the world were to be so kind, I would want everything to stay exactly the way it is.

I reached into a secret spot hidden deep within my desk drawer—a place nobody else could possibly know about, even if they destroyed the desk itself—and took out one of the final remaining remnants of my memories: the photo of Kurusu Nono, Kawahara Masashi, and Minamisawa Senri. It was the same one that I still have on my phone; unlike the digital copy, however, Senri's face had been blacked out heavily with a marker, to the point where you could practically feel the hatred oozing through the darkness.

If someone were to see that picture, the mysteries surrounding Nono and Senri would undoubtedly increase in number. I moved to cut it to shreds with scissors, but in the end, I reconsidered, instead choosing to leave it intact. However, instead of placing it back in its original location, I hid it under the bed, so that others might be able to find it.

Perhaps someone will find the photo, think it odd, and then go on to solve the mystery behind it. If that happens, I'll be okay with it. After all, within it is a truth that I wasn't able to leave behind, even in that letter.

"Thank you for everything," I said aloud. Then, I changed into my uniform, bowed to the room I was leaving behind, before at last turning my back to it. Taking care not to run into anyone on my way out, I then snuck out of Aoba Dorm. I have no doubt that if I had seen anyone's face as I left, I would have lost my resolve right then and there, and I would have found myself sobbing at their feet.

I stepped outside the building, and then, ignoring my interminably vibrating phone, I walked toward the place where I would bring everything to a close.



Even though I know it's a holiday, and thus school wasn't in session today, Hekiho Academy is so empty, it feels unnatural.

I'm currently sitting in the Newspaper Club room, waiting for Serika's response. She's almost guaranteed to reply right after midnight; I know this because it's still November 3rd, and the final case of the New Generation Madness, the DQN Puzzle, occurred on November 4th. So she *will* meet me after the date changes, or perhaps even right before. I know she will.

All things considered, I wonder why I didn't consider staying in the other room I knew so well—the student council room. After all, if

I'm in the Newspaper Club room, Takuru or one of the others could suddenly pick up on my intentions and come straight here.

That's when an answer comes to me: in all likelihood, it's because the student council room is the home of the Empress, Kurusu Nono, while the clubroom is a place where I can just be myself.

The cardboard box with "Nono Juice" written on it as a joke comes to mind. I have no memory of why that was written on it, let alone what it contains... but strangely enough, it's never particularly offended me. If anything, I actually remember having a fairly pleasant conversation about it when I brought it up once upon a time.

There are no memories like that in the student council room. That's why I want to be in the clubroom—a place where I can be surrounded by happy memories. Upon realizing that, I take a look around the room... and the rest of my memories, the nightmare that was the Return of the New Gen, and the sadness of losing my family all come flooding back.



November 4th

The moonlight streaming down from the sky lands upon an empty bench, illuminating it. Not a single soul remains on the rooftop at midnight; in this sealed-off world, Serika and I will face each other. I've agonized over this many times, yet I still chose this path—to protect my family, and for Takuru.

"Non-chan?" The same expression on her face as always, Serika finally arrives on the roof. Despite receiving an incredibly unusual request to come to the school rooftop at midnight, she still came here all the same. Does she trust me—the person who called her here—that much? Or is this just a part of her plan?

“I’m really sorry to bring you out here so late,” I say apologetically. It has already begun, yet, even still, I’m at a loss of what to do next. But I have no choice but to shake off that feeling and face her. Calling her by a different name than usual, I speak once more. “Hey, Onoe?”

Other than my family, I don’t call anyone by their first name; by calling her by her last name, this is my way of cutting off my best friend—the girl who I always used to be able to let my guard down around. And then, I begin to interrogate her.

I ask her why she was at the scene of the first incident. Why she killed Yui. Whether she was truly at the hospital basement eight years ago. But no matter how much I ask, Serika doesn’t answer. She simply acts afraid and bewildered, a response that only the girl I thought I knew would’ve given.

It’s not too late... I can still stop... My voice echoes within my mind, but I quickly destroy that last remaining naïveté. I have no choice but to use my last resort.

I raise my arms high, and press my hands together as if in prayer. Between my hands, I feel a sensation both unclear, yet clear as can be at the same time... and, for the first time in six years, I draw my sword.

I am a psychic that wields a DI-sword. Now that the truth has come out, I admit that I have always been able to see such swords. When Arimura-san brandished hers in terror, and when Uki-chan retrieved hers after being asked to by Takuru, I saw both of them. What I said in those situations were nothing more than lies I told Takuru. But now, the truth has come to light; I am a psychic, and therefore, I have now opened myself up as a target.

The sharp blade extends downward, taking the form of two arms interlocked with one another. My DI-sword has an incredibly bizarre

shape; it is a sword that signifies a misguided prayer transformed into a deadly weapon.

And I immediately swing that weapon down upon Serika.

With a gasp, Serika watches my strike closely, and swiftly avoids it with a quick step backward—something that was nothing more than pure reflex. From this, I can draw a single answer. “So... I was right, huh?” I say.

Serika remains silent. However, her expression from before is fading rapidly.

The ruthless queen of the night, illuminated by the moon. In complete contrast to her normal warm and sunny façade, the coldness of the moon suits this Serika perfectly. Her eyes move from my DI-sword to me, and then, they pierce straight through me.

Eyes that see all. So, these are her telepathic abilities...

“You were the one who was *using* Minamisawa Senri, weren’t you?!” I shouted at her.

“...I don’t want to hear that from you of all people, Kurusu Nono.” Her pet name for me, Non-chan, is long gone. Her tone of voice chills me to the bone—a voice so cold, I can hardly believe it came from Serika’s mouth.

A long, sharp, sinister blade materializes within her hands. Her DI-sword. Like the petals of a poisonous flower, her blade embodies so much beauty, you simply can’t help but be drawn to it—entranced by it.

She closes the distance between us in an instant, swinging her sword as she leaps. Unlike my own sword, which has remained unused for six years, her DI-sword seems to be a weapon she’s very familiar with.

The tip of her sword grazes my shoulder.

With a gasp, I frantically return her fearless, consecutive attacks. While my own DI-sword has a strange shape compared to hers, its great size allows me to use it as a shield, granting me the power to endure her fierce assault. But I can do little more than that.

On top of her familiarity with her sword, she can also read my thoughts. It's like playing Old Maid with your entire hand being visible to your opponent; both situations are unequivocally unfair.

"So, you didn't tell Miyashiro yet, huh? You fake." Her words cut deep into me. "Then maybe I'll just tell him myself—"

"*Onoe!*" I scream, cutting her off midsentence. Her words prove that she's reading my every thought, and I find myself attacking her in fury. However, she catches my blade effortlessly, and our two swords clash in a shower of sparks.

"I won't allow your death to knock Miyashiro Takuru out of the game. To meet that end, I'll make sure he doesn't realize you've been killed."

I hear Serika's voice, yet her mouth isn't moving. Her words echo inside my mind.

Wait, is this...?

"This is the game Miyashiro Takuru wants."

There's no mistaking it: Serika's thoughts are passing through her DI-sword and flowing into my mind. In this moment, the truth behind the girl known as Onoe Serika and her plan are suddenly becoming clear to me. An unthinkable, abhorrent game, crafted all for Takuru's sake. It's beyond ridiculous. How could such heinous acts be carried out in the name of something like that?

"I always did think you were incredibly irritating... but even your DI-sword pisses me off," she spits out.

“What about you...? Seems like... your DI-sword has a few problems of its own...” It feels only natural to confront her with the truth—truth I gained through her very own thoughts. For it’s not only my thoughts that are flowing into her—Serika’s thoughts are flowing back into me through my DI-sword as well.

“I know everything about you.”

Upon hearing my inner voice, Serika comes to the same realization, and instinctively jumps back.

“But that’s... impossible...” she says in shock; for the first time, cracks appear in her coldhearted exterior.

She’s a walking contradiction. Plotting this game for Takuru, forcing Itou-kun to kill Yui, and now fully intending to kill me here today... None of these things are what Takuru would want. The game that, in her mind, is all for Takuru... in actuality, is a game entirely for herself. A game for her to prove the reason behind her own existence. A game of revenge.

In the past, Takuru was only able to survive by relying on Serika. But, after he met us—his new family—and Itou-kun, he was finally able to let his guard down around people other than her, and her reason for existence was threatened. Or at least, that’s what she came to believe.

It’s for that reason that she made use of the longing that had opened within Takuru when he left Aoba Dorm; she took the yearning he had felt in that moment and used it as a reason to start this game, all for the sole purpose of making him feel special. A game filled to bursting with contradictions—a mixture of love and selfishness—that would eliminate all who posed a threat to her reason for existing, and make Takuru hers and hers alone.

“Shut up... Shut the hell up, you lying *fake!*” screams Serika, and our face-off continues. Perhaps fearful of the side effect of her telepathy being usable by me as well, Serika begins to attack from farther away, causing our blades to clash endlessly.

Amid the sparks that fly from each strike, an image appears... and when I see it, I realize: these are not Serika’s thoughts.

The image is of Takuru and “her” offering flowers before Kurusu Nono’s grave.

Images that cannot possibly exist continue to flash before me. They are impossible, and yet, deep down, I know that each of them paints a possible future—the possibilities brought forth by the interaction between DI-swords.

That’s the only way I know to describe it.



November 6th

It’s the day of the Shibuya Peace and Restoration festival—a magnificent event held to celebrate the end of the reconstruction that’s finally come after six long years. While tens of thousands of people gather before the station, Takuru stands in the uncharacteristically empty Shibuya Hikariwo Theater, facing off against another culprit behind the murders.

“You goddamn brat!” they shout, enraged.

With him letting out nothing but a pained gasp in return, I realize that Takuru is tremendously injured. However, Serika isn’t the one who did that to him; no, she’s lying down on the edge of the stage, her body not moving an inch.

“I should’ve just used the mind control to put you in the torture room from the start! Actually, maybe I’ll torture you for real, right

now! How would you like that, *huh?!*” the culprit continues to shout.

“*Aaaaaaghhhhhhhhhhh!*” Takuru’s screams pierce through me.

When I peered into Serika’s mind a few moments ago, I realized the identity of her accomplice: the man that we, and the late Yui, call Dad... Sakuma Wataru.

I don’t believe that he’s a psychic as well, but the machinery he carries on his back, as well as the pseudo DI-sword connected to it by a number of wires, grants him abilities on the same level as Gigalomaniacs.

The accomplice who so carelessly mind controlled Itou-kun and the others... doing so without even a hint of mercy... was Dad all along. I thought nothing could be more soul-crushing than Yui’s death... but reality has found a way to destroy me beyond even that.

“Aghhhh, gaaaaaaah!” Takuru screams.

“Hmm... Nah. There’s nothing new to be gained driving someone mad with pain,” Sakuma muses. He’s treating Takuru like some sort of lab rat... *This* is the man who I loved so much?! Who I admired as both a doctor and a father?!

“Maybe I should just kill them all in front of you instead. They’re probably still in Shibuya, right?”

“AAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“Yeah, that’s right! The more important they are to you, the better the result! This’ll... definitely work!” Turning his back to Takuru, Sakuma moves to leave the theater. But before he can...

“*I won’t... LET YOOOOOOOOOU!*”

Having materialized into reality, Takuru’s DI-sword soars straight toward Sakuma’s back.

“What?!”

Without even granting him the chance to turn around, Takuru's DI-sword pierces through Sakuma's medulla oblongata and emerges from the back of his throat. In an instant, Sakuma collapses to the ground, coughs up a spatter of blood, before his life comes to a swift end.

Takuru's tenacity triumphed over Sakuma's hedonism; with his death, Takuru has avenged everyone. If things were different, I'm sure I would've praised my brother to high heaven... and yet... I find myself unable to feel that.

Even if one of them had no right to be called family anymore... I didn't want to see my family kill each other...



November 4th

I hurriedly repel Serika's incoming DI-sword. Her attacks continue without cease, and the glimpse of the truth I saw is enough to dull my movements.

I doubt she's seeing the future like I am, though, because...

...what I'm seeing right now is the conclusion to both Onoe Serika and Miyashiro Takuru's stories.



November 6th

Takuru defeated Sakuma. And now, only one more person stands in his way. ...No, that's not quite right. All this time, that one person has been trying to guide him down a certain path without his knowledge nor his consent—to give him the ending to his story that he wished for.

Serika.

“Give me something I want to do! Help me do it!” Right after the earthquake struck, he wished that from the bottom of his heart, pleading with his imaginary friend.

Having now remembered the truth he sealed away, Takuru is rejecting the ending Serika prepared for him to her face. “When Ootani died in the Don’t Look case, and Takayanagi died in the Audio Bleed case, and when Arimura’s friend Kakita died, and when Watabe the journalist died, and when Haida died and was made to look like Minamisawa Senri, and when Itou was mind-controlled into killing Yui... and when **** died...!”

The name of the victim after Yui is muffled for me—I can’t hear it.

“All of that... was my fault?!” Takuru cries out, tears streaming down his face.

“No! I did it!” Serika cries out in turn, tears pouring from her eyes as well.

“That’s right! You did it! And I made you do it!”

“I told you, that’s not true!”

“...Kunosato-san was right. Too many things involving the case were going on around me. But of course they were, right? The whole point of the case was for me to solve it!”

Now knowing the whole truth, Takuru takes a step toward a new path—one different from the ideal ending Serika prepared. But it’s a path she won’t allow him to choose. Even if she has to resort to using force.

Enraged, Serika challenges Takuru to a battle. Tragically, just like in the tough struggle I’m facing in reality, her ability to read minds is too powerful for him. She reads all his thoughts, and overwhelms him with a full-frontal assault.

“Just sleep. The police will be here soon,” she says upon his defeat.

“Ugh... gah... hah...” Takuru groans.

“Don’t worry. Once you wake up, and time passes, you’ll realize what you really wish for.”

What you really wish for.

The offer to have everything done for him... instead of putting Takuru to rest, it rouses him to action. The very next moment, he summons an array of DI-swords formed from his own delusions, and, upon bringing them into reality, fires them wildly in every direction. Even with her telepathic powers, this attack is one Serika is not able to counter, and she finds herself utterly defeated.

Now reaching the end, Takuru points his DI-sword toward her unmoving body, then raises it high. “Just sleep. The police will be here soon,” he tells her softly.

“Ugh... gah... hah...” groans not Takuru, but Serika.

“Don’t worry. Once you wake up, and time passes, you’ll realize what you really wish for.”

I hear the same conversation as before, but with one major difference: Serika has run out of ways to turn things around in her favor. All her telepathy can do now is tell her what Takuru plans to do with her.

“Stop it... Taku... Don’t take my reason for living from me!” she shrieks. “I’ve read so many minds since I was created! Everyone’s always so scared, and no one ever knows what to do! How can they live like that?! How can they even smile?! They don’t even know why they’re doing it!”

Only moments ago, I thought of her as a monster. A doll. Yet... with the way she’s crying out now, it’s almost like...

“...No. You’re going to be a normal girl,” Takuru says to her.

“No... Please... Please! Let me help you forever...!” she cries out desperately.

“...This is it. Goodbye.”

“*TAKU!*”

And then, he swings his DI-sword down upon her.

◇◇◇

November 4th

The moment Takuru swings his DI-sword downward, the vision vanishes, and I find myself staring into the Serika of the present. Her blade is still facing me, as sharp as ever. I’m certain she didn’t see that vision of the future. Otherwise, there’s no way she’d be able to maintain that cold expression she wears on her face.

“What am I supposed to do now?!” I cry out, falling into despair. The father I’ve trusted for so long... the nigh-unbreakable bond between Takuru and the killer standing before me... and the foretelling of my own future... it all coalesces and nearly brings me to my knees. And yet... all that hurt... it pools together and becomes my strength, and I fiercely repel Serika’s assault.

Caught by surprise, Serika lets out a gasp. Perhaps it’s because of my sheer, bewildered anger flowing into her mind, or perhaps my movements were too sudden for her to have read my mind in time. Regardless of which it is that gave me the advantage, I have to make use of it.

This is my chance. And it’s most likely the last chance I’ll ever have. I’m going to throw her off-balance with an unending assault.

I close the gap between us, diving straight into the sparks that still shine in the air from our last clash. But, for a single instant, I witness a future even further past the scene at Hikariwo, and my shock is

more than enough to stop me from going any further. And... that's when...

...Serika's DI-sword pierces through my chest.

I was too shaken by the vision to react.

This is reality. My DI-sword disappears from my hand, erased into nothingness. I collapse to the ground as Serika looks down on me from above. The moonlight casts a shadow upon the both of us, and her expression soon becomes unperceivable to me.

"Kurusu! Onoe!"

I hear Takuru's voice. *He came to the roof after all...*

"...Run...!" I yell desperately, my vision blurring. But the sound of Takuru's footsteps keep coming closer and closer.

No... If he comes any closer, he's going to—

But before my thought can reach its end, another set of footsteps cuts through the moonlit air. Onoe's. She escaped. ...But of course she would. She would never kill Takuru—therefore, escape was her only option.

Tears of relief flow from my eyes, and from my chest flows the last blood I will ever bleed. This is a fitting end for me—a deserved ending to my story.

If only I had just said I was a Gigalomaniac back when this all began... that I was actually _____... I might have been able to protect Yui... and the ending to all of this might have been different...

"Kurusu!"

I might have been able to save Takuru from having to see me like this.

The blood gushing from my organs and into my throat begins to choke me. Panicking, Takuru places my head on its side. Following the law of gravity, blood spews from my mouth and onto the rooftop.

He knows so many things... Such a smart boy...

As much as I want to stroke his head and praise him, my hands and feet aren't doing what I tell them to.

"Taku..." I whisper weakly.

"Don't talk! It's okay! You're gonna be okay...!" he shouts.

My, what a hopeless liar you are... Almost as bad as I am...

With the last of my strength, I take Takuru's hand away from my wound.

"No! I need to keep the wound closed!" he shouts in protest.

There's no use, Takuru... So please... allow me to be selfish just one last time...

I press his trembling fingertips to my lips.

Oh... I understand now... How I truly feel... As my thoughts trickle away, a tear follows them down my cheek. I thought Takuru was only family to me... but the truth is...

"No! That can't happen! It *can't!*" Takuru shouts in desperation.

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

I can't even give him a proper apology... Even in the end... I'm still such a failure...

"...Nono? Hey... Nono? Wake up, Nono!"

Even though Takuru... is finally calling me... by my name...

The moments after I become unable to breath stretch endlessly.

But... if I'm going to... disappear... anyway...

The truth is...

I always...

love...d...

Chapter 11 — The End Begins in Silence

The confession came and went, bringing with it only an intense malaise.

“It’s not my fault that I did this. It’s the fault of our sick society.”

With those words, Takuru confesses to being the one who pulled the strings behind the Return of the New Generation Madness. With those words, he confesses that he ended the lives of three celebrities, Ootani, Takayanagi, and Watabe; killed Kakita to practice on an ordinary person; forced his own friend to kill his younger sister; and then, for the finishing touch, murdered the woman who served as his surrogate older sister.

He haughtily claims that he did it all as a challenge to society—a truly cliché motive—all with a staunch aura of pride shining on his face.

Who is responsible for this disgusting lie? Is this being shown to me through mind control? Or is Takuru being made to say it?

Takuru is a victim. The culprits are Onoe Serika and Sakuma Wataru. And yet, Takuru’s speaking as if he’s been the culprit all along.

Wait... something strange is happening...

Every now and then, strange flashes of light assault my eyes—almost as if they’re trying to get my attention...



March 28th, 2016

“I-Is she awake, maybe...?”

I remember being hit with this light a long time ago.

“Not ‘maybe’—she is! She’s responding! Uki, hurry and get Kunosato-san! Or a nurse—it doesn’t matter, just be quick!”

A nurse...? Oh, I remember now... This is the same light they flashed me with again and again in that hospital basement so many years ago... But there wasn't a nurse in sight back then.

"I-I got her!"

"For god's sa— Have none of you ever heard of a nurse call button?!"

I hear someone's angry yell, and the very next moment, light envelops me. As my eyes adjust to it, the light reveals itself to be a mysterious picture I have never seen before; upon closer inspection, I realize that it's a Rorschach design that I don't recognize.

With a small clicking sound, the equipment attached to my head is removed. With my vision no longer impeded, I gaze up above myself.

An unfamiliar ceiling.

I'm lying in a bed. To think hell would be gracious enough to grant its sinners beds...

"You're awake. Frankly, I was halfway ready to give up on you, but..." The voice trails off. "Hey. Look at me. You know who I am, right?"

Before me is a woman wearing a doctor's coat atop a Hekiko uniform. She's glaring at me. "...A demon?" I answer in a daze.

"*Pfft!*" A girl with blonde twintails bursts into laughter beside the now-noticeably more irritated woman.

"Th-That's rude, Arimura-san," scolds a younger girl; a pair of glasses rest on her nose, and her hair is tied in a side ponytail.

What's going on...? All the people here feel so familiar...

"Laughing is rude, maybe..." The instant I hear another girl speak, the shock shakes me awake. After all, the girl who just spoke is also wearing glasses, though unlike the last one, she has short hair.

“Kazuki?! Did you just talk?!” I ask with a start. Kazuki, who always communicates in simple mumbles, is *speaking normally*. Hearing her voice for the first time turns out to be quite the effective alarm.

In response to my words, Kazuki nods her head. Standing beside her is Uki-chan, Arimura-san, and Kunosato-san. Friends from the Newspaper Club and my family—or, well, people connected to the case in general encircle my bed.

“Well. Look who finally decided to shake off the brain fog. How does it feel to be fully conscious again?” As she speaks, Kunosato-san wastes no time removing the various cords attached to my head and body. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought she was a real doctor—a fierce contrast to my current perception of her. After all, as long as I’ve known her, she’s been a researcher without even a hint of compassion.

“Where am I...?” I ask.

“AH General Hospital,” Arimura-san responds nonchalantly.

“Huh?” I immediately start to tremble.

“Oh no. Okay, first off: the basement’s been sealed off, and the old hospital staff got fired a while ago. Second: you got stabbed on the rooftop of Hekiho Academy on November 4th, and you got carried here straight after. That was last year. In other words, you’ve been dozing for months—and in critical condition, too.”

“Is that really what happened...?” My confusion grows; I thought for sure Serika stabbed me... and I died.

“You most likely would’ve died if the sword had penetrated even a couple centimeters deeper. So, it was either by complete and utter chance, or a total miracle that you survived,” Kunosato-san explains. “Or maybe someone *caused* a miracle to occur via their delusions.”

Someone caused a miracle to occur... with their delusions...? Wait, like a Gigalomaniac?!

I immediately start blurting out questions. “How is Takuru?! No, wait, what happened?! Is it over?! Is the Return of New Gen over?!”

Takuru isn’t here, and Arimura-san just said November was last year. That means that multiple months have passed since my fight with Serika—and that it’s 2016.

“As much as we’d love to explain everything in agonizing detail, there’s something we need to confirm first,” Kunosato-san says.

“Okay, uh... I’ll just come out and say it: I can’t tell when people are lying anymore,” Arimura-san follows; it’s a huge revelation, but she says it with relative ease.

“You what? Does that mean you’ve lost your powers?” I ask, confused.

“Pretty much. Oh, and I can’t see DI-swords, either. Same goes for Uki,” she continues. “Seems like everyone who got powers from the earthquake weren’t actually real Gigalomaniacs. Our powers were fake all along.”

Uki-chan nods, and, oddly enough, so does Kazuki. Come to think of it, I *did* find what I’d overheard about true Gigalomaniacs to not really match up with those who only have one ability, like Arimura-san... If anything, from what I understand, true Gigalomaniacs seem to be almost omnipotent. Meanwhile, those who gained their powers in the Shibuya Earthquake are losing them now...

My eyes open wide and I immediately start inspecting my body. Even if I were to discard the obvious effects of being in a coma for several months, my legs, feet, and body as a whole are far too slender, and my breasts and rear have gotten much smaller. Not only that, but I’ve

gotten both thinner and shorter. "...Excuse me? Could you pass me a mirror?" I ask.

Uki-chan passes me a hand-mirror almost instantly, almost like she already knew that I was going to ask for it.

I sit up slightly on the bed and peer into the glass. In its reflection is a plain-faced girl with gloomy eyes—one that bears zero resemblance to the ever-radiant Kurusu Nono. Even her hair is alien to me—it's lost its pigmentation, and it looks completely different from Nono's sleek, dark blonde hair.

"So. Who are you really?" presses Arimura-san. In that moment, I realize that she hasn't called me by name ever since I opened my eyes.

I... I am...

"I am... Minamisawa Senri," I say, at last telling her my real name.

I am the impostor who wore the face of Kurusu Nono. The fake who took on the life of someone who, in truth, died in the earthquake.

That is my true identity.

■ Minamisawa Senri

It was several years before the Shibuya Earthquake.

My mother had recently converted to a certain religion, and she began to regularly take me to a facility housed in the basement of AH General Hospital—a place managed by the very religious organization she had come to follow. During my time there, I was found to possess the necessary qualifications they were looking for... and that was when it all began. From that day onward, I was subjected to horrific, torturous experiments—ones that were designed to transform me into a god. A god known as a Gigalomaniac.

My father, who had been against it at first, soon abandoned me without even a second thought. I was in elementary school at the time, and with every day that passed, I became more and more depressed. I had no friends; everyone avoided me because of my strange surgical scars and injection marks.

Everyone had abandoned me.

“Hey there. Are you alone? If you are, do you wanna play with me?”

That is, except for one. The one and only person who didn’t abandon Minamisawa Senri—the one person who didn’t cast her aside as someone who wasn’t even human anymore—was the most popular girl in my class, Kurusu Nono.

Nono-chan treated me like a friend. Even when she played with others, she would always think of ways to make sure I was included. Even though everyone else hated being around me, Nono-chan would always treat me as a friend, purely out of the goodness of her heart.

Then came the Shibuya Earthquake.

On my way home from the hospital, I was caught up in the chaos of the devastating quake. Fortunately, I myself did not sustain any seri-

ous injuries, but... I did witness my mother die in front of me. The hospital staff came to collect me—to retrieve their test subject—but I ran away as fast as I could; as I ran, I heard their voices calling after me, telling me my father was also dead.

And then... I found my best friend. Dying. She had been crushed by rubble, and was crying so, so hard... I tried my best to save her, but there was nothing a small child like me could do.

Slowly, Nono-chan stopped moving, and... after a few more moments, I became well and truly alone.

Why had I, the one everyone hated, survived, but Nono-chan, the one everyone loved, died?

I despised it. I despised the sheer unfairness of the world.

“If someone was going to die... it should’ve been me... I... I should’ve died... instead of Nono-chan...!” As I wallowed in grief, I screamed my wish into the night. It was then that I first saw a DI-sword, its entirety enveloped in a stark, white light.

Suddenly, I saw the hospital staff reappear in the distance. They drew closer and closer, until... they ran right past me. I couldn’t understand why they would’ve possibly done that—that is, until I peered into a puddle of water.

Something strange had happened to me. Through the power I had suddenly awakened to, I had transformed into the girl I admired so much: Kurusu Nono.

I had become Nono-chan.

If... If Minamisawa Senri can’t be happy... maybe Kurusu Nono can...

Taken over by a truly horrific thought, I found myself setting Nono-chan’s body aflame. But... by the time I realized the true horror of my actions, it was already too late.

Nono-chan was then buried as Senri; the one who testified about her death was none other than me, the person posing as Nono-chan. The impostor.

This was something I could never take back.

That day—that moment—was when my lie began.

When I was hospitalized as Nono-chan, many of my living classmates came to visit. By using various excuses such as shock or my memories being foggy, I was able to pass as her. The faces they showed me then were ones they would have never shown Senri.

I could be happy like this. I felt vile, but I let myself be carried along by that thought even so... until one day, I came to realize something. *What kind of girl was Kurusu Nono?*

She had been positive, cheerful... and if that wasn't enough, she had always been so very kind. If I was going to be her, I could no longer be who I had been before.

From that moment onward, I did everything in my power to remember how Nono-chan used to be, and live as she would.

Nono-chan would absolutely act this way.

Nono-chan would definitely take on this responsibility.

But, in exchange for my newfound happiness, I began to lose who I was.

After I was taken in at Aoba Dorm, acting as a kind older sister to Yui and Yuto, a young boy arrived at the household. This marked the turning point in my life.

He was the same boy I had seen just a glimpse of in the hospital basement, before the earthquake struck. Though he had grown considerably, the same distinctive features remained; it truly was him. The moment I realized that, I went completely pale.

Back then, I had begged him to help me, but in the end, he had run away. And yet, despite him abandoning me, I didn't feel any anger or resentment toward him.

What could a single boy have done? I was simply being realistic.

But... as I looked at that boy as he lay in the bed at Aoba Dorm, I found myself terrified. Terrified of the boy who had seen me as Senri. Terrified of the boy who had seen her fighting through that hellscape. It felt like something I had buried a long time ago was trying to burst free from its grave—to crawl back to life.

"Wait a second. Weren't you in that hospital?" The thought of him asking me that left me petrified, but now that I had changed my appearance, there was no conceivable way he would. He wasn't even conscious. And yet, even so, my fear refused to disappear.

When he'd first arrived at the clinic, I had been the one who proposed that we take care of him. The reason for this was simple: I was too scared to take my eyes off him. It took an entire year before he woke up, but when he finally did, I was unexpectedly happy—it felt like everything I had done up until that point had been rewarded.

Before I went to sleep that night, I came to realize something: even though there was the possibility that my circumstances could worsen greatly due to his awakening, I still felt genuine joy to see his eyes open. It was a truly strange feeling for me to grapple with, but, naturally, I continued to help him—this time through his rehabilitation.

He was infuriated at his inability to even so much as turn over in bed; in his eyes, he saw it only as a display of how pathetic he was. Of course, as I was always the one who was nearest to him, I often found myself taking the brunt of his anger. Still, I attempted to use various methods to help him through it—calming him down, distracting him,

taking care of whatever he needed... I continued to support him using everything I had been developing from acting as Nono-chan. But, no matter what I did, the rehabilitation showed no results.

What would I do if he started taking out his frustration on Yui or Yuto...?

One day, as worries such as those flowed through my mind, an incident occurred. When I was at the entrance to the clinic, I heard a loud sound echo throughout the entire building, and I immediately ran over to the source as quickly as I could. There, I found Miyashiro-san collapsed on the ground. He had fallen off of his bed. Yet, before I could react with the shock the moment called for, I instead found myself overwhelmed with nothing but sheer joy. He had *fallen off his bed*. In other words, he had finally turned over.

Before I knew it, I was hugging him. It wasn't an action I'd thought to take at all—I simply found myself hugging him out of pure, unfettered glee. At least, until Miyashiro-san... I mean, Takuru got angry at me for hugging too tightly.

Through supporting that one boy, I had finally been released from the immense pressure of trying to be Nono-chan.

Soon after that, I began to argue with the teachers over various things involving the cafeteria, and eventually took charge as student council president. Ever since Takuru had woken up, not just Nono-chan's kindness, but her strength came naturally to me too.

After a while, what I feared came to pass: Takuru first spoke of the hospital basement around when his rehab was coming to an end. "Come to think of it, I went to this one hospital's basement when I was a kid... Now that I'm looking back on it, though, I really shouldn't have gone anywhere near someplace like that..."

“Huh?!” I yelped, my voice shrill from surprise. When Takuru looked at me, I immediately waved it off as nothing important, and I urged him to continue his story. He then went on to say that he had snuck into the basement of a hospital, and, in its depths, he had witnessed a girl enduring horrific experiments. In the end, however, he’d run away without doing anything to help her.

Although his retelling was vague and undetailed, it matched exactly with my memories. *So... Takuru really is the boy who saw me in the basement...*

As he told his story, his face became incredibly pained, and tears began to fall from his eyes. “I still see her in my dreams... She always asks me, ‘Why didn’t you save me?’” he croaked. He had been struggling with it even more than I had.

“Takuru. Have you told anyone else this story?” I asked him softly.

“Huh? ...Actually, I think you’re the first one I’ve ever told this to, Nono.”

“I see.” I sat beside Takuru on the bed. “Listen, Takuru. I’m sure that girl doesn’t blame you at all for what you did, nor do I think she holds a grudge toward you. After all, you remember her, even after all this time.”

As Nono-chan, I’d had many opportunities to meet with my classmates. Every time, without fail, they had all completely forgotten about Senri—or, to be more accurate, they were actively trying to forget about her. A few of them would even advise me to forget about her, too. Takuru, meanwhile... he remembered her after all that time... and not only did he remember her, but he mourned that he hadn’t done anything to help her. If I had died that day back in the basement, then

come to learn in the afterlife that Takuru had held such feelings for me... I think I would have felt truly blessed.

Thanks to Takuru, I was able to remain as Nono-chan. His sensitivity and kindness had saved me. ...And, because of that, feelings were born deep inside me. Feelings I had only become aware of in that moment on the rooftop.

The moment when I'd thought I had lost everything.

March 28th, 2016

As I confess to my infinite selfishness as the fake Kurusu Nono, the others in the hospital room look greatly troubled.

“What do you even say to something like that? It’s just insane...” Arimura-san says slowly. “...Well, I’m pretty sure that if you’d told me this back on the night we got cornered by that phantom Senri, I would’ve been pissed.”

“I’m sorry...” I apologized to her. It’s only natural that she’d be angry. After all, ever since I first met her, I deliberately spoke in ways that would avoid detection from her ability.

“Eh, don’t worry about it. Not only is your story too crazy to really sink in, but the person I’ve been hanging out with is *Minamisawa-senpai*, not Kurusu-senpai, so... yeah.”

“Save your brainless soap opera for when you two are alone,” Kunosato-san jeers.

“*Brainless*? Oh, sure, sure—it’s completely empty up here. Don’t have my brain on me, and I don’t have my cat ears on, either, unlike a certain *someone* did once upon a time, as a part of a *certain little exchange*.”

“I specifically told you to forget about that. Want me to crack open your skull and make absolutely sure there’s nothing in there?”

“Aaaah, you’re so scary! Hmm, before you do that though, what about the *photo* a certain cat-eared maid took when we were in Akihabara? That lovely lady sent it to me as a memento. You know the one, don’t you? Hmm, d’you think I should send it to all my contacts? I think I should.”

“That *evil*...!”

Arimura-san and Kunosato-san continue to bicker, and while Kazuki and Uki-chan seem flustered, the atmosphere around the two older girls has changed considerably. At the very least, it doesn't seem like the typical relationship one would see between a researcher and her experimental subject.

"We'll settle this later," Kunosato-san says through gritted teeth. "Anyway, we're not the ones who'll judge you and your story. I'd say Miyashiro Takuru is the only party that matters in this case."

"Takuru?! He's safe?!" I raise my voice without meaning to; yet, as overjoyed as I am to hear his name, the others look at me with awfully grim expressions.

"Miyashiro Takuru is a suspect... no—he's being confined in this hospital, as the culprit behind the Return of the New Generation Madness," Kunosato-san says slowly.

I have no idea what she's talking about. "That can't be! The culprit is Serika...!" I protest.

"Nono-san... actually—"

"I know, Uki-chan," I say, cutting her off. "Dad... Sakuma Wataru was an accomplice of hers. That's what you were going to say, right?" Uki-chan looks incredibly surprised—I doubt she expected me to know when I've been in a coma these past few months.

It seems that my vision of the future—or the past, at this point—was real after all.

"Sakuma Wataru is deceased. Onoe Serika is... effectively, a free woman," Kunosato-san continues. "Regardless of your feelings on it, she's in no state to be held responsible for any of the crimes, nor does the situation allow for her to be."

"You're lying..."

While I can accept that a Gigalomaniac incident would be difficult for the law to comprehend, why does Takuru have to take responsibility for a crime he didn't commit? How could they possibly expect me to accept that?!

"Takuru-san didn't have the crimes forced on him... he *wished* to be the culprit..." Uki-chan says sadly.

"Why?!" I shout; my questions have now turned into nothing more than simple outbursts. Everyone's apologetic faces pierce through my heart, and, after a moment, I manage to calm down. I'm sure that they all have already vented their anger while I was asleep—there's no conceivable way any of them could have accepted how unfair it is otherwise.

"I'm sure he did it to save us all... maybe..." says Kazuki.

"Minamisawa-senpai. As you can see, there's four beds in this hospital room. Until just recently, Hana, Uki-chan, and I were all sleeping in those beds. We were in a coma, just like you," Arimura-san begins.

Arimura-san, Uki-chan and Kazuki were all in a coma? How did that happen?

"To put it simply, you, the rest of us, and everyone in Hekiko Academy—which means most of the kids in Shibuya—were living in a sea of lies."

Only a few minutes ago, Arimura-san said that everything I told her was insane... yet, what she's telling me now is even more so. I'm struggling to keep up with it all.

"You were the last one to become cognizant of the lie," Kunosato-san follows. "This is mainly because you were in a post-traumatic coma—something that only amplified your inability to wake up."

“Y’know, I was gonna say something like, ‘Man, I’m so jealous you got to sleep right through the hardest parts in all this,’ but I guess you really didn’t, huh?” says Arimura-san. “It was a bit of a coinflip on whether or not our treatment would work on you while you were in a coma. As for what caused all this... spoiler alert: it’s Chaos Child Syndrome. Needless to say, that wasn’t just some form of PTSD like we thought it was.”

As Arimura-san explains everything to me cheerfully, for just a moment, I notice a few wrinkles on her face. I then look closely at Kazuki and Uki-chan, only to see that the two of them look almost emaciated... But upon closer inspection, I realize that it’s only their skin; it looks as if it’s aged several years since I last saw them.

“The young man who became cognizant of the lie and saved the minors of Shibuya was none other than Miyashiro Takuru. I doubt you’ll accept that without hearing it from him, though,” says Kunosato-san. “Can you move? If so, we’re going straight to his hospital room.”

I want to go there immediately, yet I struggle to say it aloud. Now that I’ve been exposed as a liar and a coward, how am I supposed to face him? Now that I’m no longer Nono-chan, but Senri instead, my kindness and strength seems to have completely vanished.

“Seriously? Do you have no faith in him at all?” Arimura-san’s angry words pierce through my fears.

“Nono-san... Big Sis, Takuru-san isn’t the kind of person to not forgive you for lying in the past,” says Uki-chan.

“I faced him head-on, so I want you to do the same, Senpai. He forgave me, even though I lied, so... you should try too. Please.”

Everyone who I told was angry at first, and yet, in the end, they all forgave me.

Of course. My confession to him has to come from my own mouth. If there's such a thing as true atonement for me, then I know I have to tell him face-to-face.

"I'm sorry. Kunosato-san, but... could you please take me there?" Using all the strength I can muster, I make my request to Kunosato-san.

"Ugh... Fine. Miyashiro Takuru has been waiting this whole time for you to wake up anyway, so that should be fine..." Kunosato-san acts slightly exasperated... yet, at the same time, it feels like she's happy, in her own way.

Epilogue

“You’re so silly... You should’ve told me sooner.” When I confess the truth to Takuru through the bars of his prisonlike hospital room, he, completely unfazed, forgives me with a small laugh. And, not only does he forgive me, he ends up comforting me as I cry my heart out.

“This makes me wonder who’s the real older sibling here,” he says with a chuckle.

“Th-That’d be... me, silly... I’m your big sister... I’ll have you know...” I say, failing to convince even myself. I can’t help but feel that, while I was unconscious, Takuru had grown into a completely different person...

Although his voice falters every now and then, he tells me everything that happened while I was asleep, as well as all the truths he learned, including Chaos Child Syndrome, and the true nature of Hekio Academy. I may have already had a rough idea, but learning Sakuma’s true identity still proves to be quite the shock to me. I find myself equally stupefied to hear that the organization known as “The Committee” actually exists, and that Mr. Wakui, advisor to both the Newspaper Club and student council, is a part of it.

It takes me a moment, but once I manage to calm down, Takuru makes a single request. “Nono, there’s something I’d like you to do in my stead.”



July 24th, 2016

Miyashita Park. Despite everything that’s happened, this park still remains a home for a multitude of homeless people.

Having been discharged from the hospital—as well as already being on my way back there for a rehabilitation session—I take a detour

through the park and head to Takuru's trailer house as per his request.

"So, you know how my RV is abandoned now? It's parked in a really good spot that I'm sure other people would love to have, so I really don't want to keep hogging it all to myself."

Many of Takuru's belongings still remain there as well, so he wanted me to retrieve them, find a place for them, and then relocate the RV. We don't know when he's going to be coming back, after all...

A very long time has passed, but the RV looks the same as ever. This is the place Takuru lived, the person who incurred the full attention and wrath of the masses as the culprit behind the Return of the New Generation Madness. For this reason, it would surely be an obvious target of vandalism, and yet, it remains completely untouched.

But there is a particular reason for that. Someone has been here, protecting his house for all this time.

"Snnnrrk... *snore*..." Gen-san is asleep in the entrance to the RV. But before I can call out to him, his head shoots up, almost as if he sensed me coming.

"Hmm? Oh, it's you, missy. How's yer stomach an' chest? That stab wound of yers heal up all nice and spiffy?" he asks cheerily.

In that moment, I realize something. I first came to know Gen-san when I was Nono-chan, so this should be my first time meeting him as Senri. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, Gen-san knows that it's me...

"...Gen-san? You know who I am?" I ask.

"'Scuse me? Ain't you Taku's older sister, missy? What, did'ja think you could trick me with some silly little makeover? C'mon, in this li'l ol' world of ours, that's far from the craziest thing, don'tcha think?" Gen-san says with a laugh. "I've seen a whole lotta things in my time. I mean, I've got a former genius scientist in my band of

brothers, there's this part-timer girl from the future, and there's even someone who got rid a' their human body and became data or some-thin' or other. So, let me be the first to tell ya: there's a whole lotta mysteries out there! With that 'n mind, good luck out there, youngster!"

Well, this *is* Gen-san. Takuru once said that he always just smiled and nodded along to whatever the man said without having a clue as to what he was talking about, and I think I finally understand why.

"By the by, missy, when d'ya think Taku's comin' back home? These days, I've been havin' to sleep here nonstop to protect my dear friend's castle o' his."

"Takuru... um... Takuru... won't be coming back for a while, I'm afraid," I tell him sadly.

Takuru's imprisonment has been the talk of the town, but Gen-san must be out of the lo—

"Well, after being nabbed as the culprit for a case like that, I'd be damn shocked if it took any less! But don't you worry, missy—I'll keep on keepin' on, holdin' down the fort. 'Sides, that boy still hasn't given me what he owes! He should know that as long as you live here, you need t' abide by the hundred laws of the homeless! And while *sure*, ninety-nine of the hundred have been rejected by the council, there's still laws y'gotta follow!"

...I stand corrected.

"A friend I trust so shall always return! As I have been doing oh-so-diligently, I must guard this territory with my life until the day my friend returns home!" Turning his head, Gen-san begins to shout into the sky. "Hey, Taku! If ya don't hurry on home real soon, I won't be acceptin' any payment no longer! Y'hear me, boy?!"

He knows his friend's fate, yet still believes that he will come back... I'm not quite sure why, but I can't help but feel that this old, drunken, homeless man is someone I can truly trust. "Gen-san. Can I ask you to please manage this trailer house until Takuru comes back?"

"Aye, aye! It'll be in good hands, missy! I'll be moving to this here entrance, now—wouldn't be real good if I went in the place proper, I reckon. This is Taku's home, after all." Gen-san thumps his chest and starts coughing feverishly.

"Thank you very much, Gen-san," I say gratefully. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

"Hm? What'd'ja come here for then, missy? Had some business to take care of in this fine home?"

"Oh, no—it's fine, actually. I just figured I'd have Takuru do it after all."

"There's a lot of... embarrassing things in there, so I want you, and only you, to clean it up, Senri. Please don't let anyone else help—especially Arimura," he told me before I left the hospital.

My sense of grief may be leading me astray, but, if I'm being honest with myself, Takuru should really be the one to do this. I'm happy that he trusts me, but even I am going to feel awkward if I find those... embarrassing things of his. Besides, if I don't show at least a little bit of defiance, I'll ironically end up making *Takuru* worry about *me*. And, as his big sister, I know I can't let that happen.

His big sister.

I think I'm fine with leaving things that way. After all, that boy is in love with someone else.

Feeling oddly refreshed, I part ways with Gen-san. As I walk, I think about that final vision I saw on the Hekiho Academy rooftop, before I was stabbed by Serika. It depicted an event that happened while I

was asleep, and it was connected to Takuru saving everyone in Shibuya. It probably took place slightly after the incident in Hikariwo.

In the vision, I saw an eerie room filled with monitors. In that room, Takuru was driven to the very edge by Mr. Wakui, who held a repulsive DI-sword. Serika was there with them, and yet, she seemed almost like a different person from the girl who had swung her DI-sword at me again and again on the rooftop.

Putting up no resistance, she was injured by Mr. Wakui's powers. As he struggled to change her back to what she was before, Mr. Wakui began to speak. "She's tougher than I thought. If you had the power to do this, then why—"

"Because... it was the one thing I could do to atone for what I did to her," said Takuru, interrupting our former advisor.

"*Her*."

He didn't use the name of the girl right beside him.

"Together, we would never change. But apart, both she and I would stop making mistakes. Otherwise, we'd do it all over again."

"Why *not* do it all over again? What's so wrong with that?" said Mr. Wakui. In his mind, he continued to speak, oozing arrogance befitting a psychic. "*Why can't you just keep going? Don't you have the same power as I do that'll let you do that?*"

But Takuru did not falter. "A man... can't spend his life clinging to the girl he loves." With those words, Takuru denied the absolute power he held in his hands, and persisted in his ever-so-boyish stubbornness.

After ensuring that nobody was around, I whispered something to myself. "I've been rejected..."

I had secretly hoped that I could be the girl by Takuru's side... but the one he chose was his friend, not his adoptive sister.

After all this time, I finally feel like I'm able to move on with my life, at least for now. But who knows what the future may hold.

Using the last of my powers, I rewrote her memories, all so she could be a perfectly ordinary girl. If you ever come to meet her again... please be a friend to her.

That was the request Takuru made of us.

Serika, now an ordinary girl, and me, having returned to my original form. Someday, the two of us may even be able to become best friends—for real this time. With that thought in my mind, I leave Miyashita Park behind and walk through the heart of Shibuya.

Lies and madness alike have vanished from the city without a trace.

I still have a bit of time, so I should talk to Nono-chan about everything that's happened.

I turn to head for the memorial, only to realize that Nono-chan's remains are no longer there; I had secretly taken her bones after she was buried as Senri and moved them to the Kurusu family gravesite. So, neither her, nor Senri are there anymore.

Today's weather is clear, and the sky a pure blue.

A dream sky; a sky born from my dreams.

Another sky; a sky I had yet to see before.

A dark sky; a sky of a dark hue.

A deep sky; a sky that always seems to draw you in.

Over sky; a view from above the very sky itself.

Many expressions I could use for the sky above come to me, but they all fail to describe what I see. The sky I see now... it's what's come to rest above me after all the falsehoods enveloping Shibuya have cleared. For that reason, I want to call it the "real sky."

Directing my words toward the real sky, I begin to speak, hoping deep within my heart that Nono-chan will hear what I say. “I’m sorry, Nono-chan... There may be a lot of sad and painful things ahead of me... but I’m not going to run. I’m going to face them... as Minamisawa Senri.”

I still feel immense guilt from taking advantage of her; that is a sin I will most likely carry for the rest of my life. But now, I have decided to live on—as Minamisawa Senri. “I think... that’s the one thing I can do for you.”

My words are taken up into the sky.

And then, words fall down to me.

I know you can do it, Senri.

Perhaps I just misheard something... or perhaps it was nothing more than a hallucination... but I, unmistakably, heard Nono-chan’s voice. The voice I missed so, so much.

“Yeah...” my voice catches. “Yeah... Thank you, Nono-chan...”

With tears in my eyes, I say a prayer to my best friend... and it, too, is taken up into the blue sky.

That sky... that silent, real sky Takuru created when he became special...

I would love to gaze up at it forever and ever.

The End



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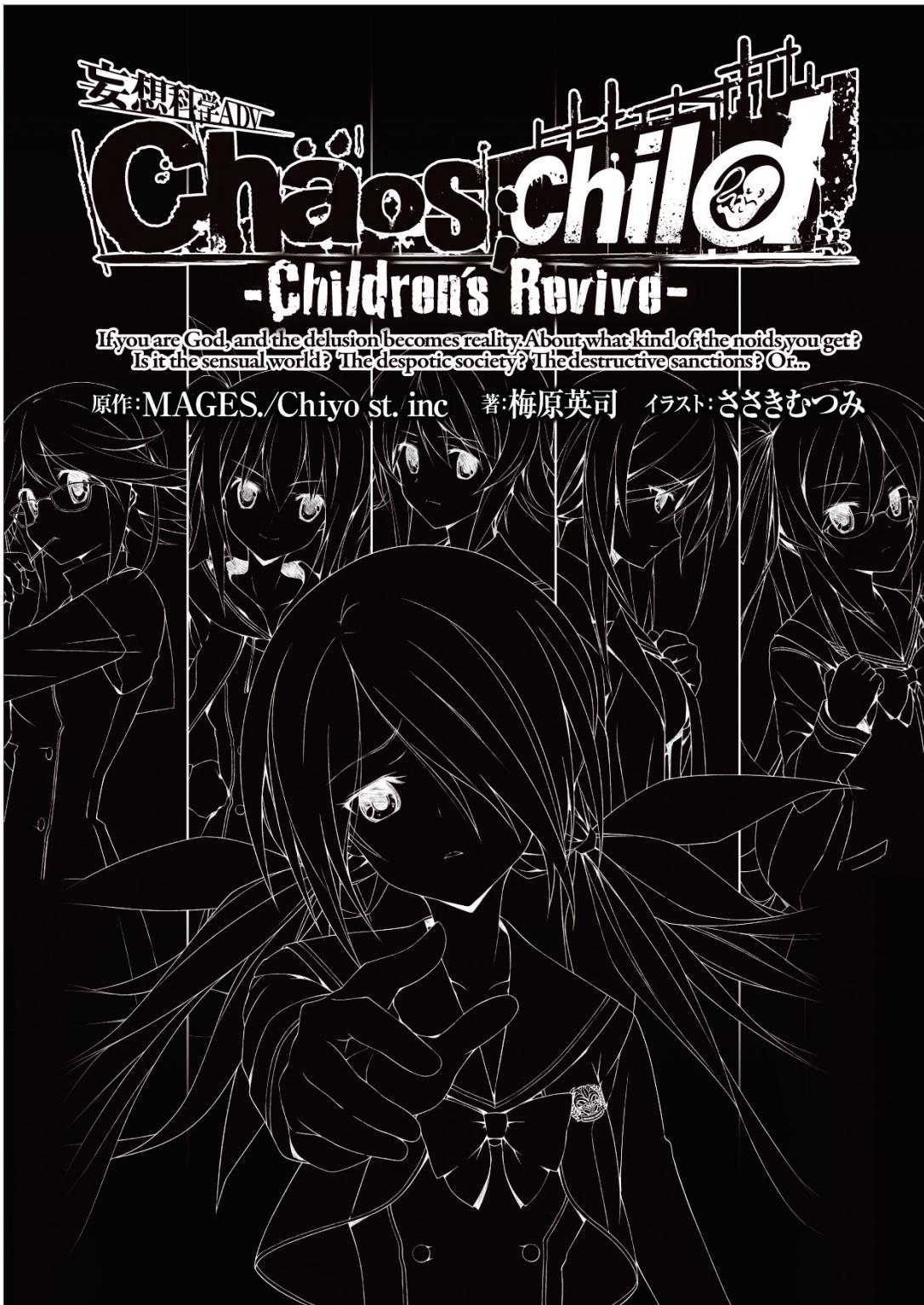
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