

奈須きのこ

空工の境界

からいのきやうかい

the Garden of sinners

下

Empty Boundaries: Volume III

The Garden of Sapphires

by Kiyoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)

STORIES BY KINOKO NASU

NOVELS

EMPTY BOUNDARIES (空の境界) SERIES

Volume I: Panorama, The First Homicide Inquiry, Lingering Pain

Volume II: A Hallow, Paradox Spiral

Volume III: Records in Oblivion, The Second Homicide Inquiry

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Tsukihime (月姫)

Kagetsu Tōya (歌月十夜)

FATE/STAY NIGHT SERIES

Fate/stay night

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VIDEO GAMES

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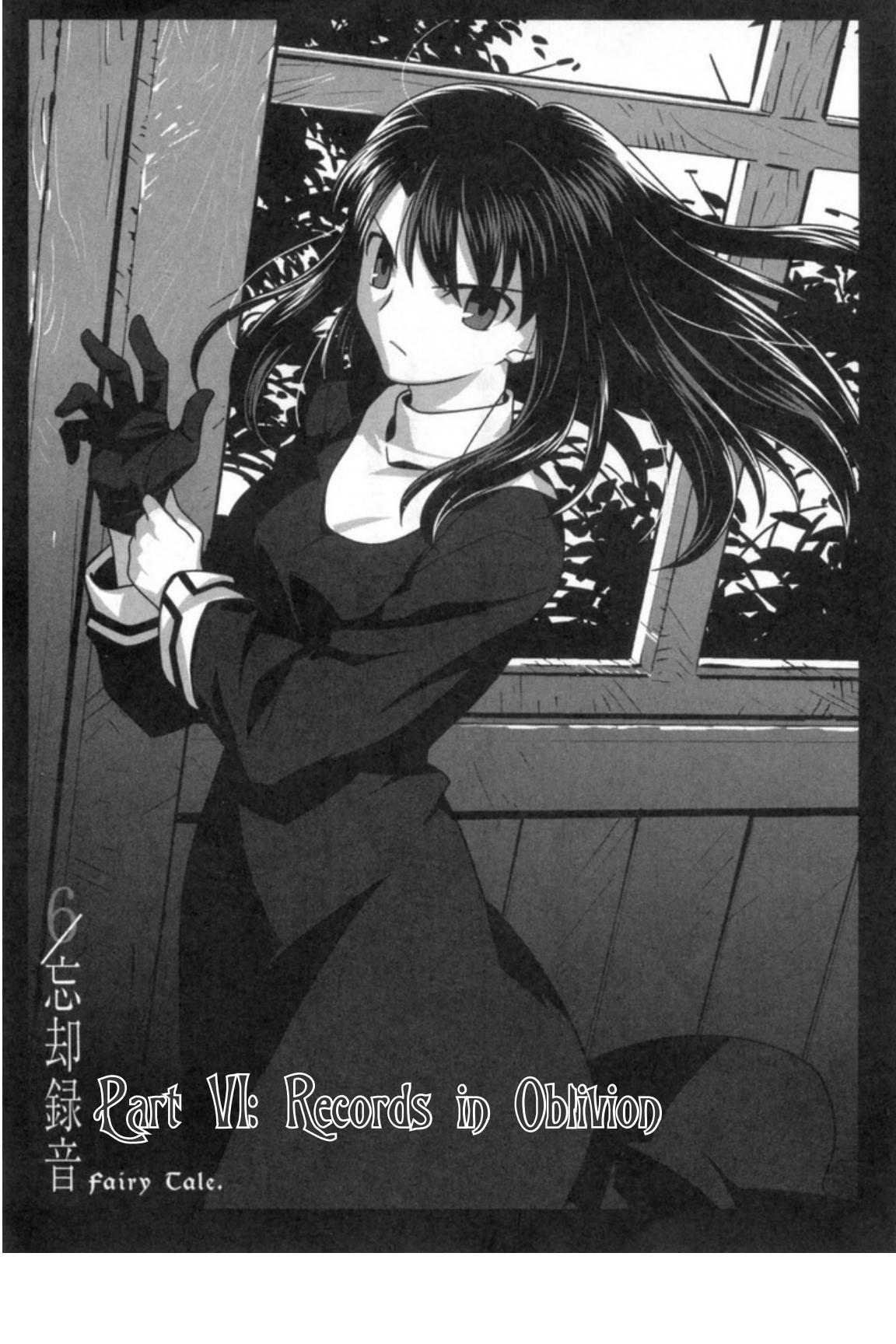
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Empty Boundaries: Volume III

PART VI: RECORDS IN OBLIVION/ PAGE 2

PART VII: THE SECOND HOMICIDE INQUIRY/ PAGE 126

EMPTY BOUNDARIES/ PAGE 221



6
忘却
録音

Part VI: Records in Oblivion

fairy Tale.

Beyond the briar's thorns there once was a deep forest, wrapped in fog.
From it wafted the smell of green and the tiny whispers of insects.
And deep into it, I passed.
And further still did I walk.

Until I chanced upon a knoll untouched by our sun, where I found myself in
the company of children.
And finally I did come to my senses, and realizing the lateness of the hour,
resolved to press home.

"But you needn't go home. For here, your eternity awaits."
The forest children began to sing.
And I wondered what eternity was.

"It is when you linger."
"It is when you are unchanging."
The chorus of cradles recited in melancholy unison.

Starlight shone quietly on the grass of the mound.
The fog flowed together like purest milk behind me.
And over my shoulder, the path home had been lost.

I know little of this eternity.
I try to hurry home.
To a home far from this place.
A home far from the children and the forest.

And wrapped in the smell of green and the tiny whispers of insects,
Inside the deep forest, wrapped in fog beyond the briar's thorns,
They denied me home for an eternity.

Records in Oblivion - I

December this year was less cold than I had anticipated, but was still enough to bring a white cloud of breath with every whisper. Nevertheless, yesterday was its final day, and with it, the final day of the year. Today is a new year, my sixteenth one. Surely, for many people around the world today, they are greeting each other in a warm "Happy New Year," treasuring the one chance in a year they can share the warmth and sense of new opportunity with other people.

Not for me, though. In fact, New Year to me has become the time of the year where I want to chide myself for my stupidity, a time when the pillows in my room are in danger of my desire to hurl them against the wall and stomp on them to vent; a time where I just want to will the rest of the day away. Sadly, human hearts and memory are not such convenient things. And so it is with a certain glumness of spirit that I hurry and make my preparations to go to Miss Tōko's office.

Though I belong to a thoroughly pedestrian household, my family still insists that I dress in a kimono for the first shrine visit of the New Year. Indeed, they've already lain it out for me in my bed. Still, I've never been one for the traditional clothing, so I ignore it and head out of my room to go downstairs.

"Oh, Azaka dear, are you going out?" my mother asks as I climb down the stairs

"Yes. Just going to meet someone who I owe a favor to. I'll be home before dark," I say with my best smile as I depart from the Kokutō residence—my household.

The sky of the early afternoon day is filled with clouds, and not too friendly ones, it seems. Still, I think for a while that it reflects my mood perfectly, and just that little bit of acknowledgement (by the world no less!) eases my steps just a bit.

I didn't always hate this particular time of the year. There was a time when, just like any other person, I actually looked forward to it. But it was in 1996, exactly three years ago from this day, when that changed; my thirteenth New Year when I went back to my real home for the holidays.

The story truly starts with me, Azaka Kokutō, and the weak constitution that my body was cursed with. I've never had any high grades in PE, and everyone could tell the Tōkyō air was bad for my continued health. And so

with that reason, the family packed me away to live with my uncle in the countryside when I was only ten years old. Since then, I only came home during summer and winter breaks, but even then I couldn't stand to go back. My uncle treated me like his own adopted daughter, and raised me away from my family. I preferred to keep it that way—even past the point where my constitution eventually improved to become normal and render the entire arrangement moot—for my own reasons.

For you see, I have a brother, Mikiya Kokutō. And I love him.

To clarify, this is not, as you might be suspecting, the familial love between close siblings, but the romantic sort of love between a boy and a girl. Of course, one might suspect that a ten year old elementary school girl might be mistaken, and it would not be wrong to assume such a conclusion. But I was no idiot, even back then, and I knew better than most exactly what sort of affection I was entertaining. And though I can accept my assumption of my possession of higher than average intelligence as a comfortable lie I can tell myself, I cannot accept that my feelings for Mikiya are anything other than real. Once I even harbored childish thoughts of somehow spiriting him away from other people, never to let another see him. Though my feelings have since taken on a more sensible form, my fondness for Mikiya never wavered. I've known from the start that this was a feeling never to be voiced, so as I grew older, I only waited, biding my time for a chance.

Even my retreat to the countryside was all part of my elaborate plan to separate myself from Mikiya, all for the sake of building in him a propensity to see in me something else, something other than being his little sister. I don't care what it says in the family registry. I left that behind long ago, and I'll only truly come back after Mikiya's forgotten me as a sister completely. Until then, though, I'd spend my days like a lady of manners. After all, I know exactly what Mikiya likes, so this was a fairly simple process. It was a plan so perfect even I have to marvel at its genius.

But then of course, a meddler had to make her goddamned appearance. Pardon my words. It was three years ago, back in my junior high school days when I first explored the notions of love. It was the winter holidays, and I went back to the house when, of all the stupidest things to do, Mikiya brought home a classmate of his. It was clear for anyone to see that he and this woman named Shiki Ryōgi were dating. And when I saw this, I had the curious and not altogether pleasant feeling of having baked yourself a lovely cake, only for it to be beset by the desperate and hungry the moment you look away. The thought that my brother, who always seemed so aloof before, would now be dating a girl, had never entered my wildest

imaginings. I mean, think about it. He'd never even so much as looked *that* way at any woman before, let alone had a relationship with one!

I think I spent the next few days after that in a complete daze, sleep-walking maybe, until I finally came back to the countryside. It was not long after that when, still in distress over what to do about the girl, I got wind of the traffic accident and coma that befell Shiki Ryōgi. And so Mikiya was alone once again. I must confess that when Mikiya told me the news by letter as I sipped my tea on the terrace of my uncle's house, that I sympathized with the poor girl. Even though I only met her once, I remember her laughing heartily at what Mikiya had to say, her attitude full of energy. But I would be lying if I didn't say that I felt some measure of relief. No girl of idle interest like Shiki would ever catch Mikiya's eye again. All I need do was graduate high school with recognition, and get myself into a sufficiently reputable university. Only a few more steps; a few more years—perhaps eight—until the notion of my sibling relationship with Mikiya was severed.

But my enemy proved herself to be no common ken indeed, because only last spring, Shiki regained her consciousness. Mikiya was beside himself with joy at the news as he told me over the phone, but it only served to harden my resolve. I would say nothing to him about my feelings, but only until I graduate from high school. I would need to be frank with myself, more so than before. And from there, I picked up the pace. My choice of high school was perfect: a boarding school called Reien Girl's Academy, where tax bracket mattered more than grades when entering. This suited me perfectly, as did my uncle, who, being a painter and artist, was only too eager to ingratiate himself with potential patrons by my presence in the institution. And so I lodged there, to become a lady in their fashion.

It's been half a year since my entry there, and now I'm living another accursed New Year, again reminding me of Shiki's continued existence. I'd actually planned to go to the shrine with Mikiya today, but that got soured easily enough when Shiki came by earlier and left with him. Strange how fickle such things tend to be in my life, and how she always seems to be at the center of it all.

I make my way toward the bay area, the sight of the once great factories serving as my guide. The old industrial area by the bay is still home to some active steelworks, but by and large it is a place of rusted smokestacks and crumbling brick walls, of old and abandoned warehouses, some of which still have asbestos flocked within ceilings. In the midst of it all stands the shell of an office building, remaining eternally unfinished in its construc-

tion; no doubt the last hope to revitalize the district, only to falter and fail. My tutor in the Art of magic, Tōko Aozaki, somehow got her hands on it (through means I am not entirely confident are legal), and made an office of sorts there, for her “business.”

When I reach the building, I go in and climb the staircase, each click of my heels on the steps an echo. The first floor is a garage, and only Miss Tōko herself knows what lurks in the second and third, and the fourth is the office where me and my brother Mikiya often end up in; Mikiya as an employee, and I as an apprentice. I open the door on the fourth floor office and announce my arrival with a lazy greeting.

“Happy New Year.”

“Mmhmm. Happy New Year,” says Miss Tōko with an equally languid expression on her face.

Somehow, the usual severity that Miss Tōko commands doesn’t seem to diminish her good looks at all. In fact, in tandem with her white blouse and black trousers, it makes her seem more in control, if anything. With her glasses off, as they are now, you might even doubt for a moment if she was actually a woman.

“Weren’t you planning to go out with brother dearest today?” she asks with a characteristic lack of restraint from behind her work desk.

“I was, but Shiki came along and spirited him away. Still, aren’t you glad I’m even in today instead of gallivanting about with Mikiya?”

“That I am. I have some business to talk about with you, actually.”

That’s strange. It’s very rare for Miss Tōko to involve me in her business. I make her a cup of coffee, and whip up some tea for myself, before finally taking a seat for myself.

“So, what is it you wanted to speak to me about?”

She puts her hands behind her head and leans back on her chair. “Just wondering whether you’ve confessed to Kokutō yet.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. I can tell from her tone that she’s not at all serious about this.

“No, I haven’t. And it’ll be that way until after high school, at the very least. Now is there actually anything significant in my answer that made you so anxious to ask me?”

“Nah. Just speculating on how calm your answer would still be if I asked the same question with Kokutō present. I suppose I still wonder how totally different you both are yet you still find an attraction for him. Maybe you’re adopted. Ever considered that?” The tips of her lips rise into that familiar sly bend of a smile.

“Now I really don’t know if you’re joking or not,” I reply, but holding in

the frown I was supposed to make at her. As if she somehow still read this, Miss Tōko chuckles lightly.

“Ah, Azaka, you carry yourself with such scholarly grace, but sometimes the purity in your answers is so refreshing. Forgive me and my stupid questions. I need to get it out of my system at least once a year, shouldn’t I?”

“Well, I’d say you’re off to a roaring great start to the year then. Anyway, what was it you *really* wanted to talk about?”

“Something about your school. You’re in your first year in Reien Girl’s Academy, right? The way I hear it, something interesting happened to class D of the freshman year. You wouldn’t know anything about it, would you?”

Class D? I think I have a hunch what she’s talking about. “The class with Kaori Tachibana in it, right? Unfortunately, I’m in class A, so I know very little about the goings-on in class D.”

“Kaori Tachibana, you say? Can’t say I recognize the name. Not on the list I have, at least.” Miss Tōko frowns, like she’s wracking her brain for something she missed. I tilt my head slightly to the side, wondering if there’s some miscommunication between me and her.

“Er...what’s all of this about?” I mutter.

“So you don’t know,” she sighs. “Guess I should’ve expected it, seeing as Reien Academy tries to isolate each class from another. Only the girls in class D would know more, I suppose,” she concludes. “Anyway, let me tell you what I know about it.”

Miss Tōko begins to tell the story of a strange incident that happened only two weeks ago. Just before winter vacation, two students of Reien Girl’s Academy’s senior high school class 4-D had some kind of argument, and in the end, tried to stab each other with box cutters. For such a thing to happen at Reien, which is, at the best of times, eerily still and silent that it seems almost like a place hermetically sealed-off from the rest of the world, strikes me as supremely odd. Worse, I never knew about it, a fact which I can probably blame on the school’s practice of separating each class from each other, and their tendency to cover up anything that might paint a bad picture of the institution.

“That’s horrible,” I say, after Miss Tōko is done with the story. “Are their injuries serious?”

“Nothing too serious. I’m actually more interested in the fact that they attacked each other at all.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. Reien is generally not the place you’d find the type of people who’d try a knife fight in the halls. Whatever its cause, it must have been something serious, or something far back in their past. Or both.”

"Right. The subject of their quarrel comes later. There's an even stranger tidbit here. No doubt you're wondering why you didn't know about this earlier. Reien's policy on these things can be blamed up to a point, but it largely isn't their fault this time. It's just that it wasn't immediately reported. It was only when the school's Mother Superior looked through the infirmary's records did she find the names of the two girls, and the cause of their wounds. She suspected class D's homeroom instructor of deliberately hiding the incident."

That would be Hideo Hayama, once Reien's only male instructor, and one of the only two in its history. But he'd already left, having taken responsibility for the breakout of a fire last November. He was promptly sacked and replaced, not by a nun as per usual, but by...

"Mr. Kurogiri? No way. It can't be him," I suddenly find myself saying. Miss Tōko offers a nod.

"The Mother Superior said as much. Apparently, this Satsuki Kurogiri fellow took to the job well, and became trusted by everyone almost immediately. When the Mother Superior interviewed him about the incident, he supposedly couldn't recall anything about the incident happening under his watch. She had to go and recite the particulars of the incident to even make the guy remember. She couldn't pry a thing out of Satsuki, and he genuinely seemed to have forgotten about the entire thing. Never struck the Mother Superior as a man to tell stories. Since he'd proven his trustworthiness before to both the faculty and the students, the Mother Superior had to let him go."

But how can a man forget something so important in only two weeks? It just doesn't seem possible. At the same time, I myself can't see a reason why Mr. Kurogiri would have any reason to break the school's trust in him.

"As for the reason the students took a stab at each other in the first place," Miss Tōko continues, "all the other students heard about it, since the two girls started arguing in the classroom just after class when people were filing out in the halls. Apparently they each somehow knew of some old secrets they were keeping from each other. And here's the kicker. When they were interviewed, they were both secrets that both of them had already forgotten."

"What? That sounds—"

"Ridiculous, I know. These girls were childhood friends. The Mother Superior described them as always being together. Somehow, this secret got out and ruined all that. I think they both said when they were questioned that it was close to a month ago when they got a letter in the mail, and at first they couldn't figure out anything about what the letter was

referring to. Then, of course, they later understood what it was about. It told of old secrets taht they both didn't want the other to know. They confronted each other, and found out that both had been sent a letter of the same nature before they busted out the box cutters and started attacking each other."

I don't know what to say. Forgotten memories and secrets being mentioned in a letter sent by someone who they didn't know, somewhere in the country?

"You're thinking this is a new case, aren't you, Miss Tōko?"

"Maybe. The letters didn't have anything else written on them. No threats, no demands. Not even a stalker could watch both girls 24/7 enough to even figure out the past that even they forgot about. If there's a mage's hand in all of this, I wouldn't be surprised. I only wonder what the ultimate objective is."

The ominous tone of the story starts to sink in. Discounting the damaging contents of the letter, it might be interesting, even funny, for you to receive letters about your life at first and not know where they're coming from. But give it a month and see if you still feel the same way. Letters about you containing facets of your life that even you didn't know about, written by somebody you don't know, some unknown figure who watches you day in and day out. The paranoia that gripped the two girls must have eaten away at them. It's little wonder they were driven to such desperate suspicion.

"Have they found out who sent the letters?" I ask.

"Yep. Fairies, they say," Miss Tōko states succinctly.

"Pardon me. Could you repeat that?" I don't know if my astonishment at what she just said registered in my voice or not.

"Fairies, like I said. What, you don't know about them? Even when so many students in Reien say they see them? I suppose you really aren't gifted with Arcane Eyes, but it's sort of a famous rumor among the students. Fairies, they say, will play beside your pillow at night, and when you wake up, you'd find some of the memories of the past few days will have gone as cleanly as though they never happened. If it's true, and not just some crazy rumor, the fairies are stealing the memories for some purpose. My gut tells me there's a connection to this and the incident in class D," she explains patiently.

Though I still study the Art under her guidance, and I've seen wonders of thaumaturgy performed that are a true sight to behold, I still find the fairy story hard to believe.

"Do you think it's true, then, Miss Tōko? This fanciful story about fair-

ies?"

"I can't say anything about something I haven't seen yet, but if there's any place for fairies to be, it's got to be Reien. Think about it. It's perfect for them: Isolated in the sticks, where you can't even hear the faintest whine of a car engine, maintained by some of the sternest rules and quiet nuns, that don't permit the latest in youth culture to seep into the institution they've built. The forest that takes up the larger portion of the grounds is deep and large enough to get yourself lost for half a day if you're not careful. The air is tinged with fragrance sweet enough to make you stay and pass the time staring at a clock's minute hand and its lazy progression. Sounds pretty much like a fairy freehold to me."

"Wow, I am surprised you know the campus so...intimately, Miss Tōko."

"Obviously. I'm an alumnus there, after all."

This time, I make sure to have my voice sound truly astonished.

"WHAT?!"

"Stop giving me that look," Miss Tōko says with an eyebrow raised. "What, you thought Mother Riesbyfe would just mouth off the latest school gossip to an outsider? She's the one that contacted me last night to see if I could do anything to get to the bottom of what's happening in there. I don't exactly run a detective agency here, but I couldn't turn down the Mother Superior either. Now, I can't go in there again, since I'd stand out too much. I wouldn't get a word out of anyone. So I thought long and hard—" she draws the two words out with a smile on her face "—on who could do it for me... Azaka?"

No. I turn away from her. I don't want to hear what I think she's about to say. She looks at me with sharply narrowing eyes before she continues.

"Oh come now, Azaka. It can be fun! I mean, come on, what do you think of when I say the word 'fairy'?"

"Tinkerbell?" I quickly blurt out, as if this would somehow dispel the topic, at which point Miss Tōko chuckles.

"A comforting image, and one that is popular among mages who try to make familiars in the image of fairies. But unlike familiars, the true fae are not creatures brought forth through the mage's will, but actual living things of varying species. Such things may be goblins, redcaps, or the *oni* of our own country. Shifty creatures, the lot of them. In Scotland, there are still stories of fairies causing mischief among people...even some stories where they cause bouts of forgetfulness among people, and drawing children into forests to spirit them away for a week, replacing them with identical fetches. Though their pranks vary, all fae share one unique quality: their lack of empathy for the victims of their tricks. They are simply incapable of it. They

do it because they deem it fun, not out of malevolence.

“The incident in Reien could be their handiwork, but the act of writing a letter seems to be out of their style. It indicates some kind of malice and manipulation, doesn’t it? I fear, Azaka, that our culprit may be the first kind of fairy that you mentioned.”

As ever, Miss Tōko never misses an opportunity to teach me more about the invisible world she seems to walk through with so much ease. And like a good student, I’m only curious for more.

“So you’re saying they’re familiars, being controlled by some mage?” I ask. She nods in satisfaction.

“Yes, and the kind borne from a captured creature, to be sure. The mage is probably using them to work his or her Art from afar, to do something with the memories of the students in Reien. To have this hedge wizard be so obvious in his work is almost uncharacteristically amateurish for a mage. Or perhaps he doesn’t have such a complete command over his fairy familiars yet. They’ve always been fickle sorts, and mages generally favor other things over them. But this rank amateur has showed his hand, and I’m thinking it will be a perfect test for you, Azaka. And so I order you as your mentor to investigate the truth behind these incidents before winter vacation ends. Find the source, and do what you can to eliminate it.”

There we go. Miss Tōko finally says the words I suspected she’d been meaning to say all this time. In truth, the task scares me a bit, since I can sense her hidden implication: that I’d be going in there alone, against an individual similar to me and Miss Tōko, able to manipulate the very threads of reality with the Art. And she expects me to root him out. I try my best to hide my trepidation with a confident nod.

“Well, if it’s for the sake of more arcane knowledge, then I guess I have no choice,” I sigh as I answer. Miss Tōko rises from her chair to give me some documents on the details of the situation, but before she can hand me a folder, I have to voice the once concern that’s been niggling at me since the moment I suspected what she would have me do. “But Miss Tōko, I can’t even see the fairies. I don’t have the mystic sight or Arcane Eyes like you do.”

Unexpectedly, she makes the grin that has only heralded her own brand of mischief.

“Oh, don’t you worry your pretty little head about that detail. I think I can cook you up something far better than a pair of eyes.” Though she struggles to hold her laughter in, she doesn’t tell me exactly what she meant.

Records in Oblivion - II

I leave the faculty room of Reien Girl's Academy's senior high school department...unfortunately, with *her* tagging along.

"You know, I've been thinking. Maybe Tōko is actually an idiot and we just didn't notice."

January 4, Monday. Past noon. Skies partly cloudy.

Walking astride me is Miss Tōko's funny idea for something "better than a pair of eyes." The enemy.

"Having you of all people to sneak into the school with me? For once, you have my agreement."

"This sucks. I definitely got the short end of the stick this time, having to put up this act that I just transferred here on the third term."

We try to avoid looking at each other as we walk through a corridor of the senior high school building. The girl's name is Shiki Ryōgi. Like all students here, right now she's wearing the Reien uniform, a dress patterned after a black nun habit that almost always looks weird on any Japanese person. And yet Shiki wears it like an old glove. When I see her dark hair still distinctly visible even against the black fabric of the dress, and how it can't hide her slender shoulders and the pale whiteness of her nape, even I have to admit that she looks good on it; as good as any quiet Catholic girl, which of course, she is anything but. The entire thing gives me a faint feeling of disgust.

"Azaka, those two girls were just staring at us." And of course, like an idiot, Shiki is staring right back at the upperclassmen we just passed as well. It hasn't been the first time it happened today, and after a few looks, I think I have an educated guess as to what could be so interesting to them. In an exclusive all-girls institution like Reien, the androgynous nature of Shiki's appearance must be some kind of anomaly. There are few people like Shiki in here, and her presence is bound to attract some kind of attention. The same two girls that we just passed must have only wanted to talk to her in some kind of childish attraction.

"Don't pay them any mind. You're a new face. Transfer students at this level are just rare, that's all," I caution to her. "It doesn't have anything to do with what we're investigating."

"There's a surprising number of students for the winter vacation, don't you think?"

"Ugh. It's a boarding school, obviously. A lot of these people live far away, and would rather just stay here over the break. Only the library on

the first and fourth floor are actually open, but since the dormitories are well-stocked anyway, barely anyone heads to the main building. Unless you need to report to the nuns for violating some rule."

Rules which are very, very strict, and the violation of which enough times is enough reason to expel you. "Don't go outside" being the most tightly held one, and they won't make an exception even if your parents themselves showed up. Still, money has proven to change that easily enough, which I found true with my erstwhile friend, Fujino. As a man of capable capital who donated significant money to the school, Fujino's father found a way to get her out whenever she wanted. As for me...well, certainly my high grades helped, which led to my uncle being employed by Reien as a painter (which completely suited his mercenary motives for letting me go here). They were more lenient of my excursions after that.

Remove the religious veneer and Reien itself is little different from other high schools. Students still study their backs off just to pass a test to get into college, and with all the high expectations for the student body here, that fact is only doubly true. In truth, I suspect the school took me in because of my high marks, seeing me as someone they can proudly send off to Tōkyō University (which had been my plan anyway). While the management in this place might be a bit too focused on what numbers they can boast about, it doesn't really bother me. I mean, at least they can give me the freedom to go out.

I snap out of my reverie in time to notice that we've exited the main building, and that beside me, Shiki had been staring at it with listless eyes for quite some time. Then, as if tiring of it, she looks back at me while idly fondling the cross hanging from her neck.

"Weird place. Can't rightly tell if the teachers are primarily teachers, or dedicated to being nuns, or whatever. Oh yeah, and didn't we pass by a chapel earlier? Is that where they do the whole 'mass' thing? Our Father, with art in heaven and all that?"

Oh, Shiki you ignorant fool. What would God do with art?

"There's a morning and evening service," I reply, "and a mass on Sundays. Students aren't obligated to participate, though. People like me who transferred to Reien from elementary or junior high largely aren't Christian, so we don't go. The nuns would rather we do, but...well, you know the law. The sudden influx of rich-but-not-necessarily-Christian families sending their well-to-do daughters here increased dramatically over the past decade, which, coupled with the number of parents not wanting to put their children in schools that force a Catholic education, forced them to tone down the mission school vibe."

"What a pain in the ass," Shiki sighs. "I'm willing to bet God doesn't care either way."

To see her dressed in the uniform she's wearing while wielding such a vulgar tongue makes me feel a little uneasy. I quickly dispense with the subject.

"Well, never mind God for now, but what about the fairies? See anything? Any weaving of the Art?" I ask as we continue to walk the campus grounds. Shiki shakes her head.

"Not a glance. Guess we've got no choice except to wait until tonight," she says, casting her sleepy eyes across the buildings, the abundant foliage, and the stone walkways that adorn the school.

Shiki, like many mages, can see what is hidden from most normal people. The mystic sight of her Arcane Eyes allows her to see ghosts and spirits...and even things with more frightening implications. Her breed of sight grants her dominion over death and entropy, and it manifests for her as patterns of lines on an object, and supposedly, by tracing them she can weave entropy into it and destroy it. Apart from that, her family claims a strong martial tradition, and whatever else may be said about her, she has still lived up to it exceptionally. Because of that, her reflexes are as fast as she is efficient and brutal.

In other words: a woman quite the opposite of my brother Mikiya. Totally unsuited for him. Above all other people, it is perhaps Shiki who annoys me the most. As a matter of fact, the entire reason for me taking up Miss Tōko's tutelage in the Art is Shiki herself. Because if Mikiya's girlfriend was any normal girl, she would never measure up to someone like me. But obviously, Shiki is a far more troublesome sort. So I put aside my common sense and took Miss Tōko up on her offer.

Now, I'm still learning, but I don't feel I've measured up to her just yet, so I spend my days here in the school, balancing my time between mundane study and the practice of the Art. But even though I consider Shiki the enemy, there is one truth about her that I have so far refused to give voice to.

"I'll have to spend the night in your dormitory, I imagine. Normally, I don't like sleeping on a bed I haven't checked and prepared myself, but in this case I'll have to lower my standards." Shiki bookends the sentence with a sigh of surrender.

See, the truth is that Shiki doesn't really hate me. And I don't really hate her either. I've always thought that if only Mikiya wasn't between the both of us, I would probably be the best of friends with her.

"So where to next, Azaka?" Shiki asks as she looks at me. "To the dormi-

tory?"

"It might be better for us to use what little time we have actually investigating and not idly resting in my room, I should think. We'll talk to class D's homeroom instructor, so just follow my lead. You're my seeing-eye dog for the duration of this case, and you'd do well to use those Eyes to scrutinize everyone you come across."

"Wasn't the homeroom instructor some guy called Hayama or something?"

"Old news. Mr. Hayama left the institution in November. The homeroom instructor now is Mr. Satsuki Kurogiri, the only male instructor in the school." I start to walk back inside, heading toward the English language teacher's quarters, while Shiki tags along dutifully beside me.

"A guy teacher in an all-female school. I guess that must stir up some latent feelings in some of the girls, huh?"

I don't answer her right away, but in her own crude way, she's right. The students of Reien are brought up to be to the school's vision of ideal young women, and men are seen as a hindrance to that growth. One of the main reasons the school strongly discourages venturing outside the grounds is because they think that a boy and a girl interacting at their age is a slippery slope to an illicit sexual relationship. But I've always thought that having male teachers undermined that philosophy anyway.

"Well, yes," I finally answer after a moment's pause. "But that topic's practically a minefield in this place, so keep your voice down. Hideo Hayama wasn't a popular teacher here not only because of his suspected lack of an actual teaching license, but also because there were rumors that he'd sexually harassed a student once."

"What? Why the hell wasn't he out of here sooner, then?" Shiki asks with cocked eyebrow.

"The sisters and the Mother Superior were forced to turn a blind eye to it because...well, let me put it this way: The surname of the school board's chairman is Ōji, but before he married into his wife's family, he shared a surname with Mr. Hayama."

"Oh ho," Shiki whispers conspiratorially. "The chairman's estranged brother or something, I suppose. If that's the case, then I guess the question becomes: why did he resign like he did."

I scan my head around quickly just to check if no one's around. Satisfied, I turn back to Shiki and say, "Remember last November when we were in Miss Tōko's office? I said it then too, but the short of it is that a fire broke out in the high school. Only the dormitories of class C and below were affected, but the fire itself supposedly started in class D's section, and they said Mr.

Hideo Hayama was behind it. Obviously, the chairman himself sacked him, but Mr. Hayama was already long gone by then. Perhaps he ran."

News of the arson never really slipped outside the walls of the school. All the firemen were purportedly bribed, as were an ample number of the student's parents and guardians. Wouldn't want to tarnish the good name of the school where their precious daughters went to after all. It took one other toll.

There was...someone that died in that fire.

"So this Kurogiri guy—what's he like?" Shiki asks.

"Very little to say about him, really, save for his being quite the polar opposite of Hayama. I don't think there's anyone in the school that hates him. He started only last summer, and unlike Mr. Hayama, he didn't have a crutch to get him in here, though I hear the Mother Superior was quite enthusiastic to have him. From what I hear, she actually wanted to have a teaching staff that was native English—like our long gone sister school—but were able to speak Japanese. Of course, such people are rare. But Mr. Kurogiri was just such a man."

"So he's one of those English teachers, I take it?" Strangely enough, Shiki scowls as she asks this. Perhaps her preference for all things Japanese has given her some kind of nervous allergy towards anything English related.

"Yes, but with a license to teach French and German too. He's even studying Mandarin now, and some South American language. It's no secret why we call him the linguistics geek. I confess, it sometimes makes him a hard person to deal with."

I stop myself from saying anything further, seeing as we now find ourselves in front of the door to the English language teacher's quarters. In Reien, teachers do most of the paperwork in the faculty office, but all of them are quartered in their own accommodations. This room is for the English language teacher, and is the same room that Hideo Hayama once used.

I inhale a gulp of air, careful not to let Shiki notice it. Then I rap gently on the door two times before opening it.

Once me and Shiki enter the room, we find Satsuki Kurogiri with his back to us in the far end of the room, concentrated on the work at his desk. His workspace faces the window, from which ashen gray rays of sunlight enter from the overcast sky outside. Like any good professor, thick stacks of paper lie in heaps in seemingly random places all over the room: on top of a chair, or a cabinet, or peeking out from inside a drawer, all in some kind

of order known only to him.

"Mr. Kurogiri. I'm Azaka Kokutō of class 1-A. Did the Mother Superior tell you about my business?"

"Yes," he replies, accompanied only by a curt nod as he looks over his shoulder. He only swivels his seat around to face us. When his face meets ours, I do not fail to detect Shiki's sharp intake of breath. It doesn't surprise me. In fact, I expected it. I too, reacted in much the same manner of momentary confusion when I first saw him.

"Ah, Kokutō. Yes, I have been informed. Please, both of you, take a seat. I trust there will be some explaining to do." His voice is as gentle as the smile he now wears. His age seems to be around his mid-20's which, if true, would make him the youngest instructor in Reien. His unassuming features, coupled with his black-rimmed glasses, easily make him look among one of the least imposing ones as well. "You are here for my account on class D, I imagine."

"Yes, sir. Specifically, your account on the students that tried to hurt each other with box cutters." My reply makes his eyes squint, his gaze placed far beyond me, and containing, for a moment, a heavy sadness and disconsolation.

"It is regrettable that I cannot help further in that regard. I myself remember little about what actually took place. My memory is vague, but I know that I could not stop the two girls in time before they hurt themselves. I know I was there in the scene, but everything after that is unreliable, I'm afraid." He closes his eyes.

Why is this man and he so alike? So ready to throw himself at another person's problems when it isn't his turn to bother himself with it? Both of them don't seem to be the kind of person that would harm anyone else, much less not move to stop a dangerous situation as with the two students.

"Sir, did you know the reason for their quarrel?" I ask, if only to make sure, but Satsuki Kurogiri only shakes his head silently in reply.

"According to the other students, I was the one that stopped them, but I certainly don't recall such a thing happening. I've been called a forgetful person many times, but this, I think, is the first time I've forgotten something so important. As for the reason of their argument, I honestly don't know. It's possible it could even have been me. I was, after all, in the same room as them when it started. Even I would think that is enough reason to investigate me." His brooding expression darkens as he says this.

I cannot say that I wouldn't doubt myself either if I was in his place. It would seem suspicious to anyone that he was there when the actual event happened, and yet he couldn't do anything, and doubly so when

he can't remember even a fleeting moment. Having self-doubts would be the sensible progression from there. He doesn't know what he did, if he were in some kind of triggered fugue state, what kind of time and memories he lost. But while suspecting yourself might be reasonable, especially with a lack of any compelling evidence to prove otherwise, worrying more and more about what happened would eat away at you, until you couldn't escape.

"But sir, couldn't it be possible that some students of class 1-D were still in the classroom as the entire event unfolded? Have you asked all of your students?"

"Yes, but they remain silent about it, as if they all just want to forget about it. Memory is a fickle thing, and I cannot rely on theirs just now to be entirely truthful. The question of how involved I was is still very much up in the air. Regardless, I think you will gain little more from me by asking me about it. I know I myself might seem unreliable at present, but if you have more questions left, I will be happy to answer them." He smiles again, more weakly now, and I nod at him and answer.

"Yes, let's continue. You said that they don't want to talk to you about what happened. What do you think might be the reason they hesitate to confide?"

"I can't say for sure. The class has always been particularly...strained, even on the day I took charge of them. Maybe it is not my place to say, seeing as I haven't been their homeroom instructor for too long, but they are unusually quiet."

"Do you think they might be scared?" As I ask that, I wonder why no other student could have stopped the two girls from cutting each other. Could the letter have found all of the students of the class instead of just two? It could be an explanation. It makes everyone a suspect for the sender, and instantly makes them suspicious of the two girls. Perhaps they would have seen the fight as the two girls outing each other as the real sender. But Mr. Kurogiri's answer doesn't support my theory.

"No," he replies slowly, letting it churn in his mind. "Not scared I think."

"Then what?"

"It would probably be more right to say that they are...reserved, maybe guarded. Against what, I cannot really say." I don't fail to take note of the nuance.

In other words, he might be saying that the problem has always remained internal to the classroom, never coming from, or reaching any other third party.

"Sir, can your students be contacted at present?" I feel like I have no

other recourse except to be direct and ask the students. The whole affair about memories being lost makes Miss Tōko's fanciful fairy theory more likely by the second, and I'll have to ask the people spreading the rumors about that as well.

"There is no need to contact them. They are all here in campus, so you can talk to them immediately if you want to."

That genuinely catches me off guard. All of them, here in school? Is that coincidence or something else at work?

"Perhaps later. For now, though, I have another engagement. I may have more questions at a later date, though, if that will be alright. Shiki, let's go." The girl has been uncharacteristically silent for the last few minutes. I catch her attention and motion for her to follow when I stand up. It is then that I notice Mr. Kurogiri staring blankly at me and Shiki, his gaze eventually falling to Shiki in particular.

"Um, sir, is there something—" before I can finish and Mr. Kurogiri can answer, Shiki finally speaks for the first time.

"Miss Azaka refers to me by name, sir. My name is Shiki. A pleasure to make your acquaintance." A miracle. She must be channeling some effort of supreme will to even talk as gently as she does now, and I can't tell if it's dripping with sarcasm or not. With her, you can never really tell.

"Yes, your silence made you a bit conspicuous. I am sorry," the instructor says. "I don't believe I've seen you before. A freshman, I presume?"

"Perhaps. Only time will tell. I am touring the school's facilities, you see. If I find it satisfactory, I might transfer."

"Clearly you've already found the uniform satisfactory. Do consider hastily." says Mr. Kurogiri with another curt nod. He looks at Shiki with a look of positive delight beaming on his face, noticing every detail on her like an artist would on a model.

A gentle knock on the door interrupts their conversation. Then a voice from outside, muffled by the wall.

"Excuse me."

The door opens with a slight creaking, and in steps an upperclassman, her almond eyes looking over the room with a cold detachment, and the slight breeze drifting in through Mr. Kurogiri's window making her back length black hair ripple slightly. Reien is already home to many fair looking women, but even here, this girl stands out. Her face is known to me. I wouldn't forget the face of our student council president since last year. When she looks at you, she almost seems to be viewing you from above, and the long, thin eyebrows give her a countenance of stately command.

"Ah, Ōji. Is it time already?" Mr. Kurogiri says to the student, Misaya Ōji.

"Yes, it is, sir. Well past the appointed time," she replies confidently. "You were expected in the student council room at one o' clock. Time is not eternal, so we have to make use of it as best we can, do we not?"

Without even batting an eyelash, Ōji berates the erring instructor. She carries her majesty with a grace only she can muster, and it is an asset she uses to rule the student council as tightly as she can. By the time I had transferred, she was already in place at her position, but according to what Fujino told me in the past, not even the sisters could touch her. And if the rumors are to be believed, nor can the school board chairman, with whom she shares a surname.

It's only natural, considering the family they hail from. The chairman, who married into the family of his wife, will obviously have a large discrepancy of influence from the Misaya Ōji, the family's second daughter. The Ōji are plutocrats; old money families with their name on a building or street or two. They have a strange practice of adopting female babies for daughters, and their marriages are arranged, taking only the best grooms into their family. Any marriage with the Ōji daughters of the family force the grooms to take the Ōji surname, while the daughters are brought up to be individuals of strong force of will to become scions to their financial empire. Such an upbringing has made Misaya Ōji a woman with a heart of iron. Still, she is not a complete tyrant. She does, in fact, possess a strong sense of justice. She shows no mercy to those who violate school regulations, but to those that uphold it, she is a sister and a role model. She is even devoutly Christian, and goes to the noon mass every Sunday without fail.

"As strict as ever, Miss Ōji. Perhaps a more flexible view of time and eternity would be wise." Grinning, the instructor stands up and leaves his seat, Misaya Ōji watching his every move with visible impatience. Surely to a woman who values discipline like her, the leisurely pace of Mr. Kurogiri must be extremely vexating.

Ōji glances for a moment in my direction, and then to Shiki, raising a doubtful eyebrow as to our identity and presence. Realizing that we're surely bothering her just by being here, I pull on Shiki's arm to signal to her that we shouldn't press our luck, and had best get out now.

"Let's move on, Shiki," I whisper as we move to the room's exit. Mr. Kurogiri opens the door for us in a manner not unlike a butler sending off some visitors, and I'm compelled to mutter a quick sorry and a bow before I step out.

"No, no," the teacher quickly says. "It is I who am sorry for not being of more help. A pleasant winter break to the both of you." He gives us a last

smile goodbye.

"Do you always smile so sadly, sir?" I whip my head around just in time to see Shiki say that to Mr. Kurogiri. He only widens his eyes, not in surprise, but more of expectation, and nods.

"Hmm? But I have not once given you a smile, my dear," he says, though the fleeting expression on his face seems to say otherwise.

After leaving the English instructor's room, me and Shiki make our way quickly toward the dormitory. We pass through the large quadrangle on the way there. Reien Girl's Academy has a campus almost as big as a university, and the layout of the buildings reflect this. The junior high school, senior high school, the gymnasium, and the dormitories are all located in separate buildings, in what seems an effort to keep the student body walking as much as possible. The distance between the school buildings and the dormitories is especially notorious, requiring you to pass through a small forest located on the grounds. Fortunately, a walkway with a roof exists so you don't get lost and can travel through it in just your indoor shoes.

After going through the quad, we find ourselves in this path toward the dormitory, each step taken by me and Shiki creating a subtle echo. I glance over at her, and recognize that she seems a bit strange...more so than usual, at any rate. Something seems to be bothering her. I think I know what it must be.

"Surprised to see Mr. Kurogiri look so alike to Mikiya?" I ask her out of the blue.

"Yeah," Shiki says, nodding meekly.

"Yet a bit handsomer than Mikiya, I'd say."

"Maybe. Can't seem to see anything wrong with him."

Ah, so we agree. When I first saw Satsuki Kurogiri, I was taken aback—much like Shiki was—at how similar he was to my brother, in both appearance, and the atmosphere that they tended to exude. His trait of accepting everything as it is seemed only stronger than Mikiya's by dint of age. To people like me and Shiki, who can't seem to help being disjointed to the people around us, meeting a person like that is always somewhat of a shock.

To look at Satsuki Kurogiri is to remind myself of the truth that I can't bear to face: that I'll never be normal like Mikiya. I can no longer remember when it was exactly that I realized this to be fact, but I know that I cried. Somewhere, buried in the forgotten memories of my earlier years, lies the scene of the moment when I understood him; understood that as I lived

under the same roof as him, I grew to love him more and more. The paradox of my existence. Brothers and sisters aren't supposed to entertain such thoughts, I know, but I regret nothing about it. If there's one thing I regret, it's my inability to remember that pivotal moment.

"Still, no matter how much he looks like him, that man is not Mikiya Kokutō, but still a man named Satsuki Kurogiri. Don't mistake one for the other," I caution to Shiki. I can tell, even as she walks beside me, that she holds the same view. But instead of nodding, she frowns and murmurs.

"It's not that they look like each other. It's more like—" Her words fade away by themselves as she stops in her tracks, looking deep into the forest that surrounds us. "Azaka, there's something inside the forest. Some kind of wooden building, maybe? What is it?"

"Oh, that. That's the old junior high school building. It hasn't been used for a long time, and it's actually going to be torn down this winter break. Why ask?"

"Gonna take a look at it. Thought I saw something. Go on ahead without me." With a rustle of the uniform robe she wears, she starts to run double time to venture into the wood.

"Shiki! Wait! You promised you wouldn't go wandering around by yourself!" I shout after her, but I realize it is futile. The brat is so willful, it'd take a miracle for me to pull her back with meager shouts.

"Azaka Kokutō?" Before I can start after her, I am stopped by someone calling my name from behind me.

/1

Got a new job for you, Shiki.

In the evening of January 2, Tōko said over the telephone the words that set me up for a job that has so far been completely different from anything she's sent me before. A strange enough incident occurred in Azaka's school, Reien Girl's Academy, but the task of rooting out its source was barely enough to get me motivated at all.

I, Shiki Ryōgi, joined Tōko Aozaki's outfit some months ago purely on the promise of the possibility of murder. But this job? This is about as far as you can get from that objective without being a doctor and doing the *polar opposite*. It's not nearly sufficient to fill me up, let alone satisfy me. Yet even as I think that, I recognize that despite the promises of opportunities that Tōko said she would have in spades, I know that I've yet to truly kill a single person.

Oh sure, there was that one time with the girl who could bend things just by looking at them, but that didn't pan out as well as I'd hoped. At the last moment, even though the bloodlust filled me more than it ever had, I couldn't take her down. Not as she was at that particular moment. But we had a good fight. One of my best. I suppose it's a compromise I'll have to live with.

The past few weeks held little opportunity for any similar excursions, however, so a hungry dissatisfaction had its grip on me. Surely it must have been the cause for me accepting such a dreary job as the one I'm in now. Besides, I had nothing better to do anyway. As I see it, there's little difference in sleeping in my room out of boredom, or going to Reien Girl's Academy and sleeping in Azaka's dormitory out of boredom. At least in the latter, there are more opportunities to get out and move. And so I'm here, in this stuffy girl's boarding school, posing as a touring prospective transfer student intending to go in on the third term, and trying to find fairies that Azaka can't see.

As I pass the tree line, I slow my pace down to a brisk step, and when I realize Azaka doesn't seem to be tagging along, I walk. Deeper into the foliage lies the wooden school building I'm heading for, just visible within the shroud of green and brown that obscures my vision in all directions. Whether because of the cloudy skies or some other, unseen influence, the sunlight peeking through the treetops is a shade of gray more akin to mist.

The distance between the buildings of Reien Girl's Academy is so unnecessarily vast that time and neglect has allowed the foliage to grow largely unchecked except among the most travelled paths. The majority of the campus is filled with a vast, sprawling forest. Forget having a forest inside the school, try saying that there's a school somewhere in the forest.

The soil is damp with leaf mold that clings to my boots, and it fills the area with a familiar fragrance, the color and air of bittersweet ripened fruit. And as it unites with the noise of the insects on the leaves, I am almost intoxicated by it. Time seems to take its leisurely pace here, and there is a comforting familiarity to it all, creating the deceptive illusion of being apart from the world. I remember then the mage who made a building a reality all his own, and the old memory of the Ryōgi estate, walled off from greater society. Both of them, I realize, are places isolated from the normalcy of the world. So it is with this school.

Soon, I reach the building, which I now see is in the center of a clearing of long cut-down trees. The design of the building itself is old-fashioned, even without recognizing its wooden make, and it sits breathless at the center of the trees like a creature asleep, or a man on his deathbed waiting for the end to come. The ground in the clearing is overrun with grass weeds, and my steps are muffled and silent when I set foot on them. Treading across them as fast as I comfortably can without breaking the silence of the place, I enter the building.

Inside, I discover it isn't as run down as its façade would have me believe. I get the feeling that the structure is smaller than it looked somehow, possibly because Azaka said this was the former junior high school building. Every footfall on the wooden floor gives an audible creak. The noise echoes across the desolate hallway, growing more indistinguishable the farther it travels, and blending with the noise of the insects outside, still audible even in such a dead space.

As I walk further inside, my thoughts turn to the teacher Azaka introduced me to earlier. Satsuki Kurogiri. Azaka said he looked very much like Mikiya, and she's right. But that isn't truly special. A lot of people look alike, after all. But when the atmosphere he gives off is similar as well, it becomes truly unsettling. But there I feel some fundamental difference between them, some clear distinction that's on the tip of my tongue, though I can't rightly place it just yet. It's a particular feeling I've been having lately. Of not knowing, but feeling. It's a very human thing.

When I first stole back into consciousness half a year ago, I was still gripped by that inexplicable feeling of simultaneously knowing and not knowing, of experiencing something and getting an emotion of newness

and familiarity at the same time. But the past months have borne new experiences, experiences that not even the old *Shiki* could have ever known about. Now, more than ever, I can feel how truly distinct the *Shiki* before the accident and myself after the recovery really are, though it is still a faint boundary. Slowly, the hollow in my soul that Tōko once told me of is being filled with new memories, trivial realities, and little emotions. There still lingers that old lack of a sensation of life, but the emptiness I had when I first woke up is well and truly gone. Someday maybe, when the day comes that this hollow soul is really filled, I can even begin to grasp that faint dream of being normal.

“Our little dream, isn’t it, *Shiki*?” I whisper to myself. Inside, I know there will be no answer.

“A fool’s dream, I would think.” Yet from somewhere unseen, someone answers.

The voice is little else but a low murmur, but it echoes down the hallway until it becomes a sound that blends with the cacophony of insects.

And then for a moment, behind my neck, something pricks me.

“Goddamit.” The light touch brings me back from my distant thoughts. Quickly, I move my hand to the nape of my neck, and I’m certain I’m holding...something. It almost feels like the shape of a model figure of a man, only slightly larger than my hand. Without a second thought, I hold tightly and crush it. It makes a conspicuous high keening sound. I draw my hand back and look at the palm of my hand.

Only a strange white liquid is left. With my palm spread, the thick, sticky liquid drips down to the floor. Is this the only thing left of the thing I crushed? Then I remember what Tōko and Azaka said about the fairies. I never saw anything of the sort in my entire time here, and I can’t tell if this crap in my hand is something related or not.

“Ew,” I remark as I whisk my hand to clear the substance away. Strangely enough, despite its almost adhesive quality before, it slips off of my skin quite easily now. It takes me a moment to notice that while I was studying the liquid, the entire place had become deathly quiet. Even the keening sound of the insects had disappeared. If they were even insects. If what I destroyed was truly a fairy or something like it, there couldn’t have been just one of them. Something so easily destroyed would serve little use for a mage. There must be a swarm. And the buzzing noise might have been them, their master deciding a hasty retreat after having observed my over-enthusiastic destruction of their comrade.

In any case, I don’t think there’s anything left for me to find in this building. Going back through the trees the way I came, I make my way back to

the walkway in the middle of the forest, where I had left Azaka, and soon enough I catch sight of her again.

Azaka stands only a little shorter than me, with hair that reaches the middle of her back. If the girl Ōji, who we had met earlier, carried herself with the air of a castle's queen, Azaka carries herself much like a princess. Well, a princess of stubbornness if nothing else. I exit the tree line and approach beside her, whereupon she finally notices me.

"Huh? Decided against it, Shiki?" she asks, perplexed somehow.

"Decided against what?"

"Going there, idiot." She motions her head to where I just came from, toward the old building in the woods. We share an expression of bewilderment with each other for a while until I finally realize what happened.

"Azaka," I ask, "do you know what time it is?"

"It should be around 2pm, righ—" her words cut off. I know why. It's already around 3 o' clock.

"I didn't expect you to stand around waiting for me for an hour. If you remember what happened in that hour, we've got no problems, but..." I trail off. Silently, Azaka begins to tremble, putting a finger on her lips as if just now figuring it out. She doesn't even attempt to hide her surprise as she stares into space.

But I can already tell that as far as she knows, she can't remember a thing from the time she called out to me to the time I got back.

"Shiki, it couldn't be that I—" her words come out in fits and starts as she trembles from head to toe, not out of fear, I start to recognize, but more out of pure anger. She can't seem to stand the thought of someone having done something to her without her even knowing.

"I don't know if I even need to say it," I start, giving voice to what she's so far refused to say, "but the fairies got you. Took the memory away too, probably."

As soon as I say it, her face turns beet red. Her realization of her own carelessness at being snuck up on like a novice mage and her embarrassment is probably making her hard to decide between being ashamed or being angry. Most of the time, Azaka is very calm and collected, but she doesn't like people to know that she can pop a fuse just like anybody else, very unlike the image she's worked so hard to cultivate.

Azaka clears her throat before she speaks. "We'll go back to the dormitory. It seems we need to plan strategies of our own." Her voice has gained an irritated streak, and her walk is brisk and determined. As I look on her, back turned to me, I wonder what she'd say if I said I actually admired her in times like these? "Shiki, are you coming or what?" she says, almost to

the point of shouting.

Well, guess I've got no time to think about it. I follow her quickly, going along with her antics like I promised to.

I 2

After returning to the dormitory and subsequently talking to some of the students in class D, it had already grown dark outside. Though the school is on winter break, it apparently doesn't stop the rules from being in effect, so we had to go back to Azaka's room.

After 6 in the evening, students are forbidden to go anywhere except the portions of the dormitory reserved for their class, except to go the bathroom, or to go to or from the study hall located on the first floor. The students who transferred here in high school who don't know better sometimes sneak out to go to their friends' room in other parts of the dormitory, and for that purpose some of the sisters keep a corridor watch in the night. The students who've been here since junior high are already used to it, and so either they don't go out, or if they do, they already know the route that the nuns keep so well, and so are never seen.

Or at least, that's what Azaka has just politely told me. Since the entire thing is really of little concern to me, all I can do is sit in her room and grumble. Azaka is sitting in her own chair. The room we're in is narrow but long, and first years get to share the room with another girl. Luckily for me, Azaka's roommate went home for the winter. There are two study desks in the room, attached to the wall, and a bunk bed for the both of us. Personal effects go in the bookshelves and cabinets beside the wall. The room itself is obviously as old as the building it's in, but it's the kind of antiquity where you can feel the comforting weight of a placid history on it.

Azaka is already in her pajamas, having changed immediately out of her uniform robes the minute we got back to her room. I wanted to change out of this stuffy nun uniform as well, but I didn't bring any change of clothes, so it looks like I'm stuck with all the robes Azaka's got. Having little else to do, I sit down on the bed and listen to Azaka's explanation.

"Seeing as we can't go out of our rooms tonight," she continues, "we'll have to call it a day. Normally, we'd wake up at five o'clock for morning service, but since it's winter break, we can sleep in until six. Remember, Shiki, that none of the other students or sisters know we're investigating the incident in class D, so please try to refrain from being *too* weird and bring attention on ourselves. Unlike you, I'm actually staying here for a second year, so please try not to make a big fuss that will mess up my reputation."

All of which I heard almost word for word the night before as well. I honestly have no idea why she even needs to worry. In some kind of inverse

relationship, I'm so bored here that it makes me *not* want to do anything.

"Relax. I'm just here to be your eyes, so I didn't bring my favorite knife with me. I don't have a grudge against whoever this fairy mage is, so I don't have any special urge to take care of him. I'm more worried about your temper running wild and chasing after this guy."

"A misplaced fear, as well. I know our objective is only to identify the source of the phenomenon, not eliminate it. Investigate, and then pass the matter on to Miss Tōko, and have her take care of it."

So she says with her signature voice of calm, but the familiar fire in her eyes hasn't died down since this afternoon. She's taking that fairy incident really personal. And when that happens, I know she sees little option except to strike back.

"Well, see if you can keep your attitude that way, Azaka," I say offhandedly, which prompts Azaka to direct her stare at me.

"Could it be that you're making a fool out of me, Shiki?"

"Like you said: a misplaced fear." Her accusatory glance is so alike to how Mikiya looks at me in mock suspicion (which is more than uncommon) that it makes me inadvertently laugh. This only has the effect of worsening Azaka's mood.

"Ugh, fine. I swear that I won't get mad, so you don't have any right to judge me. Now to get back to more important matters," she says as she changes the tone of her voice. "Among the people we met today, was there anyone you thought was strange in any way?"

"Strange? Well, all of them, to be honest. All of the people from class D that we met had some of the stuff somewhere in their neck."

"By 'stuff,' I assume you mean the same blood that came from the fairy you supposedly killed." Her brows come together in a frown, as she must think that I'm the worst person alive for crushing a perfectly good (and more importantly for her, studyable) familiar. Still, it's the truth, so I can't argue with her on that.

"It's not blood, I think. More like the scales on butterfly wings. I doubt they wouldn't notice it if it was just some kind of liquid. It was in that teacher we met earlier, too. Kurogiri, right? I didn't know what it was when we met him, but now that I think about it, it's the same thing."

"I see. Say, Shiki, whoever's responsible for this, why do you think he's taking away the memories?"

"Wouldn't know. I don't have any reason to do it."

"I don't even know why I even bothered asking you," Azaka says with a huff. Then, ignoring me, she starts to enumerate the facts we have at hand in as low a voice as she can muster. "In December, members of class

D got a letter, containing secrets that even the person who knew them forgot about. At around the same time, rumors of fairies in the campus started to spread, sneaking up on you while you were asleep and stealing your memories. Just before winter break started, two students from class D argued and then attempted to harm each other with box cutters, the cause of their quarrel being the letters they received. The other students didn't even try to stop the fight. Even up to January, the students refuse to talk about the incident, and the atmosphere remains very strained and unhelpful."

She grants me a sideways glance with dagger eyes for a moment, and then goes back to her reverie. "Well, *she* actually encountered at least one of the fairies, and I lost an entire hour to the creatures. What was I doing? I could have been doing all sorts of things in that lost hour."

So even the calm and composed Azaka Kokutō is bothered about memories forgotten.

So what of me?

My memories of what happened three years ago, during my freshman year of high school, still contain many blanks. The ambiguity of their nature still creates a great unease in me, filling my imagination with all kinds of doubts, all kinds of explanations, none of them painting me in the best light. That same year, the city seemed to have been frozen in place from the violent murders committed by an unknown serial killer. The gap in my memories almost makes me feel like...I'm connected to those incidents in some way. But if anyone would know, it would be **Shiki**, my other self. But now he's gone, and whatever elucidating information he may have had is gone along with him.

Wait—*wait a minute*. Why haven't I thought of it before? If the holes in my memory is due to **Shiki** dying...then why are my memories relating to the moments directly before my accident also gone? Surely it wasn't **Shiki** in control then, but *Shiki*. Maybe—maybe if this fae mage has a way of stealing memory, then could he have a way to give lost memory back? In any case, it would be difficult to get the idea past Azaka. And even discounting whether or not Azaka believes in them, the existence of fairies here isn't something I particularly approve of.

Whatever the situation evolves into, we still need to find the man responsible. And whatever fact me and Azaka are missing to tie everything together is so close that I can almost feel it through the walls, bleeding through the serenity in this enclosed space of madness.

"Azaka, have you given a thought as to how we're even going to begin to investigate lost memories?"

"I know, I know. It's not like we can hypnotize people and dig into their subconscious or something. Do you know anything about the four processes of memory, Shiki?"

"Encoding, storage, retrieval, and recognition, right? Same as any VCR. Recorded video sticks to the tape and encoded and stored. When you watch it again, you put it in the box and it retrieves the video. You verify if it's still the same video as before with recognition. If one of the processes fail, there's some kind of a memory disorder."

"Indeed. Even if someone forgets something, the memory itself is still stored in the brain. Anything the brain encodes stays there. This isn't some kind of weird mass hysteria. These so-called fairies are extracting these memories, but to what purpose, it isn't clear."

Before I left, Tōko confided in me that she suspected that there was some cold intent behind all of this, but I can't say I entirely agree. Seeing as the memories being stolen are memories the persons themselves have already forgotten, the person wouldn't even notice if they were taken away. In fact, the whole thing with the letters seems almost a benevolent act, as if whoever was sending them was informing the person that he or she had forgotten *this* particular memory, and that they shouldn't forget it ever again.

"It's possible the culprit is looking for something in all the memories. Some information, some kind of proof that he needs," I suggest. Azaka acknowledges me with a slight nod and leans back on her seat.

"Or just someone that really likes to tell people about the skeletons in their closet and point them out for everyone to see."

"If anything, it's not something so benign. Harassment, at the very least. Like a kid, this one," I add. Well, fairies are already like children in their fickleness anyway, so why do I even wonder? I try to stop myself from thinking any more on this. After all, I'm just Azaka's eyes right now, and it's her job to take the arcane knowledge and derive some kind of an answer to all of it, not mine. And with that thought, I move from sitting down on the bed to lying down on it spread eagled.

"Tell me something, Shiki," Azaka suddenly blurts out, seemingly embarrassed as she sits lazily in her chair. "How is it that you see the fairies?"

Man, she's still beating herself up over that? "Don't really know how I do it. Even I don't know how the mystic sight works. All I know is that *you* don't have it. But if you want to try and sense them, what you could do is improvise on the spells you *can* do, and the kind of Art you can control: find the moving currents in the air that you feel are warmer. If your senses are right, then you can catch them."

"Warm pockets of air, huh?" She nods and puts a hand on her chin as she thinks. It might sound like a load of bullshit, but I didn't lie to her. If the fairies are alive, then they must give off heat, and that's where Azaka excels. All she needs to do is find the small nooks warmer than others as soon as she knows that fairies are about. That would be the fairies trying to maneuver in the space around her.

In any case, we conclude our planning after that. In a stroke of unexpected generosity, Azaka lends me one of her pajamas, just a bit larger than what I'm used to, and I take the top bunk and go to sleep.

Records in Oblivion - III

January 5, Tuesday.

Shiki refused to wake up despite me spending the better part of thirty minutes trying my best efforts to do so. Either she's an amazingly sound sleeper, or is actually awake and just lazy. Either way, I gave up on her, and at just past seven o' clock, I decided to just head to the study hall on the first floor by myself.

Normally, the study hall is populated by the same students (of which I am one of their number, of course) occupying the same spaces, dutifully studying for exams, but the break has cleared the room of most of its usual semi-residents. What the hall was built for and what most students actually use it for can be wildly different at times: at the same time that studious individuals are perusing books, others are conversing behind shelves, keeping a constant lookout for the patrolling sister Einbach, lest she unleash the customary disciplinary lectures when she discovers students misbehaving. The ease of using the shelves as concealment isn't lost on me, and so I know that over the break it becomes one of the best places for any sort of clandestine meeting, especially so in mornings like these, when it sees little activity, and even less so on breaks.

Seeking to exploit that fact, I arranged a meeting with class D's president here. Yesterday, when me and Shiki asked a few questions to a few of the students from the class, they were fairly uncooperative, and all of them spouted the same suspiciously similar lines. We couldn't get anything of value out of them. Well, it's not as if I expected them to open up to people they perceive to be outsiders like us. So I saw little choice except to be a bit more direct, and I saw the best option for that was to make our position clear and talk to the class president, one Fumio Konno.

All seems as expected when I finally arrive at the study hall, with no one in sight. No stove for heating can be found here, because the hall is too large, and so entering the hall, I am caught off guard by the winter chill running through the spacious room, colder than it is anywhere else in the building.

"Kokutō, over here," says a cool voice from deeper inside the hall. It is only a whisper, but the loneliness of the hall seems almost to amplify it. I can see rows upon rows of shelves inside, and between two of them, I can see Fumio Konno leaning out her head, waiting for me. Quickly, I close the door and head further inside.

I share only one thing in common with Fumio Konno: the fact that we

transferred into Reien Girl's Academy's high school in the same year. Other than that, we couldn't be further apart. Her height easily surpasses five and a half feet, marking her as one of the tallest in the school, while my height is quite average. Where she is forceful and exuberant, I am composed. Where her hair is cut quite short, mine is grown out long. She looks almost an adult, and could probably pass herself off as a college student at least, and she herself acknowledges that she doesn't truly act like the kind of girl that Reien tries to engender.

"I'm quite sorry for having to meet you so early in the morning," I say to Konno as I near the shelves she's hiding between. I bow to her to acknowledge that this is the first time we've met, but she is evidently surprised by this courtesy enough to cross her arms as she draws a nervous breath, averting her eyes from me in the short moments it takes me to bow.

"Er, forget about it. I can't sleep easy with the girls in my class anyway. Keeping myself occupied through other things seems like the right thing to do at this point. So, what was it that was so important for you to talk about? Is it about Hayama?"

Well, that was certainly straightforward, and it catches me off guard. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, yeah," she says with a snicker. "I sort of heard you were asking around with the people in my class yesterday, and some looker no one recognized was tagging along with you. Besides, what else would be so important to the president of class A to ask me about personally?" She ends with a slightly suspicious glance at my direction.

As I'd feared, word of our activities is spreading faster than anticipated. I glance back at Konno, trying to dispel her little fear. "I never really thought much of Mr. Hayama at first, but I suppose that was a mistake on my part. I'll be frank with you Ms. Konno. I've been tasked by the Mother Superior to investigate the incident that happened in class D. I need you to tell me if you know anything." Unexpectedly, the tall girl's face darkens at my inquiry.

"Straight from the Mother Superior, huh? I guess honors students are different. And they just told me to keep forgetting about the incident and focus on studying. Wow."

"Keep forgetting. So that means—"

"Pretty much. I'm in the same boat as Mr. Kurogiri. I was at the scene, unable to do anything. Then, nothing. Beyond knowing that the thing happened, I can't remember anything. Then, I remember Kashima and Ruridō being transported to the infirmary somehow. I tried to visit them in the infirmary, but the Mother Superior forbade it when she was interviewing them." Sweat starts to glisten from her forehead, and she seems

almost embarrassed to even be speaking at all. That only goads me to press further and ask.

“I have a wild theory here but—did you get a letter too?”

“Oh, that. It wasn’t as creepy as the kind the other two got. It was pretty benign, comparatively. A lot of us got it every day, including Kashima and Ruridō. That’s got to drive you up the wall, doesn’t it? Mine just had stuff about walking home together with an old junior high crush, or my pet cat that died a long time ago. At first, I thought it was pretty useless. But then I almost started to like the letters. They made me remember things I almost forgot about. That whoever was sending them still knew about it was kind of scary and all, but to be honest, it didn’t seem to register all that much with me.”

“Did you ever feel guilty about what he was sending you?”

“I dunno. Maybe I did, and I just didn’t know what to call it.”

“This might be a long shot but, do you know who sent the letters, or know anyone who would?”

“No one I know. But this is hardly a normal situation anymore is it? If we’re assuming that things like ghosts or fairies exist, then surely there must be some...thing that knows.”

She fails to specify what she thinks, however, so I try to change tack. “So personally, what do you think about what happened, Miss Konno?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. It’s weird, that’s for sure, but my class has always been weird from the start. Maybe it’s some kind of karmic thing, y’know? Maybe you don’t know about class D, Kokutō, but they’re all actually high school transferees. A lot of the parents think they’re problem children, so they dump them here. Me included.”

Even I know about Fumio Konno’s reason for being here. She was a star basketball player in her high school once, but her dad wanted her only daughter to follow in the family enterprise. When she rebelled, her father put her into Reien by force to discipline her, and that was the end of that. I didn’t realize it’s a fate she shares with the rest of her class.

“What can you tell me about Mr. Hayama setting fire to the dormitory?” I ask. This is the most important card I can play. The sisters forbade us from talking about it on pain of expulsion, and it shut the girls up quite effectively. Hopefully, the trust Fumio Konno shows in me can lead to something fresh.

Her face turns bitter and she looks away as I ask the question. “I have no idea what he was thinking, burning the dormitory down. Hideo Hayama was unhinged. Behind the closed doors of our class he was fond of going on and on, complaining about why his brother didn’t let him just—” a pause,

and a gulp “—fuck the Mother Superior. I dunno. Maybe you don’t believe me. But as far as I’m concerned, he had no business being an instructor.” Her voice starts to break, becoming halting. “And Kaori even died because of him! All because his brother took pity on him and gave the jobless fool a responsibility! Our class...we didn’t have anything to do with it. We weren’t responsible!”

She spits out the words louder than she probably should have, and they echo across the empty study hall, giving me a moment of alarm before I remember that the hall is empty. I peek my head out of the shelves just to make sure, and quickly return to Fumio Konno, only a few moments ago looking cheerful and confident, now reduced to hiding her face from me, obviously holding back her sobs. I’d try to press further about what she means with her eerie last statement, but I realize I can’t get anything more out of her at this state, not now at least.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Konno,” I stammer awkwardly. “I really am. If it’s any consolation, you’ve been very helpful. Let’s leave it at that for now. Do you need help getting back?”

“No,” she quickly says, her voice muffled by a hand over her mouth. “Just leave me here for a while.”

I turn my back on her hesitantly and start to walk out of the shelves worriedly. Just before I turn the corner however, I try to ask her one last question.

“Do you believe in the fairies?” I almost regret the throwaway manner with which I state it, but Konno looks up at me with a measure of surprise in her eyes.

“I don’t, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist, right? I mean, how else can you explain the memories being like they are in our class?”

I sigh in agreement, and leaving her, I make a beeline straight out of the study hall.

After parting with Fumio Konno, I try to socialize with the few members of class D I happen to run into in the halls, but the responses are expectedly the same as before. In fact, there are much less of them wandering the halls now, as if they’ve started to hide themselves in their rooms to reduce their contact with the outside world as much as possible, like they were waiting for something. The few class D students I encounter all shared the same desire of wanting to go home, whispered in tones of cold disappointment. When I asked them why they don’t, in fact, go home, they only give me a very confused look.

I already knew I couldn't get a proper conversation out of anyone except Fumio Konno, being the class president weighted with responsibilities that she needed to get off her chest. The only thing I can gather is that all of them certainly believe in the rumors of fairies sweeping away the memories. Everyone did indeed receive the mysterious letters, and like Mr. Kurogiri, everyone had gaps in their memories.

The conclusion I can derive is that all of the girls of class D are hiding something. What that may be, I can't say, but it's almost certain that Hideo Hayama was embroiled in the very center of it.

With few other options, I make my way to the faculty room. Hideo Hayama might have left the school in November after the fire, but I'm hoping there might still be something in his files I can uncover.

"Excuse me," I whisper to no one in particular as I open the door to the empty faculty room. I know it's empty at this time since the instructors rarely use it except for the morning meeting they have, and the office's custodian is out on vacation as well. "Thank you, Lord," I whisper with a smile on my face, half in my luck, and half in actual benediction.

It doesn't take me long to find the file on November last year, and I take my time poring over its contents. I hardly realize that an hour has passed while I'm flipping over files and opening folders in the unlit room, my sight only helped by the sunlight peeking through the windows. Despite my best hopes though, I can't find anything of great importance to my investigation.

"Darn. Looks like I'll really have to use Shiki and search every nook and cranny of this school for a clue." I don't really want to have her follow me around like some kind of obedient Doberman, but it seems I have little choice. With nothing else to do, I close the file, now a bit messier than when I opened it. But one of the papers catches my eye.

"Hideo Hayama, employed since 1989, employment termination at December 1998." At first glance, it seems typical enough. But a cursory inspection reveals some very strange details. December 1998? That seems impossible when the fire happened in the beginning of November, and they haven't heard a word or seen nary a peek from Hideo Hayama since. But according to this he was employed until December. And below that, the reason for termination is listed as "no known permanent address." Does that mean he's missing?

The thoughts roil in my mind as I return the file where I found it and quickly slip out of the faculty room and back into the corridor...

...only to meet the person I least expected—nor least desired—to meet.

“Oh, Miss Kokutō. What business do you have in the faculty room so early, pray tell?”

“G—good morning, Mr. Kurogiri.” I give a quick bow. “It’s already noon, though.” I try to dodge the question at the same time as I try to dodge past him without seeming in too much of a hurry. Yesterday, with Shiki beside me, I allowed myself to feel at least a bit less disquieted by him as I do regularly, but alone, the unease returns. My chest tightens, and my heart races. I can’t tell anymore whether the unease comes from the fact that he looks so like Mikiya, or it’s simply the nervously calm air with which he carries himself. “Were you retrieving something from the faculty room?”

Despite my careless question, he answers. “Ah, yes. Something the Mother Superior asked me to do. A list of the students’ names, rendered in French. She needs to send it to the sister institution in France.”

“I see. Our names, is it?” I stammer clumsily. I try to slip past him to end the conversation there.

“Indeed. You are not entirely unrelated to the matter either. The short list for exchange student candidates for our French sister school includes you and Ōji.”

That stops me in my tracks before I manage to make my way past him. This is the first time I’ve heard of this. I take a moment to relish that fact before continuing my steps. But I stop again when I pass him to ask him the question I’ve asked the students, but haven’t yet asked him.

“Mr. Kurogiri, are you aware of the rumor circling amongst the students these days?”

“The fae, correct? Yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“Do you believe it, sir? Oh, but of course I don’t believe in them myself,” I quickly add. Unexpectedly, he smiles a lazy smile.

“I think I understand your confusion. Stories of the fae aren’t as numerous here in Japan as they are in my country, are they? I think I find I have an affinity for the old Scottish tales of the cait sith, the cu sith, and other fantastical creatures.”

I’m surprised for a few moments at his response, and it takes me some precious few moments more to remember that Mr. Kurogiri was, in fact, a foreigner. The university he studied in might have had something as esoteric as folkloristics, so my question might not have seemed so childish as I had originally assumed.

“If I remember correctly, the cait sith is the cat that wears long boots.”

“Oho, so you know. Still, talking cats find some commonality in some Japanese folk tales as well, so it’s not something so original.”

Hah, well at least he knows where to sniff out actual intelligence when it's present. "So do the myths seem more real in your country, sir? Or are they still another misunderstanding of folk practices or natural phenomena?"

"I haven't heard much in the way of such things recently, but there is always the odd story of children being spirited away and replaced. More and more I find the breed of stories of farmers being helped out by the Good Folk diminishing dramatically." He clears his throat before continuing. "Those old legends of the seelie fairies—of brownies and knockers, for example—are really just one way of exaggerating the acts of men who, for one reason or another, find themselves cast out of every village they visit. Left with little recourse except to live a hermit's life, they briefly appear to lend a welcome hand in menial tasks such as the harvesting of crops, through which they hope to build a friendly relationship."

"That sounds like a very noble way to live a life," I remark.

"Yes, but on the other hand, you have the tales of kidnapped children, where the stories of changelings come from. Some legends are about gentry kidnapping certain children they believe to be of some random stock blessed by God. Their desire for these children leads them to swap the child."

"What happens to the kidnapped child?" As soon as I say the question, Mr. Kurogiri reacts with a wide grin.

"Ah, do not fret so much on it. They usually turned out the way they were before. You see, since it was gentry that took them, it was usually easy to find the child in the baptismal records of a church. Any man, *nobilis* or no, had their child baptized lest the child suffer in society through persecution. So a trip to the church usually satisfied the altercation quite legally."

I sigh, and almost smile, until he continues.

"But then there are the cases where this is not true, where no other sensible explanation is true. There are the children actually whisked away by the fae, the ones they called changelings."

"So you *do* believe in them, sir?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation, "I think they exist. But it doesn't mean I have to like them. The pranks they pull sometimes go much, much too far. The changelings are one example. They would kidnap a child, sometimes keeping it for many years, and then return it inexplicably on its parent's doorstep. Then its parents would find their joy quickly curtailed when the child rapidly grows ill, its very essence misaligned, only to die a slow, lonely death, hated by its parents and lost to the world."

I almost bring a hand to my mouth. This was certainly not the kinds of

fairy tales I had grown up hearing.

“Oh, I am sorry,” the instructor quickly says. “It seems I have spoken overmuch yet again.”

“N—no,” I utter meekly. “I enjoyed it quite well, sir. If you’ll excuse me, however...” I let the sentence hang unfinished, give a curt bow, and hurry away with uneasy but quickened steps, as far away from Mr. Kurogiri as my feet will reasonably carry me.

Noon passes, and more out of a combined desire to get away from Mr. Kurogiri and simultaneously avoid Shiki more than anything else, I decide to head to the burned down dormitory in the eastern end of the campus. I’m not particularly certain I’ll glean anything of actual importance there, but I feel like I should visit the place that Hideo Hayama tried to burn down at least once, seeing as my investigation seems to be heading closer and closer to that direction.

When I stand before the dormitory, I see its perimeter surrounded by ropes, a “No Entry” sign in place to discourage any casual would-be intruders. Obviously, it’s not enough to deter me. I walk over the ropes and toward the imposing structure. Most of it is a burned down hulk, the rooms formerly lined up on its east wing completely gutted, as though a giant monster clawed it down from roof to foundation. What little partitions remain that were once the walls and floors of its rooms are crumbling and blackened wood and concrete. In contrast, immediately westward of that sight is the building’s west wing, the corridor leading out of the rooms and everything west of it surviving largely intact.

Walking through the corridor, you’d never notice that immediately to the east, beyond doors that remain closed, a fire had taken the other half. Open the doors, however, and you see only the campus and the verdant trees beyond, like a bad piece of installation art. Maybe it’s better to have the doors remain closed, as respect to the last bitter taste of normalcy this building still has.

Though his name bounces around in my mind more and more these days, I’ve only really seen Hideo Hayama the one time. He was teaching in classes C through E, so he never had any reason to come to class A. The one time I saw him was during a morning service, looking bored and flipping absentmindedly through the pages of a Bible. I took him to be at least thirty years old, and his face plain and unassuming.

“How am I supposed to look into him when I don’t even know the first thing about the man?” Now I’m talking to myself, which is probably a sign

that there's little left for me here and that I should leave. I descend from the second floor back to the first using the lonely, barely lit stairwell, making my way to the still-intact exit.

Only to find a familiar figure blocking the exit, shadowed by the afternoon sun. Though her features are obscured, it's easy enough to figure out. There is little else in Reien with black hair as fine, and features as delicate as Misaya Ōji, the secret power behind the academy. She walks towards me wordlessly, and something makes me feel I should hold my tongue until she has her chance to speak. She stops when she is only two meters in front of me. She looks me straight in the face, and grants me a gentle smile.

"So tell me, Miss Kokutō. Has there been progress in your efforts?" Misaya Ōji says to me. As soon as she says that, the temperature seems almost to drop a few precious degrees, though I can't say for certain why, or even if it's real. But it's enough to put me on guard. Her voice is familiar, more so than the level that I associate with the many snippets of conversation that I have heard through her in the past months, but on a more recent level. Somehow, a memory of a noise, of an echoing chorus like the buzzing of flies, comes to mind. Memory turns to reality, and I am certain the noise swelling to some kind of low crescendo that I hear right now is similar.

The fact falls into place, and I realize belatedly that this will be a repeat of what happened to me yesterday. My memories will be stolen again, and I will stand here dazed and confused for god knows how long this time. I don't have my glove handy right now for a quick spell, but there is little choice. The flame calls, and perhaps it is not yet too late. I focus on Misaya Ōji in front of me, and then weave my Art, feeling the pattern around me and sensing hot currents in the air like Shiki told me to.

I can feel the spell working, and I close my eyes almost reflexively, trusting the Art to tell me of any unnatural pockets of heat in the air. And then—

“—Gotcha!” Something warm tried to draw near my chest, but I catch it with my bare hands before it can hit me. I've definitely caught *something* with my hand, and it's making a frantic, keening noise. I ignore it for now and open my eyes, keeping my gaze locked and level with Misaya Ōji.

“Well, well,” she says, as if she had expected the entire thing. “You told me that you've never seen the fae in your life, but here you are swatting one away?”

Her tone is enough to assure me, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she is the enemy I've been looking for.

“I see. So my one hour blank yesterday was me talking to you.”

“Yes, and you have made things so much easier for me. My children have made it simple for me to know what sort of person you truly are, Miss

Kokutō." She raises a hand to brush something unseen on her shoulder, and I hear the same familiar keening sound in response. Another fairy? No. If I wove my spell right, then there is a minutely abnormal amount of heat all around her, a rough estimate numbering in fifty such sources. And though I don't truly see the fairies, I am almost overwhelmed by the truly impressive amount of potential she can bring to bear.

"Your composure is admirable, Miss Kokutō. It almost seems as if you're not even surprised, though I know it is a simple lie. However, I was surprised at what I learned about you. To think that there would be someone in the academy that studied the Art besides myself."

"You don't surprise me, Miss Ōji. I've known from the beginning that there was a mage here with fairy familiars. But you; you waited for me to be alone didn't you? To be vulnerable, and then eliminate me? Commendable strategy, but it seems a mistake to me to reveal yourself."

I try to stall for time, scanning the area around me for alternative exits. I remind myself that my part here is only reconnaissance, not a fight. While I'd gladly take a fistfight any day of the week, even I don't desire a duel to the death between mages such as us.

"Perish the thought. I never thought to remove you, Miss Kokutō. Why would I, when you are one of the few of my breed of person? Understanding each other would be better than to put a blade at each other's throats in this situation, yes?"

"Says the person who tried to set her fairy familiars on me."

"Oh I only tried to learn more about you, my dear. Very useful, if we are to have any sort of meaningful conversation and avoid meaningless deaths," she says with a deathly calm voice. Is she actually serious? I glance for a moment at the corridor that stretches behind me—my only means of escape—and try to stall her to until she reveals some point where I can retreat in relative safety.

"Talk? With me?"

"Why of course! You visited this desolate place, Miss Kokutō, and that is enough to endear you to me. For this place is—"

"—the place where Kaori Tachibana lost her life, isn't it?" Ōji nods, satisfied. Her eyes, however, still betray a merciless and spiteful mien, cold as winter. "The one student in November's unfortunate fire that somehow couldn't get away. You knew her, Miss Ōji?" Another graceful nod at my question.

"I valued Kaori very dearly, like I would a little sister. She took in hardship her entire life, but her faith in the Almighty God was beyond question. And yet, she died here, her life free of great sin and still full of beauty. She

had chosen a difficult path for herself." Ōji's voice descends into a tinge of melancholy, but I cannot find any mercy in her words. "And though this horrible tragedy has taken place, the girls have not yet learned their lesson. They have not renounced their sins, even as they live knowing that Kaori lost her life as a sacrifice. That is not the manner of a human. The students of class D are all sinners, and sinners cannot be permitted to sully my institution. Garbage such as them must always be burnt away."

"Wait, so you're saying that the students of class D killed Kaori Tachibana?"

"No. That would give them too much credit. Miss Kokutō, Kaori took her own life. But I cannot expect you to understand what that truly implies." Her gaze full of disdain doesn't stray away from me for a second even as I wonder what she's truly trying to say. At the very least, I can gather that class D was somehow involved in Kaori Tachibana's death in the fire. But what did she mean that I wouldn't understand?

"Then all of this is payback for Kaori Tachibana's sake?"

"Correct. I swear that as long as I stand, those girls will see hellfire, and they will find no rest in their days here in Reien."

"So you would kill them, then?" I ask desperately, though I think the answer is obvious enough already. Misaya Ōji recognizes no humanity in her prey. Murder is not enough for her. She will see them purged thoroughly. But even as I think this, she surprises me by shaking her head.

"Why should I? Killing them is no guarantee that they will be sent to the pits of hell where they rightfully belong. This is why I say you do not understand, though I do not blame you. Stay your hand and stand down, Miss Kokutō. I do not desire to fight you today." She brushes the invisible fairy perched on her shoulder as she says this; a subtle, yet unnerving movement. "Though you cannot truly see them, these little folk are pregnant with memories, yours included. Striking, isn't it? Your memories are the beauty of cold, smooth marble, yet they burn with an inner fire. And though they are as unseen to me as the fae are to you, I can feel the purity of your recollections. You are truly splendid, Miss Kokutō." Her gentle smile only serves to make her tender speech more unnerving.

And when I look at her, I welcome the arrival of another emotion, one I haven't felt in this intensity in almost three years. An emotion that I felt when I first saw Mikiya with Shiki. The urge to kick the ass of the woman in front of me as hard as I can.

We stand there for a few more moments as she waits for my reply, and I don't give an inch to her thinly veiled threat. As far as I'm concerned, she's violated me as surely as if she'd stolen all of my belongings, and

that demands a display of response as potent as I can muster. I banish the thought of escaping from my mind, and stay until finally, I elicit a small sigh from Misaya.

“You have made your choice, then. And I was so looking forward to getting to know you better. Is there truly no room in your heart for a truce, Miss—”

“None whatsoever,” I quickly cut in. Misaya only chuckles.

“Is that so? A shame. I had taken you for kindred, and we share so much alike. Our intense passions for our brothers, for example.”

“Wh—wha,” I struggle to finish but the word doesn’t come out completely. My throat dries instantly, and I know my face is turning beet red by the second. Misaya Ōji, on the other hand, only closes her eyes, truly enjoying herself.

“Yes, it came straight from your lips yesterday, but I suppose you do not remember. I know about your brother, and about you becoming a mage. You see? We travel in the same direction. Though you have practiced the Art for half a year now, I have claimed it only recently.”

The Art. That most potent of words strikes me deep, and reinforces my understanding of the situation’s gravity: that I am fighting another weaver of magic, and that the unconventional nature of such duels makes them quick and deadly.

Misaya continues. “When Kaori died, I learned how to craft the fae familiars, and the Art of robbing memories. Not for the typical mage’s lofty goals of enlightenment, but as tools for my own purpose. I collect the memories relating to Kaori only for her sake, to remove all vestiges of her shame. I care little about anything else. I am not destroying anything, nor committing murder. And you still think this a selfish goal, Miss Kokutō?”

“I don’t think it’s for me to judge, but you *have* terrorized the students of class D, as well as troubled a teacher. Why you had to affect Mr. Kurogiri though, I can’t seem to grasp.” At the mention of his name, I notice Misaya’s eyebrow twitch. She must know as well that Mr. Kurogiri only became class D’s homeroom instructor well after Kaori Tachibana died and Hideo Hayama disappeared. He has little relation to the incident. Why, then, has he too had his memory plundered by the fairies? “It seems to me to be a bit overzealous for you to take his,” I say outright.

I thought she would betray some flaw in her plan, but contrary to what I expected, she lowers her worried eyebrow and scoffs with a noise half in annoyance as well as amusement.

“Not overzealous, I should think. All this is of little consequence to him, but the truth must still be hidden from him.”

"But why?"

Misaya Ōji turns sideward, her hair swaying gently swaying as she answers. "Because my blood is his blood. Because he is my true brother."

"Your true brother? Him?" I stutter out, unbelieving. Maybe it's nothing but a great coincidence, but I realize that it isn't out of the realm of possibility. The Ōji all adopt their daughters, so Misaya's former name might really have been Misaya Kurogiri, for all I know.

Misaya elaborates, unmindful of my surprise. "At first, I didn't know. After Kaori's death, I was full of suspicion at the entirety of class D, and turned to their new instructor in my desperation. I talked to him, asking for some way to help me deal with all this, when alone I could do nothing. And Mr. Kurogiri was truly kind. For the sake of knowing this gentle soul better, I snatched his memories. But that too was a blessing, for there in his dreaming was the proof that he was my true brother. Somehow, he knew something about the true nature of Kaori's death, and so regrettably I had to silence him."

She casts her eyes downwards before continuing. "Once when I was little and knew nothing, my brother said to me that I should honor the living more than the dead. But how can I do that now, when the ones still alive, living peacefully, are the ones that pushed Kaori to her suicide? I remembered what my brother said to me long ago, and so I couldn't stand to see him burdened by that knowledge. So I took away his memory of the incident, and of me being his sister. All of it. Satsuki will live without worry, and love me without regret. And having done this, there is no turning back for me."

I am at a loss for words at the gravity of her act. She says we are alike, a statement that may be true. But I look at her, and listen to her, and realize that we are alike only in so many superficial ways. What we desire may be similar, but our means cannot be more different.

"But that had a use to you as well, didn't it?" I reply. "You took his memories only to preserve the secret of class D. But what will you do about me, I wonder?"

"That will be decided by you soon enough, surely? I have taught you about our common ground, Miss Kokutō, and I understand the discord within you. And with time, I can grant you the thing which you've longed for so much."

Misaya holds out her hand to me, conciliatory and genuine. I look at her outstretched arm, the arm of an enemy that throws her crimes in my face.

"I'm willing to overlook this, on a condition..." I lie to her.

At the same time, I think about what she is truly capable of doing, and

a thought crosses my mind, unbidden. If she could truly do as she says she can do—

“...if you can bring back to me a long forgotten memory.”

—then perhaps her Art can be mine.

“A forgotten memory?” she says, amused.

“Like you, I have a brother that I love dearly. But the memory of the moment I fell in love with him has been lost. If you can bring back that memory from my mind—”

“It cannot be done, I’m afraid. If you yourself have forgotten it, it is no longer a memory. Merely a record of one. And the fae only extract the former.”

I sigh, disappointed, but also somewhat relieved.

“Then it seems a deal can’t be brokered between us.” I tense my muscles for what I know will come next. There is little distance between us. Only two bounding steps, and I can be close enough to kick her in the face if I wanted to. Misaya too, leans forward, shifting her center.

“Miss Kokutō, you know that a familiar must be crafted from something, yes?”

I know at least that much. Does she think I’m new to the Art?

“Then you must know that what you hold in your hand was borne from some material.” There is a keenness to her smile.

I find that my gaze falls to the thing I have been keeping secured in my hand the entire time. But though before I couldn’t see it, now I find that I can. The fairy’s appearance differs from what I expected. Here, in my hand, is the form of a person I had seen only once, a little Hideo Hayama. I inadvertently let it go with a startled cry.

In that instant of weakness, Misaya Ōji rushes forward. I black out with the kind of intensity that overtakes victims of blood loss, but before it I see only the image of Misaya Ōji reaching out with a hand and touching my forehead.

"If memories are painted in our minds as clearly as any image, why are we able to forget?" he asks.

"Forgetting is natural," I answer.

"Those are only things you can't bring to mind. Even you remember such things. Memories slough off me like rotten skin, but my mind is not the mind of man. The mind of man loses nothing," he says.

"But to be unable to bring something to mind is to forget it," I protest.

"Forgetting is a degeneration, not a loss. Only excess from which color retreats. Isn't it wasteful? All of it is the stuff of eternity, withering and rusting. But such eternity can only be disposed by one's own will," he says. I offer no answer. "Eternity is relentless, and this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats like a record."

"Who decides what is eternal and what is not?" I ask.

"No one knows. That is why we search," he answers.

He is one for whom thoughts are foreign and cannot be derived, one whose answers are merely emanations of the past, and of snatched ideas and the disparate thoughts of strangers.

A knock on the door rouses me to wake. Immediately, I see the window, and the ashen sunlight streaking through it that makes me unable to determine whether it's morning or noon. A quick glance at the desk clock confirms my suspicion that it is already past noon.

"Miss Kokutō, are you there?" I hear a voice call from outside the room. It's only then that the splitting headache I always get from oversleeping starts to become apparent, and reflexively, I hold a hand to the side of my head because of the pain. I try to ignore it as I descend from the top bunk and open the door to the room.

Standing outside the door is one of the nuns, who gives me a once over before a look of confusion settles on her face.

"Hi. Yeah. Shiki Ryōgi," I say lazily before I notice that I have to keep up appearances. "I am a transferee for the upcoming term."

"Er, yes, of course," says the sister, her look of suspicion slackening but not really disappearing. "Miss Kokutō has a phone call from her family."

It figures that the one time he family calls, she's not around to take it. Oh well, nothing to be done about it.

"Perhaps I could take the call in her place, seeing as she is out," I say. "I am close to the Kokutō family, after all." At least if you count their estranged son, I suppose.

"I see. Then there is no problem. I shall have the call transferred to the lobby phone, so please hurry." The nun gives one curt bow before leaving quickly. I move to exit the room, but realize that I still have Azaka's oversized pajamas on. I get them out of the way and change into one of Azaka's uniform robes, walking as fast as I can to the lobby in the dormitory entrance.

I saw the phone in the lobby yesterday, lacking any dials or buttons, but it was sitting next to a really neat sofa, so maybe they're hoping that makes up for it. According to Azaka, they filter the calls, which first go to a room managed by one of the sisters. If it's not the family of one of the students, they have to reject it. If the call has their approval, they have it transferred to the lobby phone, where the student can take the call privately.

Even when I'm going to the lobby, I already have a good idea who's calling, and when I arrive and pick up the receiver, it only confirms my suspicions.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Azaka?" It's a voice I know very well. Mikiya's voice. I give the lobby a once-over to see if no one's around before talking.

"Nope, not this time. Azaka's out. It's only the fifth day of the new year and already you're pining after your sister?" I say in an unusually cold way, even for me.

"Shiki, where's Azaka?"

"Dunno. Out, like I told you, doing something or another. She's been in a hell of a hurry since this morning when she tried her best to wake me up. I think she really wants to take care of things as fast as possible and hurry back home."

"Really? She doesn't seem to enjoy herself much when she's at home, though. I told her it'd be easier if she stayed over there."

"I don't think here being better for her is any real deterrent for her to go home, if you know what I mean." Of course he doesn't. "So, what's your business, Mikiya?"

"Nothing in particular. I was planning on surprising Azaka, but that's not too important. Just wanted to check up on how the two of you are doing."

"Well, I can't say for sure. Maybe if you call up again tomorrow, you can ask Azaka yourself. See ya."

"No, wait a minute, Shiki!" I hear his voice coming from the receiver right after I move it away from my ear. I look at myself at the mirror at the

far end of the room, seeing myself holding the receiver and frowning. I can't rightly place why.

"You called to talk to Azaka. You don't have anything to say to me, right?"

"Yes, I do! I've been worried about you. Talk to me for a while. Besides, if I'd wanted to talk to you, I'd have said Azaka's name to the nuns over there anyway, since they don't allow any phone calls except for family. Anyway, any progress on the search?"

"Some. Not a lot. Anyway, I really hate talking on the phone, so maybe we can do this later when I'm not interrupting you."

"Alright. Fine. I mean, it's not like I'm allowed to call you again today anyway, so *maybe* I'll call you tomorrow." There's just that little bit of sarcasm in how Mikiya says it...on second thought, maybe talking to him for a little while isn't so bad.

"Well, if you're free anyway, maybe you can do me a favor. I can't find out anything from here, so maybe you'll have more luck outside. There's a former instructor here in Reien by the name of Hideo Hayama, and also a guy named Satsuki Kurogiri. Any chance you can get their work history before they got here?"

Mikiya sighs. "Well, won't know 'til I try."

"It's not totally important, so it's alright if you can't," I reassure him "I don't want you getting reckless. Don't go doing anything illegal or something just to get it. Anyway, I probably need to go and look for Azaka wandering around the campus."

"Wait, wait. If you're asking me for a favor, then I'll ask you one too. There's a student there named Kaori Tachibana, and I'd like you to search on her records. Attendance records in PE, disciplinary actions, stuff like that. Reien keeps a tight lid on their paperwork, so I can't access it from where I am."

I vaguely wonder for a moment what he's up to, but it's sure to be something that has to be useful if it's investigating a Reien student.

"Alright. If I can, I'll do it. Bye for now, Mikiya." After saying that, I put the receiver back on.

Records in Oblivion - IV

Sleep, Miss Kokutō. Within your hollow dreamscapes lies the grief that I will repeat.

The last words I hear from Misaya Ōji before I descend into oblivion. When my eyes close, darkness overtakes me, and for a moment, there is a nothingness of neither dream nor sleep. And then, within the stirrings of the dreaming, I gaze on eternity.

But I hate that. I want to be special.

I said that once. But when did I say it? I don't even remember the face of who I was talking to, or what I looked like at the time. It was a very, very long time ago. When I came of age, I've only yearned for the shadow of that one word. Like a curse, it hung over me, and I couldn't love any life that led me closer to it. I don't truly know why. But I know that I don't want to be like everyone else around me. Awakening mundanely, living mundanely, and sleeping mundanely; I scorned their nature.

I am me and me alone. I have to be different. The child that embraced that vague concept soon came to think of "different" as outclassing everyone else. But when I grew up, I freed myself from the innocent but confining vestiges of those youthful thoughts. Every year, my body forced itself into adulthood, and every year I kept the secret, deceiving everyone that I was normal; though inside, my difference with the other children my age only widened.

Performing well in academics was never my road to becoming special. I wanted to be more than this, a thing apart altogether. It didn't mean to the best in everything. It didn't mean to be weak, either. Only something else. And it was an impulse that led me to abandon so many connections. With this impulse, I hurt people, estranged myself, sometimes even made them fear me. And it made me happier to slough away the excess. My friends, my teachers, and even my parents gave me the strange sort of distant praise that always follows those that clearly overreach. And through all this, some fashion of peace over my perturbed soul seemed almost at reach.

It was a time when it almost felt as if something else held dominion over me, something that longed to return to some primal origin, predetermined

before I was even born. As a child who followed this urge, I could never judge if it was right or wrong. I only knew that if I indulged it, my wish of being a different thing would become true.

A thing apart. A thing that can't live with others. A thing that can only hurt. And I tried to fool myself into thinking that this benefited me. But in the end, it wasn't some princely figure that shook me from this stupor. It happened naturally, almost entirely without my notice.

Now what are you doing all by yourself, Azaka? It's boring to play alone. Come on home. It's getting late.

It was only one boy.

I was ever alone, and because I allowed myself to believe that this was better, I hated him cruelly. But he always sought me out, always drew me in to play his games. When even my parents were distant, he was always close at hand to offer a laugh. He talked to me unconditionally. At first I thought he was only dim-witted, yet he would often grab my hand without a care, and always led me back home. Only he could have done that. After all, he was my brother.

And it was then that I dared to hope that the distance I created for the sake of being different allowed him to entertain the thought, even if in jest and in passing, that I was not a child of our house, that I was of different blood. He should always be away from me, to nurture that thought. And though the idea pricked my heart like the thorn of a hedge, I came to realize that I had wasted my days in my obsession.

I followed my brother with my eyes every which way he went. He never drove away a frightening dog, or defended me when my parents were scolding me, or saved me from drowning in a river. But all the same, I had to admit to myself one day that the affection I held for him had turned to love. And it made me hate him even more. Because how could I hold this irrational love for him, of all people? But no matter how much I denied it, there was nothing to be done about it. And I found myself looking forward to the little episodes where he would call for me as I played alone. To the child that I was, maybe the scorn was nothing more than an echo of my loneliness.

How many times did I try to summon the will to apologize to my brother? I had looked down on him for so long, but I couldn't let an apology form whole. He let me experience something better, but the child who threw away what she thought was merely dross found that she couldn't muster the simple words of thanks.

Sometimes, I wonder what my brother has done to me. He hasn't attempted his foolish sermonizing, and if he had tried, he would have found

me well prepared. It seemed almost a change of heart lacking a reason, a love without a true beginning. But no. There *must* be a reason. I've only lost it, forgotten the most important thing. And I have to remember it, so I can start believing in myself again, and believe that this love is certain and true. And when that happens, maybe I can finally say that I am sorry for the first time in my life, even if it may well and truly be a clumsy apology.

"Wake up, Azaka. You'll catch a cold out here."

I know that voice. It is a voice more a man's than a woman's, and when I hear it, I slowly open my eyes. Someone has a hand on my back, helping me up while staring into my face. The hand holding me up is solid and almost cold. My vision is still hazy, but I can more or less see that I fell asleep on some corridor, and someone is trying to wake me up.

"Miki—" I find myself whispering a name, but I quickly stop myself when I see the clear black hair of the one I'm facing. Me and Shiki Ryōgi both notice the name I was about to say, and stare at each other more than either of us found comfortable.

Until Shiki suddenly slips her hand away from my back. Then with a loud thud, my upper body slams hard on the on the wooden floor, leading to a sudden white flash of pain.

"What the hell was that for, you ass?!" I protest before proceeding to stand up in as intimidating a matter as I can muster.

Shiki only glances at me with lazy eyes. "Well that should wake you up."

"Yes, awake enough to forget whatever important thing it was I was dreaming, you clumsy barbarian!" I shout. It takes all my force of will just to stop myself from hitting her.

"So you got hit by them again, I guess." When she says this, I try to remember.

I was talking to Misaya Ōji, and I was sure I captured one of the fairies while it was happening. She cast some kind of illusion on it. I was surprised. She rushed at me, made me sleep. And the next thing I knew, here's Shiki.

"Huh, that's strange. They attacked me for sure, but they took nothing from my mind. I remember everything that happened."

"So you know who our fairy mage is? You've got a name and a face?" Shiki asks. I nod. Unfortunately, it wasn't someone we had ever expected, nor someone I cared to accuse carelessly. I glance at my wristwatch, and

I realize that it hasn't been more than a few minutes since I fell asleep. Maybe she was planning on doing something to me, but she noticed Shiki was coming and made a break for it before she could pull anything off. I suppose this time, Shiki really did save me.

"*Thanks, Shiki,*" I murmur under my breath, making positively sure she couldn't have the pleasure of hearing it. "Yes, I know who our culprit is. It's Misaya Ōji."

"That tall girl we saw for a while yesterday?"

"That's the one. Little time has passed between our conversation and now, so I'm thinking she escaped to hide from you."

Shiki nods in acknowledgement, putting a hand on her chin as she thinks. From her furrowed brow, I can see she's thinking that something doesn't quite fit.

"What's wrong, Shiki? Having a spot of indigestion?"

"Wasn't she one of those that had a bout of forgetfulness too?" She's right, but whatever turn of events that might imply is a secondary concern for now. Shiki seems to arrive at a conclusion close to mine. "Whatever, we can ask her what's up when we see her. Anyway, you got a call from Mikiya. He asked if we could look into some student's records, one Kaori Tachibana or somesuch."

"What?" I say in genuine surprise. That was a name I didn't expect to hear out of her or Mikiya. I never wanted him involved in this business. Back in summer, he got caught up in this stupid ghost incident that left him asleep for three weeks. Fortunately, since Mikiya lives alone, our parents never knew, and Miss Tōko took care of him while he was in his short coma. Thank God for her, because if she wasn't there, he would've died in three days or less. Ever since then, I've never wanted him involved in what Shiki and Miss Tōko are doing for a living. But how does he know about the whole mess about the fire, and what name to look up? I'm fairly certain I said all of one sentence about the fire to him last November, but surely that wasn't enough to spark his interest. Miss Tōko promised she'd keep it a secret, too. Then how did he call with such good timing, and with information to work on? Who did he talk wi—

"Oh, why didn't I think of it before? It's always you, isn't it Shiki? You told him where we were going before we left, and that made him curious! And now he's probably pried the entire thing out of Miss Tōko." I say, anger boiling under my voice.

"What?" she raises her voice in protest. "He was worried I wasn't telling him where I was going, and he wanted to know! You're fault for not being there to take the call this afternoon and make him back down."

I sigh. I hate to admit it, but she's right about the call. I could have scolded him then and there and that would have been the end of it. Shiki shifts gears, ignoring my complaint.

"Anyway, that's done and we can't do anything about it. Mikiya said something about looking at the girl's PE attendance record and such. What do you think? Is it gonna turn up anything?"

"PE attendance record?"

What could that possibly tell us? Some kind of code, or some—

Then in a flash of recollection, I remember what Misaya Ōji said. Kaori Tachibana didn't die because she couldn't escape from the fire. She killed herself. But there was one important factor that I neglected to ask Misaya Ōji, and that would be Kaori Tachibana's

“—reason for killing herself.” I mutter, leaving Shiki to raise an eyebrow. She and her questions can wait. I break into a run. Shiki, mystified, doesn't seem inclined to follow me, which is all the same to me just now. I need to make this quick. I run out of the ruined dormitory, hurrying back into the path that goes straight through the forest and leads into the main school building.

I know exactly where I'm going. The infirmary wing will likely have records on the students, and my position as class president and my dispensation from the Mother Superior might just be enough to get one of those records out.

It only takes a little buttering up for the school nurse and administrator to cough up the documents I need, and within a few minutes, they allow me to peruse Kaori Tachibana's health and PE records, as well as her related infirmary logs.

Second term started from September up to winter break, and the PE for class D at that time consisted entirely of field trips or other out-of-school activities, with the homeroom instructor supervising. Kaori Tachibana's October attendance record is replete with spots of absences, and a week before the fire in the old dormitory started, she didn't attend PE class at all. Just to make sure, I ask the school nurse, and as I expected, she did indeed have a check-up in that period. The cards are starting to turn face up, but the looming presence of our enemy can't be avoided as long as we're here.

14

Afternoon passed and the sun soon fell, far too early for what I'm usually used to. Students are already starting to return to their dormitories and rooms, as the daily Reien curfew of 6:00pm draws near. Having just eaten dinner in the dining hall, we make like some of the students and go back to Azaka's room.

Outside the window of her room, the sky is a blanket of star-filled night, and darkness envelops the entirety of the campus, pockets of light from windows and pathway lamps lighting up certain portions of it here and there. Nothing breaks the desolate silence except for the blow of the wind, and the rustle of trees swaying from its brush. If it weren't for the whole boarding school system thing, this might have actually been a pretty nice place to go to school in. The high school I (sort of) go to in the middle of Tōkyō is infernally noisy at most times of the day.

I enter the room ahead of Azaka, and sit myself down immediately on the inviting top bunk. Azaka makes sure to lock the door, and with a sway of her hair, she turns to face me with a troubled look on her face.

"Shiki, you're hiding something." Now she has an index finger pointed squarely at me.

"I don't know what you're talking about. And let's be honest here, aren't you not telling me something too?"

"I'm talking about a physical object, you dunce. Just stop fussing about it and hand over the knife you stole back in the dining hall," Azaka says with a frustrated but not entirely non-belligerent voice.

Well, that's a genuine surprise. I actually *am* carrying a bread knife, stolen straight from the dining hall and hidden right in my sleeve. Either that knife is too big or I've been slipping in my weapon hiding skills if even someone like Azaka noticed it. Well, I *have* been practicing too much with the sword I got last November, so maybe that's why.

"Oh c'mon, it hardly carries an edge," I protest. It doesn't seem to matter to Azaka, though, who closes to the foot of the bed.

"No. I don't care. That's final. Anything you hold turns into a precision death weapon anyway. I won't have any accidental deaths in Reien on my watch."

"You're doing a pretty piss poor job of it considering there's already been a murder in here."

"There is a difference between an accident and a murder, you know. Enough. Just hand over the knife. I don't know how many times I have to

repeat our objective here before it gets through your thick head.”

“You’re a bigger idiot than I thought if you still think we’re getting away from here without a fight.” I show Azaka no intention to give up the knife, and she takes it as her cue to start making her way up to my bunk.

I was serious about what I said to her. I didn’t steal the knife just for kicks. I told Azaka about me taking out one of the fairies, but I didn’t tell her that I got pricked by it too. I don’t know if that was enough for Misaya Ōji to have access to some of my memories, but I have no intention of letting it happen twice...and besides, the design on the knife is pretty good and elaborate, even for the school. If I could take it out of here, it would sit pretty beside the other knives.

Azaka stops at the top of the ladder to my bunk. “You’re really not going to hand it over, Shiki?”

“Have I ever told you how much of a persistent bull you are? Not your most attractive trait. It’s why Mikiya keeps breaking his promises to meet up with you and stuff. Like this New Year’s.”

Azaka’s face scrunches up in a bundle of annoyance. Somehow, I think I might have hit a nerve.

“Fine. I’ve been waiting to do this for a long time anyway.” Then she jumps on me with as much force as she can. The tackle forces me from my sitting position, and makes me fall down on the bed, Azaka on top of me. She wrestles and pushes me down with surprising force and starts reaching for the knife in my sleeve.

The girl is a regular temper case. Almost like a wounded, cornered bear if you threaten her enough to get mad. Words aren’t nearly enough to make her back down from what she wants, so reluctantly, I take the knife out of my sleeve and hand it to her only to finish our ridiculous episode on top of the bed. As soon she gets the knife, she scrambles down from the top bunk and walks toward her desk, and I remain lying on top of the bed.

“Fucking retard strength. You put a bruise in my arm, you know that? What the hell do they feed you here, steroids?”

“Just a regular diet of bread and vegetables, thank you,” she says, her tone mocking. As she hides the knife inside her desk and checks again to make sure the door is locked, I pull myself up, returning to my previous sitting position and looking at Azaka’s back. It probably would have been fine if I’d ended it then and there, but I had to blurt out again.

“I didn’t expect you to be that strong. Should be enough to push Mikiya down on the bed when you finally do it.” In an instant, Azaka’s face turns red. Well, I don’t actually know since she has her back turned to me, but her red ears aren’t painting a flattering picture.

"Wh, wh, wha—" she stammers, swallowing her words. She turns around to look at me. I knew her face was red. "What the heck did you just say?"

"Nothing. Nothing important to me at least." She doesn't rise to the bait. We stare at each other for a time, me and Azaka's blushing red face. When it seems like we've heard the clock's second hand tick for what must be the hundredth time, Azaka exhales a disappointed sigh and asks.

"So you know?" She seems to hold her breath for the answer.

"It wasn't me that noticed it first, I can tell you that. No need to worry though. Mikiya doesn't know a thing."

With great relief, Azaka lets go of her breath. It's true what I said. I didn't notice it first. It was **Shiki** that saw through Azaka the first time they met. And through him, *Shiki* came to know it as well. If he hadn't been there, I don't think even I would have known about it. She's so guarded around Mikiya, and if he's not around he hardly even talks about him or even so much as steers the conversation in a direction remotely close to her brother, except to talk about how bad an influence I am, and so forth.

Refreshing herself and regaining her usual composure, she looks back at me.

"Aren't you mad at me, Shiki?" I don't really get why I should be, but I'm not, and so shake my head. It only succeeds in making her look more confused.

Wait, are we still talking about Mikiya? But he's not my—
—he's not my what?

I try to put the thing out of my mind, by just asking Azaka the first question that comes to mind. "You're siblings, right? Why're you into that sort of thing?" Unfortunately, it turns out to be the most landmine filled question I could spontaneously come up with.

She doesn't lose her cool, but she does allow her eyes to wander around the room as she thinks. "It's because...I like being special. Or more accurately, I like things that are denied me, things that flirt with the taboo. Hence, Mikiya. He just doesn't...he just can't return what I feel, and maybe I'm happy being that way. I'm lucky, aren't I? I'll always be near the person I like."

Inside myself, I'm laughing. Not at her, but my unexpected but seemingly accurate observation that all the weirdos always seem to have a thing for Mikiya.

"You're sick."

"You're one to talk!"

The abruptness of both our replies does not escape the notice of either of us, and for a few seconds, we are silent. But then she smiles, and I smile

as well. And in a wordless agreement, we decide to leave it at that and go to sleep.

Azaka clearly has something to do tomorrow relating to the investigation, since she seems to fall asleep only a minute after hitting the sack. My nocturnal habits are completely at odds with this school's curfew though, so it's much harder for me to just fall asleep when I feel like it. I stay awake for a long time, hearing the second hand on Azaka's wall clock tick two hours away as I do nothing save for staring at the scenery outside the window opposite the bed. Now even the few precious lights that glowed faintly in the campus have all been snuffed out. Beyond the quad, there is only the deep darkness of Reien's forest, where the light of the moon can't seem to pierce through the canopy of foliage, whose earlier stirrings have now given way to the eerily thick and unbreakable silence.

As quietly as I can make it, I reach inside my left sleeve. What Azaka doesn't know is that I stole two knives from the dining hall. I draw it from my sleeve and take it out, holding it up above my head such that what little light from outside can strike off it. I was planning on using this one here, and the one Azaka got as a display item when I got home. I wish I wouldn't have to sully this blade here, but I realize now that it's a fool's hope.

"Everyone's so busy tonight," I whisper to myself when I return to looking at the forest outside, only to see numerous faint but wandering lights flitting around in the darkness of Reien like fireflies. There must be ten or twenty of them at least. Yesterday night I saw something similar, but only one or two, and I doubted they were anything except a figment of my imagination. Now there can be no doubt that they're the fairies, and their activity tonight implies something suspicious. Must be because of what happened to Azaka this afternoon. Now, the mage who's controlling all these fairies is forced to speed up her plans.

"You're gonna get a test drive soon enough," I murmur as the blade glints in my hand, letting it catch the dull moonlight from the window. This will be the last night I spend in Reien, I'm sure. Whatever has to happen, it's clear that it has to happen tomorrow.

Records in Oblivion - V

"I don't know what is so good about this arrangement," I say.

"There is still a way. There is always a way to mend that which is broken," the man answers.

"But can I still be restored?" I ask.

"I can remake things. Make them whole again. The sin is not yours, and such pure things need not touch that which is unclean. Remain as you are, and all will be well," he answers.

"But am I pure? Once, perhaps. But now, I am not so sure."

"Though you push back the growing darkness in you with your own hands, those hands are still clear, still contain no taint." He nods, and laughs a sweet laugh. "And they must remain as such. Filth like that are a cancer on this world, and must remove themselves or be excised. It is a mercy to do so, for such impurities travel with the soul, to one's line, passed on in a dynasty of endlessly repeated curses. And so as not to sully you, another must be used."

But what will come of it? I cannot answer, and I do not voice the impudent question to the man.

"Eternity is relentless, and this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats like a record," he says.

"I have forgotten nothing, least of all that," I reply.

"The oblivion are thoughts missing in your consciousness, wandering in the vast wastes of the oneiros. Not forgotten, not lost," he says flatly.

What, then, explains the gaps in my memory? "I do not understand. What of the part of me that has been lost?"

"The stirrings and thoughts that orient around your brother," answers the man. "Should you wish it, I shall play back that echo of nothingness."

It was an easy thing to say yes.

January 6, Wednesday.

In the past few days, the weather has taken on a predictable pattern, with gray cloudy mornings and clear nights. This morning proves to be no different, and it seems resolute to pursue this pattern for a while.

The first thing I see when I wake up is the clock. "Seven...thirty," I whisper groggily. I can't believe I overslept for an hour. I immediately climb out of bed and whip myself up into a whirlwind of multi-tasking, taking off my pajamas, slipping into my uniform, fixing my hair, and finally attempting to wake up Shiki, still asleep on the top bunk.

I try and try to call her name but it is fruitless; she doesn't budge an inch. It's her fault for sleeping so late after me; and yet despite the fact that she slept at such an ungodly hour she somehow never found the time to slip out of the uniform robes and into some sleeping attire. Still, I don't think it matters to her really, since she never seems to complain about whether it's warm or cool. She grinds her teeth for a few seconds under the blanket that covers her entirely. How annoying. Otherwise, she sleeps as still as a statue, and so I write waking Shiki up as a lost cause and give up.

Our objective to observe hasn't changed. The incident with Misaya Ōji was an unnecessary encounter, and though we now know who the culprit is, there's no need for me and Shiki to go around trying to eliminate or capture her. Besides, I don't think Misaya Ōji is still at a dormitory at this point. When I tried to check up on where she was yesterday, just before night fell, the answer I got was that she had filed a formal report to leave the school for winter break that morning. In other words, as far as the school was concerned, she wasn't on Reien grounds anymore (though obviously, at least until our encounter, that was false). If she's smart, she'll follow through on that report and leave, and she won't try to come into contact with me or Shiki ever again.

Still, she was driven to accomplish something here, and something tells me that despite my conciliatory attitude toward her, and the last chance to withdraw that she gave me, she'll try again. It's hard to imagine her showing up herself and attacking us sometime today, but they do say that third time's the charm. Just in case, I grab my magical tool of choice: a glove made out of salamander skin, used to channel my Art. I tuck it in my pocket securely and head out of the room.

Outside in the corridor, the temperature is practically freezing, and I find that I have to keep moving if I want my body to stay warm. I pay a visit to some of the rooms of the class D students, but most of them are already out of their rooms. The few individuals I do meet aren't of any help. Most of them seem out of it, never meeting your eyes, and like in some kind of lethargy. I would have believed that they were all taking some kind of strong narcotic if not for their sudden and ready refusal to talk to me. Their eyes suddenly take on a glint of mixed fear and disdain. Had Shiki been with me and been able to keep their boiling hostility in check, it might not

have been so bad. But I don't think I would have been able to talk to them like that alone, so that seems like a lost cause as well. I give up trying to talk to them for now.

I relocate from the dormitories to the main school building, asking some of the instructors questions, but while they were kind enough to entertain me, they were all similarly unhelpful. Feeling like I've wasted my time, I head back to the dormitory to my room to regroup and rethink all the information I already have.

I go in to find Shiki still sleeping persistently. Her eyes twitch for a moment, and I hope for a second that she's already waking up. But after a few more moments of waiting, I realize she's just in REM sleep. Disappointed, I sit down on the chair in front of my desk and think.

The information I got from perusing Kaori Tachibana's infirmary documents yesterday was enlightening. The fact that class D's PE consisted mostly of field trips wasn't so important. It's a common enough event in Reien, and even the school nurse said as much. The useful portion came when I compared the dates of her physical examinations and the class field trips.

I don't know how it goes in other schools, but seeing as its important medical knowledge in all of Reien's students, the school keeps a record of each student's menstrual cycles. What I found out was that she was able to go on the class field trip on the time when she's usually excused from doing so because of her period, and when I asked the school nurse, she said that she was certain that Kaori Tachibana had reported a late period. She also assured me that it was merely stress that was responsible, but that's only because she doesn't know the circumstances surrounding the girl.

Her period being late might only be one part of the story, a conclusion all too easily reached when she never had the opportunity to have another one seeing as she died the next month. She might never have had a period at all in the month of October. The most obvious reason might also be the answer: pregnancy.

At first, the period doesn't come, but then the quickening in her stomach would have felt more real each passing day. From September to November, she must have driven herself into a corner, mentally speaking. After all, in Reien Girl's Academy, getting pregnant seems to be considered a sin quite above murder. It means that at one point, you willingly exited the school without permission, went out into town, and for one reason or another, had sex with someone; a situation that would surely make the Mother Superior or any of the sisters faint were it told to them. And of course, with their very strict and conservative Catholic upbringing, I'm fairly sure Kaori

Tachibana's parents would have never forgiven her.

There was truly no way out for her. An abortion would require her to go to a hospital, but the doctors would definitely report it to both the school and her parents. I'm willing to bet she didn't know any unlicensed or quack doctors, and would be very hesitant to submit herself to their treatment. And so she spent those few weeks living like a criminal on death row, scared everyday of her stomach growing large enough to be noticeable.

If I believe what Misaya Ōji had to say about Tachibana, though, I find it hard to believe that such a girl who so intensely follows the traditional Catholic way would be in that kind of relationship.

"Rape then? Hayama Hideo, for a certainty," I whisper to myself. Who else could it be? And it fits the circumstances. Did he rape Kaori Tachibana, and upon learning she was pregnant, kill her by setting fire to the dormitory building, seeking to simultaneously destroying the evidence and make it look like an accident? It's a sketchy thought, but it seems to fit the man.

There's still another thing to consider. The nurse said that Kaori Tachibana was very stressed out, and I don't think it's an assessment entirely without meaning. I've observed before that class D seemed to be hiding something, and my talk with Fumio Konno confirmed as much.

"She was being harassed," I venture. That's entirely possible. After all, she was constantly the highest scorer in the class, and is the only member of the class that got promoted from Reien's junior high instead of transferring in. That's the kind of natural environment that bullying is born from. But what about the class president? Fumio Konno didn't seem like the sort of girl to permit that sort of business to occur and turn a blind eye to it. If even she had to ignore Tachibana's plight, there must have been some truly compelling reason to do so.

"Like the class knowing about the pregnancy." That would have been enough of a reason. Enough for me to envision Fumio Konno deciding to just have nothing to do with it. And Tachibana, the poor girl, couldn't even talk to the nuns who were supposed to support her. Enough of a reason for Tachibana Kaori to commit suicide in that fire. And class D, feeling that they have some dark secret to protect, keep their reticent behavior for the entire school.

"Something's missing," I whisper, but I can't seem to think *what* exactly. It's easy to sit here and couple fragmented, limited information with personal insight, but turning that into a viable and supported conclusion is quite another task entirely. That's the kind of thing Mikiya thrives in. At least he knows how to gather information, and how to get people to talk, like a police detective. Compared to him, I'm just the crazy wannabe PI that

keeps throwing out ideas with only a modicum of factual basis.

I always really hated those characters in detective fiction that always had the right guess, with their only excuse being that “it’s possible,” as if they were somehow above the normal person, above even the police detectives that the books always portrayed as weak and ineffectual, when in reality, the converse is true. I know how police detectives work. My cousin Daisuke is one, and I’ve had more than an earful from him. The police detective’s job is to strain an entire desert for the single grain of a gem, to give form and shape to a past that he wasn’t privy to, and in real life, this sometimes takes months, even years of grueling work. The detectives of fiction, at least to my understanding, abandon the process, miss the desert and the clues it gives, in favor of a short-sighted conclusion. Between the real detectives, the average men and women in police departments all over the world, who take all the clues they can get and try to speak for those who died, and the fictional detectives who take the flash of inspiration they get and bandy it as truth; the latter is more trapped by his own folly, and if he were real, he would be always alone in his suppositions beyond normal ken.

It’s quite ironic then, that I find myself in that very same position now. I have neither the time of months to work a case like cousin Daisuke, nor the same resources available to him. So it is with a great regret that I realize that I’ve donned the role of that which I hate. I sigh, realizing I’m at my wits’ end, and lean back on my chair heavily before looking at the wall clock. It’s already near noontime, and the sky outside the window still persists in being cloudy. If anything, they’ve only darkened, and will almost certainly mean rain later. As I think this, a knock comes from the door, and then a voice.

“Miss Kokutō, are you there?” It’s one of the sisters.

“Yes, I am present. Is there something the matter?” I say as I open the door.

“There is a phone call for you. Your brother.” As soon as I hear this, I excuse myself and walk with as much haste as I dare toward the lobby. The lobby is deserted when I arrive, which I am thankful for when I pick up the receiver.

“Hello?” I say, maybe a bit too eagerly.

“Hello, Shiki?”

It’s a good thing I can’t see the frown on my face. “Unfortunately, Shiki is still asleep. Mmm, so you’d call all the way to Reien just to talk to your girlfriend, Mikiya?” I say with a cold voice. On the other end of the line, Mikiya clears his throat.

"I didn't say that. I called to ask about how things are going over there."

"You shouldn't worry. After all, I did say some time ago how you shouldn't be involved in these *things*." I raise my voice only slightly, as if it were an interrogative.

"Ah, here we go," he says, clearly expecting the subject. "It's not as if I wanted to be involved. But you expect me to ignore the entire thing when you and Shiki are neck deep in it?"

I wanted to give him a definite yes straight out, but that would have been too blunt, and so I hold off on it.

"Fine, fine. So, what is the purpose of this call? Are you planning to talk to Shiki or me?"

"Well, Shiki was the one that asked me, but I think it'd be better if I told you. I've found some stuff on Hideo Hayama and Satsuki Kurogiri. Wanna hear it?"

Huh. Shiki never told me about that. I'd chide her for not consulting me first if it wasn't a pretty good move. Still...

"Oh, *Shiki* told you to do it, did she? Even though she promised that she wouldn't make you do anything dangerous? I knew she hasn't learned. It's clear that she doesn't care about your well-being if she told you to perform such a dangerous task. Perhaps you should finally consider breaking up with her." Even I'm surprised by what I end up saying, but predictably, it doesn't faze Mikiya one bit. In fact, he even laughs.

"Nah, Azaka, she just has a very...unique way of showing how worried she is." His voice on the other end sounds so pleased, and I wonder what it is that has him so happy. "Anyway, I'm going to bring up the file on the two Shiki asked about."

I can hear the faint noise of pages being flipped on the other end. A thick file, from the sound of it, and if I know Mikiya, very well arranged to boot. While he's searching through it, I ask him a question.

"Where are you right now, Mikiya?"

"Miss Tōko's office. She's out right now though. Meeting with cousin Daisuke. I'm stuck on watch duty over here," he says morosely.

"Wait a minute, you mean *our* cousin Daisuke?!"

"Keep your voice down on the phone, will you? And yes, yes, it's him."

Daisuke Akimi is my father's little brother, technically our uncle. Since he's the youngest of his siblings, he's very near our age, and we call him cousin as a joke. He's very close to Mikiya, enough so that someone watching them that doesn't know better would almost call them brothers.

"Apparently he's an acquaintance of Miss Tōko's," Mikiya explains. "When we met in New Year and I told him about where I work, he shouted

'but that's Tōko Aozaki, ain't it!' and that was that. I think he's out on a date with Miss Tōko right now. She was like 'how could I refuse an offer from Kokutō's cousin,' and then left me in charge of the place."

This must be wrong on some level. Even Mikiya sounds displeased by it. So he was Miss Tōko's contact inside the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department the entire time. If I think about it, it isn't really surprising for him. He's a member of the Criminal Investigation Section's first squad, plainclothesmen that have had a lot of experience on foot, on patrol and in investigation, and so have some of the best street-level contacts in the entire CIS. And even within this group, cousin Daisuke is known as quite talented and driven, but also arrogant and having a disdain for authority. Exactly the kind of person that Miss Tōko would run into, in other words.

"Anyway, he's not the reason I called," Mikiya continues. "Before I get back to Hideo Hayama, I gotta ask, have you ever talked to the guy?"

I hear the worry in his voice, and I realize immediately what he's really asking. "No. No, I haven't. I know what kind of person Hideo Hayama is, for the most part."

He sighs, relieved. With slight hesitation, he begins. "Alright, here goes. I've been working the commercial district and asking some of the people in the vice squad through cousin Daisuke, and what I've heard isn't pretty. The truth is that Hideo Hayama was pimping out his students, with clients paying for their company. He'd take the students out, probably on the pretense of a trip, and make them do it."

I catch myself inhaling sharply. I was prepared for the worst, but I honestly didn't think it would be anywhere near that. Either Mikiya didn't hear me, or he ignored me. Either way, he carries on with the report.

"I'm not clear on the details, but you know how much students go in the prostitution arena. And they're Reien students too, which makes them rare, and the guy knew that too. He was good. Charged high, but not high enough to make people stingy. He'd take them out every two times a week, and judging from the numbers, only a few in the class didn't go regularly. I don't know if he was bold or reckless, but he ran a pretty tight ship. Downtown, he was a popular name once, on account of his being flashy and acting like a big spender. He took it further and further every day, and ended up owing something big to a bar, which in turn was owned by some yakuza group. Of course, they wanted to collect. With little options, he turned to Reien, where his estranged brother was the chairman of the board, and I assume he pleaded with him to give him a teaching job there. I'm sure he made his excuses, forged his licenses, and eventually got in. Whether he was planning on starting a student prostitution ring right from

the start, or he got the idea later, I don't truly know, but the fact is that he turned it into his thing pretty fast. And since Reien's students are largely daughters of rich or influential families, they fetch a pretty price on the street. I heard at first that it was only one student, but the yakuza put the pressure on him, and soon enough he was bringing all of them out. That's most of the important things, I guess."

Then Mikiya tells me the names of the students involved, the dates when they went out, and even the rough estimates of the time they went back. He even got some details on the yakuza organization the entire operation was connected to, and I know how hard that can be to ferret out.

"It's a shame that most of this is unreliable testimony and can't be used as proof. Take from that what you will," he says disappointedly. He's correct in his assessment. The police certainly can't move on something as little as this, and the vice squad people he contacted are probably building their own case to take the entire thing down all at once. Though Kaori Tachibana's pregnancy made the entire thing big enough such that even Reien couldn't possibly have the power to make it disappear, the connection was weak, and the parents of the students were certainly powerful enough (some of them probably financially involved and invested enough in the yakuza) that they would see the investigation flounder and die a slow death if they ever got wind of it.

"I'm sorry about all this, Azaka," he says gloomily.

Though the truth is still leaving me in quite a shock, I still find the awareness to give him a nervous "No problem." But the truth only left us a truckload of problems. The secret that class D was protecting wasn't Kaori Tachibana's suicide, but this prostitution ring. Hideo Hayama couldn't have kept it a secret alone. Even though he may have forced some of the students to go, the ones that went purely for pleasure and weren't big fans of Reien's abstinence policy must surely have used their influence to silence the entire class and keep the secret. For them, the temptation to seek something outside the regulation of the school was too much, and Hideo Hayama was their only key to that.

But the confluence of factors that contribute to the entire problem doesn't end with the people. To an extent, the severity of the institution can be partly to blame as well. It has its tall, ornate walls, the better to divorce it from anything that doesn't belong in it already. The wind rarely sings inside, and not a sound from beyond the walls can be heard. Time proceeds at a languid, leisurely pace. All of it manufactured to provide some kind of proof against the perceived threat of defilement from what lies outside. But like any airtight room, eventually the air gets stale, becom-

ing gross and fetid. The people here all think it's some kind of secret world, warded against the other, harsher world. But it's nothing more than a prison from the real.

"So what led you to ask about Kaori Tachibana, Mikiya? You asked for her grades and everything." I ask the last mystery I still have left for him.

"The girl in the November fire, right? Remember back then we were in Miss Tōko's office, and you told me about the fire in your dormitory for a while? Well, after work got a little lighter in December, I looked it up whenever I had free time. Started asking some authorities around. Eventually, cousin Daisuke hooked me up with the autopsy report for the deceased girl, our Kaori Tachibana. Apparently the cause of death is rather more ambiguous than what we may expect. The medical examiner apparently found some evidence that she may have died from heroin overdose, and she may have already been dead before the fire. But the final word on it is that they couldn't determine either way. The final weird note on her death is that there's a good chance she might have been pregnant, though the state of the body left it officially unconfirmed.

"They're pretty sure, though, that no one led her to the fire to kill her. She was deep enough inside the building that anyone that might have taken her there wouldn't have been able to get out. It's a sad case for her. First the rape, then the pregnancy. Not the kind of thing you thrust on a sixteen year old girl, obviously; she probably couldn't handle it all. Now this next one is just a guess but...I'm thinking when the fire started and everyone was rushing to get out of the dormitory, she's the only one that stayed in her room. She might have actually wanted to die."

"Right," I answer more evocatively than I should have. I can't help myself. Kaori Tachibana's case was all finally starting to take shape. "She has a motive for suicide established, I suppose. I wonder why she didn't just have the baby aborted? If she had said it to Hayama, he might have considered it."

"Wouldn't really know," he answers with a curious voice. "Too young, maybe? Complications?"

"Maybe," I say lazily, thinking of something else. Her pregnancy was the reason Kaori Tachibana was harassed by class D, but not entirely out of the reason that it embarrassed the class. No. As long as she didn't have an abortion, she threatened to spill the little secret that Hideo Hayama and the class had kept in the darkness. Worse, she didn't even have to open her mouth for it to happen. The class probably didn't even wait on the word from Hideo before they started ostracizing Kaori. No physical harm, though. That would have garnered the attention of the sisters sooner

or later, which was the last thing they wanted. So for three months, she carried her perceived disgrace and endured the scorn of her class, a mental brand of torture. And then suicide, after the burden proved too great.

"What an incompetent thing to do. If she was so ready to die, then she would have found the pregnancy a much easier ordeal. That hopeless little girl..." I find myself losing my pace for a moment with an unwanted hiccup before recovering. "Throwing out everything she's worked for to just die. She's been here since she was a child, and she lost to someone like Hayama. How—" I choke on my last words, as I finally realize what I'm blurting out. I close my eyes, willing the tears not to come out. I put a hand on my forehead, thankful that there is no one else in the lobby to see me.

"Losing? Azaka, what are you talking about? This wasn't some game, not some kind of competition with winners or losers. I swear..." he sighs, and my hand moves to my hair before I lean back on the wall. "And she may have committed suicide, but it's probably not for the kind of reason you're thinking of, not for her kind of upbringing." Mikiya's voice is tinged with some regret, though I don't know truly if it's directed at me or at the deceased Kaori.

I gulp and think of my words carefully before asking. "Why do you say that? Don't you think she committed suicide because her classmates were being so hard on her? She probably only saw the escape of death as the only recourse left to desperate individuals such as her. That's the only meaning in her actions, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't expect you to understand," he says. Something resonates in that statement. It's almost the same thing that Misaya Ōji said to me only yesterday.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"See, Kaori Tachibana's been in Reien since she was a kid, right? She's a very traditional, very conservative Catholic. In the Catholic faith, suicide is taken very seriously. It's an old crime to them that not only insults the life you've been given, but also devalues the life you were supposed to live to earn salvation. It's on the same footing as murder to them. For someone that identifies so much with the Catholic faith, Kaori Tachibana had a reason for suicide that, for her, probably goes beyond the rational."

What Mikiya says surprises me, eliciting a small gasp. I'd almost forgotten about Kaori's religion. Unlike the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Buddhism, Christianity promised salvation in the afterlife. I knew that, of course, but for someone like me who only attended the masses and morning services as a student and not a believer, the fact held little more weight to it than any other English word. But to someone like Kaori, who's zeal and

ardor for the Catholic faith had defined her since childhood, they were all she had in this school. The prospect of suicide to her must have been more fearful than the fact of death could ever have been.

"And that reason being?" I ask. The answer to questions such as these does not come easily to me at all. Mikiya is fond of saying that my drive for competitiveness has burned out at least some of my empathy. Sometimes, he smiles, saying it's a joke. At times, like in my outburst earlier, I think I often prove him true.

"Atonement, maybe. She took in her sins, and the sins of her classmates, and sacrificed herself to erase the sins of class D, so that she alone falls into the Christian hell. She tried to redeem everyone."

I say nothing, letting silence settle in for a moment.

I cannot expect you to understand what that truly implies. That was what Misaya Ōji said. Her anger was real. She had understood Kaori better than anyone else, and because of that, she cannot find it in herself to forgive class D, little changed from the incident.

Killing them is no guarantee that they will be sent to the pits of hell where they rightfully belong. She was right. In Misaya Ōji's mind at least, killing them wouldn't mean that they get sent to hell. It wouldn't be the proper punishment for the people that had made Kaori Tachibana fall. That's why she hounds them, unseen, all this time. There is no forgiveness left for them. Only the proposition of a death so horrid that all would have to see it.

I 5

The rain is heavy, and the drops that slip through the thick cover of bamboo leaves land on my skin. A thousand frigid daggers burying into me. The first time I have ever really felt the cold. Some of the drops fall onto something metallic, and I notice that it is the blade of a knife that I hold in my hand. Cold rain to match equally cold steel. My cold, expressionless eyes are fixed on someone below me, though I do not know who—

I wake up from a dream, a sensation of familiarity echoing inside my mind, but it is already retreating into a forgotten memory. Before I can process it further though, I open my eyes just a little bit only to catch sight of something small flying nearby. There is no mistaking it: it's one of the fairies. The moment I open my eyes fully, I draw the knife from inside my pocket and throw it as hard as I can toward the fairy in flight. It takes only another instant to hear the dull sound of the knife impacting and clinging to the wall.

Skewered through the knife is one of the fairies, an insect-winged creature just like Azaka's vivid imagination of the things, making a small but high pitched keening sound. I think it's trying to pull the knife out of itself with small hands, but it's no use. With a last small noise, it disappears into the air in a trickle of momentarily bright material, only for that too to wink out of existence.

"Fuck. I shouldn't have killed it. Maybe it could've—"

Maybe it could've what? Made the dream continue? Finally learn the truth about what happened three years ago? Remember the traffic accident that forced me to a coma? What of it then?

"Stop *thinking* about that right now," I tell myself as I quickly climb out of bed, readying myself to receive any more unwanted visitors. Just as I jump from the top bunk to the floor, I hear the distinct sound of the creak of the wood outside the door, and the sound of footsteps hurrying away. Someone's been standing outside the door all this time!

I put the knife back in my pocket and rush to open the door. The corridor stretches both east and west, and when I look east, I see only the shadow of a person running away, the height the only thing distinct about the figure. Misaya Ōji, maybe? Maybe she mistook me for Azaka? Hmph, fat chance of that. I know Azaka still insists on doing exactly as Tōko told her to, but if Misaya Ōji is conducting attacks on us in our room as we sleep, then

there's really no other choice for me.

I pounce on after her, our steps making the hardwood floor groan, the sounds echoing in the corridor's expanse. She's faster than I expected, and I can't close the distance between us. She knows where she's going, too. She ducks out of the corridor, out the exit from the dormitories, and heads toward the direction of the main school building, using the covered path me and Azaka used the other day. The forest surrounds us for a minute or so of the chase, and the distance between us still remains far enough only for me to barely see her. Finally we emerge back into the school grounds. She doesn't head to the school building like I expected though, but to the chapel.

A trap. Nothing else to it. But it would be stupid to turn back now after I've run so far. She's cornered here, and we both know it. I catch my breath for a few seconds, wipe the sweat off my brow, and throw open the door to the chapel.

Despite its size, the door doesn't produce the barest hint of a sound. In the gloomy interior of the deserted chapel, there is only a single individual standing within it all, the shadows of the silhouette long in the afternoon sun. I close the door with as fast as possible, never facing away from the silhouette. The distance between us is a mere ten meters, but the person keeps the silence that wraps over and above the sacred place. The person brings a hand to where the face would be, as if adjusting glasses, and finally I catch a glimpse of the man, staring at me as if I was some kind of statue.

"Oho. What business brings you to the chapel at this hour, Miss Ryōgi?" A fleeting smile plays across his face, a lazy, carefree expression reserved for children. It is the same smile he had worn two days before, but this place seems to give it an air of falsity somehow, and the smile rings hollow. There, in the dim, clouded light of the chapel, Satsuki Kurogiri stands alone.

Records in Oblivion - VI

"Let me bring up the file on Satsuki Kurogiri."

On his end of the line, I can clearly hear Mikiya tossing a thick stack of paper to a desk, and then getting a new one. Regrettable that he looked up so much, but I don't think I'll have any further use for any information he might have gleamed about Satsuki Kurogiri. With Hideo Hayama's acts and the secret of class D now brought to light, I have nothing further to do. Whether Misaya Ōji would do anything or not, the case is Miss Tōko's now.

"No, it's fine, Mikiya. In all probability, me and Shiki will be departing the premises in short order. Just wait for me there in the office."

"That so? Still, I don't think it might be completely useless not to hear this stuff. After all, it might not be completely unrelated."

Something about the tenor of his voice presses the weight of what he's about to say. "What, is Satsuki Kurogiri involved in the prostitution ring as well?"

"Nah, this one's a totally different thing. He's got nothing to do with the class D incident. Azaka, do you know where the guy was born, by any chance?"

The name would probably automatically make you think he was Japanese, but I did hear he studied abroad for a long time. Maybe his parents were Japanese, but he wasn't really born in Japan.

"I couldn't say for sure," I state. "But I have heard tell that he was in Britain for quite some time. Are you saying that that's where his family stayed?"

"Yeah, it seems that he was born in some small town in Wales. He was put up for adoption when he was ten years old, and he was given the name Satsuki Kurogiri by his new parents in place of his old name. Pretty weird that they'd change the name of a kid that old, too."

Not too strange, I should think, if his adoptive parents felt that it would bring them closer to their child. Though this is the first time I've ever heard of something like that, and of a child being placed for adoption at so late an age.

"Anyway, I did a little checking on him," he continues. "Apparently he was considered some kind of wunderkind way back when. Bright, full of talent. But he did something to make his parents hate him and put him up for adoption. It was a while before anyone actually adopted him, but apparently some Japanese national from a far-off city picked him up. Since he studied in schools there, what happened later is easy to find out with the

paper trail, but before he became a kid for adoption, his history is fuzzy.”

This is certainly a very strange story, and one that, on the surface at least, doesn’t seem to fit Mr. Kurogiri. And more than that, the fact that Mikiya could actually find someone who knew about this portion of Mr. Kurogiri’s past is quite a feat in itself. One has to wonder what sort of information network he tapped this time.

“I wonder why his parents would put their child up for adoption, even though he’s some kind of genius,” I muse. “Could it have been money problems?”

“There’s the rub, isn’t it? To be precise, he was only a genius until he was ten years old. After that, he somehow lost it. I couldn’t find out if it was because of some mental damage or something, but what happened was that when he was ten years old, he became unable to remember things. Anything he saw, he couldn’t remember, and for a while he was almost considered mentally retarded. And when that happened, his parents couldn’t put him up for adoption fast enough.”

“He couldn’t...remember?” Something in there rings similar to the rash of memory problems that Reien has been experiencing of late. “But I didn’t get that from him. He seems to remember what he experiences now, and he’s a fairly well-read man.”

“Well, I’d imagine. He wouldn’t have even gotten a teacher’s license otherwise. It was probably some kind of miracle, though. He got his genius back at some point after he was adopted. When he was fourteen, he got into a university program, and eventually earned a doctorate in linguistics by the time he was in his early twenties. It was looking good for him. He chose a career in academia, and was employed in a lot of universities and colleges. There’s something strange about that, though. There would always be a suicide—”

“—in the school, from one of the students, right?” I say, suddenly getting it.

“I know it isn’t such a special thing for kids to commit suicide in schools these days. But there’s the pattern. Every time Satsuki Kurogiri is employed by a school, and then leaves, there’s always some kind of student suicide. Now, far be it from me to establish a causal link, but I’m just telling you what I see. A coincidence like that in ten or twelve different institutions? Can’t be, right?”

His words send my thoughts racing. A professor leaving a trail of grisly suicides in his wake. Could he actually be related to the events unfolding now? But Misaya Ōji said that he was being manipulated like a tool. He lost memories as well, and was led to believe that nothing was truly out of

place in class D. I thought the mastermind of all this was Misaya Ōji. What did this man do? How deep in this was he?

“Anyway, that’s all the stuff I got,” Mikiya concludes. “The rest of the legwork is on you. Don’t overwork yourself now. And try not to get separated from Shiki.” I open my mouth to respond, but he interrupts me before I can begin. “Oh wait, one last thing. I heard something about Satsuki’s name. Apparently the name ‘Satsuki’ is supposed to be some kind of weird translation of the word Mayday. I don’t really know what that is, though.”

But I do. May Day is the first day of May, and also the day of the Beltane festival that celebrates the coming of the summer sun. And Satsuki is the name of the fifth month in the Japanese lunar calendar. In that context, the name Satsuki *does* make sense. May Day or Beltane aren’t exactly widely celebrated holidays in Japan, but I know something of their significance. And if I’m right—

“Mikiya, do you know what happened to Mr. Kurogiri that temporarily removed his mental proficiency?”

“If rumors count, then yeah, but take from them what you will. The rumors about him was that he was taken, or replaced, or something like that. Apparently he disappeared from home for three whole days. When he came back, he’d already changed.”

“Replaced, and then changed. His name is fairly suspicious for this kind of thing. Like Halloween and the summer solstice, May Day is supposed to be a time when the fairies come out to hunt, and when seeing them is common, and that’s exactly when it happened to him. Thank you, Mikiya. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I put the receiver back on the phone quickly, not sparing any more second than I have to for my goodbye. Mikiya was right. This information was relevant.

Miss Tōko’s last words before I left echo back to me now. *Commanding fairies as familiars is a fool’s game. It’s only a matter of time before they are no longer fulfilling your wishes, but turn you into fulfilling theirs. Be wary of these familiars foreign to the mage’s soul, Azaka. They can just as easily turn you into their own chattel.*

Foolishly, in my rush to find the culprit, and find out what class D was truly hiding, I’d missed the basic questions that I still lacked. The reason Kaori Tachibana was driven to suicide in the first place, for example, which Mikiya had handily supplied.

Misaya Ōji had said that the fairies only make away with memories still alive in one’s mind, but never the forgotten records and emanations of such memories. But who drew these records from oblivion and gave them

form through the letters that circulated with the students? And given the new knowledge that Mikiya generously shared, that question now begs another fundamental mystery which I had forgotten.

Who had taught Misaya Ōji how to manipulate her Art?

"Thank you, Mikiya. I'll talk to you soon." Having left Mikiya with just that little bit of pensiveness, the phone immediately cuts off.

"Azaka?" Mikiya tries to ask, but he knows an answer isn't forthcoming. He shakes his head in disappointment as he puts the phone receiver back in its place. He gets the feeling that this is terribly more complicated than he's been led to believe, and he just doesn't know about it. He returns to take a seat behind his desk.

It's January 6, just after midday, and no one else is present in Tōko Aozaki's office save for himself. Tōko herself is out on her own excursion, but Mikiya was supposed to be on leave today anyway, so his being here is not entirely proper. But of course, since his sister, Azaka Kokutō, and his friend, Shiki Ryōgi, are tangled up in some new case, he has to be here and keep watch on the phone. Not for the first time today, he worries at why those two should have tackled a case so early in the year.

He hasn't the vaguest idea what the case is even really about, or any word if it's safe for the both of them. He didn't really ask anyone outright if the two were going on another investigation, but a terribly annoyed Shiki only mouthed it off the day after New Year, seemingly without any regard to any kind of secrecy Azaka had made her swear to. Then that was that. According to her, she was supposed to pose as some kind of prospective new student in Reien, which would be their cover story to investigate the place. It was only a few days after that when Shiki called from Reien and asked him to look up Hideo Hayama and Satsuki Kurogiri.

Mikiya first heard about the dormitory fire in Reien in October last year, and it was from that point that he started developing the curiosity to look into it, but he'd only assembled any coherent set of documents from the thing today, which, combined with his fretting over his sister's safety of course meant that he hadn't really had a wink of sleep.

"Well, I guess as long as she's near Shiki, she's relatively safe," he says to himself as he stretches his arms out above him. So what should he do now, then? Sleep is starting to sound like a really good idea. And just as he

thinks it might not be the right time for him to sleep when Azaka might call back at any moment, he finds his eyelids heavier than he had anticipated and quickly falls into deep slumber.

A dream takes Mikiya back to a moment only a few days ago, after New Year. Shiki had shown him the uniform Azaka had expected her to wear going into Reien. Outraged at how ridiculous she thought it looked on herself, she dragged him along with her to complain to Tōko, who, upon seeing it, only said one thing.

“Splendid.”

Whatever was so splendid about it seemed to escape Mikiya, and obviously Shiki as well. She had made it a point never to show herself to him wearing that again until she left.

“You’ll catch a cold sleeping on that desk, Kokutō.”

“I’m awake!” Mikiya responds reflexively, instantly waking himself and looking around the room at who had just said that. He spots the wall clock first, though, which shows the time at three in the afternoon. As soon as the fact that he had just spent two hours sleeping on his own desk dawns on him, Mikiya suddenly feels much colder. It was his own fault to start sleeping here lacking any sort of heating at the height of winter.

“Miss Tōko?” he says, finally laying his sleepy eyes on the woman walking across the room. “When did you get back?”

Tōko Aozaki, still in her trench coat and with a cigarette pressed between her lips, stops beside Mikiya. “Just now,” she answers. Her long face looks like she’s starved for any kind of entertainment. It looks as if today’s date with cousin Daisuke ended on some note of failure.

“You seem bored, ma’am.” Mikiya smiles, thinking he can get away with a few snide observations with Tōko looking the way she does. But her answer is contrary to what Mikiya is expecting.

“No, not bored really. He was kind of dull, but I wasn’t bored by him or anything.” And that is the only assessment she gives of how the day went before reaching into her coat pocket and bringing out a can of coffee and placing it on top of Mikiya’s desk with a comment. “Little present I got you for watching the office.”

An...economical present, Mikiya thinks, but one that he is nevertheless grateful for thanks to the coldness that took over his body while he slept. He manages a small thank you before he quickly breaks open the can's tab. Tōko suddenly spots the thick stack of documents placed on top of Mikiya's desk and grabs one of them while wearing an even more bored look on her face.

"Oh, those are just some stuff Shiki asked me to look up about some of the faculty in Reien. I don't think you'll find it riveting literature."

"Probably not," responds Tōko with a nod, but still she starts to flip through the pages. For a few seconds, she retains the uninterested look on her face, but stops right at the page with Satsuki Kurogiri's photograph stapled to it.

"Godword." Her voice is a surprised whisper, and after she speaks that word, her mouth remains ajar enough to let the cigarette previously affixed to her mouth to fall to the floor. Her eyes suddenly open like she's seen a ghost. "I can't believe it," she finally mutters. "The spell weaver that the Ordo Magi have run themselves ragged trying to hunt down is posing as a high school instructor, here? This must be some kind of joke for the Master of Babel."

She takes on the ragged smile of any person who knows that she stands to lose as much as she can gain, a smile lacking in scorn but with plenty of the potent mixture of dry caution and calculated risk of the next precipitous choice.

"Satsuki Kurogiri? A mage?" Mikiya asks, incredulous. Tōko gives him a quick glance before going back to reading the document intently. Still wearing her madly unleashed grin, she takes her seat behind her own desk.

"The Mother Superior didn't bring along a photo with her request. Leaving this one to Azaka might have been a mistake. I could have...no. If I'd went, my memories would only have been stolen."

Not understanding what Tōko's halting words mean, Mikiya can only shrug, concluding only that she referred to stolen memories as probably one of her more colorful and obscure metaphors. Still, from what he can gather, this man seems to have been more dangerous than Tōko had originally anticipated, and it inspires more questions from him.

"If this guy is really a mage, then Shiki and Azaka have their necks on the line being so close to him. Miss Tōko, I need to know if he poses any danger to either of them."

"Not likely. If the rumors are true, Godword doesn't plan on harming anyone, at least not intentionally. He is no mage, for one. He hails from no dynasty of magic, nor does his soul bear the lucky spark that animates the

Arts of a few lucky individuals, such as Azaka. But just as Azaka can do no more than control the flames, his one particular gimmick is the command over language. It seems to be an ability outside of what is documented in the Arts of the magi dynasties, but he claimed it when he was but ten years of age.

"My mastery of the arcana of the Runes at twenty years of age is often considered early, but there have been those who reached it earlier. One of those individuals, a man who studied in the Collegium of the African Atlas Mountains, I have not personally met, though all Collegium know his names and titles. The Master of Babel, Godword Mayday. The only weaver of an Art so potent and ancient, it borders on mythic sorcery."

She snickers, as though she was suddenly privy to some cosmic secret. Mikiya knows that she is spinning the words as much for herself as for him, and somehow, that makes it all the more unsettling.

"No one truly knows what Godword's real name is, and even those who knew him in his Collegium are limited. Few ever see him in person. But his face and magic are known to all who claim allegiance to the traditions of the London Ordo Magi. You see, Godword's Art is fairly obvious to derive from his title: he speaks the high speech, the mythic Adamic language. The words still hold power over reality, and they tap a consciousness embedded in every human being, rendering it comprehensible by anyone. There is no word he does not know, no dialect he is not privy to. Though he hears himself as only speaking one single language, anyone who hears him hear it how their paradigm manipulates them to. Even you must know the story of the Tower of Babel, Kokutō."

"Yeah, the same thing that Pieter Brueghel painted, right? A tall, spiral tower almost reaching heaven, where they planned to build a temple on top so that God could talk to them easier. But God saw that as hubris and struck down the tower, and so men could never repeat the same thing, he created the confusion of tongues which scattered people all over the Earth."

"Indeed. The old Babel story from the Bible. Other extant sources point to similar stories, and there is always what they call the 'confusion of tongues.' God made to scatter humanity, but not through the complex physicality of skin or race, but through simple language. After all, the largest difference you notice between Japanese and foreigners isn't the color of the hair or the eyes, but simply the constructions of our grammar and words, correct? It forms a continual barrier of understanding. The reasoning of God goes that because of this barrier, mankind will never again build such a towering edifice. But over time, mankind grew, and prospered, and

globalized, and eventually, the barrier of language became somewhat lax.

“What now for the confusion of tongues? Such a judgment was made in the time when humanity still felt their gods, in the mythic ages. This was a time when our mysteries were not yet mysteries, and the Art was the consensus, and therefore common, and when mighty sorcerers wielded great powers from the occult phases of the moon, and the jealous tides of stars, which made the world overflow with mana. So it was taught to us, at any rate. Godword is a constant reminder of this. Before the confusion of tongues, there was but one, formless, high speech, through which everyone understood all, and when men spoke to the anima mundi and its creatures as surely as they did each other. Then God gave us the debased tongues, stealing from us the promise of wisdom he had once so readily granted. Godword is the only known one able to reproduce this universal language, and work his Art through the high speech. He communicates to all men, a channel through which that demiurgic force, that ultimate origin passes through. That his lack of talent for magehood prevents him from truly using it dangerously is a blessing for us.”

In contrast to Tōko’s sinister smile, Mikiya sports a troubled and confused look. He doesn’t know if he truly understands what Tōko is trying to say, seeing as she has forgotten, yet again, that he isn’t privy to the mystical aspects of her trade. Still, he knows enough to parse it in something that his mind can understand.

“So in other words, Satsuki Kurogiri can speak to anything?” he asks.

“Mostly. The universal language is not as universal as it once was, and though he can speak to a beast, and it will understand him, the beast cannot convey his thoughts in the same way. People will also return to him the language that they speak.”

“So what’s so special about that? If they can’t talk back to him, isn’t he just kind of talking to himself?”

“If the medium of words is used, yes. But the man is different. He speaks not truly to men and beast, but to the soul in them that still contains that last connection to something higher. There is always a part of us that is culled from that primeval spiral of origin, and when the high speech speaks to the soul, our fallen selves are compelled to obey. To deny it is to ontologically deny the very structure of reality, and thus impossible. An absolute language, that starts from statement and then proceeds to become truth. It is the ultimate form of hypnotism. He accesses the Akashic Record unconsciously, and through the high speech, taps into it to channel his will. It’s how he draws forth the memory, not from your mind, but from the Record of things past that reality still contains. Truly a spell worth the

Academia Seal that's been granted to him."

Tōko leans back heavily on her seat with a heavy sigh, and Mikiya wonders if she is finally satisfied.

The Academia Seal. A mark of recognition and uniqueness that the Ordo gives to mages or spellworkers that have a talent so rare it hasn't been seen before, or indeed, is not expected to be seen again. For the preservation of these abilities, they seek to contain these individuals. Though the Ordo considers it a high honor, the affected party hardly ever thinks so, since his use is now eternally as a subject of study. Mages trapped in this way have no more opportunity for study, no more time for the quest for ascension that defines every mage. Thus, most mages marked with the Academia Seal make haste to separate themselves from the Ordo, and Godword is one of a number of such apostates. If the Ordo knew about Godword being here, it would only be a short while before he is eventually caught. But Tōko Aozaki cannot resort to this measure. Will not. She had risked her independence and owed the Ordo after that incident with the Ōgawa Apartments in November, and she was not so keen to do the same thing again.

She stares up at the ceiling blankly and thinks. As long as Godword is in Reien, Shiki and Azaka are always in some measure of danger. Still, Azaka *was* the one looking for a showdown, and she would never forgive Tōko for denying her this opportunity.

"It's the benches for us for now, Kokutō. I don't think it'll be anything serious anyway." She declares with finality as she finally slips a new cigarette into her mouth and lights it. Mikiya looks at her with an eyebrow raised.

"Are you sure? If I understand what you're saying, which might not be in the realm of impossibility, Satsuki Kurogiri sounds fairly dangerous. You're really not going there to help, ma'am?"

"I already told you he's not the one to harm anybody. His Art isn't even polished enough for him to use it as any kind of attack. His isn't the kind of Art that Shiki and Azaka cultivate. He can only make other people's desires come to fruition. And he's only here for that vaguely defined goal that he always seems to chase after."

"Which is?" The simplicity of Kokutō's question makes Tōko think back on when she assigned this case to Azaka. The incident of forgotten memories, lost to oblivion, does indeed sound like the handiwork of Godword in retrospect. But what's done is done. Who was to suspect that one of the Ordo's best sport would be hiding himself in an academy in a backwater province?

"It's a goal that's fairly simple, inconsequential even. It's...well...I suppose you could call it eternity. As long as he has that power, he'll always chase after shadows incomprehensible to us, but valuable to him. It's like a bittersweet mirage to him, and the chase will last a lifetime and more." She takes a long drag from her cigarette, and then breathes out the thick gray smoke. "He'll never get it, though. Even though he can find eternity everywhere he looks."

The smoke from the cigarette wafts toward the ceiling, catching the light in a hazy pattern that tells of some obfuscated mirage.

I 6

The ashen tint of sunlight, filtered through the myriad colors of the stained glass windows, grant the chapel interior a sort of delirious quality that touches over everything; over me, and over Satsuki Kurogiri, standing there at the center of it all with that silly smile on his face, looking straight at me without any truly lingering good or ill-will.

“Oho. What business brings you to the chapel at this hour, Miss Ryōgi?” His tone is not to fault me towards my brazen entry of the place, but a plain question, which makes it all the more suspicious. For a moment when I entered, I thought it was Mikiya standing there beside the altar, and it was enough to bring an awkward stop to my feet. But I regained my senses in time to pull the knife from the back pocket of the uniform, and have it at the ready at my side by the time we had faced each other. Now he looks darkly at the fine, scalpel-like blade, perhaps not knowing what to make of it.

“Best put that away,” he says. “You could hurt somebody with that.”

Said with all the grace of an instructor gently guiding his pupil. I ignore him, still scanning the chapel for signs of any other presence, but though the place is darkened, I can’t place any suspicious shadow or glint. The female student that I had chased here doesn’t seem to be present, and no one else is visible save for Satsuki Kurogiri himself.

“Would you happen to know where Misaya Ōji is, sir?” I say, stopping my survey of the place and looking back on the man standing before the altar. Satsuki Kurogiri’s eyes softly cast themselves downwards.

“Miss Ōji is not here. But it is me you are looking for, is it not? Because it is me collecting the pieces of scattered oblivion in this school, not her.” He smiles again as he says it. Somehow, I easily believe it is no lie. He’s the culprit, the real one, and it is a truth that is so easy to accept without mystery or reservation. Somehow. It almost feels like a given truth, long known and strangely compelling.

“What the hell does that mean?” Well, so much for the gentle student façade. Though I think at this point, its usefulness has long past. I stare at Satsuki Kurogiri sharply, and he welcomes it with a fittingly guilty chuckle.

“It means what it means. I am the one you’ve been seeking, though I admit the fae you killed is not mine. You are still a blank slate to Misaya Ōji, and she has some interest in you. Her false fae can do little of value to you, yet she insists on facing you with it. Though it is nothing more than something willed into being with her Art, it is still regrettable that one had

to die.”

Again, the grief in his voice seems genuine, even as he closes his eyes in seeming prayer for that departed thing. Still, I shouldn’t allow myself to be swayed by such a stupid display of compassion. Azaka has gone on and on about our observational role here, but with the enemy clear before me, there seems but one thing left to do. I’ll—

“I think not, Miss Ryōgi,” he suddenly says, as if my mind was open to him. “The mage of the fae familiars is not me, but Miss Ōji. In the first place, it would be patently impossible for my skill in the Art to command such an impressive number of familiars. The only one here capable of such a feat is Miss Ōji. My talent lies only in the recording of words and thoughts spoken, and thus, my role in this has little connection to the fae. And you *will* not think me an enemy in that regard.”

“Wha—” Again, his words have a strange ring to them.

“That having been said, it does not mean I have no connection to the whole drama in general. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to raise Misaya Ōji up from her little failure this time, wouldn’t you agree?” His eyes finally open again, and when I look into them, they have within them some unchanging peace. “I did not intend to be as involved as I am in this affair, but I didn’t count on you entering the stage so early either. Miss Ōji was only to probe Miss Kokutō’s capabilities, but I suppose when I revealed my hand, it was only a matter of time before your master sent you along as well. Seeing as I drew you out, it would probably be best that I be your opponent this time.”

“Any reason you want to throw your life away so easily? Don’t see any reason for you to step into my blade at such a ready attitude.”

“Perhaps. I wonder what it is you feel about the memories you have locked away deep inside you. Do you refuse them as you refuse me, or do you want them back? The plundering of the memories was Miss Ōji’s role, and mine was the drawing out of memories lost to oblivion. Both of you chase Miss Ōji, thinking to end this confusion, and yet here you find me, with a hand ready to grant what it is you might wish most fervently for.”

I don’t move. I don’t even blink. There is some truth to what he says. I don’t think that having my hands back on the lost memories would be anywhere close to my liking. So far, my somewhat overzealous reaction to the fairies has probably been due to this, and why I’ve been so hard up for finally getting rid of Misaya Ōji one way or the other. Though the target’s changed to Satsuki Kurogiri, little about what I feel has changed.

But there is none of that familiar feeling, none of that impulse telling me to take a step forward. No sense of danger emanating from this person

before me. Odd. I know he's the enemy, but I remain unimpressed. And as soon as I notice that strangely foreign feeling, I feel a cold chill down my spine. But it is still not that crisp clarity of purpose that tells me to kill. Maybe...maybe I don't really need it.

I ignore the chill in the small of my back, and I use the Eyes to take a clear look at Satsuki Kurogiri and his weird-ass smile. And with the weaving of the spell, the black lines of death come into view, tracing themselves all over his body like the calculated positioning of a spider web pattern, twining into itself with the complexity of a fractal. The sheer number of them only tells me that his is a body already prone to death, more so than anyone else I've ever witnessed. As the crazed ash tints of the sunlight and the darkened, electrified crackle of the lines of death intermix, Satsuki Kurogiri still manages to make a faint, almost mocking chuckle.

"You've woven a spell. The Arcane Eyes of Death Perception, I presume. I claim the finite streams already travelled, but you see the infinite paths yet to be trodden. I record nothing but the past, and you see nothing but the future. Ironic that Alaya called me out here to deal with your past, eh, Miss *Shiki*?"

His eyes close halfway, seeming to glare at me suspiciously. But more important than the odd little ways in which he carries himself, only one word he said catches my complete and undivided attention, and even the mention of it goes some way to partially explain the mysterious brand of hostility that I have been feeling in my mind since I came in here.

Alaya. There is no doubt he said that name.

"Fuck. You're a mage, too, aren't you, Satsuki Kurogiri? You *are* my enemy, then." I grasp my knife tightly. Then the strange thoughts intruding into my head ever since he started speaking were no coincidence. It's his spell, no doubt.

Then there is little else to think about.

No more debate.

Killing him will make it all right again.

Killing him will end all of this.

And at the end of reason, though I do not see myself, I feel in myself the urge to laugh.

For a heartbeat, he looks much like Mikiya would. Another heartbeat, and I remember that he is a mage, on the same side of the boundary as I am, separated from the teeming masses, but together with me in the

world of secrets and lies. I keep myself from leaping with reckless abandon, from attacking to tear his throat and taste the still warm blood. There are methods for this, a bit of planning to not underestimate my opponent. As soon as there is an opening, I'll pounce, close with him and stab him vertically through the base of his throat, drag the knife downwards to his belly in one bated breath and finish it all in an easy three seconds.

But in my mind's eye, though I see the limbs scattered and bloodied, I hear another heartbeat. And then there is tension. My breathing quickly becomes ragged, and my hesitation is clear.

"That is *not* what you will do, Miss *Shiki*," the mage says with an air of authority as if to emphasize a point. I should be at him by now, making him regret those words. But instead, they somehow hold me in place, preventing me from performing an action that something inside me tells me is purely *wrong*, even as my mind says everything about it is right. The murderous urge I usually ride isn't coming for me, and I can't bring myself to attack him, this man who looks so much like Mikiya.

My throat dries, my tongue begins to numb, and it is all I can do to try and fight it, preventing the fear from manifesting, and push myself into final action. My body is unmoving, cadaverous in its paralysis. If only I could blank my mind, I know I can dispose of these useless thoughts and *move*. But I'm not.

"No, I can't." The only thing which, with some difficulty, I manage to say. The mage looks me over like a towering watchman.

"Good. You've stopped. You would have killed me if you had continued on like you did. Once, you killed the murderous impulse inside you named **Shiki** over and over again to grant yourself the illusion of a normal life. Now you find yourself trying to silence *Shiki*, and wanting to lean on the shadow of that same voided part of yourself. But silence *Shiki*, and you will return to the outer darkness from which you awakened from. Hmph. Alaya said to me that you were brash, impulsive. But all I see before me now is a cowardly child without resolve." His eyes wander away from mine. "Alaya told me all about you, relied on me to draw you out. It is the worst kind of comedy of errors that puts me here even as the man himself has already been defeated. A shame. I had wanted to see what he could do with his experiment."

Some seconds pass with him saying nothing, and he stands in front of me, unblinking and unmoving like me, with no motion to run or attack. The lines of death dance in anticipation, and my knife is still firmly in my hand, its heat asking me how long I plan to stand and face him like this. I can give it no answer. In the silence that falls over the chapel, only my

own wild heartbeats echo in my ear like a tolling bell, and it is not slowing down. Unable to bring myself to attack, or indeed, even to quell my rapid heartbeat, I decide to ask.

“Why are you just standing there, Satsuki Kurogiri?”

“The things that must be said have been said, and anything I say further will be answers to your questions. That is how it goes, doesn’t it? If you leave all this now, ignoring the strange paths that fate has brought together for us, then I will leave you, unrelated as before. Decide to fight, and I will defend myself. I owed Miss Ōji my help once, and that is finished now. I will do nothing now except to abide by your desire.”

My eyebrows twitch at his peculiar reply. What does he mean when he puts the choice to me? Is his heart not in this fight? Then why did he even trap me like this?

“So you’ll do what I want then? Fine. I never wanted those lost memories returned anyway.” My heartbeat races even faster as I say this, and I manage to put a hand over my chest to try and stop the pain. The mage looks at it curiously before shaking his head in a negative.

“That is not what your heart is saying. You’ve sought those long forgotten memories for so long, and your heart here speaks the truth. It is to that answer that I will abide.”

Goddamit. He’s...not lying. But I only ever wanted **Shiki’s** memories. The warm but painful memories of that old classmate. But never that one last memory. Not that last memory in the freezing night, with raindrops as cold as ice daggers on my skin—

“No. Don’t do it, Kurogiri,” I say, an unexpected desperation creeping into my own voice. “I don’t want them back. I never...I just want to forget all about it, alright? That’s what I want!” I mean, isn’t that why I forgot about that night? Isn’t that why **Shiki** died and left only the worthless fringe vestiges of that memory as a mark of his passing? I’d always thought the memories would never return. He killed himself so I could be here, now. “I don’t need your help.” Inadvertently, I find that I say it with a crack in my voice.

There is a small silence before a grin rises to his face and he answers. “My mistake, perhaps. If that is your wish, then it will be granted. That is the role I play.” In his words I can find no malice or anger, no virtue and wellness.

Tōko told me about the fae once before I left, about how their tricks were not bound by our notions of morality. Only the impersonality of action, as if compelled by some spiritual tell or obscure ban. This mage, with his deliberate fickleness of mind and the arbitrary nature of his gathering of

memories, strike me almost as fae. Why then does the man smile? Would it be more right for him not to?

"You're fucking weird, you know that? Even though you say you can only follow what I want, I don't know why the hell you're smiling like you're so satisfied. I never wanted a smile. If you're so intent on being a mirror for what I want, then you can wipe that smug grin off your face."

"You are correct. However, I don't believe I am smiling right now. As I've told you before, I have never smiled." Though he says this, the smile never leaves his face. "Everyone seems to see it that way, though. I seek to carry myself normally, but Satsuki Kurogiri is ever the smiler. I've never felt myself smile, Miss Shiki. Never even thought of it. I don't understand its merit, or why people do it. Joy never comes easily to a man like me, and in that regard, I was similar to you, who once never felt truly alive. But time seems to have settled that matter for you, hasn't it? Shiki Ryōgi has a future, a purpose. As for me, I have nothing else save the past, and it is all I see within others. Just as other people need to consume something to live, I am compelled to gather the past and reveal it. What happens after is of little concern. It is all up to the person himself to judge what to do with such memories, because I certainly cannot judge. It is not in my nature to."

The smile he wears seems to weaken somewhat, but it seems no less real than before.

"Nothing else save the past? What does that mean?"

"To have no past is to be nothing but a blank. Regrettably, my nature is weak, bound to old, eldritch fae. I cannot think for myself, and thus have no dreams or aspirations. I am like a book, written with meaning by a writer, but imprinted with the desires and meanings of the multitudes who read it. The same weakness makes me recoil from suicide, and I have no choice except to live. Only one thing ties me to some semblance of identity. The granting of people's wishes. I don't do it to find good in myself, yet I am compelled to. Like fate, I respond to the desires of men. I bring back forgotten time. Isn't this clearly a desirable outcome, Miss Shiki? I only return what is rightfully yours."

"For you, maybe. But you just said it wasn't for you to judge." I narrow my eyes at him. I make my show of defiance, but inside me there is a strange ring to his words. It's almost as if they're not stopping in my mind, but continue to course throughout my body. Like the force that he says compels him also compels me to give weight to his words above anyone else's. "Thanks for the offer, but the answer is still no. You don't need to send me a letter telling me what I already know. Lost memories don't come back. All that proselytizing isn't going to change me."

My heart throbs inside my chest and the hand held against it. For the first time, our eyes meet, but his own looks at something farther, a hollow black that speaks of some long held farewell.

"So even you are among those who would renounce their past. I simply cannot understand how you, all of you, come to this decision. Why would you renounce eternity so easily?"

"Eternity? Making people remember old sins and recording them is eternity to you? Hilarious, is what it is. Where do you get off spouting things like that? I mean, if people really wanted to preserve memories, let them do it with a camera. Unlike mages, they never lie." The rhetoric seems to finally pull down the smile from Satsuki Kurogiri's face for the first time, and when he speaks again, his voice has the seed of some conviction, however small.

"'What is material cannot in eternity lie.' An old truth, but still just as correct. The stuff of this material world is not everlasting. Your Eyes tell you that better than most. Anything must have an observer to give it meaning, and the impression itself must not deviate, else it is not eternity. Even you cannot tell exactly if what you saw in one day matches exactly as you remember it. The observer's mind is simple, and heuristic. The new becomes old, and the color of wonder fades. In our minds, the value of anything is variable and ever-changing. Entropy is more relentless than eternity, and we are always tied to it. Eternity comes in no shape, no form, an intent controlled by its beholder that can never deviate. Only the record of things transpired—an accurate, omniscient record—can be such a thing."

"Records can be changed," I reply sternly. "This whole incident proves that. I don't think you can find your oh-so-precious 'eternity' anywhere you care to look."

"Those are not records. Merely fleeting memories. Such things form only the base personalities of men, and like memories, they too change to fit an occasion, becoming little more than a dress one wears. You should know this. The flesh and the mind can be molded just as easily as you change your manner of speaking." The mage takes a step toward me, and it causes my heart to jump. "The observer observes himself, and in turn is changed by it, identity preserved only by the cognizance of the weight of time. There is no such thing as a definitive personality. The records are the only seed of a soul that has ever existed, and its watch over eternity is stern. It is the scar that remains inside you even after yourself and the universe has crumbled under the passage of strange aeons, ever unchanging."

"I have literally no idea what you're getting at."

"Nor did I expect you to. You and all else like you cannot understand. You

never get it. There is no memory that deserves to be abandoned. Whether unconsciously or not, you all wish for the records from oblivion. I merely reflect this truth back."

Another step forward from him, bringing him farther from the altar. His awkward smile returns as he draws near. The heat of my grip on the knife has my palm in a sweat, but it is a familiar and comforting warmth. His meaningless tirade held only one important conclusion. This man was never like Mikiya. He never had a pace so careless and indifferent. That difference is all I can hold on to, trying to banish the unusual effect his words have on me, even for a moment. A moment is all I need. It takes a great exertion of mental effort, but I feel my heartbeat relaxing, the numbness in my fingers starting to disappear. The effort strains me, and I know it is only temporary, but it's all I've got.

"You say you're not trying to find good in yourself," I say casually, trying to will away the strain this is causing me, to maintain the illusion just a little while longer, letting him come closer. "Well, I can't rightly say you're evil or anything, just like you can't call a mirror evil."

That was a patented lie. He makes himself out to have no choice, but clearly Satsuki Kurogiri has the intelligence to weigh his actions. And even then he has the gall to call himself harmless.

"And that's what you think of yourself, am I right?" I continue. "A mirror. So you can pretend that you're not doing anything wrong. You're just doing what you do. But you know what you resemble more? The way you push the responsibility to other people reminds me of some spoiled kid."

At this, his eyes gain a mad, almost fossoristic gleam. "You *want* to fight me, don't you Miss Shiki?" A cruelly twisted smile. "Then let us do so. It will honor Alaya's role for me. It would have been so much better if you actually chose to just ignore me, though."

The mage adjusts his glasses slightly and dares himself another curious step, the one step that puts him just in reach of one burst of speed, one strike of the blade. Adjusting his glasses in front of me was the biggest and last mistake he'll make.

The mental block still makes moving difficult, but I manage to pump strength into my legs to close the distance, raise my hand—

"Your sight is lost."

I hear his voice for a split second, and in that vital moment, it echoes in my mind like an undeniable truth. The next thing I know, I see neither hide nor hair of Satsuki Kurogiri, and my knife swings only at empty air.

"What the—" I swing my head around, left then right then behind me. The chapel is empty save for me, and my senses, mundane or otherwise,

fail to find my target.

He was right in front of me. But now he's gone. But unbidden there comes a voice.

"Close. Very close. I do so hate people who interrupt other people before they're done talking. That attack claimed an arm from me. Ah, it is no wonder now how Alaya was defeated. You are truly an excellent killer."

The voice comes from dead in front of me. The mental block he induced in my mind still presses down on me, and makes it difficult to focus the spell of my Eyes. I try to bring it to bear. If I can't see him, then maybe I can see his lines of death.

"But you cannot win against me." The voice enters my mind unbidden. But it's useless. I've seen the lines of death, right in front of me.

"Found you, bastard," I spit out. I close as fast as I can, before the advantage is lost, not planning on letting him get away. But before I can do anything of value, he is gone from my sight again.

"Your Eyes will not avail you here."

The statement echoes confidently above and below the chapel, and darkness rapidly begins to curtain everything. Through his words, I am deprived of even the faintest light in moments, and become surrounded by a world of darkness.

"Hmph. The first tongue has less effect on you than I expected," he grumbles. "The connection of both of our spells to the spiral of origin grants you some measure of resistance perhaps. But in the end, the death you cling so close to remains unseen. As does everything else."

His words burrow inside my ear, as if he were right beside me. I swing my knife in a wide arc around me, left and right, but hit nothing except air and a random wooden surface, maybe a pew.

"A pointless exercise. I have already told you that you can't win. You kill anything so easily, but you are brought low by simple words. Unfortunately, you are spared a fate of death today. That is not my role. And besides, in truth, I do not kill anyone. Not with words. But I can grant you what it is you truly desire."

His last sentence makes me shudder faintly. My wish. The truth about me that I never wanted to know.

"No! Stop it! That's never what I wanted!" I scream as loudly as I can, but the sounds are dead and fade into the darkness.

"Now, this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Do not worry. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats itself like a record."

The mage's voice is the sound of a rhythm, as excellently plain as a musi-

cian's metronome, and mathematically perfect. I feel the rhythm of that woven spell pierce deep inside me, and if I had a soul, it finds its terminus there. Unable to stop it, he reaches to my core, to *Shiki*, and all I can do is stare helplessly as his voice finds its passage, and I observe its work.

Records in Oblivion - VII

I head immediately to the high school building after I get off the phone with Mikiya. The hour has just passed 1pm, but already the cloud-thick sky overhead is filled to bursting, the sun barely peeking out behind the leaden blanket.

“Rain is coming early today.” I whisper. The cold winter air mixes with the scent of the black pines in the forest and the coolness settles into my lungs when I breathe it in. I suspect, under normal circumstances, the odor would be enchanting, but now I can’t help but judge it as vaguely unsettling. A few minutes later, I am glad to be out of the forest path and into the high school building.

I walk the corridors, meeting no one else, the building’s deserton granting it a desolate loneliness. Nothing moves as I traverse the building, making my way to the English instructor’s classroom. When I arrive, I do not bother to knock, simply opening the door to find Mr. Kurogiri sitting in his chair facing the door and me, as if he was waiting, as if he knew everything. He is smiling as though everything were normal, unsurprised by my unannounced appearance.

My eyes wander to his left arm, hanging lazily like dead weight still tethered to his body.

In an instant, I know exactly who is responsible for it.

“Shiki did that to you, didn’t she, sir?”

“Yes.” Satsuki Kurogiri nods. “In appreciation of her skill in destroying my arm, I let her go freely. Miss Shiki is unharmed. She should be awake within the hour. I cannot say the same for this arm, though.”

With the ashen sunlight spilling through from the window behind him, Satsuki Kurogiri has some illusory, dreamlike mien, and the manner with which he is at peace is in itself disturbing. I hold my breath for only a second, and then exhale, deciding to ask the questions I have been tempted to ask.

“It was you who troubled Kaori Tachibana, wasn’t it, sir?”

“Yes.” Satsuki Kurogiri nods.

“And the one who made Hideo Hayama disappear...”

“Yes.” The instructor nods.

“And the one who granted Miss Ōji her Art...”

“Yes.” The mage nods.

“And the one collecting all our forgotten memories...”

“Yes.” The man nods.

"So the story about you being taken by the fairies is true then."

"Yes," he nods with a smile.

"But why?" It is the only question I can put to words. "Why you?" The second question comes more clumsily than the first.

The eyes behind the glasses do not twitch one bit, or darken as he leans slightly forward. "It wasn't for me to put a purpose behind it. Whether it be Miss Tachibana, or Miss Ōji, or Mr. Hayama, the only thing I did is grant their true desires. As for why they wished such things, you had best ask them yourself. I can't answer."

Somehow, I know he speaks truth. The answers aren't for him to give.

When Kaori Tachibana, in desperation, turned to Satsuki Kurogiri for advice, he showed her a way out of it all that could only have come from someone like her. The choice of salvation by suicide was hers alone.

When Misaya Ōji, in anger, shared her desire to recompense Kaori's death, he showed her the means to punish class D by terrorizing them into terrified inaction, a means that could only have come from her. The choice to learn magic from him was hers alone.

All seemed pure. None of it contained the ulterior motive one would suspect of a mage.

"But gathering memories seems out of place for all this. All the things you made people remember, none of them truly wanted."

"Is that so? And why do you think that, Miss Kokutō?" The lilt in his voice contains little suspicion, as though the question was sprung out of pure curiosity. All of this is the epitome of strange. I'd come to this room expecting to finally confront the man behind the black curtain of madness enveloping the school, but here stands Satsuki Kurogiri asking me a question as though we had never left a classroom, him still the instructor, and I still an eager student.

"Because I certainly never wished for mine to be taken away." I decide to answer him squarely.

"Maybe. But you do not even remember the memory, so how could you have even thought of it? It sounds suspiciously similar to my situation, Miss Kokutō."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"It's very simple, really. I am compelled to seek out memories so that I can better understand people better. There really is no other way for me to comprehend people other than reading the record. It is why I collect the memories lost to oblivion."

He speaks as if talking of some long past event, and the way he leans his head on his hands puts a pensive silhouette against the gray sunlight. His

eyes that lack any sort of emotion stare at me with a curious judgment, and I try my best to return the favor.

“I am seeking a less vague reason, sir. For example, the reason why you begun to collect the memories in the first place. Don’t you only seek out your own past?”

Immediately, Mikiya’s detailed report comes back to mind. I remember the little detail about how Satsuki Kurogiri, at ten years of age, was supposedly kidnapped by fairies. Upon hearing the question, the man lets slip a low hum which I take for an impression of admiration.

“You surprise me, Miss Kokutō. You have done your research well, it looks like. Yes, it as you imply. I had a run-in with the fae in my youth. After that incident, memories have become difficult to place. The best medical science had to offer couldn’t help, but the glamour that the fae influence granted me eventually expressed itself in the Art, and I thought that it could help me where the world couldn’t. So I tried to learn the Art in a bid to reclaim my forgotten memories. If it weren’t for that incident, I wouldn’t have needed to do all of this.”

Far from anger, his speech is one of repentance and regret.

“Then why?”

“I have told you. Whatever eldritch magic the fae forced on my mind compels me to do so. I’ve learned so much about the Art, but I am still a riddle to myself. The mind never truly forgets, but only in intact minds. But my memories are not simply lost to some temporary oblivion, but damaged and fragmented. There is only one last way to reclaim them, and that is to read the records of the pattern of reality; all the memories, one person at a time. Fortunately, the fae glamour granted me an ability that could allowed me the freedom to pursue that. But it is fast becoming fruitless. No one can tell me anything about myself. And it separates me from the rest of humanity. So I have no choice except to feed on the memories of myself that people make, their own personal interpretations of me. That this requires me to tap into the spiral of origin, the final goal of all mages, is fortunate, and through it, I can see inside you for what you are, and hopefully find something to put inside of me.”

“And you do it by tapping into the Akashic Record?” I shake my head in disdain as I say it. When Miss Tōko first told me about the Akashic Record, the origin of everything, it seemed such a nebulous concept that I couldn’t bring myself to believe it. The fact that she had tried but failed to reach it had only served to help my stance. A collective record of all that has happened, and will happen, given metaphysical being by the combined consensus of all humanity, pursued by mages in a quest for ascension seem-

ingly designed to make them solitary creatures.

"But sir, if you can do that, can you not find your own past there?" My voice weakens, as if it carries not only my words but this man's own end. However, he shifts his smile only ever so slightly, in a manner of observing some kind of cosmic amusement.

"It is a certainty that I could. But I don't. I'd much rather construct myself from something new, such as the memories of other people. Tell me, Miss Kokutō. Why do people forget?"

The sudden question forces a gulp in my throat. I hesitate to answer at first, and then, "Because there's a limit to how much our brain can recall at haste. There are memories that need to be recovered faster than others, and with the passage of time, the memories we don't need only grow larger. We need it, to bring a semblance of order to our perception of reality."

"Certainly the correct technical answer. But you misunderstand me. The question was not *how* time chips away at our memories, but *why* we can even choose to forget our past. Look at you, Miss Kokutō. You know what you must say, but you do not relish the words." Mr. Kurogiri shifts comfortably in his seat, the rays of gray sunlight behind him shifting with a wild accordance to his movement.

Reflexively, I am forced to take another empty swallow of air. "We... choose to forget to protect ourselves. Is that the right of it, sir?" At this point, all the force in my voice has been lost. He's right. Yes, of course I know. He reads me so easily, and even just being here in front of him feels as if I've encountered someone ten times my intellectual superior. I'm a child again. I know, more so than most, that sometimes, remembering is more dangerous than forgetting. The sins of the past are faintly recalled, so all of us can claim the illusion of purity, so that we can judge ourselves better than the next person.

"Quite correct. You all choose to *forget* the crimes, the taboo, and your contrition, resigning them as a deeper part of yourselves that you can lock away and never look upon again. They're dirty and stained records, and to look for them only brings pain. It is the same reason I am torn between finding the truth of my past, and choosing to discard it. But it is that emotion that I am cursed to feed upon, and so I return the records of those lost memories to their owners. Everyone chooses to forget some past stain. It's not a sin. It is the only way we know how to live. It's also part of what makes us better than monsters. We are aware of our sins. But I find I cannot separate myself from my past, but I know that if I return to it, I will return to a world of uncertainty and constant conflict. Such a world is undesirable, lacking the eternity I need. I grant the wishes of people to stave

back that force of conflict, leaving them to exercise their freedom in the memories that they've carelessly forgotten. If they commit evil because of it, then the blame can be laid at their feet, not mine."

His words ring strangely. He says he searches for a past he desires in the dormant memories of people, and through it he, inadvertently or not, makes the person himself remember. He claims human agency as the reason he does not sin when he does this, but all that only has the hollow tone of a child's excuse.

"And you still think that there is no evil in what you do, even if it clearly results in more conflict and death. Don't you think you're deluding yourself too much in your pursuit?"

"Yes. I truly believe in that fact. I do not desire anything, save for a means to see a definitive conclusion to my predicament." While his declaration does not strike me as confident, he grants it an air of unnerving naturality, as though it was such an obvious fact that he is stymied by my ignorance.

But he has some measure of that ignorance as well. He thinks all memories are forgotten because of some old sin, when that is far from the truth. Some memories are forgotten only because they are not needed. Childish illusions and images of things, like clouds as animals, or the horizon as a reachable destination, are discarded as one grows older to make way for the truth. These memories serve no more use in a world of adult perspectives, except as humor based on a time of mere ignorance and shame.

"I pity you, then," I say, surprising even myself with what comes out of my mouth. "It is only right to claim back your own past before toying with the memories of others."

Again, no reaction from him. "But how so, when it was the fae themselves that robbed me of my memories? My memories about my time with them must be confused, complicated, and I cannot truly hope to understand them."

"Wouldn't understand...?" I parrot back at him stupidly, frowning. What does he mean by that? Since we have talked he has tended to refer to his circumstances as distant, like it was another person's troubles and not his own. I don't know from where that mannerism stems from, but...

"The fairies destroyed your memories?"

He nods. "Yes. To a limited extent. I didn't lose myself. But they tied me always to the oblivion of strangers, ensuring that even when I escaped them, I'd never be able to go back home again."

And now, for the first time, comes a change in the face he wears. It is not a truly big change, but for him, any change must be marked, as though his face exhibited this sort of transformation in the passing of strange ae-

ons. The smile he wears is now warped, a parody of its previous self, reflecting some dark image in his mind that he would rather forget, but still finds some sick pleasure in returning to. He continues, the tone of his voice changing slightly, though I can't seem to detect what quality has entered them.

"The fae took me as a child, yes. For what purpose, I can't say. Maybe they wanted to toy with me. Maybe they wanted a friend. I didn't understand them. All they said was they wanted 'eternity.' I only wanted to go home. I knew the stories about children abducted by fairies. Replaced by changelings, never to go home again. I tried as hard as I could to cast aside their words and run. I ran and ran, stumbling on the overlarge roots of the trees, until finally, I slipped out of the forest sighting the open field that led to my home. Only when I saw the house did I dare to look back inside. And all I could see were countless corpses of little fae things, covered all in bright blood. And when I looked on my hands, I saw it was covered the same. And I knew then that the legends were true. That you could never go back. They made me theirs forever. You can imagine what happened at home after that."

The cruel smile never leaves his face. So he was gone—for three days, according to Mikiya's report—and comes back home covered in eerie blood. The reaction he'd receive is clear enough. And that event would inform everything that comes afterward. All its warm familiarity replaced by a cold fear.

"So the fairies didn't kidnap you—"

"No. It seems I killed all of them in some mad dream. And in return, I was cursed with something I will never see the end of. My memories are never truly lost. But I fear that when I have them, they will be alien and unrecognizable as my own. And now, after that unfortunate event, I can no longer recall anything I experience. Everything after that is no longer memory, but mere information, and the world no longer images, but data. The world stopped when I was ten, and though the how and why of it eludes me, it is a curse no should ever be forced to endure."

He struggles to hold back a chuckle from escaping his careful lips. Satsuki Kurogiri's mind was altered by the fairies, making it so that he never grew up from being ten years old. He says such strange things. Does he mean something metaphorical or literal when he said that he couldn't recall anything he experiences? But that can't be right. People can't live like that. No new history being created, learning nothing new. A blank book where yesterday is written. If he is not lying, then everything repeated back to him always seems to be fresh and new.

"But that can't possibly be true, sir. I mean, after all, you know my name don't you? You know I'm Azaka Kokutō. If you cannot retrieve your memories, then surely this wouldn't be known to you."

He takes the repudiation in stride. "Is that so? You are nothing but mere words to me, Miss Kokutō. You are recorded that way. When I look at you, I see someone who closely corresponds to the recorded words, and so I name you Azaka Kokutō. If someone were to come along that fit your description as well, then she would also be Azaka Kokutō. There is nothing wrong with this. I do not recognize you for who you are, but only a collection of information: height, weight, structure, skin color, hair, speech, age, and such. You are only Azaka Kokutō to me because you are the closest to fulfilling the criteria I have set for you. Encoding, storage, and recognition all work. Only the retrieval portion of the process is damaged. Of course, this method will have its inevitable mismatches. A major change in your appearance is enough to ensure that I recognize you as someone different. The school has called me easy to forget because of this, and I am only happy to let them think this."

Now the smile disappears from his face entirely, replaced by a blank, straight faced expression. Somehow, it calms me. In his explanation, I think I can see the reason why I'd thought he bore an uncanny resemblance to Mikiya. Both of them put in nothing of themselves when judging another person, willing to listen to anyone and give them a chance. It is only that one single peculiarity that binds them, but also the same property that separates them clearly. Satsuki Kurogiri only does it to find himself in the memories and desires of others, and he is driven to hear and grant them. He is childish in his beliefs, and his inability to recognize his mocking smile is a greater proof of that. He has no thoughts, no original ideas, unable to understand complex concepts. That is why he can only know people by collecting their lost memories. Like a machine, he reflects it back at those who speak to him, and in a world where an independent will is necessary for function, he is uniquely crippled.

"I pity you," I repeat. "You're never certain about your reality."

There is a pause, and then a silent, patient nod, and then, "But that is enough for me. I do not feel that I smile. I see my five fingers, I know I move them, but I cannot feel my arm as my own. My body too is just information in the end. But we are creatures of the mind, aren't we? Our mind is all we need. The world we see is only stimulus in our brains. Reality is always vague, and we can never be certain if it is all a lie. All of it is subjective. Our Art that changes reality itself should be proof enough of that. All that we can be certain of is what is inside our very heads, the mind and its soul that

are outside of this material prison. But even the true reality of our minds is corrupted by the curse of this fallen world. It is why the gathering of memories so interests me. Through it, I can perhaps study the human consensus that gives this world its power. But I always remember: *dubito ergo cogito ergo sum*. We have no need for stable bodies and objective realities. The soul itself does not dwell here, and nor does eternity, and there is little meaning left in this fallen world, this simulacrum."

His face remains level, even uninterested at what he himself is saying. He doesn't really seem to be appealing to me emotionally, though at first I tried to understand his plight. But his words tell me there is no person in there, no man shaping them. Only some empty book moulded by the memories he stole and the ambition of regaining his own through the Art. But in the end, those memories betrayed even him. And when he switched to looking into the minds of other people, he saw their "corruption." His mind, not having left that forest since he was ten, turned to fear. He cannot permit the corruption he sees, nor the corruption of the "fallen world." His fear won't permit him to. He is literally cursed not to think of anything else.

"That's why you searched for your memories even after you knew it was impossible," I observe. "The fairies bound you to."

The man of the demiurge nods.

"A mage once shared to me his plan of ascension by recording the deaths of all humanity. But I desire a world of eternity, because I love humanity too much. But it is too much for me. I do not know what to think anymore. There is too much noise. Everyone must be at peace, but they do so much to throw it away. I cannot guide them to that quiescence. I only try to find all the answers in memory, in the hopes that the shared history of humanity can give me something. It is quite possible it will be fruitless. But since the future holds nothing for me, there is no other way."

It saddens me to look at him now, a creature that cannot even begin to realize that people forget the common answers so quickly. He believes—or is cursed to believe—that's what makes us imperfect creatures. And within the contradictions of the people whose memories he has robbed, and within the contradictions of his own shattered recollections, he has the singular hope of finding the answer to that problem.

"I have only two questions left to ask," I declare. His unflinchingly smiling face seems to eat in the sentence.

"And what would those be?" he asks.

"You didn't need to collect the lost memories, nor did you need to grant wishes. Why did you do so?"

He nods in unspoken comprehension. "Simple enough. It is what I need

to feel, at the very least, human. Though the fae have their curse, the granting of wishes is an act I can own, an act beyond the fae magic. Do it enough times, I figure, and I can start to believe I'm doing out of my own will. And that's what we all need to feel human. Without it, I would not have purpose. It is the natural inclination of a mage, isn't it, Azaka Kokutō? These were the words you wanted to hear."

I sigh deeply, as the man who would grant people's wishes and dreams nods contentedly to himself. Before I move to leave the room, I inquire one last thing, not as the girl assigned to investigate this whole incident, but as Azaka Kokutō, the person.

"One last thing before I leave. What is Misaya Ōji to you?" My interest and concern in this person has long left, but the answer to this question will tell me everything I need to know about him. And perhaps I can find the last bit of a person inside him. But the answer is just as I had thought.

"Miss Ōji is what she is. Does that concern you?"

"Misaya Ōji loves you, you know."

"A fleeting illusion, I am sure."

"So you harbor no love for her?"

"That is for her to decide."

Simple answers that nevertheless ring hollow. No humanity is in that voice, but only a calm acceptance.

"And that is the will you value so dearly?"

"Yes, I suppose. In the end, she was not so different from the other students, really. Nor was she exempt from my acts. No one was. But it was Misaya Ōji that immediately suited my needs."

He says all this with the collectedness of someone relaying simple data, but I am more concerned about his curious statement than he is. I take one step forward at him.

"No. Don't tell me—"

"Yes. Class D was not the only group I affected. All the people on this campus bears my touch in some way. After all, it is not only class D that contained a stain on their conscience that needed to come to light. You all just haven't noticed it yet."

But that's absurd. If he's echoed the sins of close to eight hundred people, then he's also reflected the wishes of just as many. Within that number, there must be at least someone who hates Satsuki Kurogiri enough to wish for his death. She might be on the move even now—

"Let me stop you right there, Miss Kokutō. There is no need to worry. If someone were to move to intend me harm, then let it be so. Whatever her wish, or whatever its outcome, the sin falls to her alone. Again, it is not for

me to judge."

He talks as if to ignore his own death. It is not the words of someone prepared to die, but someone who devalues his own existence.

"I...am mistaken, then," I say nervously. Before, I thought this man could do no real harm. But now I find that is untrue. The damage he does is far deeper and more sinister than I'd ever tried to imagine. "You were never like Mikiya."

Satsuki Kurogiri nods in seeming satisfaction. I turn my back on him, moving toward the door. This place has already tired me, and my business with him is done.

"That was a long interrogation," he calls behind me. "Longer than any conversation I've had, maybe."

"Not by my own choice, you'll find. My mentor sent me here to run an investigation into all this. And because Miss Ōji can't be here to ask the same questions, as I am sure she would." I continue walking toward the door. I take one last look at Satsuki Kurogiri, and the expression plastered on his face is an odd smile, seeming almost fake and stiff.

"Miss Ōji is in the old school building. He failed to enlist both you and Miss Ryōgi to her cause, so she has been forced to hurry her plans. She has gathered the students of class D in the building and plans to burn all of them. Yes...you should hurry, if you want to stop her."

My eyes widen, and my feet instantly slam into action, breaking into a run out of the room and the building. That final statement was, I feel, made out of his own volition, and not through any fae curse, but I only notice this when I am already well out of the main building.

Records in Oblivion - VIII

The rain begins to fall, first in a drizzle, and then in a more steady, rhythmic pace that falls upon the stone and concrete, the wood and mud. Nothing can be seen beyond the tree line of the forest that forms a perimeter around this old ruin, but I stand here, little else save the trees in my field of vision. The rain begins to get heavier, and starts to ruin my view of the building, half a charred derelict that looks fresh and almost recently burned, and the other half miraculously saved from further immolation.

The girls are all gathered in the fourth floor, asleep. But it will not be by my hand that the hammer finally falls. I wait only for one of them to start the cleansing fire herself. And I await only the cleansing rain to wash over me completely. Standing at the mouth of an open wall on the second floor, I see Azaka Kokutō emerge from the forest, her steps splashing water around her.

I sigh, disappointed, and set out to the stairwell to meet her.

The rain drops cling to the black uniform robes, and the winter weather makes them almost as cold as snow. Her breath is white upon the air, and her shivers are barely suppressed. Azaka Kokutō tries to ignore all of this, which she finds harder and harder to do now that she has finally arrived at the old junior high school building. As with yesterday, she enters through what used to be the building's front entrance. The building still carries its burnt half like a festering wound, still hurting, but the rest of it only gives the impression that it has been abandoned a decade more than it really has. The vibrant voices of the students, once this structure's very breath, are now only half-imagined echoes reverberating in the charred halls and destroyed doors.

Now there is only the barely perceptible keening of something located a bit farther from the entrance, and an offensive smell in the air. The moment Azaka smells it, she recognizes it for what it is. Gasoline. That, along with gunpowder, has proven to be the materials she has found a constant use for in her practice of the Art, and she finds she has a nose for it.

"What a bother," she sighs, both shoulders drooping as she does. "I'm going all this way for a woman I've only ever met once."

As she walks, she retrieves a glove from her pocket and slips it on her right hand. The glove is a dull brown, made from leather, given to her by her mentor Tōko. Made from salamander skin, she uses it to channel her Art, giving her an ease of control she otherwise wouldn't have had without it. When she finishes putting it on and flexes the fingers of her right hand, she reaches the stairwell leading to the second floor. She stops immediately upon looking up, for there, waiting in the landing, is Misaya Ōji.

"Is obstinacy your defining quality, Miss Kokutō?" she asks, her tone of voice the gentle suggestion of the helpful classmate teaching a favorite friend. Her posture in the darkened landing, however, speaks otherwise. Her stance is wide and steady, prepared and looking down on Azaka. The air around her buzzes, filled with the keening sound Azaka had heard earlier, and though she doesn't truly see them, she knows it is the fairy familiars that surround her, awaiting the signal from their queen to begin the attack.

The aura of imminent danger that Misaya Ōji clothes herself with has not changed since their first encounter in this same building. Azaka recognizes the position of disadvantage she would start with if combat were to begin now. Misaya Ōji has the high ground, and the distance between them too wide to close for the kind of combat that Azaka would prefer to occur. As usual, however, she puts this in the back of her mind and tries to talk to the girl looming above her.

"It's a trait that's served me pretty well. So I take it your plan here involved some mental suggestion, forcing the students of class D to commit suicide."

"Naturally. I have shepherded them here, but the task of the fire they must perform themselves. Only then will they pay contrition for their sin. I have had to accelerate my plans because of you and that other girl. Only a few in the class are actually on the verge of suicide because of the predations of memory and sorrow that have plagued the school, but you need only one to push everyone else over the edge."

"Hmph. No one I talked with seemed too far gone to be marked as suicidal, though, but that's just my opinion. Still, you've prepared quite the stage here. Conditions are perfect, and the atmosphere is fairly correct for dying. A regular shepherd of unwilling souls, aren't we, Miss Ōji?"

I shrug, but Misaya Ōji seems to misunderstand the gesture and frowns.

"But you came here for a reason other than the students, Miss Kokutō?"

"Oh, of course. After all, an unbeliever like me has no use for stupid evaluations of crime and punishment like you have been doing. If it is true that some of those girls desire to kill themselves, as you claim, then who am I to stop them, right?" Azaka smiles, and Misaya Ōji can't tell for certain

whether it speaks of a simple ignorance, feigned or real, at the blasphemy she just uttered.

Misaya Ōji narrows her eyes dourly. "Then what could you have possibly come here for? Revenge against me, is it?"

"Fairly close, but still not dead center. I came here out of pity for you, Misaya Ōji." As she says that, Azaka inspects the staircase that separates her and her target. Because the building was made for junior high school students, the steps are not that tall nor numerous. She figures that she can clear the entire thing in two well-timed leaps if she needed to.

"Pity? For me?" Animosity starts to boil in Misaya Ōji's dark almond eyes. Azaka shifts slightly at that, careful not to provoke her enough to dispatch her familiars just yet.

"Miss Ōji, why did you even talk with Mr. Kurogiri?"

"Because he is my brother," she swiftly replies.

"Right, right. And who did you receive your power from?"

"That too was my brother's gift."

"I see. When was it, then, that you recognized Mr. Kurogiri as your brother?"

"From the very beginning."

But no sooner have the words left Misaya Ōji's mouth when she realizes the contradiction, and her eyebrows twitch at the small revelation. Her mouth opens slightly, hanging dumbly and letting go of a cracked and hesitant breath when she realizes that she cannot reconcile the sequence of events in her mind. Azaka sees this, allowing the faintest hint of a smile to play across her face.

"Well, that's how it is, Miss Ōji. You didn't go to talk to Mr. Kurogiri because he was your brother. You went to him first and foremost because he was the homeroom instructor of class D. And it wasn't strictly to consult on the matter of Kaori Tachibana either. You're the most powerful student on campus. You could have reached Hideo Hayama and talked to him directly even without Mr. Kurogiri's help. And afterwards, Hideo Hayama just turns up gone, likely dead. In your wisdom, you probably tried to pass it off as an unfortunate accident, like most confused killers do. But it doesn't change the fact that you killed him. And because it troubled you like nothing else before, you went to talk to Mr. Kurogiri. And he was only too happy to help, wasn't he, Miss Ōji?"

Misaya Ōji keeps her silence, her eyes fixed on the empty air before her as if some horrific and unseen shadow only she beheld stands before her, forgetting the troublesome student standing at the foot of the stairs and retreating into her thoughts. She goes back to the thoughts of her

supposed brother, and she wonders when it was that she started to dress the role for that persuasive man. It could not have been when they first met. And besides, how could she remember? She does not even know her brother's face. Only one possibility is left. She had used the fairies to plunder him of a memory. And something in that mind touched by fae changed her and what she saw in the man. It awoke latent memories, assigned him a role to play in her life.

"I—I was..." Misaya Ōji cannot finish.

"You never knew. It was never by your own memories that you saw Mr. Kurogiri as a brother. It was through his own memories that you came to that realization. A stranger's memories, where no truth of your own can be drawn. He made you see what you wanted to see, and it was no favor. To him, you were the same as the fairies that surround you. As you exploit them, so does he exploit you."

Azaka remembers what Shiki said to her yesterday as she found her asleep in this building. Even then, she had already observed that Misaya Ōji had been one of those afflicted with forgetfulness. Maybe she had grasped upon the solution early and unwittingly.

"This...isn't—" Ōji stammers, breathing hard as if she was drowning, a glistening of sweat visible on her long neck. But with a single gulp of air, she manages to find herself and her voice. "That is a lie!"

At that moment, Azaka weaves her Art as with their first encounter, picking out the countless pockets of heat in the air. A flash of a moment afterward, the heat of the fairies rush forward blindly, like they were responding to Misaya Ōji's outburst of rage. They consolidate themselves into a thin line and speed like bullets toward Azaka. To her senses, the storm of heat is as fine and dangerous as a naked blade, slicing downward through the stairwell and toward Azaka below. But Azaka's spell allows her to feel exactly when they move, giving her just enough time to put her back flat against the wall. She can *feel* the dangerous warmth of their flight on the skin of her face, rushing past her with great momentum.

She wastes no time. As soon as the flight of fairies have gone past, she puts strength into her feet and leaps up the steps of the staircase. She only has a few seconds. Having deftly avoided the fairies that Misaya Ōji had tried to use as a makeshift weapon, Azaka has the benefit of seeing Ōji's face of utter astonishment. She is up in three big steps, just slightly in excess of what she'd predicted. She doesn't stop, maintaining her momentum and checking Misaya Ōji with a body blow to the abdomen so she can sweep past her to the center of the landing.

She hears Ōji grunt when she is hit, but already she works the fair-

ies to redouble the attack. Azaka stops as soon as she is past Ōji, caught between the tall girl and the fairies behind her that have not yet entered the battle. Azaka senses the pockets of heat that she had dodged swinging back around toward her, and the fairies only a few feet beside her start to beat their wings and move. Exactly as she wants. Though the fairies are like bullets, she will not be a foolish deer caught so easily.

Azaka takes a wide stance, then throws out her hands on either side of her, toward the direction of both swarms of fairies, careful to avoid pointing a hand to Misaya Ōji. “*NZOL!*” Azaka calls out. The lorica echoes, and she feels her weaving of the Art course through her, a magical ritual boiled down to a single moment. The tingle of the temperature rising seeps through the skin of both mages.

The next thing they see is the eruption of a conflagration as startling as it is sudden, burning numerous invisible things in the air in a spontaneous combustion on either side of Azaka. Countless shrieks of anguish, high and tremulous, are heard until they all fall down silent on the floor. A few seconds later, when Azaka is satisfied, she clenches her gloved fist, and the fire extinguishes itself, the only proof of its passing being the smoke rising from embers on the ground. Settling her hands back to her sides, the fire-starter sighs.

“This is the true face of the magic which you think you’ve learned,” Azaka says. “But the Art is not learned. It carves your soul with truth forever, and I do not see that mark in you. The Art doesn’t open to you in a month or two, as you thought it did with you. But the contract you forged with Mr. Kurogiri offers you a suitable substitute, doesn’t it?”

Lingering smoke still emanates from Azaka’s right hand, but soon that too vanishes. Misaya Ōji looks upon her with an expression somewhere in between amazement and confusion. Her legs finally give way, and both her knees fall to the ground.

“So...so this is it...” she says blankly. Somehow, she finds in herself the will to make a silent smile, wishing she had realized everything so much sooner.

I talked to Hideo Hayama about Kaori Tachibana’s death, but it quickly turned into an argument. I kept saying he was responsible. I blamed him for everything. And he kept denying it. But I was right. I’m always right. I was getting irrational, thinking that any measure might be acceptable. I recall pushing him, but after that, everything is a haze, but it fades to me, facing his still-warm corpse. And for the first time in my life, I didn’t know what to

do. I sought the help of Satsuki Kurogiri. After all, talking to my father or the university president would be suicide. But he...he had a presence to him, like he could solve everything and grant my every wish. To a person like me who valued only merit, this man of little attachment to anything was a mystery to be solved. He could save me. And as I had desired, he gave me all I needed to settle everything.

Satsuki took the role of the beloved brother I'd lost so long ago.

Satsuki made real the power I needed to pay back Kaori's death.

He always said that clean hands need not touch that which was tainted. Why did I never notice that it was not myself and the other students that he spoke of? He said that in order to not be dirtied, one must use someone else to do it for you. He understood then, as I understood, that all the students of class D had to die to pay.

If only I had realized earlier that all will be the same in the end.

"If I had said nothing, all would have gone better," Misaya Ōji whispers. She is looking at the wall, but it seems altogether like she is looking at some vast emptiness beyond it, paying no attention to me standing beside her. However, I'm sure the words are for me to hear.

"I knew, but something kept me from remembering. I loved him, and it made me not want to destroy the fantasy he crafted just for me. I didn't want him to love anyone else, and in turn I loved only him. But it would always be a secret. Even if he thought nothing of me."

The story she recounts is an old one, for her and me both. And I have to acknowledge its familiarity, sickening though it is. I could have said the same words myself.

"I can't live without at least acknowledging that," Misaya Ōji says, muttering it mournfully as if saying it out loud were the gravest sin she could have done.

"Miss Ōji, you should know that it was Mr. Kurogiri that drove Kaori Tachibana to suicide. He never loved you. Only made you believe you did. The revenge you sought so much is meaningless to him," I say without bothering to think through.

"Don't be foolish, Miss Kokutō. I told you, did I not? All of that was known to me. All I need do was remember."

Hands and knees on the floor, she bends down and hides her face in a position of prostration. I hear her making a noise, which I mistake at first for laughter. Only when I look closer do I see the wet tears falling to the floor from hidden eyes.

I leave her there, in the building where children once roamed, now only as pathetic and lonely as she is. The rain that fell upon the forest earlier in the hour has gone into a thick fog, obscuring the trees and hiding the path back home in a dreamlike haze.

Records in Oblivion - IX

I dreamed of a memory when, as a child, I still lived in the family house. I dreamed of the distant past.

We had a neighbor then. An old man, whose family had all left him, alone in a little house all by himself. Dementia had long crept up on him, and even remembering the events of yesterday was a rare feat for him. Yet he was kindly, and warm towards us always.

I always maintained a distance from him, but my brother Mikiya became very close to him. Perhaps the old man saw my brother as a way to forget the loneliness, if only for a while, by talking to a boy next door. They spent time talking about trivial things, but my brother would come home every time to tell me all about what he had said as if they were the most important things to him.

But the day came. It was suppertime, and no one ever truly saw it coming. It was my brother that went over to the old man's house that discovered him collapsed on the floor, unwaking, and told our parents. It was our parents that rushed to him, doing what they could, and it was them who shook their heads when we asked the questions that must be asked. We knew what it meant. The mood of the suppertime table strained and vanished quickly. And inexplicably, I found myself crying for him. He had endured ten long years without his family, only to pass away unthanked. Even I, who I had thought had already hardened her heart, had to shed tears for this man.

And if even I was brought to tears, I thought how hard it must be for my brother. But he didn't cry. His face betrayed only the faintest glimmers of sorrow, but he didn't cry. I thought at first that he was feigning a strength that he didn't truly have, even though it would be foolish of him to think that a display of such strength would win him any favors.

Days passed, and not a single tear passed from Mikiya's eyes. I found him sitting by the veranda at night, looking up at a bright full moon. I took a place beside him, and like him, looked up to see the countless stars. And I asked him.

"Why aren't you crying?"

"Who knows," he said. He looked down at me from his height with an awkward look. His eyes were pained but steady.

"Is it because boys don't cry?" I asked, repeating the words my father once said. But my brother only shook his head. "Why aren't you crying?" I repeated.

"I want to, but I shouldn't. Because crying should be special." Thinking the matter settled, he looked back up at the night sky. Even as I recall it now, his face then was the closest he came to crying, but in the end, he never did. He, more so than anyone, was close to that old man, and he, more so than anyone, deserved to cry.

Because crying should be special. It casts a shadow over everyone who sees, letting feelings of sadness slip in easily to all who witness it. It is a contagion, an echo that worsens the grief. But it is still special, and private.

That is why he doesn't cry. More than anyone I know, he would never willingly hurt another, and he holds all the anger and grief he can carry inside him for the benefit of others. If he were to cry, it would be for someone truly special, someone truly personal. But for that understanding of others, he trades himself ever being understood by anyone. Nobody understands him for what he is. He must have been so lonely then.

And it was at that singular point that Mikiya Kokutō became someone truly special to me. An important figure that I would struggle never to lose.

It was a night when the moonlight played wildly off the glass, and whenever the lights of the city could not hope to match it. And so, brother and sister turned skyward to see that blanket of stars. And that is the image I see every time. It is an old dream from a day that should be left long forgotten.

January 11, Monday.

Classes have begun again, and I've returned to the mundane student life. With my classes done for the day, I hurry back to the dormitory to prepare. Afterwards, I go the main office building to secure permission to exit the premises for the day. The sisters greet me with stern faces of disapproval, but they know I've never done anything to their disliking outside Reien, and so, as always, permission is granted.

When I exit the main office, I manage to run into Fujino, spotting her by her distinctly fine raven hair first and foremost.

"Going out again, Azaka?" she asks gently.

"For a while. I might not make it for curfew this time, though, so can you tell Seo for me?"

She nods, promising to tell the message to my roommate. Satisfied, we say goodbye to each other. Hurrying through the forest path with a quick step, I eventually reach Reien's front entrance. The guard leaves the larger gate for cars to pass through unopened, instead opening the smaller side gate for me to use.

As soon as I step outside the campus grounds, I see someone waiting for me who I know all too well. His wardrobe choice never changes: an all-black ensemble that makes him look like he just came from a funeral, though I'm glad to see that at least the coat he's wearing is a light shade of brown. I allow myself a moment to calm my breathing and my voice before walking up to him.

"Did I keep you waiting, Mikiya?"

He leans his head forward a bit, looking at me over the top of his glasses, then points a finger at his reddened nose. "What do you think?" He smiles, and I can't rightly tell whether it's genuine or sarcastic. "So, we going? It's only two hours before your curfew, so we'd best hurry."

He begins to walk, and I situate myself astride him, trying to lower my heart rate by a few beats. We walk parallel to Reien's tall fortifications as we head to the nearby bus station.

This whole event started when yesterday, out of the blue, Mikiya called me up. Apparently worried about leaving me high and dry during New Year's for Shiki, he arranged this to make up for the entire incident. *A little late to give you New Year's money, I think. But hey, you're a loaded girl anyway, right?* he had said. It was just too funny to keep being angry at him, so for now, he's forgiven. I told him that I didn't need the money, and that maybe we should just go shopping instead. When he asked me what we would shop for, I couldn't give him an answer. So I decided to sleep on it, and now here I am, walking beside him, still lacking an answer.

"So, where are we heading today?" Mikiya asks. I cock my head to one side and stare at him in puzzlement. "For dinner, I mean. You want Japanese or a Western restaurant? I'll treat you." Again, I cock my head like a songbird.

Does he...does he mean he's taking me out on a *date*?

"You couldn't decide on anything yesterday, right? So I thought maybe taking you out to dinner would be okay." I look up at him in astonishment. Did he say anything about this over the phone yesterday? I don't think he did! "What, can't even decide on a place to go? Fine, let me choose one for you. Don't worry, it'll be a place appropriate for the fine, upstanding young lady, and even the price isn't gonna scare me off." He beams at me.

Does he really think that women are so easily swayed by meal offers? "*I shouldn't be asking. I guess he does,*" I whisper under my breath.

"What's that?" asks Mikiya, but I choose to ignore him with a sigh. After all, even if I complained, he'd still probably take me there. I fell in love with him the same way, after all. I felt like it was the right thing—even the most natural thing—to fall in love with him, abandoning what I'd tried so hard

to avoid. *Not too hasty*, I repeat to myself like a mantra, in as low a voice as I can.

"You sure do like to whisper conspiratorially, Azaka. There anything wrong?" asks Mikiya. I shake my head in a negative. And for a moment, all the world feels lighter, and all the questions in my head seem lessened.

"It's nothing, really. Just swearing to myself not to screw up like some other girl I know in Reien." I take his arm, wrap it around mine, and that is the farthest I can go before anyone starts to ask questions that lead to awkward explanations. With a slightly reddened face, Mikiya walks with a steady pace. I follow his lead, travelling to the sparkling, shining city where night is only beginning to fall.

And so, my New Year's outing finally starts, even though it *is* a bit late. And yes, I eventually do decide on some nice, extravagant Japanese food.

Records in Oblivion - X

After finishing his classes for the day, Satsuki Kurogiri heads back to his room. The weather had maintained a fine cloudy firmament since morning, and it cast the corridors of the school in the filter of a monochrome portrait, and about as still and silent as one as well.

He opens the door to his room, taking in the sights of it well. It is filled with little knick-knacks and assorted objects, books and tomes. But they carry the air of having not been played with, or having not been used with the intent of study at all. The books all look like they were as new as the day they were bought, and maybe they have never been opened. Gray sunlight streams in from the window, lending a façade of frozen time to the entire place. As soon as Satsuki Kurogiri can confirm that all is in place just as he had recorded in memory, he steps inside.

With a sharp thud, he closes the door behind him.

At the same time, he feels a sharp, piercing pain.

He lowers his glance, seeing only a Reien student standing only a head below him. Somehow, he feels like he should know her. She holds in her hands a knife, which she has buried deep into his stomach, the blade barely seen.

"Who are you," he asks weakly, though not in anger. The girl student refuses to answer. Her hand trembles on the blade's grip, and Satsuki Kurogiri feels every vibration inside of him. The student cannot even look up at the one she had attacked. He observes her.

Height, weight, hair, skin color, structure. As far as he has recorded, only one student fits the bill closest.

"It's you, isn't it?" asks Satsuki. "You waited here to murder me." She still refuses to answer. Satsuki offers her a shrug, and a gentle hand on her shoulder in order that her tension would drop. "Then go. Your part in this act is done."

The words, spoken without malice or hatred, even in the end, only succeed in making her trembling worse. The disquiet in the girl is evident, more at unease, it would seem, from the truth of his statement than from act of assault she had just committed. A few more precious seconds pass until the girl finally releases the knife, as though relinquishing it to the man she had stabbed. She hurries away, out of the room.

Catching his last glimpse of her, he still cannot be sure who he is seeing is as he assumed. Who was she? All the characteristics he had recorded were correct except for her hair. It is shorter, he thinks, cut wildly and with

little care. Still, something as broad a change as that means that for Satsuki Kurogiri, the girl is as good as a stranger met for the first time.

Struggling, he closes his door, securing the lock with a satisfying click. Every step he takes scatters a few droplets of blood to the floor, dripping lazily from the wound where a knife still clings to. That last act finally saps his last remaining strength, and he is forced to lean on the nearby wall, his body sliding down slowly against it until he is sitting upon the floor. He thinks that death will be of little concern, since he has long ago known it would end with something like this.

He looks down on his weakened body. Ironic. He finds that it too is different from the Satsuki Kurogiri recorded in his mind. Maybe that is why death does not engender in him the kind of fear that grips most people. He collects himself, even as the bleeding continues to worsen by the second. He knows there will be no relief here, and that death will come in mere minutes, perhaps ten. He sighs, deciding to use these minutes the best way he knows how. But ten minutes is too short. What should he think, or feel, or imagine? But time is a lesser problem. He is born now, and will die only ten minutes later. A lifetime of minutes, perhaps more worthy than other years walked on the good earth.

Think, he tells himself. /Imagine. He consumes the larger portion of his final minutes considering in this way, barely feeling the pain in his stomach. And in this mysterious last lifetime of clarity, he is surprised he can find an answer to his deliberation.

His breathing is rough.

The minutes are long.

The bleeding is dire.

The life is short.

He clears his mind from all other extant thoughts, and focuses on that one answer so that he can tell it to himself.

“Maybe I will think of what I thought before I was born.” It is the last oblivion he can draw from, the time of memory that no human has. The world before one was born, with no symbolic value, and no conflict. His distress is a very simple thing. “If I had not been born, the world, and myself, would maybe be a lot more peaceful.”

Happy and content, Satsuki Kurogiri smiles. He fails to understand the meaning of the gesture. But he understands the value of it now; realizing, for the first time in his life, that he is actually smiling.

IT

The mage was right. You can't die just with a word. But people do die someday. Entropy demands that we die, disappear, and be forgotten. Otherwise, the boundary between past and future will be empty and meaningless. Reversing entropy takes a kind of energy we don't have, and so things gain value in their temporality.

But things can still lie eternal. Even if something is gone and forgotten, the fact of its existence didn't change. It dwells in the mind, always with you, residing in its dark corners, awaiting only the right trigger to return. Which is why the more I think about it, the mage trying to derive eternity from the oblivion of memories seems to my perspective, like wasted effort. Things left forgotten are never truly gone, and somewhere in you is the truth...or what passes for the truth. That was already the kind of eternity he was looking for, wasn't it?

Now I know why **Shiki** made me forget the important memories from three and four years ago. He knew they were just there inside of me, perfectly asleep. And even if I can't remember them, they are still there. That mage knew that, but still couldn't accept it, still couldn't see how that forgotten state could somehow be a good thing. The only thing he wanted was to pursue his misguided philosophy. In the end, the eternity that was as strong as his words came to be a reckless and worthless goal.

The morning of January 7 eventually comes, and I am glad that this marks the official day where I take off the ridiculously restrictive uniforms of Reien. Sadly, Azaka gets to stay in school for now while I go outside, living the life of a free woman once again. I crumple the fake transfer request form up and throw it in the waste bin like some kind of old cleansing ritual. Azaka's word to the Mother Superior should take care of everything else.

Happily wearing my leather jacket again on top of the blue kimono Akitaka sent for me, I head to the front gate, ready to leave behind this strange world of forest and stone. But as soon as I step outside the front gates, I see someone waiting for me who I know all too well.

"So you've got nothing better to do than to wait for me to get out of here?" I ask.

"A vacation day from Miss Tōko and her generosity. It's not gonna be like this all the time, you know." He shrugs. He does it exactly the same way. A shrug that makes it look like what just happened was your fault. I remem-

ber it with even more conviction now too, as I do the biting cold. And it only reminds me that I hadn't wanted to see Mikiya today.

I carry old memories now. Awkward ones. Maybe dangerous ones. And being next to Mikiya while I haven't had time to have even thought properly on it only makes me more at unease. But maybe seeing his face might be better than still being afraid of the entire thing. Maybe.

"Then how's about we start our day with a good old waste of time?" I suggest sarcastically. "I've got an amazingly worthless fairy tale to spin for you, and I'll let you hear it." I start to walk down the road parallel Reien's walls, and Mikiya easily keeps up, like we have been doing for the longest time.

"Well, you're in a good mood today," he says as he looks at me straight in the face. But my eyes dart downwards almost instinctively, and I try my best not to let him notice it. I don't know if it worked.

In the time it takes for us to ride back to the downtown area, I finish telling Mikiya the whole deal about Satsuki Kurogiri and Misaya Ōji. We walk for a while amongst the familiar streets and buildings, not going back to our apartments, but instead somehow settling on an unspoken agreement to head to Tōko's office.

"So mostly everyone in the school had some kind of memory drawn out from them by Satsuki Kurogiri, right?" Mikiya muses with an expression of comprehension on his face. "But it was Misaya Ōji that wanted class D to suffer the most, hence the letters. The other students had their secrets revealed to themselves, but not to the other people that would stand to be affected by them."

"Yeah, yeah, that I know. The real question here is how come it was only Misaya Ōji's stupid wish that resulted in the real chaos in the school?"

"Right. She had to have been special in some way for Satsuki Kurogiri to go the extra mile for her. He only drew memories and revealed them to other students. But for Misaya Ōji, he actually gave her the means to act on her own."

His observation is correct, now that I think about it. Satsuki Kurogiri was a mirror reflecting the desires of the students, but this wasn't so true for Misaya Ōji. "But why?" I whisper. Mikiya either didn't hear me, or chooses not to answer.

We walk in silence like that for a while, with me still refusing to meet his gaze directly. The stroll is made just a little bit uncomfortable by the cold air. It's the kind of cold that really gets under your skin, no matter

how much clothing you're packing. After a few more wordless blocks have been passed, Mikiya turns to me, brow furrowed and with half of a frown formed in his mouth.

"Shiki, the truth is that Satsuki Kurogiri really did have a sister." He says nothing more, and the reasons for him saying so he leaves only to speculation. Whether Ōji was really his sister or not, only Satsuki Kurogiri knows. And the irony is that, if what he told me about how his silly parody of a "memory" works, the man himself wouldn't even know. Whatever the truth was, it'd be lost forever. Hah, again with this "forever" business.

"It's definitely a weird story. I kind of feel bad for Satsuki Kurogiri, you know?" I think I have to qualify that there was no lie in me saying that. His situation with memory and feeling does, after all, resemble a certain girl's situation only a few months ago. Mikiya, however, fails to recognize this, and only blinks his eyes in astonishment at what I just said.

"Huh. Even though he supposedly attacked you? Actual sympathy from Shiki Ryōgi. Color me surprised."

"I'm not defending what he did specifically, you dunce. It's just that I...understand why he was so desperate, I guess." After all, how could I begrudge him and his actions? I can't fool myself. Those long walks at night, travelling to dark alleys and narrow streets; I know what I was really after then, and it was something altogether worse than just messing with people's memories.

"And besides," I continue, "the guy's kinda like you."

"Can't say I see how that could be."

"Oh c'mon, if you read your name differently, it would be *Kurogiri*¹ too, wouldn't it?"

Mikiya chuckles. "Glad to see that your wits are still intact after being in that place."

"Just a dead language joke," I say, as Mikiya looks at me sideways, perplexed at what I just said. When I catch a glimpse of his face, I can't prevent myself from laughing a little.

"What's wrong now?" he demands.

"Nothing, man. Was just entertaining the thought of me killing you, seeing as I didn't get to kill anybody back there." I laugh again, and Mikiya can only shake his head. I really can't blame him. It is, after all, a very strange pair of sentences I just said. "Don't mind me," I quickly add. "Just thinking out loud, is all. And my thoughts tend to sound a bit less obvious to me when I actually say them."

1 Mikiya's surname of "Kokutō," can be read alternatively as Kuro (黒) giri (桐), the same way Satsuki's surname is read, but with different characters (玄霧, Kurogiri).

On account of thoughts put into words, when meaning is lost and it becomes a mere sound. When the mage Satsuki Kurogiri stayed a child, and grew as one, he too lost the meaning of being an adult, thinking that pure mimesis would be enough.

"If you say so," Mikiya says with a shrug. "Besides, I've never hurt anyone, let alone killed someone, so don't expect me to relate."

Sometimes, this guy can be such an idiot. But at least he's the bearable sort of idiot. Having laughed off the last traces of my anxiety over the returned memories, at least for the moment, I continue to walk beside him, letting a smile rest on my face as I do. Before the both of us can notice, night has fallen, and the moon, seemingly frozen in place, floats with the stars overhead. In another unspoken agreement, we decide to forgo our visit to Tōko's office, passing through it only on our way to continue our stroll, past unknown streets and winding alleys, through the dark circulatory system of the city. In the idleness of our walk and in the midst of our steady breaths, I find the willingness to finally meet his glance.

He might be an idiot, but I'm glad to be with him right now. The reason, such as it is, is simple when I think about it. This is, after all, the first time that I went out at night for a stroll with a companion.

BOUNDARY GRETIA

I need to beat someone up.

I don't care who it is, but I'd prefer it if it was somebody I wouldn't feel any guilt over, and preferably done in a place where nobody can see me. For a fella, I'm pretty shy, and I don't want this ending up with me expelled from school, at least not until I'm done.

After thinking on it for a week, I know exactly who to hit and where to do it. It's going to be a schoolmate of mine, a grade or two lower than me probably. The blond-dyed kid looked at me funny this one time when we passed the hallway. The place is going to be near an arcade he frequents. Thinks he's a big shot over there, winning in video games, and letting loose with his fists at anyone who dares make him lose.

He doesn't do it inside, though. Usually pulls the poor sap into the back alley of the joint under the pretense of a friendly chat about the game in order to force his recompense out with his fists, obviously thinking he can wipe away his imagined disgrace by taking a swing or two at anyone. That location pretty much takes care of the problem of not being seen by anyone, and so no one is really able to call him out on his bullshit.

All is good. Conditions are perfect.

Weak people disgust me.

I'd mustered up enough courage to face her and tell her one day, only for her to put me down with that one sentence as she left.

Maybe she was right. I've never been in a fight—a physical one—once before in my entire life. I've just never had a fight escalate to that degree, or haven't been brave enough to escalate it myself. In truth, that is probably why she had called me weak.

So it follows that I probably need to beat someone up to get rid of that weakness. It is the swiftest proof of strength that I can think of, and since then I've planned and planned for the moment. Hitting someone as hard as I can is probably the last thing of importance I haven't done in my seventeen years of being alive.

And so, I began to draw the kid out.

It was already night when I went to the arcade, and he was already there, like clockwork. I beat him in the same game, over and over again, for

what must have been an hour. And when the time finally came for him to pull me outside, I followed him out of the store, slowly, almost hesitantly. There is a show to this. A proper moment that appears only when he least expects it. So he gives me a wordless eyefuck as I step out, his height lending it an added effectiveness. This, in itself, is a development, since there's usually some amount of cajoling involved. There are no words tonight. He leads me to the back alley as I follow with a feigned hesitation.

Alright. Calm down. It's almost a given that he's going to try and hurt me tonight. Still, hurting him back gives me just a little bit of uncertainty. But even that is soon willed away. After all, if he's really going to hurt me, no one can judge which is crime and which is punishment. He pulls me deep into the alley, the light from the street barely reaching us.

"Hey," I say dully, which causes him to look back over his shoulder. I take the small wooden club from behind my back, hidden under my shirt, and give his head as great a swing as I can give.

A crack, and then a dull thud as the kid falls to the ground flat on his face like a ragdoll. A few moments later, blood starts to blossom from the wound on his head, flowing down his scalp and into the concrete alley, tainting the trash and discarded needles around his head. It only takes me a few seconds to conclude that he isn't moving again anytime soon.

"What?" I can't believe it. I only whacked him once with the wooden club, but that was pretty much instant death wasn't it?

"What the fuck?" It is a genuine remark, provoked by the moment. I mean, look at it. It's an accident is what it is. I didn't intend to kill him! It isn't murder, surely?

"I never knew..." ...what? That humans were so fragile, and that they could die so simply and easily?

But this is the sort of thing that these kinds of people always turn to, but why am I the one that ended up killing someone? They've always resorted to violence, but this is my first time! How can this be even remotely fair?! Am I just unlucky, or are these people just too lucky? Is there bad luck going around for everyone?

I don't know anymore.

I don't know.

I don't know!

I don't know anything about this mistake, or this state of affairs, or the question of whether this was a crime or not, or even the simple question of how to proceed further. But I do know one thing. The police will treat this as a murder, no matter how much I plead that this is an accident and no real sin. Soon, they'll catch me. And that will be that.

"No. I've never done anything wrong. It'd be wrong of them to just lock me away." But still, the entire thing needs to be hidden. Thankfully, there aren't any witnesses to take care of. All I need do is hide this corpse, and the normality of my everyday life can be restored.

But where to hide it, and how? There's not a single place you can stuff a body here without being seen. I could start a fire, but even that's not foolproof these days. Not to mention it would start a commotion here that I most definitely do not want. Damn it all. If this were somewhere in the forest or the mountains, I could count on the animals to just eat all of it up—

Just, you know...eat it, natural like.

"Maybe eating it would do the trick?" Man, the answer is so simple, I can dance! I am such a genius tonight! Doing it that way means there'd be little of a corpse to be found.

So then, the question is still "how?" There's just too much meat. There's no way I can eat all of that meat alone before morning comes. Then, maybe I should just start with the blood. Yeah, the blood.

I lean down on the body, letting my lips wrap around the kid's open wound, where blood continues to spill like water from a leaky plastic. I begin to suck, and the thick blood is sticky upon my lips and throat. But after a few seconds of it, I cough up all that I'd just drunk.

Goddamn it. I didn't even drink too much. Sticks to my damn throat and I can't drink it easy like water. If I keep at it like this, I could block my breathing and die here just like him. Oh god, what should I do? Can't eat the meat, can't even drink the blood... My teeth are chattering as I think, and I can't do anything except shiver here like a pathetic loon.

I've killed someone.

I can't even hide the act.

I've killed someone.

This is the way my life ends. In chaos and confusion with no easy exit in sight.

"Why do you not take your fill until the very end?" says a voice that comes upon me suddenly from behind. When I turn to see who owns it, I sight a man wearing a black coat, cloaklike in its immensity. The long umbral silhouette he casts inside the alley as he stands against the streetlight looks of a cruelly made body that not even his massive coat can hide. His eyes are gaunt and clouded, bearing the weight of an eternity.

"Do arbitrary rules blind you still, keeping you tethered from your true nature?" he continues to ask, looking not at the bloodied corpse behind me, but only at me.

"Rules?" I say in a whisper. Come to think of it, why *didn't* I think anything was wrong with just thinking to eat the corpse? I didn't even feel disgusted when I dared to drink the blood. What told me to put my lips on the worsening wound, but feel nothing about it? I tried to eat someone, which is probably a crime worse than murder by popular definitions. One need only look at the number of killers who also decide to cannibalize on their victims, and it's obviously not a pretty high number. No, most people wouldn't even think of it. Obviously because cannibalism is such a strange, alien act.

"But I thought it was the natural thing to do," I find myself saying inadvertently.

"Indeed. This means you are special, for you to have chosen such a course of action after a murder. Most would have already run, confused and pathetic. But you faced your act in your own manner. Even if it is a manner that decidedly breaks from the consensus, it is an act from which you cannot be blamed for."

The man in the black coat takes a step inside the alley, a step toward me. Why do his words sound so sweet, almost making me forget that he is a witness to my crime?

"Me? Special?"

"Yes. Consensus has no hold over you. A reality of rules binds those who deviate, their acts called a sin by men of ignorance. But to the deviant, his is the most natural thing in the world. So where is evil in this equation?"

He nears me, placing a hand on my head, and I do nothing to stop him.

Deviants and lunatics and degenerates and fools. I am none of those clueless men. But still, if I am truly mad, there was nothing I could do about killing the kid, now was there?

"I'm not normal...different," I mumble.

"You are. And if you are so broken as you claim, **THEN YOU ONLY STAND TO PROFIT BY BREAKING COMPLETELY.**"

His voice digs deep inside my brain, my heart, and the rest of my body, ringing with the sound of some spellbinding sorcery. He is right. He had always been right. And when I take his words into me, my trembling and my fear for what comes after this are expunged, replaced with a joyous sensation, like I've gained a new lease on life. My vision turns white before me. My throat dries, and even breathing as hard as I can puts little air in my lungs. I feel like my body is being burned by a pain travelling through all my veins and arteries, but it's a glorious pain no drug can hope to match.

The inscrutable, cruel-featured man holds my head in place with a hand that I know can crush me. And under those hands, I crumble to tears in a

manner that has never happened in my life entire. The tears are warm, joy-made. The scream that wanted to exit my lungs speaks of some primal passion.

This. This is the time and place where I break.

The boy consumed the corpse in an hour. He used no tools save the power of his own teeth and jaw, devouring something much larger than himself wholly and completely. His tongue does not tell him the quality of it, of its succulence or otherwise. He finds value only in the physical exertion, the mastication of his subject.

"An hour? You are excellent." The black-coated man examines the boy's handiwork thoroughly, bearing witness to all of it before speaking. The boy turns to him lazily, his mouth and face thick with red blood, both from his subject and from his own, borne from the breaking of his own chin, and the tearing of his own flesh, showing the fruit of the haste and difficulty of his act. He, however, does not seem to know that this has even happened. The boy tore into the corpse, never stopping for even a moment, leaving nothing except a few drops of blood in the darkened alley.

"But that excellence will still define you," the tall man continues. "Becoming aware of your origin by yourself will only take you so far. One must put the catalyst in the soul, awaken the vital spark." The boy hears the man's words, looking at him through now hollowed eyes. "You are still on the brink, that empty, hollow boundary. Henceforth, you shall be the man-eater, from now and until death. But you do not wish for it to end there. You will be a man not bound to the senses of the rabble, someone transcendent. A unique and new life must emerge. Do you not want to claim it?"

The man's words are spellbinding and lyrical. They engrave themselves directly into the boy's now numb thoughts, pressing inside like a subliminal force of authority. Bathed in his and his victim's blood, the boy nods slughishly in assent, an act that can be compared to a prayer to his own god of salvation.

"It is done. You shall be the first." The man only needs to nod, and raise his right hand from its place over the boy for the bloody ritual to be concluded. The boy dares to ask him one question.

"Who...who the hell are you, man?"

The man in the black cloak remains motionless as he answers. His voice seems then to be powered by some demiurgic force, and through him that force speaks, resounding through the alleyway with the whispering of ages.

"A mage. My name is Sōren Alaya."

At last, the man asks the boy's true name.

The boy tells him.

And within his stonehearted face, the man finds it in himself to smile.

"Leo. Regrettable. You lack one last step in being a lion." There is a genuine melancholy in the words, even as he grins.

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Part VII: The Second Homicide Inquiry

Only our frozen sighs played between us

As we watch our heartbeats fade slowly into stillness

Soon, all of the dear and treasured memories

Will become mere regrets, weak and soon to fade.

Even the memory of rain:

Of an endless gray veil seen after school

Even the memory of sunset:

Of a classroom ablaze in orange light

Even the memory of snow:

Of the white night of first contact, and the black umbrella

Beside me you would smile, and that would be enough

To bid my soul rest, turbulent though it was

Beside me you would walk, and that would be enough

To bid the rift between us close, distant though it was

Once, a moment in time

We stopped for shade, warm unmoving sunlight peeking through leaves

And there, as you laughed, you said that one day we'd stand in the same place

They were words that I've yearned to hear for so long

But now it is but the fleeting remains of the day

Prologue

1999, February 1.

It's the beginning of the last year of a millennium, and the tip of a new millennium's inception. And as with most arbitrary shifts and divisions of temporal measurements, people start to cling to the words of prophets and doomsayers, whether out of personal profit or the osmotic and infectious effect of a panic in slow-boil. Wrapped as the city currently is in this nearly tangible layer of artificial menace, as well as a more easily perceived winter whose temperatures have reached levels atypical from the past few years, I, Mikiya Kokutō, have decided to spend this night walking together with Shiki.

Winter is at its height, and these days, the sun is already well set after five in the afternoon, granting an early evening veil to the entire city. My breath is visible in white puffs before my mouth, and beside me Shiki is in the same state. The both of us are, I suppose, ever reliable (some would even say *predictable*) in how we dress. A dark-colored coat worn above a black turtleneck sweater paired with black slacks for me. While Shiki wears a blue kimono coupled with a red waist-length leather jacket, all the while having a pair of high combat boots donned. I've long since given up asking her if she's ever cold in that attire. I've seen her in it ever since three years ago. The heat or the cold never seem to affect her as much as it does anyone else.

Shiki offered to meet me on my way home after finishing work, which is not something she often does, and is an act I often associate with some ulterior motive on her part.

"Alright, out with it. There's something really important up if you can't muster enough patience to wait for me back at your place. Taking the trouble to meet up with me so near the office is a pretty rare event."

"It's nothing, really. It's just been a little...dangerous lately, so I thought I'd see you home." Her face is sullen as she casts her eyes about the surrounding area, never really looking at me. The wind blows a lonely breeze our way, and Shiki's kimono flutters slightly.

Shiki Ryōgi has always donned that style, ever since the day I first met her in high school. It always makes her look kind of strange, but I have to admit that it goes well with her height (around 160cm). Her hair frames her face, and always looks to be haphazardly cut to terminate at collar height. Like her hair, her eyes are a threateningly deep black. As if to contrast all of this, though, she always speaks in a tone as rough as she likes, and almost

without a thought for the next word. It always throws people for a loop the first time around. Now, she retains a posture more dignified and noble than beautiful, even as she walks and surveys the streets still partly awash in quickly retreating sunlight, as if she were a carnivore on some kind of hunt.

I call her attention. "Shiki, you've been acting kind of funny lately."

"How funny can I be if you aren't even laughing?"

She says this lazily, lacking her usual spirit. Normally, she'd glance over at me just to enjoy my usual frown after her wit, but she keeps her eyes occupied elsewhere. Well, if she's not in the mood to talk, then so be it. I keep pace alongside her, and proceed without another word. Shiki leads the both of us toward the direction of the train station near her house, which at this hour must still be packed. The way there, however, is as dead as midnight, with only me and Shiki walking along the narrow back streets. Without the lights on in the shops, and the street lamps, you'd think there was some kind of calamity. There's a reason for it, though. I would guess it's the same reason Shiki thinks she needs to walk me back home.

Lone people who walk at night are being reported missing or turning up dead. Now, given the usually low crime rate in the area, this would have been shelved as something of a statistical anomaly. If it wasn't so similar to the winter three years ago.

In my first year in high school, there was a serial killer that put the city in a bit of a panic. He'd only appear in the night, and conduct violent ritual killings on people for no discernible reason. All in all, he killed seven people. Despite the numerous inquiries and cooperation with the media, the police's desperate attempt to catch him failed, and a solid suspect never materialized. With no other murders fitting the pattern, it was assumed the serial killer had stopped, and the case was buried cold.

The first murder started around summer four years ago, and the killer went to ground at around winter three years ago. I remember it being a cold February, with me and Shiki about to enter our second year. It was only afterwards that Shiki got into a car accident, and lapsed into a coma. As for me, I eventually graduated from high school, and moved on to college, but it only took a month for me to drop out, and soon after, I found employment with Miss Tōko. Shiki herself recovered from her coma only last year in summer. For me, the entire affair with the serial killer is a thing of the past.

I imagine, however, that it isn't the same for Shiki. To her, it would have only seemed to be half a year ago. The recent strings of killings fit the same gruesome pattern as four years ago, and the TV news has been playing it up

as a return of the old culprit, with all the graphics and reenactments that come along with such a high profile story, almost as if the news networks were just lying in wait to spring the story fresh on their viewers again. Still, I can't help but notice Shiki looking grimmer by the day the more she hears of it. I've only ever seen her like that once, three years ago, before the accident.

When *Shiki* Ryōgi, still containing her other, masculine, **Shiki** personality, told me that she was a murderer.

The train station is a taste of normalcy when we get there, as it is filled with all the usual number of people. Unlike the residential district we had just passed through, the station is brightly lit and packed with people going to and fro in a hurry, and the activity spills into the surrounding commercial district. Only one of few places in the neighborhood that you could count on the serial killer not making an appearance. Yet even here, the influence is felt. The way people draw closer together, as if to close ranks, and the touch, however slight, of fear on all their faces, guarded though they may be. The night's just begun, and rush hour ensures a nearly endless stream of people.

Passing the busy station and making our way through the commercial district, we pass an appliance store, the television on display showing the evening news. At a glance I already see what I expect: another feature story on the killer. While I quickly pay it no heed, Shiki is led to halt in front of it, her eyes affixed on the screen, so I reluctantly stop alongside her.

"Mikiya, take a look at this," Shiki says, with a chortle, "they're calling him a murderous monster." She's right. In fairly large letters, bulleted by an X mark in the bottom of the TV, it says *How the Murderous Monster Began*.

"I guess they thought just 'killer' wouldn't make people nervous enough. A murder count exceeding ten is nothing to laugh at, I know, but don't you think they're being a bit sensationalist, though?"

With an eyebrow raised, Shiki finally looks at me. "Well, yeah, that's obvious. But I think they're kind of right, though. If anyone right now deserved to be called a monster, it would be this guy. He wants the attention, the spectacle. He's glad for it. Monsters rarely need a reason. The victims certainly never got one before they died. That's why you can't really call this a murder." She returns her attention to the television, seeing the faint image of herself reflected on the glass surface of the screen.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Massacre and murder can be different. Maybe you've forgotten, Kokutō? That a lifetime only has room for one real murder." She looks into my eyes then, as straight as she can manage. Normally, she looks quite

detached, almost sleepy, as if she's looking at something far away. But now there is an intensity in her black eyes, a pleading to some ancient memory.

"One real murder..." I allow my voice to trail away. I definitely recall hearing something like that from her before, but when? And where? It was only long after this particular moment, when I can look back, and regret. Maybe if I remembered it, at that moment, all of what followed could have been avoided.

"Never mind," Shiki finally says after a few seconds. "It's not important. Anyway, let's get ourselves home. I just woke up, and if I don't eat something I'm never gonna calm down."

"Wait, you just woke up? What happened to school? Did you forget that it's a Monday today, or did you just decide to sleep over?"

Her face breaks into a sly smile. "Calm, deep breaths," she pleads mockingly. "I was at school this morning, c'mon. I meant my afternoon nap. Actually, I never told you, but my grades have been getting better since November, you know? C'mon, tell me you're surprised." I nod, genuinely taken aback. Her grades had been slipping as badly as her attendance rate, and I was worried she wouldn't make it by year's end. When I nod, she makes a self-satisfied sound, and puts her hands inside her coat pocket.

"Right, then a reward's in order, then!" declares Shiki out of the blue. "Azaka kept bragging to me about this fancy joint you took her to down in Akasaka. And whaddya know? I've actually always wanted to go and try it out. Oh, how I so wanted to kill her then."

The disturbing thing about Shiki saying that is knowing full well that she has a knife and has used it before. Before I can have a say in the matter, she grabs me by the arm and leads me away. I'm not entirely sure where she's leading me just yet, but if her previous remark is any indication, it's to Akazaka, where half of my paycheck will be no more than shattered hopes and dreams in the face of one night's meal, and it doesn't look like there's any stopping her. Silently, I curse Azaka for telling Shiki about where I took her on New Year's.

Oh well, might as well enjoy this. After all, it feels like it's been such a long time since we had a real date. In fact, the last time may well have been four years ago, back in high school, when she still had the boy **Shiki** inside her. She reminds me of him tonight actually, and I don't think to question where this could have come from. Beyond the aloofness that she had earlier this afternoon, I didn't see anything out of place.

So we started February with an expensive dinner, and a night walking around town, just being together and enjoying ourselves like it was the last night we were allowed to do so.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - I

- April 1995. I met her. -

It has been a week since the night that me and Shiki chanced upon that news report on TV. The label the news gave to the killer, a "murderous monster," ended up sticking, and lately, everybody's been using it, even Daisuke Akimi, my uncle, who at 5am in the morning, now sits in my modest apartment, helping himself to a slice of French toast that I made for him as he skims the morning paper. The date on the broadsheet reads February 8. Unfortunately, in the six intervening days since he's received the moniker, the 'murderous monster' has claimed six more victims, one for each day.

"God, they're really sticking with this name, aren't they?" remarks Daisuke. "I thought the department made a deal not to get the names of the vics out so quick too. Makes the job harder, you know?" To hear him talk would make you think he was discussing some other person's case, which is far from the truth. In fact, he has a relationship with it as close as kin. He was the primary detective on the case three years ago, and the brass have seen fit to saddle it with him again, being the most informed officer they have. It only makes sense.

"Are you sure it's alright for you to be lazing about here, Daisuke? I mean, I'm looking at the front page of that paper, and it's the story of the last night's fatality right there." I say as I eat my breakfast at the table, facing Daisuke. His face is hidden behind the newspaper, but I know that he heard me.

"I've been running around checking leads for a week now, and every day there's a fresh murder. Let the SDF handle it, why don't they? I need a little break 'round this time sometimes, anyway. Thanks again for the breakfast, little buddy." I watch as he takes his coffee mug from the table, and see it

disappear behind the newspaper before he gulps and places it back. All of this is pretty much standard procedure any time he comes here. He takes a break for thirty minutes for breakfast, he reads the paper, he chats, and he goes out. He used to do this at my folks' place back when I was in high school too, and he saw fit to bring the tradition here, not that I mind.

"I'm sure the SDF would just completely botch it all up anyway. You're the best detective the Metro Police has."

"Eh, I'm not so sure about that. But whatever the case, a man has limits, and I'm pretty sure hauling a three year old case out of the graveyard to haunt the motherfucker who tried to solve it is damn near toeing the line." He quickly closes the newspaper and folds it as he continues. "God, I just need to talk about this to someone that ain't police. Listen, Mikiya, what I'm about to tell you is really classified stuff, but I trust you. Don't even think about telling it to your friends or family, you got it?"

I nod. Though I wouldn't think of letting anything of what he's about to say leak out, he's obviously never heard of the story about King Midas and his donkey ears.

He begins. "Right, so like last time, this one's a complete stone whodunit. No suspects, which means no motive. No connections. Only one weak-ass witness, even in the killing spree in the past seven days. Last time, the only leads we got were your school emblem and the perp's skin, which didn't bingo a match in the offender database. But...well, I'm not sure just yet, but he might be changing up his game."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you know how he's been nabbing citizens since last fall, right? We weren't sure yet that it was him back then, so the media didn't latch on to the story until the killings started this year, when he started getting sloppy. Especially in the past week."

"Leaving evidence, you mean," I suggest.

"Which is weird, right? We can't put a face to the fucker for four years going now, but now he decides to change his pattern? Doesn't sound right. It might just be a copycat."

"But that can't be right," I muse, thinking back on how Daisuke described it to me four years ago. "The exact manner of how the victims died hasn't been leaked to the public. I only know because you told me. If this guy was a copycat, he couldn't have known exactly how to conduct the murders."

"Yeah, I know, I know," Daisuke says with a resigned sigh. "I wonder, though. The murders four years ago struck me as less ritualistic and more...like someone who was just getting used to what he could do, and he decided to play around, you know? He was at least leaving a body to be found

back then. Now..." he clears his throat, and shakes his head, as if to rid his mind of a self-made image, before he continues. "...now he's just leaving severed arms or legs. If he's trying to clean up his act, then why take all that time to hide a body but leave the limbs intentionally?"

"Calling card, maybe? A signature for the police to know him by? He's gloating," I think out loud.

"Yeah, that's where my mind automatically goes, too. But it didn't look like the limbs were cut, that's for sure. There's no clean cut, or even the signs of multiple attempts to hack them off. They look like they were... torn off, or twisted right out." Daisuke smiles then, and makes a chuckle, the heaviness in his features leaving him for a moment. "Heh, heard any escaped alligator urban legends out there lately, Mikiya?"

"Nah," I say, chuckling now too. "If I do, though, you can get lost. I'm keeping it as a pet just to spite you." I drink from my coffee now too, the temperature finally becoming agreeable. I use the moment to hide my expression when my mind wanders to four years ago...and Shiki.

It was four years ago when Shiki told me she was a murderer. But that couldn't have been true. I can't believe she would kill anyone. Not truly. She was never ready to swing that knife down on anybody. I've always put my faith in her. But, if that's true, then why does my mind now go back to thoughts of her?

"Your witness," I say quickly, as if doing so would banish the thought from my mind. "You said you had a weak one. What's that about?"

"Yeah, from last week's incident downtown over at commercial. Place is packed full of people at most hours so it must have been pretty hard for the killer to hide what he was doing. Sure enough, even though the crime scene was an alley, someone passed by. Witness managed to see the perp booking it after the murder took place, said he wore a kimono. Actually though, the witness can't say for certain whether the suspect was actually a guy or a girl. Like I said, no legs on that info just yet." Daisuke shrugs as he says this, and rests his head on a hand propped up on the table. "It'd be nice if we can at least bring in some viable targets for questioning. The brass is pretty hung up on getting the 'monster' and tying this up quick. Far as I know, the pressure's coming all the way from city hall."

"A red ball. Media coverage is getting kinda crazy hysterical too."

"Best road to stress, I tell ya. Gotta thank you for this, Mikiya."

"It's why I'm here." Yet even as Daisuke shares the new information about what the witness saw, he returns it unknowingly to Shiki. Who else do I know that walks around at night in a kimono? My fingers clutching the coffee cup seem to go numb for a moment, but I manage to retain my

composure.

"One more thing I gotta ask you," says Daisuke, adopting a more hushed tone now. "Now Mikiya, I know you know your fair share about the drug trade here in Tokyo. Whoever's slinging the best shit, who the players are, that sort of thing."

"I guess so," I venture hesitantly. "I mean, more than the average person, sure. But I'm sure you've got a pool of guys over at your narcotics bureau better acquainted with that than me."

He waves a hand in the air dismissively. "A bunch of conservative old hacks playing at understanding what games the kids play now, and deluding themselves that buy-busts are the ultimate answer. That includes me." He gives a mocking chuckle before pulling out a polaroid photograph from his coat pocket, setting it down on the table for me to see.

In the photograph are two evidence bags, one containing something that looks like a bunch of stamps, and another with some kind of grass inside. The labels on the bags have the words "mescaline" and "THC" written prominently on them, alongside how many grams of it is stored, and below that is the chain of custody for the evidence. I recognize them easily enough.

"The stamps are LSD, right? The other is weed I'm pretty sure."

"Well, kinda like weed. The forensics guys told me that the THC and CHC content in the hemp are very low."

"So it's not marijuana." It can't have been. You would have to have enough THC, the psychoactive substance found in weed, for it to qualify. "It's probably something more like *tochigishiro*."

"Which is what?"

"A specially bred strain of hemp developed here in Japan. Because hemp growing is regulated heavily by the prefectural governments, they've got a pretty strict ceiling on how much THC should be in usable hemp, which is at 1%. The hemp that used to be grown natively here in Japan usually sat at around 1.2 to 1.8%. So, to comply with the new prefectural policies, they developed a low-THC strain in Hiroshima, called *tochigishiro*. Obviously it didn't stop illegal plantations or smuggling of marijuana inside the country." Daisuke nods, his eyes showing their characteristic concentration. He's following along with a genuine curiosity now. "So what does the picture have to do with anything?" I ask.

"Most of the murder victims this past week had some in their possession on time of death," Daisuke explains. "But hey, what do I know? They're kids fooling around at night so maybe it's no surprise, eh?"

"Unfair generalizations aren't going to get you anywhere, Daisuke."

"Which is why I'm turning to you for opinions. You know these street hoppers better than I do."

"To be honest, I don't really know about that. I haven't been in contact with any of the street level dealer guys for at least half a year. They might have changed up their boys, especially the guys who sell acid. They do rotations so they don't get caught so easily. The cocktail slingers too."

"Cocktails are two drugs mixed together in one dose, right?"

"Yeah. I hear the popular thing right now is speedballs: when they mix cocaine with heroine or morphine in one needle. Powerful stuff. Very dangerous too, if you aren't careful."

Daisuke narrows his eyes. "You're suspiciously knowledgeable about all this. You aren't taking any, are you?" he asks. Though I'm pretty sure he isn't serious, I decide to answer him truthfully anyway.

"Do I look like I do? If I was a dope fiend, you'd know it with one look at me. I'm a pretty easy guy to read, or so people tell me. I'm not one to try drugs. I've just got a...well, an old high school friend who knows a lot about it."

"Fine, fine, I believe you," he says dismissively as he stands up, though it doesn't escape my notice that he noted my hesitation in saying Gakuto's name. "Anyway, gotta get back to work soon or they'll light my ass up. Last question, though. Is weed an upper or a downer?"

I sigh, thinking regretfully on how little this supposed detective uncle of mine knows about the whole thing, despite being on the job for years now. "That's a question I'm sure even your narcotics people can answer, but whatever. It actually isn't clear what weed is. Different people have different reactions. For some it's a stimulant, and to others it's a downer, and also a hallucinogen. For a few people, it doesn't even leave any strong effect. Other drugs have been extensively studied and their effects documented, but the THC in weed is the only thing that remains a mystery."

"Heh, thanks for that. I'm a homicide guy, not in narcotics, so I don't know everything about it," he says as he grabs and puts on his coat. "I'll be sure to bone up on it, though. Looks like I'm gonna need it soon enough if the stuff keeps getting found on victims. Might be enough to form an angle on the case." He gives me a short wave as he walks toward the entrance of the house, and I wave him back. He opens the door, admitting the noise of raindrops assaulting the rooftops of the buildings outside. "God, fucking rain again?" Daisuke complains as he heads out and closes the door behind him.

"Just has to spill the beans to me, doesn't he?" I whisper to myself. The conversation with him left a gloomy undercurrent to the room, though, and

as the dreary dawn light peeks in through the window, I finish my breakfast and get a sudden urge to take the day off. I quickly call Miss Tōko up and inform her. Her reply is curt.

"Whatever you plan on doing, take it easy." She says it like an order, not a mere suggestion. Before I get a chance to assure her, there is a click on the line; she's put the phone down. She knows what I'm up to for sure. She's always had strangely accurate intuition.

There's only one good reason I need the day off today.

I haven't seen any sign of Shiki for a week now.

The past week had seen a new murder turn up every day, and since it all started, she hasn't come back to her room, or her old Ryōgi family estate. I can't get in touch with her, and nobody I know seems to have seen her. It doesn't take a genius to see what reason she could have for doing it.

If the murderous monster really is the same serial killer from four years ago, then Shiki is out there, searching for answers. But I don't even know who this monster prowling the streets is. And I know that the memories related to her old Shiki personality have all vanished along with him, which means we'll never be able to prove if she was related to those crimes or not.

Maybe I'm not the one that can break this case wide open. But there are far too many memories that will be betrayed if I wait any longer. Shiki's disappearance heralds something far worse. I can feel it. And before that happens, I need to find the truth. Me. Because this isn't someone else's problem. From four years ago until today, this has always been mine and Shiki's problem. We just kept prolonging it, afraid to face it. So to understand it, I need to start investigating, not for someone else, but for my own sake.

I step outside the house, seeing the rain cover everything in an unceasing grey veil. I pop open my black umbrella and travel to the crime scenes of the past week. I reach last night's spot, an alley in one of the busier portions of downtown. People are walking the sidewalk as if nothing had happened last night, trying not to notice the alley which still has policemen standing guard and yellow police lines stretched over the mouth of the entrance, and a similarly yellow tarp covering the top of the entire alleyway. Preserving the crime scene for at least a day, they can do no more than that. I leave, and head to the other crime scenes, hoping to find them less guarded. Luckily, the police have abandoned them, and I'm able to pry through them without notice.

By the time I reach my third crime scene, I barely notice that much of the day has passed, and it is already early afternoon. If I wanted to pay all

the places a visit and give them a thorough search, it'd probably take me until late tonight. This is all useless. The crime scenes are open and they're more than likely already tampered, if not through daily traffic, then surely through the continuous day of rain. But without a single clue, what can I really do? This investigation is kid's stuff for now, but before I take it up a notch, I have to make sure not to leave a stone unturned. And so with just my umbrella for company, I wander alleyways tainted by murder.

The late winter rain is icy cold, and hasn't let up the entire day. The rain in this month has always had a special melancholy attached to it for me. It's had that for me for three years. After all, it was this month, three years ago, when I lost her.

“I...I want to kill you.”

It was a very gentle smile.

The girl in the red kimono had a knife pointed at me, hovering above my neck. In one terrifyingly brief moment, *Shiki* Ryōgi raised the blade. I, lying on the ground while she straddled me, could do nothing but to look into the eyes of my coming death. Like a guillotine, the knife blade shone in the rain, and she brought it down in a strike swift and true.

But the knife did not pierce my neck, did not strike home in my flesh, but instead stopped unsteadily an inch or two before making its mark.

“Why?” *Shiki* whispered in a voice incredulous and unbelieving. The totality of the question was left unvoiced. *Why can’t I kill you?*

In that moment, I felt the fear ebbing away slowly, replaced with a growing pity at this girl, whose existence was at once given meaning by a desire for murder and her disgust of it. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. But it was only for one, lucky moment.

I saw her look at her own arm, and in those eyes there was nothing but anger and contempt at her own actions. She took her other hand, letting it clutch her blade arm, as if to force it to action. *This time*, I thought, *this time it will be the end*.

But something interrupted us. A man approached beside us, seeming to come from nowhere at all, wearing a great black coat like a monk. With a single small gesture of his hand, she sent *Shiki* flying from me, using some unseen force. He spoke.

“Fool. This weakening does not become you,” he said in a low, tormented

voice. The man helped me up, his strong grip on my arm lifting me effortlessly. That seemed to awaken some predatory instinct in *Shiki*, who pulled herself up from the rain-soaked ground, and launched herself toward the man with redoubled vigor. In an instant, *Shiki* was beside the tall man, jumping up and aiming her knife at his forehead, and slashed in one quick motion.

A thin red line ran through his forehead then, and blood poured out slowly like sand. After she slashed him, *Shiki* quickly ran past him, and retreated to a distance he could not reach. They glared at each other, the tall man in the black coat barely even registering he was wounded. Amused, he even gave an observant chuckle.

"Would you stay your hand even for me? Then you are still useless to me." The man then took me by the arm and ran. Behind us, *Shiki* gave chase. But the man's speed is too fast, almost as if we were flying. But we couldn't have been, because my feet were still on the ground, struggling to keep up with him. Eventually, we were out of the Ryōgi estate's grounds, and only then did he let go of me. Then he looked at me, as if to say that if I went home now, all would be safer for me.

"Far too early to break her," he murmured, but even his murmurs were a low audible rumble. "The duality of the spiral of conflict has always been her destined end." Leaving me with those words, the man walks away and disappears with only a few steps, as if letting the shadows of the surrounding bamboo grove swallow him.

The asphalt road home stretched out welcomingly before me, but behind me, I could hear *Shiki* fast approaching. I could've gone home. I could've left her. But I chose to be with her. I still don't know if that was the right thing to do. But in the end, she couldn't swing the knife down. I turned without reluctance to the sound of her approaching footfalls. And when she caught up to me, there was surprise in her face, but more than that, there was confusion. Then a burning clarity. There were words exchanged then, words that couldn't be forgotten. But her last sentence to me was this.

"If I can't make you go away," she said, under the unceasing rain. In the distance, closing fast, she spots the headlights of an approaching car. She laughed. A weak, bitter laugh. "I have to make myself go away." She runs toward the middle of the street.

The car approached fast, and she presented herself in front of it, lit brightly on one side by the headlights. The rain fell hard, but even it could not overcome the keening sound of the brakes. It was too late. It was over in a second. The girl who fell in the wet asphalt looked less like *Shiki*, and

more like some lifeless, warmthless doll, broken and ruined. Right there, at that moment, I knew no more painful and regretful moment. Her eyes before the impact had tears in them—or was it just the rain? And yet, even having seen that, I could not find it in myself to cry.

The evening only brings more rain and less clues than I had hoped for, but is only in line with what I expected. It is cold tonight, more so than the past ones have been. A good thing I brought my umbrella.

The black umbrella...the same one I was using when I first met Shiki. She had been looking up at the sky that night, but seemed to see neither the stars nor the moon, as if she had frozen in place, and all was right with the world.

I 1

- May. -

- I've become acquainted with Mikiya Kokutō. I knew I'd like him ever since I first saw him. He talked to me without reservation or hesitation, with a smile uncalculating or plotting. He's perfect. -

"More rain again?" I grumble as I seek cover from the growing intensity of the shower. The volume of the raindrops as they impact the roofs of the buildings starts to build towards a crescendo. Luckily, a nearby convenience store provides some temporary shelter, and of course, the umbrella bin outside proves to be a welcome convenience indeed. I help myself to one umbrella, a cheap plastic one the owner is unlikely to miss fondly. My objective is lost, though. Hard to track the smell of blood mixed with the rain. Still, there's nothing to be gained from standing here the entire day, so I continue to walk.

It's February 8, and dawn is just breaking. The streets still lack their usual foot or vehicle traffic, and the silhouettes of people I share the street with are few and far between. Even my own shadow, projected by the dim lights of the passing neon and fluorescent, feels like a hazy illusion, almost incomprehensible in the rain. After putting some distance between myself and the generous convenience store, I stop for a while to take stock of myself.

I've got a cheap plastic umbrella, borrowed; a wet and dirtied leather jacket, and a pretty good kimono soiled by thick dirt and mud at the hem and waist. Well, I can't really expect to be clean after spending a week sleeping exclusively on alleys. My appearance is one thing, but my odor is entirely another. And man, I smell exactly like three-day old sweat.

"Sleeping outside has got to stop today," I whisper to myself, a sugges-

tion that, the way I say it, almost makes it sound like some kind of fun game. For the first time in a week, I laugh.

My name is Shiki Ryōgi. Like the Taoist term “*ryōgi*” used to describe the duality of yin and yang. Yeah, my family is weird, and I’m sort of a chip off the old block. Once, I nursed another personality within me, a male one called **Shiki**. Same pronunciation, different ideogram. I’d been saddled with him since birth, a murderous personality cultivated by my strange lineage. And so since birth, I’ve always known of the pleasure he derived from the thought of murder. It was his passion. And in a sort of twisted way, it became mine too, as I pressed down on the dark impulse inside me, killing it over and over again to control it. I killed the self inside of me, sensing both the pleasure it gave me, and the pain. All so I could live a parody of a normal life. Murder defined me then, if not literally then figuratively. But there was always the threat of it, lurking in the rafters, tempting me with its allure.

When I was a child, perhaps the only thing that held me in check were the words of my grandfather. While my father was without a doubt a Ryōgi, he did not inherit the “blessing,” as he liked to call it. So of course, when I was born, there was no prouder father, and my otherwise normal older brother was passed over for the right of succession. So I’ve been special ever since birth. Always left alone, but never lonely, always having the other **Shiki** for company. We were one, he and I; a girl and her shadow. So it was when I was sixteen, still fearing that I was just a mere tool for murder, that my grandfather passed away. Like me, he had the “blessing.” But he had never been able to control his other self completely, and in his long years, he had hurt himself, sometimes grievously, cursed those around him, while denying what he was. It had been told to me that he and his other self switched constantly, so much so that people forgot which was truly in control, and for twenty years, he had been confined to an asylum.

But in his dying hours, he called for me. In those last moments with me, he returned to some semblance of sanity, and shared with me his only words for me, and his last as well. And I’ll never forget them. He taught me that murder was important, a great and terrible thing of monstrous weight. Since that day, I think I was able to better think on my position because of him. And perhaps my masquerading of life, while forever alone, might be accomplished after all.

Until I met Mikiya Kokutō.

When I met him in high school, it coincided with me starting to act very strangely. There was something about him, something that told me that life wasn’t a thing to hide in, but to live through. I remember thinking that all

would have been better, if I hadn't known. If he wasn't a promise of something far better, something I wanted that could also destroy me. I couldn't fool myself anymore after him, and neither could I fool **Shiki**. He broke me apart, and me and **Shiki** started to become more out of sync. When once, I knew exactly what I was doing when **Shiki** was in control, he eventually hid it from me, and I could recall nothing of what happened when he was in control. I would oftentimes come to my senses in the middle of the night, a bloody soaked body lying in front of me, and I, smiling. I didn't know if the serial killer that haunted the city then was me, or I just wandered into his work afterwards. Doubt started to creep in.

Eventually, Mikiya found me in the middle of such a scene, but he still believed in me, and trusted that I wasn't the killer. And it was then that I decided that his joy was just an impossible dream to tempt me. There was a confrontation between us. And then the accident, which resulted in my two-year coma.

When I awakened, I found myself unlike my previous self in small yet important ways. I had lost **Shiki**, my steadfast companion, taking his share of the memories along with him. As for the memories of my old self, they felt empty and vague, like someone else's experiences. I was hollow, like a doll. And since then, I've been trying to fill up that hollow in my soul that **Shiki** left inside me with new things. It's probably the greatest irony that the guy responsible for that going pretty well in the past half-year has to be Mikiya Kokutō, the same guy almost drove me to ruin. I'm not an empty doll anymore.

But now, something's happening that's bringing back the sins of the past. When I awakened, **Shiki's** memories were lost to me, when he "died." Though I don't really know if he has the kind of autonomy in my brain that would make it work, it comforts me to think that he took it with him because he thought it would be a blessing to me to forget about them, to live a life unburdened by guilt. And for the most part, he was right. Something happened last New Year's though.

I encountered, fought, and lost to a mage who, against my will, returned my lost memories to me. And so...now I remember everything four years ago. How my final moments before the accident really went down. How I fell to the most extreme solution of trying to murder Mikiya Kokutō, a knife pointed high above him. How I wandered the streets at night, spoiling for a good kill. It relieves me somewhat to find that it was not me who conducted the serial killings. But then, that leaves an obviously bigger problem of who the serial killer actually was. Or is, if the news tells it true and this new one is the same guy. I still don't know who he is. Mikiya must already be

suspecting me after I ran away. Hell, if you ask me, he'd have every right to. I have the shady past to back it up anyway.

So like four years ago, I wander the streets again, chasing a murderous monster that's burdening the streets with a new body every day. And if I must admit to myself why I do it, then the reason is very simple. Envy, at his willingness to snuff out a life. Jealousy, at the artfulness of his skill. Answers, if that were possible. And an end to all of this...hopefully when we decide to pounce on each other. We're all the same, us murderers. We attract each other, then we spill our blood on the floor.

It's sort of funny in a sick sense, really. Four years ago, I knew it was **Shiki** who took pleasure from the thought of murder.

But he's not inside me now, is he?

And yet, attracted to a murderous monster's acts, I'm searching him out to murder him.

Why didn't I notice it before? Why did it take so long?

Shiki's only thought was murder, but he never acted on it. *Now it's me who's doing it. It's me who really likes it.*

I make my stop at a love hotel, where the front desk, such as it is, is nonexistent; rooms are selected and bills paid through a machine. The better for the anonymity of their very specific clientele. I remember Mikiya once saying to me that if you wanted to hide from someone, this was a better entry-level option than most, since they don't card you. Also, because of that, transactions go by really fast, which is better overall for me.

When I get to my room, I quickly slip off my clothing and get into the shower, taking my time in the bath. After I'm done, I lie down on the bed. And though I wasn't planning on sleeping, my fatigue and frustration loosens my grip on my ability to remain awake, and the bed is too comfortable...

I wake up to a much more darkened room, the clock in the table beside the bed reading two in the morning. It was just getting dark when I got here, so I must have slept for six hours. The room, lit only by the lamp, and the dry digital readout of the clock, is populated only by strange shadows.

"Fuck," I whisper low under my breath, but in the noiseless room, even that can be heard. Chiding myself for oversleeping, I change back into my clothes angrily. It's not just oversleeping that's bothering me so much though. I've only been by myself for seven days, but why am I so irritated? It's hasn't been *that* long, has it?

"It hasn't," I tell myself, as if saying it aloud would persuade me some-

how. I leave the hotel as quickly as I entered it six hours earlier, my business there done.

Just past 2am. Even the stone and concrete are asleep this time of night, but of course, the police, on the lookout for the murderous monster, are not. They'll be on the lookout for anyone suspicious, with likely orders to pat anyone down. They'd find some pretty illegal stuff in my coat, so I'm not dealing with that hassle. With that in mind, I duck inside the nearest alleyway I can find. Every avenue in this area is indicted now, and the police would have the main roads covered, so I can't use them. Of course, the murderous monster knows this too, and so like him, we travel the thieves' highway, flitting through the narrow spaces between buildings. Hopefully, we meet each other. That's the plan, anyway. Unfortunately, you tend to meet all sorts of people in alleys, and not usually the ones you'd like.

"Not a dealer, man. You got somewhere else to be," I say as I come to an intersection between alleys. Someone's been tailing me since a few seconds ago. And now, in this intersection, I find more corner boys, one at my front, and two more to either flank. They've got me right in between. I look at the one in front of me. Slow, unsteady steps. Lazy arms. Slightly cocked head. His eyes are wandering a bit. This guy is totally fucking high. I cast a quick glance at the remaining three, and find that the same is true for all of them.

"Well, can't say I didn't warn you." They close in simultaneously, the entire thing obviously planned beforehand. I reach inside the pocket of my jacket, pulling out my blade, seven inches in all. I sigh before it all begins. "Well, I guess this is as good a solution for boredom as any. You all wanna get high, right? Fine. We're all gonna have a different high tonight."

Maybe they want a quick fuck. Maybe they want some extra cash for dope. Maybe all they want to do is bash some skulls in. Far be it from me to decline that offer. At least, for a little while, I can relax, be the me that **Shiki** always wanted me to be, and lose myself in a moment of high.

They close in on me, faster and with a purpose.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - II

- May. -

- I need to write about her again. -

- I lose myself when I see her, drinking her presence in. My fingers become numb and I forget to breathe at the sight of her. Can I die from doing so? I need only look at her, and she buries herself again in my mind like a virus. She's invaded my life. Got deep inside, this miraculously perfect girl from my high school. I think I've fallen in love. I've never even talked to her, never even heard her voice. And that emptiness weighs more on me every day, so much that I'm scared. -

February 9.

The rain stopped sometime last night, and the city once again welcomes daylight, albeit filtered through a cloudy grey canopy that the rain managed to leave as a parting gift. I was up until late last night canvassing the crime scenes for clues, and I was so tired I decided not to go home and just crash at my old high school friend Gakuto's place, which was nearer. Good thing he was very accommodating. Now, despite my lack of sleep, I can't seem to shake off my custom of waking up early, but stuck with nothing to do, I spend the time looking out the window and looking at the dawn slowly creeping over the rest of the city.

"You up early, ain't ya? Maybe you're looking to fix me some morning chow?" It's Gakuto, awake now and rubbing his eyes. Of course, I decline his polite request.

"In your weirdest dreams. Besides, there's nothing but beer in your fridge. I can't work miracles, you know."

"Hah, sharp as ever, Mikiya. Time to bang on my neighbour's door and see if they have some grub to eat," he concludes with a yawn. I watch him

get up, scratch his head, and look at me for a moment, to which I muster my best look of disappointment. Then, still groggy, he struggles to reach the door, before doing a very slow double take on me, his eyes now as surprised as if he had seen a ghost.

“Ever take note of how pale you are at the moment?” he says to me. “You sure you feeling okay?” Frowning, I take a look at myself at his mirror. He’s right. I’m as deathly pale as a doll.

“Don’t worry. It wears off after a while. Acid only takes about four to six hours. Might be having some hallucinations and random synesthesia until then, though. Should be interesting.”

“Someday, you’re curiosity’s gonna make you end up face down in a gutter somewhere.”

“But it hasn’t.”

“Give it time,” he smiles. “So, you curious enough to try out what’s being passed around on the corners these days,” he observes, looking over at the remnants of my fix last night. Some blotters the size of stamps, and some rolls of weed still remain unused, scattered above his table. I nod.

“The weed you can throw away. The acid...well, I’m done with that, but you can have them if you want. It’s not addictive, if that’s what you wanna ask, and it’s definitely got to be more fun than the poor excuses for amusement parks we have here.” I grab the coat which I hastily hurled on top of the bed last night, and quickly put it on. It’s still 7am, and the city should just be beginning to breathe again. I don’t have time to be leisurely anymore.

“Heading out already? Stay for a while, man. You can’t even stand up correct, let alone walk,” Gakuto says.

“Can’t. Got things to find out,” I answer, surprised at how weak and throaty my voice comes out.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

I point to Gakuto’s TV. “Watched the 6am news a bit earlier. Seems last night, behind this love hotel called Pavillion—”

“The one with high prices for them suit-and-tie motherfuckers?” Gakuto asks, interrupting.

“Yeah, that one. Apparently the murderous monster killed some more people in the alley behind it. This time’s different, though. News said four people all at the same scene.”

Gakuto hums, a sound of curiosity, before turning on the television. Predictably, it’s all morning news programs, and will be for a little while longer. The content is unsurprising. The murderous monster again, and the subject is just as I told Gakuto. There *is* one new point of interest in this

report he's watching, and that's—

"The suspect is dressed in a kimono? How about that, huh?" Gakuto asks, keeping his eyes glued to the TV. I shake my head, leaving the remark hanging in the air as I continue walking towards the exit to his apartment. Though I'm better off than I was just an hour ago, I'm still a little shaky as I put on my shoes. As I do this, Gakuto walks up behind me, seeing me out. With his hand holding the two drugs I left behind on his table, he starts to ask a question before I leave.

"So what's it like taking both of these at the same time?"

"Can't say it's a glowing review. You only get what Hansel and Gretel felt." With that, I stand up and open the door, waving my hand behind me before leaving his apartment. I don't bother to turn around to see if he waves back.

It's only when I've stepped outside into the sun and closed the door behind me that I begin to feel the pang of hunger. I haven't eaten for a day. And the munchies from the weed is no doubt only making it worse.

It takes me an hour to walk from Gakuto's place to the crime scene that I saw on the news this morning. Nothing is out of place when I get there. Blue uniformed policemen are keeping a tight perimeter around the entire place, and aren't allowing anyone to get near. And of course, rubbernecks are there as well, trying to get their fair share of an unusual sight. Between them and the police blocking the entrance to the alley crossroads, I can't catch sight of anything useful inside.

I think about going to the Pavilion love hotel nearby, but then I consider that it would probably be a waste of time. There wouldn't be a receptionist to talk to, and whatever personnel certainly wouldn't even consider talking to me. And like hell they'd show me their security camera footage. And anyway, even if Shiki did make a stop at that hotel, she wouldn't be there now. So I decide to come at this from a different angle.

I came into contact with a particular drug slinger right around this neighbourhood when I was trying to find a friend of Gakuto's back in July, and I was tracing his whereabouts back to his usual slingers. I only ever got a cellphone number, so the phone is the only extent of our interaction, but I talked to the person before and that was enough for me. I find a pay phone nearby and call up the person up, asking for a meet to get some new information. There is a silence on the other end of the line for a few seconds before the person gives his consent. Then I make my way over to the address.

It leads me to a place far from the noise of the city's main avenues, outside of the commercial district. Here, old buildings crowd around each other, poorly zoned and a testament to what the economy had left behind. The apartment building I arrive at is an old, run-down place, the dirt of years that cling stubbornly to it making the color of the place darker than it was originally intended to be. It was obviously long abandoned, the front entrance having been boarded up. The address I have says to go to the second floor, however, so I look around for a fire escape. Soon enough, I find one, though it is missing a few steps and the rust has long overtaken it. I climb it, each footfall sounding on steel, and careful to watch each for a sign of dangerous collapse. When I get to the second floor landing, I find the door leading to the apartment's common hallway unlocked. I step inside, quickly finding the room I'm looking for, and knock.

Beyond the door I hear the sounds of footsteps, and the movement of shadows under the little stab of light emanating from under the door. This lasts for a few seconds before the wooden door finally opens slightly, and a person sticks her head out. It is the face of a woman, her long brunette hair sweeping down from behind her head. At first glance, she looks to be only a few years older than me. She looks me up and down, slipping me a visible smile before opening the door the entire way. She is dressed unremarkably, with only her red winter coat as a characteristic feature.

"Hey. I'm the one who called you this morning—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Hope nobody followed you. Wouldn't want anybody to know someone's living in here. Get in here, quick." Suddenly, she reaches out and takes my arm, pulling me into her room forcibly. I spend a moment trying not to stumble, and find myself inside a very messy room. Clothes and magazines and other assorted things have claimed possession of the floor, and in the middle of all of it is a kotatsu. The woman walks past me, quickly sitting down and slipping her legs inside the kotatsu. She gives me an impatient glare, motioning her head for me to come near her. And so, a bit more timidly than I'm used to, I sit down on the floor across from her. The kotatsu isn't warm at all, however, and I notice that it isn't connected to an outlet. Probably because there isn't even any electricity in here.

"So this is what you look like, huh?" she says in a high voice. She rests her hands on the table, and her head on her hands, tilted sideways so that she has to look up at me awkwardly. "Didn't really expect you to look the way you are."

I want to answer that it's entirely the same with me, but I hold off on it. She's acting a lot different than the two curt conversations we've had on the phone have led me to believe. I don't know how she slings her product,

but—

“Oh, it’s easy. Nobody really gives a hoot if you’re a guy or a girl, as long as you got the product.”

“Err, yeah, I suppose,” I manage to stutter out. “How did you—”

She chuckles. “You’re an easy book to read, and it’s written all over your face, you know? Still, though, I could swear from your voice on the phone that I had you pegged as some kind of reptilian look-type guy. Complete with widdle spectacles, ‘information is power’-type college boy. Well, guess it doesn’t matter in the end. So, what was it you wanted to ask?”

She blinks, then narrows her eyes. In that instant, though she did not move at all, I could feel something change in how she carried herself, almost like a switch has been turned on in her mind. Trying to ignore the feeling, I press on with my first question. I clear my throat.

“I guess I’ll start with what happened last night. Heard anything to the effect of witnesses to what went down with the murderous monster last night?”

“You mean the wild girl in the kimono with a leather jacket?” she says. The sentence catches me so off guard that I’m forced to avert my eyes from her. If she’s as sharp as she claims, she’d have probably noticed *that* too. She continues, “Don’t need to ask anyone else about that. I mean, I saw it after all. Let’s see now...I think it was around 3am last night? The rain didn’t seem to want to stop. This place is scary in rainy nights, and business has kinda sucked lately, you know? But that love hotel is a constant customer. They buy from me all the time. I was going out to make my delivery, and I passed by the entrance to the alley, and then I saw them. Four youngins, trying to mug a broad in a kimono. Shameless, I tell ya.”

There is a playful thoughtfulness to her eyes now as she recounts last night’s events, and before long I find my eyes meeting hers again. “The news says the suspect’s gender is unconfirmed. How do you even know she’s a girl?”

“Trust me, I’d know. Ain’t no better judge for a girl’s body than another girl, is there? That said, it *was* pretty dark,” she furrows her brow, as if trying hard to remember, then, “Wait, do you know this girl?” She raises her head now, and looks at me straight. I bite my lip. No answer. “Fine. Nothing to do with me, I guess. I was hoping this would be an info trade and not just me giving and you taking, you know? My advice, though? You should probably drop her like a bad disease. She’s not normal. I’ve been friends with dangerous people my entire career, and I know how crazy it can get. I’m friends with more than a few junkies, but they’re pretty safe as long as you’re not a dick. What I’m really afraid of is people like her.”

"She was something else. Four youngins got her surrounded, but she was at them easy-like. She had a knife, right? And then she was just dancing around them like a ballerina, swinging at them, but never enough to seriously hurt them. But it wasn't to avoid killing them, that's for sure. It felt more like she *wanted* to stab them over and over again. Like she was... enjoying herself. The dope fiends eventually got tired, or maybe the pain was getting harder to ignore, so they started to run. It didn't matter. The girl was faster. She jumped on them, killing three with a stab on the back. Why she waited until then to finish them off, I wouldn't know."

It went especially bad for the fourth guy she cornered. Guy had his face to the ground, crying and pleading for his life, but the woman didn't waste any time, and planted the knife straight to his neck. Then she just stood there for a long time, doing nothing except standing in the middle of all the carnage. I saw her eyes then, glowing for some reason in the middle of all that dark. A deep blue light. Like nothing else I've seen, I swear. I wanted to scream, but it wouldn't come out. A good thing, looking back on it. She would've chased me down and stuck me like she did those four guys if she'd heard me."

She says all of this with no gesture or gesticulation, just her eyes looking up at mine, affixed there as she tells her story. It tells me that she isn't lying at all.

"Something bothers me about that, though," I finally say after a full five-second delay. "You say you were hiding at the corner of the alley and the sidewalk, where you could only see silhouettes. How could you even know that the cuts weren't that deep? Or the state of the bodies?"

She grins. "You're right. I don't have solid proof I can show, and I can't tell you I was near close enough to tell you about how bad the cuts on the guys were. It's just the gut feeling I got, and some healthy assumption. Which is why I didn't take this to the cops. But if you want to find some other witness, then you're welcome to try."

"So it's safe to say that you probably couldn't truly tell what gender the suspect was."

She concedes me a tired shrug. "Whatever you say, chief. Again, I just know from looking. I could tell what she was wearing well enough though. It's a kimono, like the news says, but it had a jacket worn over it. Couldn't see the sleeves, see? In fact, without the sleeves, the kimono looks more like a skirt that way. Funny how that is, huh?"

"Yeah," I mutter absentmindedly, "really funny." Something *is* off about all this. All of it seems like the facts are too controlled. The manner of death coming to light first, making the city remember the entire affair that ended

three years ago. Then the frequency of the murderous monster's actions increasing exactly after this was exposed, paralyzing the city. Then showing his general appearance. All orderly, engineered. Almost like—

"Almost like a game, yeah?" The woman says with a tired wave of her head. I look at her, eyebrow raised, and she shoots me back a catty smile as she rests her head back on the kotatsu. "We done here? Cause there's not a lot more I can tell you about last night, you know."

I can't muster a reply. I feel like there's more to ask. I keep repeating in my head how she was in the dark, unable to see very well in the heavy rain. I keep thinking that she's wrong that she saw a kimono. Inside, I keep saying to myself that it isn't Shiki. But laying out the facts before me makes me expect the worst. It's just like three years ago, then. I need to keep believing. I haven't even seen anything with my own eyes yet.

"Yeah, I guess that's enough about what happened last night." I say, as much to her as to myself. "I still have some questions, though. This might be a weird question but, this was the first time there was a witness for the crime, wasn't it? I mean, especially since there's been a new body every day for the past week, and they weren't exactly happening in deserted places. Unlike three years ago, the murders today all took place downtown, and it's kind of weird that there hasn't been anyone that's stumbled on the crime as it was happening before now, or seen anyone strange wandering around."

"Mmm, I guess so, now that you mention it. But if you're asking if anyone I know has seen it just like me, then I'd have to guess no. Most of the bodies were dropped at places that we don't really cover. Besides, as a rule, it's not like slingers and junkies like to talk to cops anyway. And if you're going to talk about strange personalities walking around, well, have you taken a good look at us? We walk around town and we're considered strange. And people who wear kimonos tend not to go near us, if you catch my drift. I mean, who even wears kimonos these days? Wealthy old maids or something, am I right? Kind of strange to catch someone like that buying drugs from us, yeah?" She repeats the word "strange" in a whisper, as if muttering some kind of code to the table.

"Still, that makes you the first one to see the whole thing being done. The murder I mean. Don't you find that the least bit odd?"

She scratches her head, getting visibly annoyed. "What about it? No witnesses means no witnesses, and that's that."

"But with no one to see it, it's like a sealed room mystery, and that removes all meaning from it."

"Wait, whoa, what? Sorry, I'm kinda slow, mister college boy, so you're

gonna have to cut me some slack. If it's a sealed room murder, then isn't that a good thing? Police never find the body and you never get caught."

"Then it's not the kind of murder our suspect wants. As far as the people outside the room know, no crime has been committed inside the room. And in fact, a sealed room killer wants this, so as to bother people as little as possible. It's the entire point of it. When there's no way to get inside the room, the murder begins to look like suicide. When people think of murder, the suspect's going about the whole sealed room thing the wrong way. The thought of a suspect should be the last thing on your mind. But this murderous monster wanted to be found. Hence the locations he chose. Open, well-trod, in the busy portions of the city; far from being a sealed room. And yet, no convenient witnesses to him."

The woman hums an affirmative and nods her side-lain head. "But you do have a witness. Me."

"I know. But if this murderous monster wanted to show off, then a witness would have long ago surfaced." My theory, however rough, is all I have to go on. If I follow where it goes, then the next matter is simple. The fact that a witness was present last night means it was different. Maybe it was unplanned, not truly a part of the great architecture of his work.

"I think I'm getting it," says the girl probingly. "So you're thinking that the lack of witnesses on the other murderers had a reason. And that because I'm a witness now means he could have screwed up somewhere." She crosses her arms lazily and furrows her brow, as if she's just now parsing what I said. "You're pretty smart, college boy, though you could stand to get better glasses. So where are your thoughts stringing you along now?"

"I...don't know just yet," I mutter hesitantly. Annoyed, I look up to think. What else is there to think about? My hypothesis and...that's that. Suddenly, the girl, who still kept staring at me with narrowed eyes, broke out into laughter.

"Ah, silent type now, yeah? You guys do have your reasons, I suppose. So what's yours, I wonder? Out to prove the innocence of this girl, hmm?"

"There's a lot of stuff to be proven first before that. Like this new cocktail package getting popular. Anything you can tell me about that?"

"Ah, it all comes back to this, eventually." She gives me a sidelong glance, her eyes somehow bolder now more than sly, and it seems to me that even the air of the room changes with it. "I'm assuming it's the acid and weed combo you're talking about. Normally, that combo is called a 'mudra,' but that's not the same as the cocktail going around now. Not even close. That shit is fierce, buddy. One dip and you're gone, same as the rest of them. Start taking it every day, and it'll kill you in no time flat. I don't know what

kind of kick people get out of that."

"Is that so? I've tried LSD and marijuana before, but all I got was nausea and the munchies, then it just went down to the kind of level you'd expect."

"Going around town and don't know the first thing about drugs, do you?" She does a little *tut tut* before continuing. "Totally not a good idea. All right, let's school you college kid. Thing about drugs is your body can have a resistance to it. If it's weak stuff, you might end up taking more and more of it every time, and emptying your wallet in the process. Not the way to go, right? Then there's dependency. There's physical and mental sides to it, but to be simple, it's how hard it is for you to deal with when you don't get your regular juice. The stronger it is, the more frequent you start to take it. Ah well, it all starts with the person anyway. Easier for someone hopped up on acid to stop than it is for a smoker, oftentimes. Ask me, alcohol, smokes, and coffee are larger problems. Why drugs are illegal and those aren't is what I wanna ask."

I have to say, her little rant at the end makes me chuckle a little bit. Luckily, enough, she doesn't notice. Not that I think she's wrong or anything. She's probably right. But I like how she just suddenly flew into it out of nowhere. It takes her a moment to calm down before she continues.

"Well, fine, I guess it's true there can be drugs that are designed to make you so physically dependent, it can do some real damage to your body. On principle, I don't sell that stuff. That's why I'm not so good with the guys selling the Bloodchip. Don't know any, and I don't wanna meet any."

"Bloodchip?" I say. She nods.

"Street name of the new cocktail. It's a special one, that. Two blotters, mixed in with ten grams of weed will cost you only this much!" she says in an exaggeratedly excited tone. Then she raises a finger, a single finger. A thousand yen. Now, other countries have always priced their narcotics higher than we do in Japan, but this is ridiculous. Even a middle school kid would have very little trouble coming up with the money to buy regularly.

"Damn. That's like fast food prices now."

"Yeah, and getting lower, too. They get people addicted, and then they lower the price. What the hell is up with that? I mean, that's just bad business sense, isn't it? That's some dirty undercutting that even the yakuza don't do. And it's even worse than the stuff out there on the street. It might be some really pure LSD , I don't know. All I know is, it's getting more popular every day. What's weird is that you take it orally, right? But then it's more effective than shooting yourself up with dope. Never tried it, though."

"Is this a well-known fact?"

"Of course. It's how the trade goes. Surprised to hear you don't know it, actually, seeing as you're apparently in the market. Though the connect for the Bloodchip only uses children to sling his stuff, so I guess that limits how the knowledge gets passed around. Street level guys know about it, but the lieutenants don't give a damn. All of them think it's just some stupid children's game, probably. Guessing that's also why the cops don't have an angle on it just yet. They keep targeting the big name yakuza groups, but never the independent merchants like me. We're just too high class for them." She laughs again, a cheerfully mocking noise.

I on the other hand, only have what she told me to darken the mind. The dealer I got my drugs from never told me about this new one. I tried the wrong thing then. Judging from what she said, that might have been a good thing.

"Thanks, miss. You've been a big help, really." I thank her and move to get up. Time for me to get back on the move again.

"Don't get in over your head now, yeah? The connect for the Bloodchip is a really magnetic guy, or so I hear. At least the junkies seem to think so. I told you before that business has sucked lately, right? It's 'cause I'm the only one left in this neighborhood that's still not slinging the Bloodchip. It's not my thing, you know? But to the new converts to the cause, the entire thing almost looks like some New Age cult by now," she says with ill humour. She elects to stay inside the kotatsu, and in this cold, even without the electric heater, I can't blame her.

I navigate around the scattered trash and magazines in her room, and grasp the knob on the front door. I ask my last, almost forgotten question, without bothering to turn around.

"Oh yeah. Do you happen to know the name of the connect for the Bloodchip?"

"Oh, you don't know?"

She says the name. The answer was completely not what I was hoping for. For a moment, it makes me dizzy. Could this be what ties everything together? I struggle to regain my composure, hoping she didn't spot my momentary surprise. Those sinister eyes I looked into before must know by now, though she keeps her silence. I say my thanks again as calmly as I can, and head out the door and out of the abandoned apartment, back into the gray-black world of the cloud covered city.

- June. -
- My life now has never been closer to perfect. -
- To find out that having a conversation with somebody, without fear or restraint, has been very liberating. -
- Perhaps it would be at recess, or lunch, or even after school. -
- I would wait for him with a clinging anticipation. -
- And the times when we talk are times when my heart beats so fast, it begins to hurt. -
- But it is pain that can be ignored, so long as we can talk, and let it never end. Though it always must. -
- Ah, I see it now. -
- My world has been cloven in two. -
- And the boundary between these two worlds relies on that singular truth, the man named Mikiya Kokutō. -

When I finally wake up, the sun had long since set in the west.

I pull myself up, and make my way to the edge of the roof I had just slept on, and jump nimbly to the neighboring roof of a long abandoned low-rise. The roof that had so kindly served as a bed to me was only authorized personnel allowed, you see. That pretty much made it the closest thing I had to a perfect place to sleep in without being bothered. So I got to the roof of the abandoned low-rise next to it, and it was an easy jump from there to the next roof and freedom of sleep. More than a week now since I started this ridiculous life.

Unlike the other building, which had decidedly less external vertical access, this building had a ladder from roof to sidewalk level. Looking down before I use it to make sure the coast is clear, I quickly descend the ladder

and find myself back in a familiar alley. A silence engulfs the city at this hour, as it begins to get truly dark. Something dangerous is out. I can feel it in my bones. I keep myself at the ready.

Only scattered trash and paper decorate the lonely alley I stand in. Conveniently, one of these is a discarded newspaper, dated February 9, today. As for the front page headline, it comes as little surprise. The murderous monster again.

“Murderous monster kills four people. A kimono-clad figure...spotted in crime scenes?” I read out to myself. Huh. That’s an eyebrow raiser. Four people? Do they mean the four guys from last night? And this paper’s saying they’re dead. Kimono...do they mean *me*? It really did get hairy last night, and the whole affair was over really fast. But I couldn’t have killed them. I couldn’t.

God, I don’t even know anymore. All I know now is I need to find him. This murderous monster whose identity I don’t even have a fucking clue on. Like three years ago, I find myself drawn to the places where this killer has done his work, to think on them and see if I can find something in myself. I throw the newspaper away, maybe a bit more strongly than I’d intended.

“I don’t know anymore,” I repeat, whispering it to myself. The wind howls, and for a moment, it scatters the trash about. With people out for me, now, more than ever, I need to move so that no one sees me. Now, more than ever, the backalleys will be my passage. Now, more than ever, I need to hide myself in the dark, dirty places. Now, more than ever, I need to cast aside humanity, at least for a while. And even then it may be painful, painstaking, yet ultimately fruitless work. That I still don’t stop what I’m doing even though I know this, might be the clearest proof of my idiocy.

Every day there are no easy or fulfilling meals, no rest for my muscles, and no satisfaction to my sleep. I don’t have anywhere else left to go, but it still feels like I’m running from something, deep in the vast darkness of the city.

I think to myself, what the hell have you started here, Shiki? Holding my breath, hunting someone? After I’ve found the murderer, what then? Kill him? Is that what I’m really after? Mikiya...he wouldn’t like that. Just remembering him makes me feel more like I’m falling into a trap that I can’t pull myself out of.

I shake my head, trying to dispel all the troubling thoughts. It doesn’t work, but at least I remember to walk now. Once more into the breach tonight, I suppose. I need to end this fast. End it, and maybe I can go home...

At two in the morning, the entire city sleeps the sleep of the dead. Not a single human shadow in the roads, and the noise of cars are infrequent and always at some place far away, a few streets over. And always, the police siren clung to them, like the neighing of distant horses. Businesses are closed, and houses have their lights off, and dark clouds cover the moonlight and the accompanying twinkling of the stars, preventing any respite from the gloom. You'd think that with nobody out, that nothing would happen, that all would be well. Ah, but there's the rub. For there *are* people out, only hidden in the forgotten places of the city, in the thieves' highways and in the gutters and in the shadow of looming overpasses and buildings. With any luck, they huddle together for warmth and comfort. But the ones who ply the night alone aren't so lucky.

I walk the main street, which looks so strange and alien tonight having been deserted.

A fair distance away, I see a person, the streetlight behind him granting me only a silhouette to work with.

I stop. Something seems off about him. There is a droop in his stance that hides something about him. Something about all this feels so...nostalgic.

The shadow sees me, and slips inside a nearby alley.

My feet spring to life without my will, following the shadow.

A chill rises in my throat, but I ignore it, and enter the alleyway.

Inside the alley, it's like an entirely different world. The alley is a cul-de-sac, with the buildings forming walls all around it. Because of this, no sunlight shone upon it even on bright afternoons. Honestly, it looked more like a room than an alley, another place forgotten by the city. In this dead space, there was once one homeless person who dreamed his dreams of happiness and delusion, but not today. The walls of this alley just got a brand new paint job. There is a wet, sticky quality to the ground, and the usual smell of rotten food is commingled with an even stronger scent.

All around me is a sea of blood. Bodily fluids seep and flow through the alley, and the sweet, sticky smell pierces my nostrils. In the center of it all is the corpse. Whatever face he donned in death can't be seen anymore. His arms were severed, and the legs became stumps around the knee area, pressurized blood pouring out of them. Where the other ends of his arms and legs are, I cannot locate. The stumps themselves don't even look like they've been cut. It isn't the work of some fine blade, but more like the violent feeding of an animal. From someplace, I hear—or do I imagine it?—the sound of a hungry stomach being satisfied, and the noise of chewing, barely even an echo. It is the sound of tough meat being chewed on.

A world so different, even the bold crimson of blood was being overwhelmed by the raw smell of beastly warmth.

And behind the body, the shadows seem to part to admit another man. A man whose contours and curves snake around him with. He wears a similarly blood red jacket, and held loosely in his lazily hanging right hand is a knife, around seven inches long. The hair that almost reaches his shoulders is cut without a care, but long enough that you would wonder at the man's gender. At a distance, he would have probably passed as a girl. Only one thing differentiates me and him: his hair, a golden and noble blonde. The putrid air that washes over and sways that distinctive feature of hair lends him a carnivorous aura. A leonine character that presses deep down into the soul.

This was all much too familiar to Shiki.

All of this was much too close to a long, dearly departed memory, now come again to repeat itself like a curse.

It was a memory of summer's end, four years ago. A dead night much like tonight closed upon the town, and on that night, Shiki saw a shadow, followed it...and the next thing she knew, she stood, still as anything, before a blood-soaked corpse. What happened in between was not her own recollection, but of the other, **Shiki**.

"Who the hell are you?" said Shiki, talking to the individual before her that seemed like it stepped out of some image in her own mind. Shiki saw this "other" her, this blonde Shiki, move its shoulders. A quiver, a tremble. Not out of fear, she imagined, but out of a perverse pleasure.

"Shiki...Ryōgi," the shadow said. Shiki wondered if that was a reply, or a beckoning to her. The voice that said it was so plain that it could not be read. With a flutter of golden hair, the shadow turned to her. And she saw now that even the face bore the twisted resemblance, like looking intensely into a queerly discolored mirror. The blonde Shiki had red eyes, no less penetrating than Shiki's own, and the ears glinted with silver earrings. Though not a kimono, Shiki saw that the shadow wore a black skirt, reaching down to just above the ankle; a match for the deep, blood-red leather jacket.

But the shadow was no woman. Just a man, given the title of a murderous monster.

"It's you. You're—" whispered Shiki, but before she could finish, the murderer had already started to make a beeline right for her. Knife in hand, he moved low like a sprinter, with no other choice in this narrow alley but to try and break past Shiki.

Shiki quickly drew her own blade with a practiced dexterity, but the scowl on her face then still told of her surprise. The shadow drew close, but with no human quality to its movement. He brought himself like a coiled snake, striking. And for a snake, even this narrow alleyway was more than enough to serve as a hunting ground. And even to Shiki's trained eyes, the man moved much too fast for Shiki to reliably track.

And as soon as the distance between them was nearing a close, his pattern of movement *changed*. With a potent force, his legs folded and he jumped, all of it happening so fast that it seemed like an explosion of strength. And suddenly he was in the air, knife held pointed, then thrust with frightening accuracy at Shiki's head.

A tiny glint in the darkness, and a moment later, the keening sound of steel upon steel. Another instant with a grating noise, as the murderer's blade makes contact with Shiki's own cross-guard. And in that instant, as both knives embraced each other like brothers, both combatant's glances fell to each other's eyes. Shiki, with narrowed eyes of hostility, and the murderer's, with widened eyes replete with joy, and then the moment was quickly over.

With a visible grin, the murderer disengaged himself, turning Shiki's blade aside, and leapt to the side, behind Shiki and toward the other side of the alley, successfully going around her. Like a spider, he landed, having leapt six meters with one jump. And then he stopped, stood there, breathing with a beastly noise.

And already, with his hunched form, and impossible movement, Shiki could clearly see that he had long been far removed from any common notion of humanity.

"Why?" he spoke. "Why won't you take it seriously?" Fresh blood from the corpse graced his fingertips and the hem of his skirt, still dripping as he spoke. Shiki felt little need to answer him, but still looks at this man that looks so much like her. "You're not the same. Not the same woman four years ago. If you were the same, you would've killed me, but you keep toeing that boundary. I've wanted you for so long. You, so much like me. But why?"

He spoke with a voice so guttural that it almost seemed like his very heart would come bursting forth from his mouth, and his breathing was loud and rasping. As if the very act of conversing was enough of a strain

on his reasoning, and that his breathing would prove the death of him. *Is it pleasure, Shiki thought, some kind of arousal, or was he truly in pain?* Shiki decided that it didn't truly matter.

"I'd have never expected it to be you," Shiki said, a hard, cold edge to her voice. "A woman's name, and a body that could really be mistaken for a woman. We only talked once back at school, didn't we?"

The murderous monster shook his head in an unsteady rhythm. "Yes. So long ago. I've forgotten so much." He snickered, barely suppressing his laugh. He was enjoying this, somehow.

Shiki could find no joy to draw from here. She had sought this murderer out to finish all of this, and that was all. "How many have you killed?" she asks, her voice slight and almost hesitant.

The murderer giggled now. "Would you believe me if I said I've already lost count? I try not to think on them. Just numbers. Just numbers, all of them. And no one can point them back at me, can they? I'm free of the cycle of crime and punishment. And so I kill, sometimes for days at a time, as you've obviously known." He coughs violently, and seems to heave forward, but finds himself again before continuing.

"I've left so many things, so many traces all for you. All the murders. How I left the corpses. I knew you'd think they were familiar. What happened four years ago. Yes," he draws the word out in a long, low breath. "I thought that would jump start your memory. But you ignored me. Ignored all of it! It didn't make the right...impression." He flashes a smile, displaying a row of bloodied teeth that shine in the night. "They call me a monster. What I lacked in a name, people readily gave me. It's spot on, no? This week was very good for me, too. I did exactly what they expected me to after giving me such a title. After all, people need me to commit murder, so that they can demonize him like any other monster they know. Right? But you know all this, don't you, Ryōgi? You admired my work. You came looking for me. It's the seed in you wanting to be free, to find a predator just like you. Just like me. Yeah, I understand. I understand. Because I know you best."

His labored breathing became higher and louder, echoing in the silence of night embracing the alleyway. Shiki saw him lick off the stray spots of blood still clinging to the corners of his mouth, his tongue savouring each drip. It did nothing about the blood still scattered on his face. What was he doing to that corpse that would cover him in blood from head to toe? His eyes were bloodshot like a madman's. And in front of such a grisly sight, Shiki could muster no reply. The hate that welled up in her forbade any words, as though gracing the man's presence with even a single word would dirty it irredeemably.

Even if—or perhaps especially because—his words were hard to deny. Her desires, and her murderous impulse, coming together.

Shiki turned away from him then, hiding her face and her furrowed brow. But the murderer didn't miss a beat, as if he could himself sense the pump of blood, the telltale sign of minute perspiration that became the formula of trepidation. The man smiles, his mouth twisting into a crooked shape.

"Oh, that won't do. You keep holding back. You know what you're doing. There's something inside you, shouting out what you really are, but you deny it every day. But there was never any need to. Just submit. Do what it wants. It's what *you* want, too."

Shiki keeps silent, still looking at the man as one would look at poison. The murderer voices his last proposition.

"You're a persistent bitch, I know. So I know that if you can't return to what you once were, then I guess I just have to kill the cause of all this. Kill the one making you hold back. After which, everything would be solved. Go on. Tell me I can't do it. You were so close to solving the problem yourself three years ago. *So close.* Now I just have to finish it myself." The murderer threw his head back, eyes shut and laughing deeply.

"Tell me—" Shiki said menacingly. Her Eyes glow unlike before, blue and rich with the power of magic. She rushed toward the man, her movement so fast, and the man so distracted by his own revelry, that he never saw her. "—who's going to kill who, now?"

Shiki slashed effortlessly; her blade, empowered by entropy itself, passing through the man's arm and laying waste. His knife bounced lazily on the ground, forgotten, and his distinctive laugh turned into a scream of mad keening on the edge of hearing. He leapt away from Shiki, trying to find safety in distance. But Shiki was fast, and gave pursuit. He needed to find someplace that Shiki couldn't reach.

So he jumped high, higher than what seemed possible, letting his remaining hand cling to a stray windowsill in one of the surrounding buildings. Unbelievably, he pushed himself up, leaping higher and higher, clinging to pipe fixtures and parts of the wall chipped away where his hands and feet could find purchase, moving with the ease of a flying squirrel. And at last when he had climbed about twenty meters up, clung to the side of the building with the sureness of a spider, he finally dares to look back down on the alley where he had just so narrowly escaped from.

And down below, shining clear in the field of darkness, are the Arcane Eyes, an intense azure glow, unflinching and affixed as if they were the eyes of Death itself.

The murderer had made his way away from that fateful alley, even though his blood thirst hounded him terribly inside. It did not matter. Another sensation hounded him more now. A virgin taste of genuine fear. And after it, strangely, jubilation that he could scarcely control.

"I knew it. You're still real," he whispers under his breath as he skirts from rooftop to neighboring rooftop with a practiced effortlessness. "She was real."

Tonight, he knew, he had found the incontrovertible proof. That girl still prowled among the side of the world where the damned lived, the secret world of monsters and murderers that lay under everything. He would expose that side of her, bring it out like no one else truly could. He knew how. He needed only mention the notion of killing a certain someone to bring Shiki perilously close to that boundary. And if she had the sense to cross it, the man knew she would be a better monster than he had ever been.

"It's so simple. I just have to kill the one holding her leash." He leapt down in a gap too wide to jump, but grabbed hold of a low-hanging wire fixture, and used it to maintain his momentum and swing himself across to the next wall, climbing it easily. Losing only seconds to climbing, he was easily back on the roof. Down below, Shiki tried to give chase, he knew. He could *feel* her, feel the drive of the hunt. But it was a hunt she had lost minutes ago. Swiftness was key, and running across these buildings was what made him swiftest of all. Though the low skyline of the neighborhood had no trees to swing from, it might as well have been a dense forest for the likes of him. He could hide himself, track his prey, all in convenience. It was an art.

He felt alive more than ever now, even as the stump of his arm bled and left an obvious trail. Already, the blood had begun to clot, and the wounds began to close. Soon it would just be a mere stump. Near useless, but it didn't matter. He offered a single, rejoicing, and defiant howl at the moonless night. A cry of love unfulfilled for four years, now finally reaching its fruition.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - III

- July. -

- "I don't like weak people." That's what she said to me, very calmly. -
- "I don't like weak people." Just like that, Shiki Ryōgi threw me out like trash. -
- "I don't like weak people." I don't truly know what she meant by that. -
- But that night, for the first time in my life, I hit someone. -
- That night, for the first time in my life, I murdered someone. -

February 10.

It's definitely a cloudy day, but some of you are gonna have some welcome sunshine today.

I hear the weather report drone on in the car radio. It only takes one look out the car window for it to be clear that wherever that welcome sunshine is, it's surely not shining anywhere near here. Not a lick of change from yesterday.

With a hand on the steering wheel, I look at my wristwatch, seeing that the time is barely past noon. If this were any normal day, I'd be at Miss Tōko's office, calling some random person for an art exhibition, or taking care of expenses. But this was no normal day. I called her up this morning, saying I'd be taking a sick leave for the day, as I did yesterday. And now I find myself in my car, trundling slowly down the bay side harbour and industrial areas.

"Take it easy, Kokutō," was all the warning Miss Tōko said to me. I wonder if she somehow knew what I was doing. In any case, the warning isn't enough to stop me. Especially after last night, when another victim of the murderous monster had been uncovered. And of all places, too... the crime scene last night was the alleyway where the first murder was found

over four years ago. Only a fool would think that was a mere coincidence. With every day comes a new murder, and every day, the connections grow stronger, building towards something that the killer wants said to somebody. That means there's little time left.

After my little stint at the home of that dealer girl yesterday, I spent the rest of the day trying to find out where the Bloodchip package was coming from. As it turns out, the trail to the drug connect led here, to the harbor district, where the connect apparently lives. It's where I'm headed to now, address in hand, to finally confront this man who might hold at least some of the answers.

The deeper into the harbour district I get, the more the traffic starts to become dominated by 18-wheeler semis carrying various shipping containers and sea cans in different colors, all going out to destinations somewhere in the city, until finally, they are virtually the only traffic on the road, a trend broken only twice by a port authority car rolling up. Finally, I reach the main road that opens into the harbor itself, and from here, I can see the bay quite clearly. Ashen waters reflect an equally ashen gray sky as waves crash determinedly at the high waterfront. Only a few ships are in today: clearly not a busy day for the port, which typically handles 90,000 container tonnage a year, but today many of the gantry cranes stand inactive. Little islands dot the interior of the bay, some of them no larger than two football fields. A dull arc in the distance crosses the great expanse of the bay, the only bridge across it. Another bridge called the Broad Bridge was slated to be built, and was close to completion at summer last year. But it was...destroyed by a typhoon, and when inquiries were made into construction safety, all work was halted. There haven't been any rumblings about it being rebuilt, so now its gutted and twisted ruin stands there as a monument to failed industry.

As it happens, the address I'm looking for is quite near the Broad Bridge, and offers a clear view of the level of destruction it sustained. This part of the harbor is a quiet one, away from the usual bustle of the stevedores and the typical traffic. I choose a parking space on the roadside and get out, immediately noting the smell of saltwater in the air as I do so. The neighborhood is unremarkable, filled with small businesses catering to low-cost housing in the area. The proximity of the place to the noisy harbor marks it as a low land value area, yet today none of that noise can be heard. If not for the crashing of the waves and the returning undertow, the place would have been soundless. The address itself is little more than a wooden prefab two-floor apartment-for-rent that looks so run-down it feels like it was run through just as bad as the nearby Broad Bridge. And yet, according to the

rumors, the connect to all of the Bloodchip packages in the city apparently owns it. Running it through city records seems to turn up a name of "Alaya" for the owner, but I highly doubt that's even true.

The building only has six studio-size rooms on its first floor, and I knock and try every lock on the doors, making sure no one else is in the building. With a little nervousness creeping up on me, I try as quietly as I can to climb the wooden stairs leading to the second floor, though the rickety thirty year old stairs clearly show their age. I find the room I'm looking for, only to discover the door is locked. No real problem. I produce a screwdriver from my jacket pocket and set to work trying to pry the doorknob out by force.

This is definitely something crazy I'm doing, especially for me. But it isn't really the time to be bothered by decency. With the dealer out, this is my only shot at this. At last, after a few minutes of frantic pulling, the door-knob bends and comes lose. "Bingo," I whisper with satisfaction, and pass through the door to steal into the room.

Immediately after the entrance, I find myself in the kitchen. I expected to find some cooking utensils here, but none are present as far as I can see. For the most part, it even seems unused. The layout of the studio apartment itself is quite narrow, and would probably never accommodate any more than two or three people, and that would be pushing it. Another doorway leading out of the kitchen goes into another small room, though a bit more spacious than this one. From what I can see from the kitchen, I find it not so dissimilar to the room of the slinger I visited yesterday, though things seem far more cluttered and littered about, if that could be believed. Whatever force passed through the room, a typhoon or whatever, it seems content to leave everything where they were discarded carelessly. In the far wall of the next room, a curtainless window is placed, offering a clear panorama of the leaden sea. The distinct sound of crashing waves that I heard from outside is eerily muffled now, small and far away from hearing. The window seems like the only concession to decoration within it that I can see. Without anywhere else to go but inside the cluttered room, I make my way in.

As soon as I step into the room, and take a cursory glance around, I feel the blood rushing to the back of my head in shock, and a sensation of collapsing. Resisting my body's inclination to just fall down, I collect myself and pass a lingering survey of the room.

I came here to find something. I expected there to be drugs, some kind of process on how they're designed maybe, if I was lucky. Just some clue that would lead me to the next step. I never expected *this*.

"Shiki," I breathe out, though no one is here to listen. What I had seen from the kitchen as trash scattered all over the walls and floor are, in fact, photographs. I take one in my hands. This one is a photo of Shiki in her high school days. In some corners of the room are canvases, filled with amateur portraits and sketches of Shiki. Hanging by wires in the ceiling are more photos, and there are a bunch of albums in a small shelf. Too many pictures, too many to count. All of the same person. Shiki Ryōgi.

The pictures are all of various times, but none seem to go back farther than four years ago, to 1995. But many of them are extremely, frighteningly recent. There is a photo of Shiki in the uniform of Reien Girl's Academy, when she had to infiltrate the school for a case this January. No daily necessities, no food, or entertainment, or personal touches decorate this small room beside the sea. And yet, nothing could be more personal as this room. This is him, the man and his world entire, sprung forth from emptiness to fill void.

A cold sweat races down my back. This room's owner could be back at any moment. Should I leave? Or stay and talk to the man? Could there still be any reasoning with him? I shake my head, dispelling the thought. Any man can be reasoned, I tell myself. And this man and I have much talk and explaining to do. We haven't seen each other since school.

It is then, when taking stock of myself, when I spot the single book lying atop the desk beside the window. It is notable, because it sits on that desk as a solitary object, when all other things in the room are scattered haphazardly and without clear regard to order. This book holds an importance. The green spine, the binding, and the cover are immaculately clean, as if it were meant to be presentable to people other than its owner, as if it begged to be read. It rests there, shone on by the single beam of light pouring into the room from the window, the soul of this personal world.

I take it in my hand. And, perhaps playing into the desires of its owner, I open it to the first page.

I don't know how many hours have passed. But I have spent them standing in this room, reading this book, a diary of the room's occupant, until the very last page. It is a chronicle of murder, a history of violence and its genesis. It goes back a long way, well into four years ago, with the ritual murders. Where it all began.

I let out a long breath, as if I had just run for miles, and look up at the ceiling. The diary began at spring, four years ago. The very first line, from the very first page, was where it could all be traced back to. It clings to my mind, and will for a long time, as the point when a person's mind comes to change. His story is no different from any story, beginning simply with two lines:

"April 1995. I met her," says a voice coming from the entrance to the apartment, sudden and clear. Slow and uneven footsteps make their way across the hardwood floor, and when he reaches the entrance to the room, I finally see him, with the same intimate smile on his face.

"Hey. Long time no see," he says. "It's been, what, three years, Kokutō?" There is not even the slightest hint of astonishment in his voice. The man wears a black woman's skirt, and a red leather jacket. From the messily cut hair that barely reaches her shoulders, to his ambiguous features, he has clearly strived to look as much like Shiki as he can. His hair is, however, a vivid blonde to Shiki's rich black, and his eyes bear contacts that color them a deep red. "This is a bit earlier than I expected you to find me. Thought it'd be a bit later, actually." He avoids looking at me, and instead looks at the floor as he speaks.

"I thought so too," I agreed, holding down the lump in my throat.

"Right? Maybe I screwed up somewhere? I thought I'd removed all trace of myself after we last talked back in that old restaurant."

"No mistake on your part, I think. But there *was* one clue. Remember the apartment complex in Kayamihama that got torn down back in November? I had the opportunity to follow the paper trail for that building before that happened. Your name was on the list of tenants. After the business with that apartment complex, it worried me, since that was no normal building. Somehow, I felt then that you had to have some kind of connection to Shiki. Am I right, Leo Shirazumi?"

Shirazumi runs a hand through his blonde hair, combing it upward, before nodding. "The list of tenants, huh? You always were good at searching for people, Kokutō. It was another one of Alaya's little tricks of the Art. It didn't hold my interest for very long. And yet, thanks to it, I met the one person I never wanted to meet again here, earlier than I'd planned." He smiles awkwardly, and steps further into the room.

When he steps into the light, it's only then that I notice his left hand cut clean from just above the elbow, with nothing left below except a dull, dried stump. "But it sounds like there's nothing to hide from you. Yeah, it was three years ago, wasn't it? When you first saw Shiki with a body. It was no coincidence that you found me on your way to the Ryōgi estate.

I delayed you, because I wanted you to see exactly when she murdered someone. Alaya had already considered me a failure then, just a thing to be cast off. But I still think I made the right choice. It seemed like a disservice to a friend not to show you Shiki's true nature. What she's really like."

He sits atop the desk beside the window, speaking in a tender tone of nostalgia. As he is right now, he seems little different from the Shirazumi I knew back then in high school. So what is this then? I've read his diary, known he was the connect to the Bloodchip, and thought he had changed so utterly and completely. But now, he seems...normal. Composed, even. Just like the Shirazumi of three years ago, still smiling and good. But written in the diary in my hands is his claim of responsibility to the murders. All it took for him was one bad day, an one individual called Alaya—already gone by now—to change him into what he is. So his sins must, like any other person's, be answered for.

"The ritual murders from four years ago have started again. And now I find out that you're the one doing them," I find the words come hard to my mouth, though I keep my gaze at him straight. Shirazumi himself cannot bring himself to do the same, it seems.

"Yes," he nods. "But I wasn't the serial killer back then. Lay the blame on Shiki Ryōgi. I only wanted to protect you from her."

"You're not a good liar, Shirazumi." I say it more confidently now. From my coat pocket, I retrieve a single blotter of the Bloodchip, letting it fall to the ground. They flutter in the air before falling, joining the many pictures already scattered on the floor. A pained glance is all Leo Shirazumi can spare for them. "When you quit school to do something you wanted to do, was all of this what you meant?"

Shirazumi shakes his head. "Maybe I've strayed. Too much, you could say. Maybe I was a fool to think that I could even survive in this trade. I've made a drug that frees people from this prison. But as to how it all could have come to this, I honestly don't know." His smile is tinged with melancholy, and he shivers as he speaks. He grasps his cut arm with his good one, letting it wrap around his body, as if to gather what warmth he can. As if sensing where I was looking, he talks of his arm.

"This? Shiki Ryōgi again, if you haven't already guessed. I expected it to start healing in short order, but so far that hasn't happened. I suppose it's the nature of her spell of death. A wound will heal, but this arm is now truly 'dead.' Alaya *did* say to me that life in its true and pure form was the domain of sorcery beyond him."

Sorcery. I never expected to hear the word from him. But I suppose I should have, having read the diary. He was rescued by Sōren Alaya, much

like I was myself. All of this smelled of the stink of a far reaching, calculated plot. Could it be so, even though the man himself was already dead?

"Shirazumi, why all these murders? What's the point?" At hearing my question, Leo Shirazumi closes his eyes in recollection.

"I don't kill on a whim, you know," he whispers with a pained tone. He puts an open hand in his chest, clutching it as firmly as though he were in pain. "I haven't killed because I wanted it."

"Then why?"

"Kokutō, do you know a thing about what they call the 'origin?' Your master is a mage herself, isn't she? Tōko Aozaki? You must have heard of it at some point. It's a soul's true nature, the grand beginning. What one should be. The origin of my soul was awakened by Sōren Alaya, that demon that masqueraded as a plain human."

I don't think Miss Tōko ever told me about this origin, or the awakening of the soul. It's all gibberish to me. "I don't really get it, but you're saying that's what's making you kill?"

"Don't think I know a lot about the origin of the soul. I only know what Alaya told me; that because I was awakened, there was no going back. That it was like instinct in you, that we all had in some form. Sometimes, you get special ones, like mine. And unfortunately, Alaya happened to find a use in it." He breathes a deep sigh. Beads of sweat begin to collect in his forehead despite the cold.

Something is changing here. There is a dangerous tinge to Shirazumi now. I spy a quick glance toward the door, noting how far I am, and how near he is to it.

"Are you alright, Shirazumi? There's something wrong—"

"Don't worry about it, alright? This always happens." He exhales another long thread of air before continuing. "Listen, Kokutō. This instinct that I have...it destroys sense. It's stronger than my will. It's my enemy. Twenty years...of being me...isn't enough to hold it back. It's just like Alaya said. Anyone with his origin awakened is tied to it. I know...you don't understand, Kokutō. But my soul's origin is 'consumption.'" His halting voice stops to admit a violent cough, and his breathing has become rough and throaty without my noticing it, as if he were holding back vomit. The hand that presses tightly upon his chest clutches it desperately. He shivers now, more violently than even a minute before, and his teeth begin to chatter in anticipation.

"Shirazumi, what's happen—"

"Let me talk. This could be the last sensible conversation I can hold. Now...the origin. It changes the body in...subtle ways. Inside. The power

of the Art is inside you, making you capable of things that the body can't usually do. It's more than ancestral memory. It's returning to...some primal state. And it's so subtle, the affected person...doesn't usually notice the change." He brings his hand to his face, covering it and turning away from me, trying to stifle laughter. His shoulders shake, whether from laughter, or from his sickness, I can't truly be sure. "So that's what this is. Before I knew it, I became...what I am now. The origin is an overriding impulse. When it's awakened...I...stop being...I. Because of my origin...I have to consume." He pauses, his voice still trying to halt some inner change. "Fuck! Don't you understand, Mikiya?! Why the fuck does it have to be me, huh?! Why the fuck does my origin need to be this way? I'm going to die because of something I barely even understand. It can't end like this! I want to die, still being me."

Like in the throes of some great illness, his teeth chatter incessantly. He gets up from the desk. I manage to glimpse his face, and his eyes, tears welled up in them. His shoulder's don't stop shaking as he desperately fights himself.

"Shirazumi, listen. I have a friend. Tōko Aozaki. Let's take you to her. Maybe she can do something to help you."

Shirazumi's knees fall to the tatami covered floor, his face looking downward.

"No. I'm special. Different." He raises his head and looks at me. His convulsions are getting worse by the second. But his face holds a kind of surrendering tranquility that I didn't expect to see. "You were always good. That's right. You were always on my side. Maybe it's because of you that I can hold myself back right now. I don't...I don't want to have to kill you." He crawls the distance toward me, clinging to my legs with his one arm. The strength in that arm is unbelievably strong, and my legs almost give way from the pressure. But strangely enough, I don't feel so afraid. The greater the strength in his hands, the better I know how desperate he is, how much he wants to get away. And I can't find it in myself to refuse that.

"Shirazumi," I can do nothing except stand here, and utter his name, in hopes that he can remember. His hand climbs to my coat as he continues to kneel, and now I can feel his shivering, so violent that it feels like he's getting torn apart at the seams. And suddenly, he whispers in a low, far voice.

"I'm a murderer," he says, in narrow penitence.

"Yeah," I reply, gazing out at sea through the window.

"I'm not like you," he says, in retched contrition.

"Don't say that," I reply, gazing out at sea through the window.

"I can't be saved," he says, in choked confession.

"You're still alive, which means that's another lie," I reply. There is little I can do but to gaze out at sea through the window.

Words uttered on the verge of tears, and vague answers. What salvation is there in that? But at last, Shirazumi manages to force out the words that perhaps he hated to say himself. In a thin, threaded voice, he pleads.

"Then save me, Kokutō."

I can muster no reply. I curse my own powerlessness, how I can do so little to help him. There is a beat of silence between us.

Then he groans, a low rumble, long held, like a monstrous noise that comes from deep inside him. The hand he clasps my coat with gathers strength in it for one surprising moment, and he uses it to pull himself up. In one swift motion, he strikes my chest, and then a moment of disorientation, and a sharp pain in my back. When I pick myself back up, I find that he had flung me toward the wall. I look back at him. He looks back at me with maddened, bloodshot eyes.

"Don't follow. Don't look for me. Next time, I *will* kill you," he says, his voice calmer than it had been since he came into the room. He climbs on the desk in one swift motion, then smashes the glass window with one strike of his hand.

"Shirazumi! We can still go to Tōko Aozaki. I'm sure she can—"

"Sure she can what, Kokutō?" he spits out, malice clear in his tone. "Make me better? You can't even guarantee that. And if I get better, what's waiting for me? Nothing but a death sentence. And Shiki Ryōgi herself hunts me. I walk a path, and I know how it ends either way. But I still have to run."

He snickers for a brief moment before quickly jumping out the window. The last thing I see of him is his blonde hair, floating in the seaborne breeze. I hurry toward the window, casting my eyes downwards. But no trace can be found of him in the harbor.

"Idiot," I whisper, not knowing whether I directed it at Shirazumi or myself. This isn't over then. Not by a long shot. He thinks there's no way out, and I can't really promise him there is. I bite my lip as I leave the room, this temple to Shiki, thinking about how helplessly caught up I am in this whole thing. No easy solution seems to be forthcoming, but there are things left to do still. I need to find Shiki, and I can't let Shirazumi go, even if saving him seems impossible. I can't allow him to murder more people. For his sake.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - IV

- August. -

- I haven't had a wink of sleep since that night. -
- I can't even go outside. I'm so scared someone will see me. -
- I look at myself in the mirror. Spoiled. Comfortable. And I hate myself for it. -
- I'm the worst kind of person. -
- Nothing seems to be worth it. I'm not even eating. -
- Though no one has shot me, or stabbed me, or pushed me off a height, I am still a crumbling existence, living through the everyday like a man already dead. -
- And after the seventh day, I realized myself that the man I murdered didn't die alone that night. -
- Because the reality is a very simple truth. -
- That to murder someone means you murder yourself too. -

By the time I'd left the harbor and went back to my apartment, it was already well past sunset, and dark had settled on the city. When I go inside the room I had not been in for a straight two days, I turn on the light, seeing no one inside. On the table is a map of the city, spread out in full. Beside it is a mug filled with barely drunk coffee. Both of them untouched in these past days. Only solitary air rules this place, and Shiki isn't here tonight to dispel it.

I sigh; involuntarily, I notice. I had dared to hope. After all, since January, Shiki had often come here without telling me, doing nothing else except talking and then sleeping, then leaving at morning the next day. An eccentricity she had repeated quite often. And I had tried to put a slim hope on such a thing happening when I got home, for her to be lying on my bed, as

if the past few days had never happened.

I remember going to Shiki's old household servant, Akitaka, a few days ago. I was looking for any advice I could get. When I told him about how Shiki could often be so unpredictable, he silently placed a hand on my shoulder and said "I must leave the lady to you now." It stymies me until now, and I couldn't help but think at the time that it must have been some kind of circuitous and poorly worded compliment. Hard to believe that just a week or so ago, the days just came and went with me barely noticing. I'd always thought they'd be that way forever after what happened in November. Now every hour of every day passes slowly and trudgingly.

I snap out of my reverie when the phone rings. Probably Miss Tōko, come to add more burdens to the soul. I can't really blame her. I mean, I *have* been absent for three days. So, with growing apprehension at the kind of chewing out I might get, I pick the phone up.

"Hello? Kokutō speaking." In the other end of the line, I hear only a sudden gasp. And for some reason, it is a familiar sound, a sound of a girl I know. I take a wild guess.

"Shiki?"

There are two seconds of silence, and then...

"You *idiot*," she finally says with a tense voice, pouring all of her sneer in that last word. "Where the fuck have you been walking around? Maybe you haven't heard, but there's a serial killer loose. Haven't you been watching the news la—" then she suddenly cuts herself off. Of course I've been watching the news. And of course, she knows what the news has been saying. A girl wearing a kimono. It's exactly why I couldn't have just sat on my ass and do nothing.

"Fine, whatever," she continues with a sigh. "You're okay. That's all that matters. Just stay at Tōko's place until this whole mess clears over. S'all I wanted to say."

I am glad, at least, that she still knows how to worry. Because at least, from what I gather from her, we've been worrying together for the past few days. And yet it still causes some disquiet. If she knows she's not the killer, why hasn't she come home?

"Shiki, where are you now?"

"None of your fucking business."

"It *is* my business. You're trying to find the serial killer, aren't you?"

There is a long silence, when I can hear only her light spun breathing. And then, a single word.

"Yeah." She says it with cold, murderous finality, so much that I think I must have shivered. And so what I'd feared is true.

"Don't do it. Shiki, just come back home. You can't kill him."

"You've met with Shirazumi then, Mikiya. Then I gotta ask, are you out of your mind? What do you expect me to do? He's given me every reason to kill him." Coldness turns to a low, short laugh on the other end of the phone.

"Shiki! Just list—"

"No, *you* listen. I've got my prey. And he's not going to get a chance to get away. He's the perfect brand of crazy that I haven't had the pleasure of hunting for a while now."

Perfect brand of crazy, she said. I remember Fujino Asagami, the killer this summer that committed murder out of pleasure. Now it is Leo Shirazumi, a murderer that kills against his own will. And she thinks them the same, because it's the same murderous impulse that drives both of them; that drives her. The impulse of murderous monsters.

"And who the hell are you to judge who deserves to die? How many sins does it take?" I find myself saying it louder than I'd intended.

"Ah, finally the dulcet tones of your generalizations. And what kind of judge are you for people who deserve to live, huh? Does Leo Shirazumi, a serial killer who's killed far too many people, deserve to live? He's as fine a candidate as any for death, I'd say."

"Don't be a fool here, Shiki," I say urgently. She *has* to remember her words. "No one deserves to be murdered, and you know it. You don't hold the scales here."

"What I know is that he's beyond help. No longer human." She declares plainly.

Say she's right. Maybe Leo Shirazumi can't truly be called human anymore. But at his last sane moment, he said he wanted to be saved. "There may still be something we can do for him if we hurry. Just come back for now and we can talk, Shiki. Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back."

Silence, save for our frozen breaths. And long enough after the sentence hangs in the air, she utters her words. "I'm sorry. I need to."

"But why?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answers, her voice dry and tired. "Because we're the same. Both murderous monsters."

An admission so frank, so direct. I put a hand on my temple and close my eyes. "No, you aren't! I mean, you can't even pin a single murder to your name."

"Luck. That's all that is. It doesn't change a thing. I've come to realize something, Mikiya. That four years ago, I was *this* close to murder. Because

Shiki was someone who knew nothing but murder. But that's it. **Shiki** knew murder, but that wasn't to say that he liked it. And it only takes a moment to realize what comes next. That ever since I woke up from my coma, ever since **Shiki** died, something's still digging inside me, shouting murder, even without him. It's simple, really. Now I know that the one that truly wanted murder wasn't **Shiki**, who died, but *Shiki*, who survived." The voice on the other side lowers, cursing herself. Though it is little changed from her usual tone, it's the slight difference that becomes painfully noticeable. "That's why there's nothing left for me on your side of the world. And that's why you shouldn't wait for me to come back."

Her voice cracks with a little chuckle, more a scoff. Is she crying?

"You're making another mistake, Shiki." She doesn't answer. I continue, unfazed. "You said to me some time ago that a lifetime only has room for one real murder. Those were *your words*. You believed in that. And you, more than anyone, know the price of murder." After all, she had been suppressing—*murdering*, in her words—the **Shiki** personality ever since she had been a child. She knew the pain of **Shiki**, the victim, and of *Shiki*, the murderer. It's why I believed in her, in the girl who always seemed to hide some invisible wound. "I know you won't kill. You're saying that you haven't murdered anyone because you keep getting lucky? Don't make me laugh! You're the one that told me we make our own luck. You've always kept that impulse tucked away. Every person leans some way or the other. It's just that you lean on the act of murder. But you've been able to hold it in, and that means you can keep doing it. I'm sure of it."

"What are you so sure of? How can you even begin to understand something even I don't understand!?" she shouts, something so rare for her. But the answer is something I've long known.

"I know...there's good in you." I know, because she couldn't kill me three years ago. Shiki offers no answer, and it causes me to wonder where she is, what she looks like now, after seven days. What expression she wears as I uttered my words toward her, in that other world beyond the phone line. But all of it ends with words of parting.

"You never change, Kokutō. I told you, right? *Shiki* always hated that part about you." And after that, the phone cuts off. All I can hear now, is a repetitive digital noise, indicating that she had hung up. Her last words were the same ones that she said as she stood under the rain last year, at the end of summer.

The clock in my room shows February 12, 7pm. With my dislike of leaving a job I started unfinished feeling like the only thing driving me forward, I soon enough forget that I had not slept for two days, and leave my apartment.

- August. -

- Every day, my brain continues to give ground to insanity. -

I know...there's good in you.

I remember, and it lends my feet to stop. When I find that the only sentiment the words dredge up from me is a strong irritation, it only makes me more annoyed.

“Optimism must be in his blood,” I conclude, grinding my teeth as I imagine what kind of stupid face he must have had as he was saying that. I try to make the image vanish.

He really hasn’t changed in four years, that guy. Still clinging to a misplaced belief in a murderer, still trying to smile at me as if all of it were nothing. Giving me a taste of normalcy, a promise of some attainable dream, all of it a foolish fantasy. A fantasy of someone abnormal like me living and having her place under the sun. *Shiki* always used to hate that, and now I understand why.

The past always comes back to square with you. I tried to kill him once before, and I don’t know if I can stop myself from doing that again. So that’s why I need to be far from him now, so I don’t question myself, and so I can be far from whatever pain his presence just engenders. But all it results in is me being the old me again, someone who thinks of Mikiya as an unwelcome hindrance. I can’t say for certain if that’s what I truly believe in.

Two hours after my chat with Mikiya, I finally get to where Leo Shirazumi likely made his final retreat. I’d tracked the place down well before I called Mikiya up. It was fairly simple to follow Shirazumi’s trail. Blood, the smell of weed, and some questions to a few street level dealers who I left only a little intimidated and worse for wear all soon pointed me in the right direc-

tion. Now, I'm back here again, eager to settle the score once and for all.

The harbor is dead at night, the steel cargo containers stacked together forming impromptu structures that make the entire place feel like it's a town that was raised overnight. Somewhere in here is the last redoubt of that murderous monster. Eventually I reach the part of the harbor that's quartered for storage and warehousing, and at that point, it is already well past 9pm. Few people live here in this part of town, and even fewer have any reason or desire to go here. The only lonely company here is the blackened sea, and high lamps shining little pools of light on the streets and walkways below. Perfect, then. This means there's very little chance of anything or anyone getting in the way.

At last, I reach my objective: a fairly sizable warehouse near the Broad Bridge. I grip my knife in my left hand, and my right is hidden inside my jacket pocket, fingers holding a smaller throwing knife. Checking myself, I walk toward the building. It looks big enough to rival a school gymnasium. The walls go up to about eight meters, and has windows going round it at regular intervals around the seven meter mark, and I suspect some larger windows in the roof as well. Much like a greenhouse, it must be terribly bright in there during daytime.

From afar, I thought that I'd have to try for the windows somehow to gain entry, but as I neared the place, I realized I don't have to. The steel door of the front entrance itself is slightly ajar, the handle long overtaken by rust. Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if it was a trap. I briefly consider trying to go around, but I remember Mikiya. *Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back.* I wonder what he meant by that.

Fuck it. The faster I can kill Shirazumi, the faster I can get these doubts out of my head. If going in the front means it draws Shirazumi out faster, then so be it. I open the door wider, and take a step inside, exiting the dreariness of the port, to enter something far stranger.

Skylights are indeed placed on the roof, which along with the side windows, prove to be the only place where moonlight manages to seep through. The light reveals exactly what this warehouse's purpose is. A few meters from the entrance, thick foliage is planted in the open soil. The plant's reach close to knee height, all of them the exact same breed. Cutting straight through the middle of it all is a concrete path. This is it. This is the garden he uses.

A rustling in the brush catches my attention, over where no patch of light shines to reveal his position. I'm not alone here. He's watching me, determining what his next move will be. I suddenly realize how vulnerable I am in here. Why the hell did I even step into such an obvious ambush

where he has the advantage? Mikiya, and his stupid words. Is he throwing me off my game that much?

At that moment, the thick foliage rustles loudly, and I see some shape in the darkness parting the plants as it runs, close enough to me now that it startles me. He closes the last few meters with vigorous steps, emerging from the shadows leaping with knife held high to make a vicious overhead slice. Smart move, but he revealed himself a moment too soon. My left hand moves, meeting his blade with a parry from my own. The blow is warded, but it was so strong that my arm falters for just a moment.

Any experienced in-fighter would spot that and press his advantage to hammer home, but Shirazumi is clearly not so experienced. He uses that momentary lapse of my guard to make good his escape, jumping high and away from me. Just like last night, he makes an inhumanly high and long leap toward the wall.

Of course, not being a bird or a spider, I clearly can't follow him like that. But I've come prepared for that move. As soon as he jumps, I quickly take an educated prediction at where he'll land. And before he even lands, the throwing knife hidden inside my pocket is sent flying by my right hand to intercept its target. A second and a half later, and I see it scored a hit, enough to elicit a painful grunt from him as he falls to the floor. I was already sprinting as fast as I can toward him as soon as I threw the knife, and when he fell, I banked on the fall and the knife hurting him enough to be disoriented and confused. The gamble worked, and it gives me the extra few seconds I need to rush up to him and pin him down to the ground by straddling him.

Now he looks up at me, his face a mixture of confusion, anger, and surprise. Surprise at how quickly I adapted from last night's little indecisive dance, maybe? Whatever the case, I savor the look on his face, and how he's lost for words. This boy who looks so much like me is silent as my left hand raises the knife. A boy. That's just what he is. A little boy, so powerless, so scared.

"W...wait a minute," he pleads. But prey do not get the privilege of begging for a reprieve. I stab my knife downwards...much as I had wielded a similar one, but against a different boy, in some other rain-soaked night.

"What?" says a voice, choking on its own surprise. It is the prey's voice, as well as my own, both startled at what just happened. The knife closed to his throat, and I stopped it right before it pierced flesh and gave him the red smile. I put my strength in my left hand. No escape will avail both of us now. The boy cannot escape my blade...and I cannot escape wearing the boy's skin, becoming the murderer. And in so doing, I will be alone again,

with nothing to call a home, nothing to hurt or pain me, living freely; a daughter of chaos.

Yet, why does my left hand not move? Why can't I kill Leo Shirazumi?

There's no going back. The words echo in my mind.

The prey has more than enough time to exploit that moment. He pushes me away, trying to slip away from my grasp. He rises, trying to escape, but in so doing, he reveals his back to me, defenseless. He wouldn't know. My Eyes and their Art weave the lines of death into sight, and I see them tracing out and around his body. All that is left is to swing the knife.

There's no going back. And just like that, my last chance slipped from my grasp. And it was me who let it slip, willingly. What a farce. A great farce. I had the chance for the sweet taste of murder I had craved after for so long, but I couldn't cross that last empty boundary. All because of such simple words.

"Fuck!" I shout reflexively. I never asked for a way back into his world. I never asked for this world's forgiveness. But why? "This is all...because of him," I whisper under my breath, each sound a pained and angered breath.

Now the prey I had let slip begins to laugh. The prey who had only seconds ago feared the predator in front of him has seen his enemy for what she really is. Broken. And now he returns to the skin he donned last night, the mask of the murderous monster. And I cannot kill him, cannot stop him, cannot even bring myself to run.

- *August.* -
- *Alaya was right.* -
- *I am perfect.* -
- *None can blame me for murder. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun. The gift of delirium.* -

The rain is pouring.

I open my eyes to the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof; a low, muffled rumble.

“Huh. Still alive,” I observe, my voice dulled. The next thing I feel is the concrete underneath my back, before I realize that I’m lying down, which makes it feel awkward for a moment. I raise my head a bit, my vision still swimming, to look at what’s in front of me. Green. The weed, all over the warehouse. And suddenly I remember where I am.

I look up at the windows on the roof. Sunlight streams through them, but dulled and colorless from the heavy rain. Still, the light that does get through is surprisingly intense, so much so that much of the place seems to be lighted quite well, albeit with a tint of dismal purgatory that helps little with the gloom of the garden. And so here I lie.

My last memory takes a while to resurface, but I suppose Leo Shirazumi knocked me out. My hands are bound by steel handcuffs, and my entire body feels slackened and weak. Due to some drug, I’d imagine. Even my consciousness doesn’t seem to be a sure thing right now. My mind is empty. All I know is that I’m here, cuffed and lying on a concrete floor, fighting between dreaming and waking, and barely able to see or focus on anything except the silhouettes of the lazy trailing of fallen winter raindrops on the roof skylight. I only notice then how cold it is in here.

It's the damn drug he shot in my body. I close my eyes for a moment, and my mind almost immediately reels back to a memory that has been weighing so heavily on me recently. A memory from three years ago, from what feels like a distant and completely separate life.

The rain was pouring.

The night was so cold that it felt like it could shatter bones as easily as frozen ice. Unsheltered from the rain, *Shiki* gave chase to Mikiya Kokutō. She ran, relying on the faint shimmer of streetlight piercing through the veil of pouring rain to guide her way. The wet asphalt reflected the ethereal light, even as shadows danced upon its surface. *Shiki* ran desperately. That man in the black coat had spirited Mikiya away earlier, but now he saw him just ahead, standing alone, no help forthcoming.

When she had caught up to him, she brandished her knife again. The boy could not find his words, nor could he run, for *Shiki* had earlier slashed at his leg. The blood from that slash still flowed, leaking down onto the asphalt and mixing with the rain. Yet now, as she had Mikiya in her grasp, when one slash could spell his death, she hesitated.

"Why?" *Shiki* whispered to herself. "Why?!" she repeated, shouting it in a rage. She could feel the bile rising in her throat. They faced each other then, both wearing a strained expression. "When I'm with you, it's always so hard. You show me what I can never have, but my madness grows each day. So...I have to kill you. So that this illusion you've given me can just fade! So that I can stop believing in lies! *So I can go back to what I was again!*" She cried out, her voice clear even in the din of the rainfall. It was a child's voice that shouted then, confused and close to tears at what had been thrust upon her, angry and full of self-loathing. And even in the endless gray veil of the rain, Mikiya could see the tears trailing from *Shiki's* eyes. He struggles to find the words for a reply.

Inside *Shiki*, a presence—her friend and tormentor, *Shiki*—whispered silent thoughts into her mind. ***All people dream, Shiki. How heartless can you be to stop yourself from doing it? How much more pain can you endure?*** And after those words, she could feel the familiar sensation of letting herself slip, of the other consciousness sliding into the part of her mind that governed.

And in the end, *Shiki's* murderous impulse was halted neither by herself

nor Mikiya. Because it was **Shiki**, always asleep, always the dreamer, that didn't want to destroy the dream of an existence with Mikiya. Because no matter how impossibly distant it may be, or how painful its idea, it was as important a reason to live as anything. So, it would stay, because its extinguishing would only hurt *Shiki* more. But *Shiki* was confused, unable to take any more. It would be up to **Shiki**, then.

The girl, controlled now by something else, took a slight step back, still facing Mikiya. Another small step, closer out into the main road behind her. Headlights rushed headlong from a distance, the beam of light dulled somewhat by the rain. That is when she decided, when the car was close enough to hear the roar of its engine. Mikiya never realized the simplicity of the answer.

"If I can't make you go away...I have to make myself go away," she said like a prayer. She offered a smile in those last moments: a gentle, earnest, and happy smile, but fleeting and soon to fade. And in the next moments, the headlights grew blinding and bathed her in light. She welcomed it. The sound of brakes shrieked through the midnight air, but it was far too late. She flew.

I had forgotten the memory for so long, but as that mage Kurogiri said, it always lurks inside of you. It doesn't fade away or wither.

I was supposed to die that night, and the one who would wake from the coma would have been **Shiki**. But in those last moments, he took my consciousness, and he became the sacrifice. It was the only way he knew to protect his dream. He knew what would happen. He knew that if he was left in this body, that he would have nothing holding him back from the murder that was the focal point of his existence. And he entrusted me to make that dream real. After all, he could do nothing but sleep in his brief existence. I was the one who ruled my body, and as long as I kept that control, he would always be asleep. He was dangerous as a beast, cornered and lashing out if let loose, and always bound by his nature as a murderous monster. Without it, he couldn't *be*.

And yet we harbored a mutual dream; a dream of normal existence. And it wasn't so strange if I think about it. After all, weren't we the same, with the same upbringing, the same experiences? It's not so big a stretch to see why we'd yearn for the same thing. But I was able to maintain the

masquerade of normality; **Shiki** couldn't. He was the paradox of my existence: to scorn other people, but to hold the desire to be one of them as well. He'll never get to see his dream of me living content and whole now. His only dream, contradicting his existence, thrust onto me. The dream we had met that March day, the classmate that **Shiki** had grown to like. The one who, I had fervently hoped, would lead me to that seemingly impossible path. **Shiki** knew how it would all end if he had remained inside me, how Mikiya's existence would always threaten how I'd always lived, and how the contradiction would drive me insane, how it would lead to me killing him. Our dream, crushed by my own hands. **Shiki** saw that end, and chose the only way out. Above all things, it was *him* that had to disappear to protect our dream. So for **Shiki**, the dream goes on.

That's why I want Mikiya to always remember **Shiki**. Because now, this life is the dream **Shiki** had always fixed his eyes upon. It's why I speak like him, to remind everyone of the man that was just as close a part to me as my own heart.

The rain doesn't stop, and doesn't look like it will any time soon. My mind is still a dim blur, still snatching at half-remembered memories of dual personalities, and of emotions long kept. Yet it is a helpful fever dream. When **Shiki** died, no one lit a candle for him. No one prepared a vigil. Not even me. I think I never truly accepted his death. But now I realize, in this final memory that he left me, it is time to finally let him pass. This is my vigil to my first friend.

I remember his last thoughts, before that car made me tumble and break.

Thank you. But I'd never think of killing you.

It wasn't said to me, but to Mikiya, who watched helplessly that night with arms held outstretched toward me. Murder was his only way of understanding, his last method of connecting with another. But **Shiki** couldn't even say his last words to the man who had deserved them.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - V

- *But killing by itself does not quiet the voices.* -
- *Being all alone only makes them louder and louder.* -
- *I need someone just like me. Someone as broken.* -

February 11, Thursday.

I'd been thinking long and hard on what Shirazumi said to me, and in light of what he revealed about his condition, I've decided to finally talk to Miss Tōko about this. So far I'd tried to keep her out of what was essentially a personal matter, but if what Shirazumi told me was true, then he's somehow being influenced by a spell woven from the Art. As soon as I heard him speak that word, I knew that it would be prudent to consult the only (decent) mage I know. So under a torrential rain that has poured since the early awn hours, I drive over to Miss Tōko's office, ultimately just a stop before I go back to the harbor to see if I can find something more.

It takes longer than I can believe to tell it all to Miss Tōko, about all that I'd found about the drugs, and especially about Leo Shirazumi, and when I finish, she only hums to herself as she lights up yet another cigarette. After waiting long enough for a reply that I thought was forthcoming, I speak.

"Something wrong, Miss Tōko?"

She looks at me with a disaffected, morose stare, and then takes off her glasses. "No, nothing wrong at all. Just thinking how best to tell you that there's really no way to treat your friend. Oh hey, there you go. If it's been four years since his origin was awakened, then he's...well, he's not your friend anymore." Smoke trails up from the cigarette she set down on the ashtray. She leans her cheek on one hand propped up on her table, and lets her gaze drift upwards, as if she were deep in reverie. "Still, one of the awakened, huh? A dull parting gift, even for Alaya. Weak willed as your

friend seems to be, he wouldn't have stood a chance against the power of that Art. His degeneration was inevitable."

"Can you explain to me what this 'origin,' actually is? Shirazumi said it was like some kind of instinct that overrides your own will, or something like that."

"Partly right, but not the whole picture," she says, transferring her cigarette to her left hand so she can gesticulate with her customary right. "If you think living for twenty years is enough for you to assert that you are yourself, and that you are in control of your body, think again. Your will is as malleable as any aspect of reality the Art can manipulate. Character rules your mind, and it is the flesh that expresses that outwardly. New Age solipsism turned out to be truer than anyone thought, I suppose."

She puts her free hand on her chin, before asking me a strange question.

"Do you believe in past lives, Kokutō?"

"I don't have a say either way, really. I'm not affirming it, but I'm not categorically denying it either."

"Spoken like a true politician, I swear. Cyclical and repetition. You see it everywhere, from occult lore to scientific theories. Spirits, souls, and life. Outside of all these concepts, there is the origin, reincarnated into something else, eternally. And from that chaos is born a certain order. Certainly, it is said that mages also make use of this manifestation of age-old power, making all of us lean towards some aspect of personality. A purifying cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Follow the origin to hundreds of spiraling lives lived, until you reach the primordial origin of the soul."

"The Collegium teaches us that there is a place and time where existence first came to be. But in eternal paradox, there is no life there. Only the impetus for creation. An overriding direction, an entropic tendency to chaos that drives all of reality. Such shards of creation obtain a purpose, a task, placing themselves into things part of the Pattern of reality that matches its symbology. An animal perhaps. Or a plant. Sometimes, or eventually, it may be a man, finding his soul. Sometimes, these purposes can feel like an imperative."

"This chaotic impulse is what mages call the origin. Is it instinct? The Greek 'daemon?' Ancestral recall? Moments of genius? The voice of God or the devil? Ask five mages, you will get ten different answers. But whatever it is, it is burned into your soul, and it would be folly to turn away from it." She smiles then, as if what she had just been saying had not been in any way peculiar. Yet I understood her well enough, surprisingly. "For the vast majority of people, though, they are never aware of it. It is just *there*, close but never near enough to be important. It differs for each person. Shiki,

whose origin is emptiness, is compelled quite strongly. But Azaka, whose origin is the taboo, is still quite normal. But to those awakened to it, well—it's a whole different ball game."

She looks at me with narrowed, razor eyes. Even I know what she means.

"So by being awakened to it, you give in to that impulse completely?" I venture.

"Yes. Little by little. Leo Shirazumi has fought it every step of the way. But in the end he has little choice except to give in to it. 'Consumption' is a pretty unique one as far as origins go, though. I can see why Alaya kept his eyes on him. Look, Kokutō. If Leo has an origin of consumption, then predatory lineages must have been his origin's legacy. When you're awakened to your origin, the weight of all your previous lives becomes too hard to bear. Leo Shirazumi is more beast than man now. While his humanity as Leo Shirazumi still remains, the beast scratches away at that, until it is finally gone. Fairly interesting development, I'd say," she says coldly, appending a laugh to her final comment.

While she always wields a grim humor, I can't ignore her last sentence. "Is all this business with the Art just a game to you people? It's all *that* mage's fault, isn't it? The one he met. Shirazumi couldn't have brought this on himself."

"Really, now?" she remarks, her voice acquiring its signature menace. "The spell to awaken the origin cannot be woven with the mage alone. It is the one to be awakened who first feels the stirrings of his soul begin to call out to him. Then there is the bargain in the form of a spell, predicated on the consent of the one to be awakened. Which means Leo Shirazumi always had a choice. His transformation into a beast is of his own volition, as are his murders. He *wanted* this. The life he cast away can never return to him, no matter how much he wants. It's too late for him. This is the true face of the man you knew, and more fool you if you think I lie. His last words to you were the death throes of a damned man trying to eke out that last bit of sympathy from you."

They say that any good instructor has a stern and firm voice. That is the sound of Miss Tōko's voice now, a tone I have not heard her adopt ever since that incident in November, and she has never spoken or looked more serious. And because of that, I know for a fact that she isn't kidding. She looks at me with a frown, perhaps expecting me to press the point and being disappointed that I haven't yet provided her with the verbal ammunition to chew me out. All that's left is an empty helplessness.

"Is there nothing you can do for him, then?"

"The spell that binds him is the final, great attainment of the mage who

used the medium of souls to chase after ascension. It would be a mercy to grant him peace, but there's little you can do to stop him. It's a miracle for Leo Shirazumi to even hold out as long as he's had. Tomorrow, he'll be different, a beast that abdicated his humanity."

I want to cry out at the futility of it all. He asked me to save him. Why would he do that if he knew that he couldn't be saved? Was it the truth, or was it, like Miss Tōko says, just a ploy for something more sinister?

"Oh, man. You're an easy book to read, Kokutō. Well, I can't very well stop you on your little quest, but you're up against a monster. Leaving him to Shiki would be the wise option. She's hunting him to finally close the book on what happened four years ago, right?"

Settling matters, huh? That's part of it, for sure, but it's definitely not the whole story. I couldn't help thinking in our conversation last night that I heard the same strained voice from her in that night when I almost lost her. When she almost made the choice of murder. What could prompt her to be so inclined towards killing?

"Miss Tōko, why does someone ever kill someone else?" I ask, hoping for a reply that is not so reproachful. Miss Tōko leans back comfortably in her office chair, and says her answer without an ounce of reflection.

"It's emotional release. When you kill, that's an outward expression of how you feel. People can only hold in so much. Whether it's love or hate, when you're filled with emotion, it has to get out somehow. It's how we deal. Those who hate try to forget it, or try to separate themselves from what they dislike. The extremes of hate go towards murder. And because they see it as self-preservation, what moral code they cling to temporarily disappears, becoming unimportant."

"But there are people that commit murder even without that reason," I put in.

"That's massacre, not murder. When one looks both on his past and his human dignity, weighs them, and throws one away; *that* is murder. That way a man pays the price, and carries the weight of the sin of murder. But a massacre is different. The victim might have been human, but the killer lacks the common dignity of man, and is thus no longer human. The sin does not weigh heavily on such killers."

I remember the diary, and what was written in it. *To murder someone means you murder yourself too.* "The news always talks about this murderous monster. What do they actually mean when they say that?"

"Exactly what it says on the tin. A monster that no longer cares, carving their place in the world until they fade like a natural disaster. People dragged into its influence are the poor, unlucky souls."

Miss Tōko's answer startles me. I can swear I've heard Shiki say the same thing once. Yes, right before she disappeared, ten nights before this. We saw the news, and she said to me that you couldn't really call what the suspect did a murder. How she said that a lifetime only has room for one real murder.

"That's it...now I remember..." I mutter in a low voice. Yes. Miss Tōko and Shiki are saying the same thing. Shiki told me the words once, and how they were the last words her grandfather left her. Family words that have guided her entire life. But now, she's about to stray. Me and the murderous monster have been led to the same realization by Shiki, unwitting or no. I don't presume to know what Shiki feels about me, but something about it pains her, and leads her to lash out and kill. Something inside her is giving way to feelings that I'd thought she'd long parted with, and now she thinks that killing someone can save her. Her impulse of murder is winning again.

Shirazumi thinks the same way. But he thinks he'll benefit from Shiki's loss of control. Perhaps he thinks, deep inside him, that he would have finally found a friend, the same as him. *Someone just as broken*, the diary had said.

"Sorry to have bothered you like this, ma'am," I say abruptly as I rise from my chair. Miss Tōko frowns, but it's the kind of frown where she seems to already know what exactly I was going to do.

"Oh, we're done are we? It's raining cats and dogs outside, Kokutō. Think it'd be a good idea for you to stay in for a while?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I realized I have to go." I make sure to bow before I walk out the door. Before the door to the office closes behind me, I hear Miss Tōko say, "Be good on yourself out there, Kokutō. And I'll see you tomorrow."

I 5

I dream an old, bittersweet memory.

“There will come a time in any man’s life where he will kill.”

“For true?”

“Yes. And there will also come a time when any man can permit himself to die.”

“Permit himself?”

“A life is a life. And death is respected and feared, esteemed as the true end. All life is equal. And yet you cannot claim the one you hold as yours.”

“Then what about you, grandfather?”

“I can’t as well. There’s too much blood on these hands. I became death for so many, so I have surrendered the right to my own. Without anyone to pay the price for my death, all that awaits me is the final emptiness, and a solitary oblivion.”

“So there is only enough for one?”

“Yes. A lifetime only has room for one murder. After this, all of it becomes less intoned. The first is always the most important decision. The men who have committed massacres can never turn inward to kill themselves. Because their death would no longer be a human death.”

“Is the sickness hurting you, grandfather?”

“Yes, and I fear this is our parting. Goodbye, *Shiki*. May your own death be filled with peace.”

“Grandfather? What is happening? Why do you die so lonely? Grandfather—”

The sound of something sticky intrudes on my dream, and I wake up. It is a sound different from the ceaseless patterning of the rain on the roof, which has faded into the spectrum of ignorable background noise. I open my eyes, banishing the dream from my vision. Here, in the single concrete pathway cutting right down the middle of the brush, I lie with hands bound, abandoned.

Little has changed since the last time I drifted back into waking, though the weakness in my body has noticeably dimmed. I notice that, with a bit of effort, I can already move my legs, though my arms are still numb and useless. It is a familiar feeling. I woke up from the coma like this.

This time, however, my imitator and biggest fan stands above me. Leo Shirazumi. With my sight slowly coming back, I see him staring down at me

with half a smirk plastered on his face. A mean smile meant for me.

"You've awoken faster than I'd expected, my lady death," he says as he moves to take a knee beside me. In one hand, he holds a filled syringe at the ready. "The drugs have had worse efficacy on you, looks like. I knew I should have used this first."

He grabs one of my bound arms and forcefully sticks the needle in a vein. The numbness makes me feel no pain. My entire body is slack and unresponsive, like a broken machine. All I can do now is to glower at the man.

"That look in your eyes is perfect," he says with audible delight. "You should always keep it that way. Relax, all I've given you is a muscle relaxant. You need it to stay calm and still for what comes next. I want you to stay quiet." He sits on the concrete path now, and his eyes run up and down my body, taking all of it in. Our eyes meet, and, disgusted, I turn away from him, choosing to look instead at the rain outside the windows.

"Oh, how long have these three years been? How long since I was *this* close to you? I wish you could feel how *good* I feel now, with all my waiting finally paying off." In his voice is an affection that I don't feel the need to deign with a response, though I let him play out his soliloquy as he wills. "Alaya made it clear to me what a failure I was. Said I was too 'unlike' you, whatever that meant. Can you believe that? How can we be unlike each other? Huh, Ryōgi? When we killers are birds of a feather. You *know* both you and I don't belong to their world. Broken people like us should get together, become *closer*."

I don't answer him. My mind is preoccupied with thoughts of someone else, someone surely far away from here. Yet the man persists with his worthless spiel.

"Ever since your accident, I've been watching over you. Seeing who has come into your life. The other two who Alaya manipulated to shape you into what you are worried me a bit, but I could not get in the way. Alaya ensured I wouldn't. He used people, like tools. Isn't that sick? Isn't that fucked up? But how could I fight him? I stayed away from you, as he'd commanded. So please, don't be so mad at me. It wasn't my fault. But I never forgot you. Your memory was always sweet. And when Alaya was finally destroyed, I knew that like you, I was free from his influence. I knew I was the only one that could do anything for you. Ah, yes, how I've waited for the day I could talk to you as I am now."

He leans in toward me, so close I can smell his breath stinking of smoke and weed, so close that he has to get on his hands and knees and linger above me, his face leering above mine. Then suddenly, he draws back,

takes one of my legs, and puts his lips on the shin in a tender kiss. He makes a disgustingly viscous sound, accompanied by a wet sensation. His tongue races roughly from the shin, going slowly upward, trembling as it makes contact with skin.

I keep my silence, letting the only thing that echoes in the dull warehouse be his own furious breathing, going faster with each beat. My body doesn't do what I tell it to, yet my sensation is as keen as before. I can feel the sweat pouring from my brow, and gathering at my back, and over my chest, as if at the height of summer.

He takes the hem of my kimono in his mouth and tears it away with one swift motion, as a dog would. Leo Shirazumi's breathes his warm breath to my skin, consumed by his act. His tongue, at the knee now, flows over with saliva as it continues to trace itself upwards. Now he clings to the inner thigh, the glutinous noise still not abating. The spit coils about my skin. And still, as much as I want to speak, to say anything, to shout, I kill my voice. Finally, he reaches the waist. He seems not to notice or care about the kimono covering me, and his mouth continues to go up, licking the cloth. There is no end to his salivating, and even clothed, I can feel its wetness seeping through.

The handcuffs feel tight and painful now.

The beast's tongue climbs, traces the outline of my breasts, taking each nipple in his mouth for only a moment before continuing to my neck, then to my cheek, and finally to my eye, forming one dull line. Now his face is above me again, his steaming breath hitting my face full on. The stink of him, and the stench that he shared on my body, is almost enough to make me throw up.

"Bastard," I finally say, the only word I spare him. The smile it puts on his face is one of self-satisfaction. Now he descends his head again, this time opening his mouth and biting deeply into my jugular. The teeth dig in, the pain furious and keen, more so than any regular bite. I let slip a sharp intake of breath because of the pain; like a blade slipping slowly into my brain. The sound is the only satisfaction I give him. And as suddenly as he began, it ends with him withdrawing himself from me, leaving the mark of the beast on my neck. I can feel the blood slowly seeping out from my neck, tracing a lazy trail as it dribbles slowly from the open wound.

"No. I can't...eat just yet. You haven't come back yet. You haven't returned to what you were." He whispers this as he stands back up. "I love you so much, that you'll get extra special treatment from me. Consumption is my origin, and when it is unleashed, I need to eat indiscriminately. Preferably people, eh? But the one that stands before you is the Leo Shirazumi that

the impulse supposedly conquered. I can't lose to such a simple thing. As long as you're here, I can slip through, yes." As if to prove his point, he stands up and distances himself from me.

"Again, you refused to kill me last night! You haven't committed one proper human murder yet. Alaya was no human, more a conviction given form. But you're more of a monster than I am, yet why is there no murder in your past?!" His breathing has become even more rasping than just a minute before. Angrily, he turns back toward me. "It's a problem that we need to fix. If I don't have someone just like me, I can't have peace. I'll always be like this! It's you...it's you that I need. I thought you'd be like me, but you betray me! If I can't have you, the impulse will take over me!"

He begins to shout toward the end, and it is hard to distinguish the rage from the desperation. With an unsteady gait, the beast known as Leo Shirazumi walks away from me, retreating a bit deeper into the brush. "Wait for me, alright? I can take care of the one holding your leash back." Then he slinks back further and further into darkness, until finally, I can no longer see him.

Though I know well enough what he means, and though I know what he plans to do, I cannot focus my mind. Is it the drugs? All I can think of is vague recollections, and incoherent scraps of memory that drift in and out of dream. The number of raindrops falling on the window, and what tomorrow might bring. Meaningless things. I need to *focus*. Why did I seek out the murderer in the first place? There were many reasons, but the most important one eludes me.

I was...it was me that wanted to settle it once and for all. The return of the murders, and the shattered memories of what happened four years ago, recently returned to me...and my fear of reclaiming the urge to kill him, just like on that rain-soaked night. All of it is connected.

And in plunging through my addled mind, I remember. If there really were monsters in this world, I want to believe—I *have* to believe—that I'm not one of them. I can feel it, the wetness welling up in my eyes. I want to go back. Back to the fragile life I lived with him this past half year since I awoke. I want to prove to someone that I can be normal. That's why I sought out the murderer. To finish it all.

But I lost sight of it. I took my sleep in the forgotten corners of the city, hunting down the murderer, and through it all, validated the murderer that still lurked inside of me. My persistence in pursuing him made me sloppy, and led me here to be ambushed and trapped. If it had been the old me—the *Shiki* three years ago—then this would never have happened. I've become weak, even allowed Leo Shirazumi, a disgusting mad dog, to

violate me.

If there was ever a bigger proof for foolishness, none exist better than myself. Inexcusable and unforgivable. I want to go back to Mikiya, face his stupid smile, and say my complaints in front of him. It isn't my fault. All of this is because of him. I turned into this because of him. All my weakness stems from him alone. I wouldn't have been like this if it wasn't for him. And now, even living without him seems impossible.

"This is all so stupid." The drugs still take their toll on my consciousness, but less so now. I still feel hot, chokingly so, and I can feel my perspiration getting worse, as if my body is about to melt. No one can see me like this. Which is why I have to go. I can't stay chained here forever. This isn't where I want to be. I have to go back. Back home. To the only place where I ever felt at home.

Strangely enough, the image my mind conjures is not that of the old Ryōgi estate, but the mundane yet familiar apartment where Mikiya Kokutō would always be waiting.

The Second Homicide Inquiry - VI

At last, two hours after I left Miss Tōko's office, I finally reach the warehouse in the docks, not so far from Shirazumi's room that I had paid a visit to before. It only makes sense that this is where he's growing the weed. It can't be too far from his home, so it was only a matter of narrowing it down to a place big enough to hide them, but where no one usually treaded. The long abandoned warehouse once served as storage for the pier, but the company that owned it closed long ago, which made it the perfect candidate to hide, store, and grow the weed around this area.

I approach the structure, not truly minding the late winter rain as it pours above me with the same gusto as it did in the past few nights. The warehouse is an especially large one, a large enough space cleared in its perimeter as if to give it breathing room. The large steel door that serves as its front entrance stands at a height many times my own, and now it seems to be locked tight. Unfortunately, the screwdriver trick I used before would be a laughable effort if I even attempted it here. So I resolve to travel the warehouse's perimeter to see if I can find any alternate ingress.

I make my way to the structure's right flank, but I can find no breach or opening. Windows line the wall, but placed at the height of around five or six meters high; I'm not getting in there without a ladder. The other side, maybe. After all, with the warehouse standing directly at dockside, surely its sea-facing side would have some kind of entrance leading directly from its port to the basement so that arriving ships can load and unload faster.

After a circuit around the perimeter that felt like it went on forever, I finally reach dockside, and sure enough, there it is. A stair leading directly to the lower seawall adjacent to the warehouse, and with it, a single door leading inside. I try to silence myself as much as possible as I turn the knob ever so slightly. It seems to be unlocked. I open the door slowly, wide enough only to admit me, then I steal inside. The room within seems to be some kind of temporary storage room before pallets are stored topside. It's large, but a bit narrower than I expected. It doesn't take long for me to spot the stairs going up, and the door to the main body of the warehouse.

I try to get closer, until I hear a sharp metallic clang behind me. I hear a grunt of pain, realizing only too late that it is my own. I never get time to feel the pain, or press down a hand behind my head; only time to collapse as darkness overtakes everything.

I wake up to the sensation of a gulp, my mouth grasping for air as I swallow something I don't agree with. Then, pain. A dull pain in my elbow, and then a sharp, sudden one on both my legs. Then, whatever caused the pain withdraws from the back of my knees, and the sensation is reduced to a pulsating agony. I look around, too confused to cry out.

My sight is still recovering, and my head is still aching, but I can see that I am still in the same place as before, probably only a few minutes having passed. It's only now that I notice how cold it is, and how much my body is shivering. I try to stand, but then the pain returns in my left arm. I look at it, and strangely with little surprise, I find my elbow twisted the wrong way. I try to look at my legs, seeing that both of them have been stabbed in the back of the knee by some blade. Blood is seeping out. I can feel it. I cannot run.

I lie back down. I need to collect myself. Strangely enough, after I swallowed the thing that felt like it was shoved in my throat, the pain seems to retreat until it can barely be felt. A drug, for sure, morphine maybe. But there's nothing that fast acting, is there? Unless it was some kind of medicine enhanced by the Art. I take stock of the situation and turn my head around the room, and on the opposite wall from me, I find the shadow of someone lingering. He looks at me, bending with one knee on the rubble and dirt-filled floor of the warehouse, observing me with a curiosity.

"Sorry, pal. I don't really tie men up. I prefer them like this instead," he says, standing up and making his way to my side of the room. What I see is dulled from darkness and the pain, and the sensation of being warm and cold at the same time might disorient me, but I can distinguish clearly enough who the approaching figure is.

"Shirazumi."

"You just don't listen, do you? I told you not to find me. It's why you keep ending up in these situations. But still, I'm happy, truly. You came looking for me, after all. I know that you're on my side, yes." He draws the word out in a long breath. "Letting Ryōgi have you would be such a waste, I realize that now. If only you'd been a real friend to me."

The voice that utters the words is not his own. They are proud, boastful words, but not the words of Leo Shirazumi. It seems all an act, and I can't hear it as anything else.

"You can't just make people like you." The moment a word comes out of my mouth, the low pain from my head returns, and every word only worsens it, making it boil from inside. Still, I persist. "Your drugs didn't work like you wanted to."

The room seems to darken as Shirazumi frowns, clicking his tongue as

he looks at me. "You're talking too much again, Kokutō. But you're right. I gave the fools and the phonies the drugs that they needed to play out their miserable lives. They took to it like flies to a corpse. And I, who sold them their happiness, was their new unseen champion. But that was never anything other than a secondary concern." He shrugs, his every word an evasion. If he can't say it himself, then it'll have to be me.

"What you sold wasn't just drugs. It was more than that, wasn't it?"

He sighs, and stares daggers directly toward me. "Yes. I wanted someone just like me. But only Ryōgi can be like that. So I thought that maybe I should just make them, right? The weed in this warehouse was courtesy of Alaya. It's a bit different than what's out there, eh? You can thank his Art for that. It dissolves slowly inside your body, the effect lasting for a long-ass time. Your body can't hope to resist it. You get high from it, it'll eat away at your mind after only a few dozen uses."

"And to those who pass, you make them take the Bloodchip?"

"That's something a little extra for those who have the potential. They're a unique kind, dipped straight into my blood. Alaya said that the awakened are bound to their origin. I thought that my blood, with Alaya's magic coursing through it, would be different. I got a result I was more than happy with. For many, the Bloodchip is just like any drug. Some die because they couldn't handle it. But if anyone could truly handle it, they would have been just like me. But then, the corpses of those who died had to be taken care of. So I ate the bodies of people that I was disgusted to even think about eating."

"And you said you didn't kill because you wanted to? Is that how you justify it?" My throat is burning, but still I berate him. Shirazumi's face is clouded over with a disappointment.

"It's not my fault they died because of it. They wanted it, they had it. It's out of my hands if they couldn't take it. Pitiful things. If only they were like me, they could have lived and tasted the glory of being free."

My dizziness worsens, and the walls and floor seem to shift and move subtly, throbbing with the pain in my head. Could the drug I swallowed earlier be doing this?

"I've never had someone take the Bloodchip and survive in the three years I've been doing it," Shirazumi explains. "I was about to give up. But then, Ryōgi woke up. I rejoiced just as much as you did, you'd best believe. We're connected that way, aren't we, pal?" He smiles, and I can do nothing but to keep my eyes on him. "Because it was I, Leo Shirazumi, and you, Mikiya Kokutō, that destroyed Shiki Ryōgi those three years ago. You ruined what she had inside of her, while I did the same to her outside world."

I close my eyes. Is he right? Would Shiki have been better off four years ago if she hadn't met me? Did we, together, ruin Shiki more than she could have done to herself?

"It was all so simple, Kokutō. Shiki's habit of walking alone at night proved to be quite convenient for me. I tailed her, learning her favorite paths and patterns through the city. Then, I planned. I would kill someone that happened to wander along the path she would take, always just a little ways ahead of her, making sure it was fresh. The first ones still saw me before I took the life from them, but the next few ones were skilled work. They never saw me. Like the one you saw after we said goodbye to each other on that day you went to the Ryōgi estate. It took some work, but the timing was just right for you to encounter it just the same time Shiki was heading back."

My head seems to be splitting apart at the seams, and it overcomes me so much I can barely hear what Shirazumi is saying. My heart beats desperately, the blood like a fire through my body, and I did not know that it could be so difficult to force yourself to breathe.

"Last Monday, those four victims...it was you," I struggle to say.

He nods with satisfaction. "Yeah, they weren't any good at all. I convinced them to attack her, but all Ryōgi did was immobilize them, leaving them there to brood on their misfortune. Ryōgi never crossed the boundary. I had to clean her mess up after her, and kill them to make sure they didn't talk. But if it made Ryōgi doubt herself for just one moment, then maybe it was worth it." He walks back to the other side of the room, where he seems to have left some things. "It's almost time. I'm sorry to have had to hurt you Mikiya. It's all right. It'll all be better in a while."

Lying atop the floor is a knife, and a small, cylindrical object, both of which he takes in his one remaining hand. Something is suspicious about the knife. Something familiar about its slender figure, and the craftsmanship...like Shiki's—

"No. What have you done to her?"

"Nothing that would permanently hurt her. It's you who I need now though." There is a notable shift in his voice, a softer, familiar tone of the person I once knew, though his words remain the same. "Forget about Shiki for a second. All she is doing is resting in the floor above, and tomorrow, I will even send her home." He comes near me again, holding both objects in his hand. "Let's start this. No need to worry. I've suffered failures up until now because I've only given them the medicine. But now I remember what Alaya said. That spell requires the consent of both involved to awaken the origin. This time, I'll be right. If you only wish it, all will be yours. You won't

be a failure, will you, Mikiya? You can be special.”

There it is again, that touch of anxiety in his voice. I shake my head, refusing. “Becoming special, but you lose yourself...” I cough, finding it difficult to breathe and speak at the same time. “Didn’t you say that you hated that, Shirazumi?”

“Words spoken in the heat of the moment. Words can be changed. Look at what happened to me when I was awakened! I can do things now that no normal human can do. I’m not a loser anymore, and *no one* can say I am weak. I do what I want, and live how I want to live. This is the kind of happiness the Leo Shirazumi from four years ago could never have hoped to achieve.”

Wishes of becoming special, of outstripping one’s peers. It’s the common dream of anyone. Shirazumi has his sins, but this is not one of them.

“Who you are won’t be washed away, Mikiya. I am still here, still Leo Shirazumi. I mastered this impulse, and so can you. Don’t fear it. I’ve consumed things, consumed people, not under the influence of my origin, but my own will.”

This is the true face of the man you knew, and more fool you if you think I lie. His last words to you were the death throes of a damned man trying to eke out that last bit of sympathy from you. Miss Tōko always made sure to warn me.

“Aren’t you amazed at me? I want to see that face of yours lighting up, a surprised smile maybe. Why aren’t you surprised, Mikiya?!”

“Because I know.”

“What?” His face shifts into a blank amazement.

I did not lie. After all, I read his diary. I know that his slide into madness was his forfeiting of humanity. When the man I knew as Leo Shirazumi ceased to truly exist. He wanted me to save him, the last proof of his former dignity, or an echo of the past. And I want to do that, but how?

“You committed many murders,” I begin, “And so that you could run from your sins, you cast off yourself. You justified it with your love for Shiki Ryōgi, sought her out so that your killing would have meaning. But what sick love do you return to her?”

“Quiet!” He says with a raised voice. He goes near me, still lying and unwilling to move, and kicks me square in the back. The pain flares, and recedes just as quickly, melting in with the other aches in my body. “We’re not talking about me, are we? We’re talking about you.” The annoyance is clear in his voice.

He stabs the knife into the ground, using it to cut the cylindrical object he holds into two. “It’s bad for you to take so much medicine in so little a

span of time, but in this case, you're leaving me no choice. You can thank your own stubborn attitude for it." He takes hold of my hair, using it to pull me up and prop me against the wall. He puts the drug inside his mouth and chews it. Then, holding me down, he leans in to take my mouth in his. His tongue slides inside, bringing the drug along with it. I cannot resist. The drug goes down my throat. At last, he parts, and looks upon me with a face of calm expectation.

"That'll solve everything. That's a dosage ten times larger than normal. Your body can't handle it for sure. But before it gets serious, you'll take this and shove it down your throat," he says as he produces a red blotter from his coat, letting it fall to the floor beside me. "And you'll do it yourself, because you want to, you need to. And you'll throw yourself away just like me, Mikiya." My vision begins to get clouded, and everything seems to shift in and out of focus. "What are you waiting for? You want to be special, right? You want to be freed from the prison of your life, right? Then why won't you listen? Eat it, Mikiya! I need you!"

I see the Bloodchip blotter on the floor, still within reach. I ignore it, but Shirazumi picks it up and puts it into my one good hand. When I don't move, he begins to become visibly irritated.

"Just take it, Mikiya! The drugs will tear your body apart if you don't. You'll just fall over dead if you don't eat it. Choose! Die as a human or live as something more. This one isn't even a choice. Anyone will answer the obvious!"

He's right. It isn't even a choice for most. And yet, I shake my head at him.

"Why?" he asks, his voice sounding like it was wrung out of his throat. And though it would have perhaps been a better choice if I didn't answer, I still speak.

"Maybe it's just not that interesting."

Shirazumi's face looks as though it has frozen over, and the cracks in his hastily thought up plan begin to finally sound out across the silence. The fire in my blood feels like it could shoot out of any vein now, getting hotter until, I suspect, it finally boils.

"When I look at you, Shirazumi, I see a broken thing. If becoming special means becoming like you, then maybe being special isn't all it's cracked up to be. Being special isn't for me."

There is no amity left in Shirazumi's eyes, none remaining of the little warmth he still had. My words have cemented me as his enemy.

"What are you saying? You have no other choice! I know you're just like everyone else, always wanting to be better. I know you are!" Indignant

and disbelieving, he shouts, and laughs like a madman as he looms over me. Whether it is a laugh borne of panic or irritation, I can't say. "How can you even say things like that Kokutō? Dammit, you're serious, aren't you? You're going to let yourself die, aren't you? Why the fuck are you acting like this is all normal. It's *you* who's broken, yes. Always something off about you, I know it."

"You're the one that's off, Shirazumi. Take a look at yourself and tell me I'm wrong," I spit out at him, as if my body forced me to. It's not doing any favors for how long I get to live, but if it makes him rethink himself, than maybe that's alright too. "That's what your daily life is like. When you first murdered someone, you couldn't bear to see your crime and what you'd done. You ran away. And you deluded yourself into thinking that your murders were justifiable and inevitable, abnormal murders for an abnormal mind. A cold comfort and a weak excuse. And you gave in to your madness. You thought it would always be a convenient out, something you can tell yourself. But the truth is, even now, you're still running."

That was it, I think. Ever since he first killed a man, and fell into the plans of the man named Sōren Alaya, Leo Shirazumi the man was irredeemably lost. He thought himself a broken existence, and became such in time, and then he looked for Shiki, who he thought was a monster just like him. It reassured him of his monstrous existence if he knew other monsters were there, lurking in the night, just as broken as him.

Shirazumi simply says, "Shut up," as he narrows his eyes. But if I don't say what I have to say to him until the last, then coming here would have been meaningless.

"Shiki was brought up as a tool, and she'd never known anything else but the art of murder for a long time. But you took murder up as a crutch for your problems. It stinks of a lie. It's wrong for the news to call you a murderous monster. Shiki's got a far heavier weight on her shoulders than you. You don't know how hard it is for her to hold in an impulse she had no choice in. You always had a choice, and you've made it."

"Shut up, Kokutō. I'm warning you..."

"You're stupid for thinking you're the same as her. You're a broken mirror, seeing what you can't ever become. You've committed murder, but you deny the nature of your own sins. You're just running like a coward. You're no killer or murderous monster. Just a mad dog named Leo Shirazumi."

He wanted to be saved. But Miss Tōko was right. She's always right, in the end. He can't be saved, no matter how much I wanted to.

"I said shut the fuck up, goddamit!" His shout is replete with his anger, said like a potent curse. He retrieves Shiki's knife from the floor, takes a

moment to make sure that I cannot, or will not, move, and raises it above his head.

His breathing stops. Mine stops with it. He leaves the rest to his fury. The knife swings down.

There is a moment of blinding pain, as my head feels ready to split open when the blade bites deep into the brow, going downward fast, across my eye. And then the world disappears.

The body slides from the wall, and settles into the floor in a slow, restive, pace. There, fallen on his face, unmoving, lies Mikiya Kokutō. The face seeps through with slick and rich blood, flowing down from the left side of his face and wetting the dirty concrete floor.

My hand holds a knife, soaked with blood, though it is not my knife. I stare at it dumbly, frozen in place, afraid to approach Mikiya's corpse, or disturb it even slightly. He's dead.

"I'm sorry. I...this wasn't in the plan." My small whispers echo in the room, but only the sound of rain rises in answer.

Tears form in my eyes. The only ally that the old Leo Shirazumi has ever had is now gone. Old memories come to fore. Memories of Leo Shirazumi stopping school, of jokes, and doubts, and threats, and lectures, all from disapproving faces and voices. But it was only Mikiya Kokutō who wished me luck. There can be no forgetting that memory. Leo Shirazumi's happiness then still lights a dim and fading beacon inside. But now that beacon that called back old emotions is fading, and it was I who killed it.

I know how easily men can die. The old Leo Shirazumi once tried to avoid the truth of it, but to his despair, he came face-to-face with it the first time he killed a man. But now, it is surely not my fault.

"Why did you side against me, Kokutō? When you were my one friend. You knew what I was. I thought you were the only one that wouldn't be my enemy." Even if the world did not accept me, then at the very least, he could accept me. If only he were alive!

He was right. There is no love left for Shiki Ryōgi. The only one that needs her is me, the murderous monster. If she would be the same as me, what then? A special existence is significant only because of its singularity. The monster had already decided to kill her, even if she had regained her former purpose. Seeing what exactly I've lost lie before me, I realize. I, the murderer, needed the comfort of a companion; and I, Leo Shirazumi, needed Mikiya. Perhaps the only reason the old Leo persisted in living is because of him. When he stood in front of me, the cracks seemed to ease, a pressure released. Now, he lies still before me, and I feel nothing.

And so, the part of me that still holds the old Leo Shirazumi quiets and fades. I'm sorry, Kokutō. It looks like the part of me you believed in has now finally disappeared.

"As for the rest of it..." I utter with a lick of my lips.

All is well. I am alive. And so is Shiki Ryōgi. And once she returns to

the way she was before, it will all be alright. Ah, yes. I don't need Mikiya anymore. Isn't this what I'd always wanted anyway? I'll beat the impulse inside of me, knowing someone like me exists out there. I will see her soon. I leave the room, climbing back up to the main warehouse, my garden of sin, where Shiki, the girl I'd loved for so long, awaits.

The blood roils and beckons inside of me, and I let slip a delighted smile. In my mind, I see her form from minutes ago, drenched in sweat and spit, and I gulp in anticipation. I want to do it to her now. With Kokutō dead, there's nothing left for her to sustain her stupid masquerading. The real murderer will come in her most enchanting form.

The drugs must still be affecting her. Even if she would lash out in rage, she'd still be unable to stand. No one can craft a better stage than this, surely. My tongue quivers, relishing the thought. I want to eat her inside and out; starting from the tips of her toes, then on to her body, drinking in her delicious sweat, delighting in the smell of her, the taste of her insides.

"Sweat?"

I stop in the middle of the foliage.

Yes, she *was* sweating when I shot the drug in her. But how could she, and why in such great amounts? All I shot her up with was a muscle relaxant. She shouldn't be sweating so much. It's almost like her body used the sweat to expel the toxin—

"No. It can't be."

I break into a sprint as soon as the thought enters my mind, hurrying back to the place I left Shiki alone. I push my way recklessly through the thick brush. I get there in a few seconds, hoping to see the scene that I wished for.

But no words spring forth now. In the little concrete path in the warehouse, the one place where the marijuana plants had not taken root, she is there, standing. With the narrowed, hellbent eyes contrasting with her overwhelming aura of composure, Shiki Ryōgi stands before me.

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There is a different sort of beauty even to Shiki's disheveled form. And it is precisely that which makes Leo Shirazumi forget to even breathe for a moment. The handcuffs that once bound her now hangs uselessly from her right arm like an overlarge accessory. There is no damage to the handcuffs themselves, nor a chink in the chain, or some breakage in its ring. The same cannot be said, however, of Shiki's left hand, from which fresh blood emerges red and whole. For it appears that in order to free her hands from the cuffs, she has had to gnaw through the base of her left thumb.

Leo Shirazumi gives a vaguely amused laugh.

"You truly *are* the best," he says, though even his chuckling cannot hide the measure of temper in his voice. "A perfect monster." His neck even trembles as he says it. How pathetic. He's in a play and the acting's not up to snuff. I'm already tired of hearing this bastard's voice, and I've got no time to hear him prattle on about his world views.

"Now, Ryōgi, let's get this started. You are tied to me now," he says as he approaches me with surefooted steps, like a moth to a flame. But I do not even deign to look at him as I speak to him.

"Get someone else to go with you, because I sure as hell won't." It takes a while for him to register what I just said as he just stops there in his tracks, the most astonished look decorating his face.

"What? But..."

"I neither have the time nor the inclination to run around with a psycho like you."

I mean, after all, what could I even do if I were a monster like him? And if that's all he can offer, than he's really going to have to step it up. I've known what I wanted long ago. I wanted the hollow in my soul to be filled. And perhaps my homicidal impulse may never be completely silenced, but I think, just maybe, I can keep it in check.

Shiki's reason for murder and **Shiki's** reason for murder were different things. The events of the past summer taught me that. I used to struggle so much, searching for that one, distinct sensation of living. But now, even that has become little more than a dim memory, and who knows if I ever

found it. But I *do* know that the little hollow in my soul that Tōko once spoke of, isn't really so hollow any more. And because of that, I am *not* the *Shiki* of the past. I go back home, struggle to find what it means to be me, and if I can't discover it, then so be it. But I *won't* give in to the convenient excuse of being born with a murderous streak as an escape from my problems. I have to do that, for the sake of the one that fills the hollow in my soul, and for the sake of **Shiki**, who sacrificed himself for my happiness.

"You're kidding, right, Ryōgi?"

"Toodles, mister murdererous monster." And with that, I start to walk. My body is still queasy from the drugs, my left hand hurts like a motherfucker, but even in that state, I pass through and beside Leo Shirazumi like he was just some stranger on the street. He doesn't even have a clue where to begin, though his exhalation begins to get louder as he stares at my back.

"So even you would betray me?" he asks, though his words become little but whispers in the din of the rain. Yes, I'm listening to nothing save for the sound of the rain. "I can't let that pass. I've done so much for you. Killed so many. And now you throw me away like trash? It's me you should be thanking! You should be mine!"

I stagger a little, but I right myself soon enough, and continue walking. Must be the drugs. So much of it in this place. I have to get out, no looking back. Get out of here, and back into the familiar rain. But, he speaks again, this time clear over the noise despite its smallness.

"Oh, I see. Going back to Mikiya, aren't we, Ryōgi?" A vague humor in his tone. "Then why not stay? Since he's already here, after all."

What? Did...did I hear him right? No, it can't be. He couldn't have followed me, chased after me.

"Y—you..." I can't say it. And though I was determined not to look back, I do so now. Why now? When I was so close? I promised myself that there would be no murder, that I would just need to live.

"It's your fault for being so slow to turn, Ryōgi. I tried to find someone a little more...cooperative. Of course, that failed." What is he saying? His voice seems so low and faded, like my hearing was dampened from an abrupt noise. "This is your knife, right? Thanks for letting me borrow it. Pity I sullied it."

A metallic clicking as he tosses the knife at the floor before my feet. The silver sheen of the blade is tainted by red stains. Someone's blood. His blood. *No*. The smell of it is so familiar. The smell of his blood on that night beneath the heavy rain. There was no forgetting it.

"So...you're gone now," I say under my breath as I walk forward. I have

to get the knife.

"I took care of him. So that you can finally do what you were supposed to do. Kokutō was sermonizing to me until the end, you know. One thing you can count on for him. He spouted some crap about us being opposites. Which is funny, isn't it? We're so alike, you and I!"

The rain beats down annoyingly hard on the roof of the warehouse. I kneel down to pick up my blade. The blood on it is fresh, newly supped from the body. I lost him, so near and so close a time.

You idiot. I told you to stay with Tōko, didn't I? Dying so worthlessly like this...is just like you.

Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back, Shiki. He said that to hold me back, I know now. Yet the beast he tried to protect slaughtered him without a thought. I saw that beast as someone who needed to be put down. Maybe I was right after all. Maybe.

I grasp the knife with my hands, one palm closed around the naked blade. I stand, holding it close to my chest. And with my head still turned to the ground, I speak.

"Fine. Let's dance." I can't turn my eyes to look at him. Like before, even giving him the dignity of an equal glance would be giving him too much. "You said that you couldn't forgive me. And on that one and only score, we agree, Shirazumi."

And with that, the beast pushes himself to a run toward me. I ignore him. He will die. Or I will. But all that can be dealt with just a little later. The lingering warmth of the blood on the blade calls to me, to feel it before it disappears.

Leo Shirazumi leaps, an assault without finesse. But I don't move. And the next moment, the beast strikes me, claws digging into my leg, tearing away flesh and drinking deeply of my blood before it spatters the floor red in a violent slash. He runs past me. But I do not move.

I hold the knife as tightly as I can, like an irreplaceable treasure. *Memento mori.* The warmth of the blood is immediate yet fading, the air or my body stealing its heat. A dying heart, pressed close to my chest. My body, too, feels colder now, so much that I feel the stirrings of a shiver. But the pain of the wound on my side is little and far away, like faint echoes of wind. For I still remember the pain of that rain-soaked night, when I chased him down and hurt him.

*Only our frozen sighs played between us
As we watch our breaths fade slowly into stillness.*

The enemy strikes me again, the claw-like nails ripping into the flesh of my other leg. He takes his time to kill me. He enjoys himself, playing with

his prey. He does, after all, have all the time in the world.

The rain does not abate. It is a little thing, insignificant to most people, but to me, it is the most pleasing thing in the world.

Even the memory of rain:

Of an endless gray veil seen after school, where I heard you whistling.

He runs past yet again, gouging out flesh in my flank. There is a tearing noise, and the sound of something speckling the concrete. Nails dig as deep as bone, and little rivulets of blood drip down freely from my waist and legs, soaking the floor in a deep, vivid red. Even standing up is hard to bear.

It's **Shiki** who I remember now. Him, and the happy times he spent with you in those lazy sunset afternoons.

Even the memory of sunset:

Of a classroom ablaze in orange light, as you and I talked.

The beast's shows off his power now, his dominance. He goes faster than I've seen him, and still his attacks find their mark as if all the world was slow to it. I'd never be able to keep up. I'm lost, and my body follows. But my arm can still move. I have to stop the beast when he makes his fourth try.

Beside me you would smile, and that would be enough

To bid my soul rest

For a fourth time, it comes. He moves to hit my right arm. And though I see it coming, I cannot make myself move. How could I kill it?

Beside me you would walk, and that would be enough

To bid the rift between us close

I'm losing too much blood, and the world starts to look darker, more pronounced. At any moment, I could collapse. And still, I keep his words in my mind. I can't kill Leo Shirazumi. It's the last thing he asked of me. And I only have that thought to give value to me now.

Once, a moment in time

We stopped for shade, warm unmoving sunlight peeking through leaves

But I am glad. You were there for me, ready to pull me back when I strayed, always ready to accept me. And those times, though I never said it, were the happiest times of my life.

And there, as you laughed, you said that one day, we'd stand in the same place

The beast draws close again, for the fifth, and final time. He aims for the neck now. We both know what will happen. A vital artery cut, and my lifeblood gushing out as it all ends.

They were words that I've yearned to hear for so long.

Death approaches, and if I look back now, I would see it smiling, proudly and broadly boasting. Every scratch it scores against me is another tearing of that happy lie, that illusion of peaceful existence. Of a past that never came to pass, of boring student life, of the remains of days with no conflict,

and no monsters, and no madness.

Now only fleeting memories of days never fulfilled.

I thank you. But I am truly sorry.

I finally raise my head, seeing with the inner Eye, the Arcane Eyes, and before me, I see my enemy's death, tracing themselves all over his body.

I know I'll lose it all of what I am that you've put your faith on. But I've lost you now, even though I loved you. And I know no one will be beside me now, there to pull me back to your world. But still...but still...this wild animal killed you. And that is one thing I cannot forgive.

My enemy is coming, reckless and complacent in victory. It will be an easy thing to kill him. I shift my feet slightly. The floor is water. And I need to be light as a swan upon it. Then the end will be mercifully quick.

There it is. Shirazumi's one arm is extended, and upon it dances one of the lines of death. I let him come close, close enough to smell him. And when his arm is almost upon my neck, I swing the knife that lies just below it upward, sweeping the arm and casting it aside effortlessly as it loses strength and dies. No time to spare. I shift just to his left, bringing my knife arm around and down in a wide swing at the line on his left leg, killing it. He begins to stumble as he loses the balance on his dead leg. Then his right leg in one swift motion. Then, in the moment that he is still in the air, I plunge the blade deep into his chest in one clean and solid stroke, finally pushing him to the ground.

The knife stands upright like a cairn marker, piercing right through to the heart. Shirazumi coughs only once, and it is over. The face he donned in death is one of astonishment, as if he was more concerned at how quickly he had died than the fact that he had died at all.

Leo Shirazumi lies truly dead in the warehouse floor as Shiki still grasps the knife sticking out of his chest with both hands, having to lean down on one knee as she does so. Angled light comes through from the windows, dull and ashen, bathing the girl and the corpse in pale illumination that makes her look like some kind of psychopomp, solemn and colorless.

No blood spills from Leo Shirazumi's corpse. The wounds in fact, seem very trifling, save for the one in the chest. Yet he is dead, blood and all. Such was the power of the Arcane Eyes. There is nothing left to spill out. The only blood that lies scattered on the warehouse floor comes from Shiki's

own body. Blood from the arm, the leg, and the body, from wounds that she still struggles to withstand. It doesn't worry her too much, however. She has worked through worse before.

Even so, the hands that a moment ago grasped the knife tightly now seem to lose whatever animating force they had, and fall away to Shiki's side as she herself collapses with back to the floor. A large sigh escapes her lips. Her breaths are large gulps of air, struggling through the pain. She lets her body rest now, so that she can call for some kind of help later.

"There's no use to it," she whispers to herself as she looks up at the light of the sky. The scene outside the windows, however, is still the same rain as before. *It's always in winter, she thinks, under these skies, that I dirty my hands with blood.*

I can't go home anymore. You would only be angry if I showed up at your doorstep, dirtied.

"But I know you'd still wait for me." You walked with me. You grasped my bloodied hands and showed me the way home. They were times covered in hazy dream, now fleeting and soon to vanish.

She gulps, and her consciousness sways and flickers as unsteadily as the light of a vigil candle, and there is something fair, she thinks, in the passing of a life. She steadies her breath, not to live, but perhaps, finally, to sleep the sleep of the just. The eyes that drink in the sunlight show rare tears. She remembered her old promise to herself when she awoke, to only cry when it was of worth for the tears. Nothing seemed more appropriate than his death.

She closes her eyes, and then she grows quiet. Her thoughts have no regrets. *But it is only a matter of time before I become as mad as Shirazumi; a monster that tasted warmth, and can never go back, crossing the boundary to be empty of anything.*

The Second Homicide Inquiry - VII

The world disappeared. That's what I first thought.

I cough, spitting out something liquid from what feels like it had come from inside my chest. Somewhere inside my body, something still isn't allowing me to die. The first things I discover I can move are my arms, and then my upper body follows suit. My legs move, but only a little. They feel asleep, and no matter how much I try, I can't move them as strongly as I'd like. I creep along to the nearest wall beside me, clasp a hand firmly on a windowsill, and pull myself up, the wall largely doing much of the work of supporting me.

Eyesight is returning, but everything is mists and shadow, the outlines of things shocked with white and red. My sense of pain still struggles to keep up. It hurts somewhere in my body. I can't rightly place where exactly, but somewhere there is a dull, throbbing pain. And then I remember.

I place a hand on my left eye, and it comes away wet and red. No small amount of blood. Yet strangely the pain is less pronounced than I'd expected. The bleeding surprisingly isn't as bad as anticipated either. The drugs that Shirazumi gave me had some influence on that, maybe? Still, the wound itself is hideous to feel. The last memory I have before falling unconscious was the knife, carving its way from my forehead to left cheek, slicing up my left eye along its path. It's probably too late to save it. It's a miracle that I'm even still alive, and that my right eye didn't die along with the left.

With a hand on the wall to steady myself, I carefully make my way inch by inch to the stairs leading up to the main warehouse floor, and climb up, having to mostly drag my legs as I hold the bannister and pull myself step by step. Upstairs, I find the floor overrun with grass. I can't readily identify what they are, and at this point I really don't care. Even in the pain and the blood and the anesthetic effect of the drugs, there is only one thought on my mind.

"Shiki," the word is on my lips, like a prayer. Without a wall to cling to, it becomes much more difficult to walk. The warehouse is cavernous, and the plants only compound my lack of keen eyesight. I take my first step, and immediately fall to the ground. A flash of pain shoots through my entire body, and the world is black again for a moment before all returns like before, and I find myself on the ground.

What am I doing? Stuck in some bloodied, battered, wounded, and bruised body, in some kind of limbo between life and death. I can only

hope that the fall didn't open some already closed wounds. The ground beneath me is soil. With my knees having buckled and offering no more strength, I have no choice but to crawl upon it. It's only then that I realize the enormity of the structure I'm in, and how little I am, and how much the grass can hinder vision at this height. My left eye feels like it's being burned with hot pincers, my right eye shows me images of wraith-like outlines, and I can do nothing to remedy it.

Out of breath, I stop for a moment. Shiki being here was only a hunch on my part anyway. I have to pace my progress unless I want to kill myself. So I advance slowly, trying to calm my thoughts.

Should I find Shiki already crossing blades with Leo Shirazumi, what am I supposed to do then? *Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back.* That's what I said to her.

No going back. I never wanted her to commit murder. Because I love her. And I want to keep on loving her. I only wanted to give her joy. I didn't want her to cause pain to anyone anymore. Call it selfishness. Yet even she detests murderers.

Once, I said I believed in her. I wonder if that's still true, or if they were always just convenient words I used to hide something. Whatever the case, I have to believe in her now, and in the possibility that maybe, she *can* come back, despite my words.

At a snail's pace, I cut through the grass, heading towards what I think is the center of the entire place. Eventually, my arms chance upon a plot of ground that isn't soil, but concrete. I find myself at a wide path where none of the grass grows, and it is here, in the center of it all, that I find Shiki. Beside her is the body of Leo Shirazumi, intact but still as a grave. At a distance and at first glance, there is no sign of life from either.

So what I thought was true. Shirazumi is dead by your hands, Shiki. For the moment, I set aside the thought. For now, I have to know what happened to her. With great difficulty, I manage to pull myself that last stretch to where she lies. Her eyes are closed, her face seems finally at peace. Her body is wounded previously on her legs, her waist, and an arm, and her clothes and skin is dirtied with blood, sweat, and dirt. Her face is pale, and there is little warmth in her frail body...and yet, her chest rises and falls with a measured pace.

Alive. Relieved, I turn my attention now toward Leo Shirazumi. In the state he is in, there is no doubt he is dead.

I am sorry old friend. No matter what situation you had found yourself in, you did not deserve to die. But you are the only one who died today, and the only victim among us three that has a right to be mourned. But

still, that does not stop me from being happy at Shiki being alive. I do not pity you. On the contrary, I curse you. It is only because of you that Shiki had to perform her terrible act.

A pale, slender finger touches my cheek, caressing it, lightly tracing over skin and blood. It was her finger.

"Are you crying, Kokutō?" Shiki says as she regards me with faint, sleepy eyes. There is a welcome surprise on her face as her hand reaches out softly to feel the wound on my cheek, and the ruined eye. The white fingers turn red. Shiki tries to rise, but grunts, and gives up the effort. And I'm in no state to carry her out of here. So we lie there for a while, facing each other, taking in the face of the other.

In the rain, only our frozen sighs play between us,

As we watch our breaths fade slowly into silence.

"I killed Shirazumi," Shiki whispers.

"Yeah," I nod.

She turns to face the remains of Leo Shirazumi one last time, looking at the terrible thing she can be capable of, then turns back toward the sky outside the window.

"There's so much I've lost, and so much I've left to lose," she says in a sad, empty voice.

She thinks she's lost what's important, and lost herself in the process. Maybe she even thinks she's lost me. It's as her grandfather told her once. And following those words, she thinks she will meet death alone, in a desolate place.

"It doesn't matter now. I told you once before, didn't I? I'll carry it in your place." A drop of blood from my ruined eye falls to Shiki's face, a red tear for a sinner. It was last summer when I swore that to you as you smiled for the first time under the rain. I said that I'll carry your sins in your place.

So I'll keep it inside of me. And until the day you die, you'll never be alone again.

"But I'm a murderer." This voice is faint, barely a whisper above the air, blaming only herself, and close to tears like a child's. She knows that the sin will never truly disappear, and no matter how much she asks for forgiveness, her sorrow is ultimately up to her. Even I wonder if forgiveness can come to me, and it will be a harder question for other people.

"I told you that murder is the last line you cross. And still you went ahead and crossed it. Just can't learn, can you? Maybe I'm just a little cross. And don't think crying will get you out of this one."

"Huh. You're a heartless piece of work."

"Yeah. Your little tricks aren't going to work."

And that's it. With those words, that distinctive manner of how she says her words, I know that she's back. She knows it too. There is a tranquility to her now. She smiles the littlest smile, and closes her eyes in relief, so calmly that you'd think she's asleep. Another red tear falls to her cheek.

I take the dirtied and bloodied girl under my nearly numb arm, cradling her shoulders as I help her get up. And I move to embrace her, to hold her tight against me so strongly, as if death itself was coming for us both and it would be the last thing I could leave to her. And in that embrace, I promise her something.

"Shiki...I'll never let go of you again." The words fade away into the endless rain. Perhaps the words didn't matter. Perhaps they never did. Perhaps all that matters is that I can hold her close to me now, and that her arms wrap themselves tightly around my back, returning my embrace with the brief strength that I can feel in her fingertips.

February has come and gone, but winter still leaves its charms on the city. The temperature is still low, and the news even says it's going to be packed with snow tomorrow. Even now, in the beginnings of March, the last whispers of winter can be felt seeping through the skin. Spring, it seems, is still a distant dream away.

The murderous monster that had threatened the peace of the streets is dead now, found by the police to have died under mysterious causes. The public statement said that the heart just stopped, definitely before the stab wound in the chest ever mattered, and that anyway, it had just barely missed the heart. The medical examiners, perplexed, would doubtlessly have declared it some kind of overdose, and the stab wounds and slash marks on his body are destined to haunt the weeks of some poor homicide detective somewhere until the case was compiled in a folder and shunted to a file cabinet, cold and all forgotten.

It was me who managed to get Mikiya to a hospital that night. He was too injured to really carry on. I on the other hand went to Tōko for a replacement hand. The thumb I had bitten off was the false prosthetic that Tōko had long ago provided for me, so it was an easy thing to replace. The household doctor of the Ryōgi knew how fast I recovered from these sorts of things, and recommended nothing special. Sure enough, I was largely recovered before February had even ended, while Mikiya is still in bed rest at the hospital, where he needed to stay for two weeks.

Well, until today that is. Today is the day he finally gets out from the hospital that he has repeatedly made clear that he hates. And that's why now, standing sheltered in the shadow of a fairly large tree outside the very same hospital, I brave the cold weather and wait. From here, I can see the national hospital's large lobby, and I watch the cars going around the hospital's elliptical driveway, pulling up and driving away as people come and go around the entrance.

I do this for two hours until finally, I spot a man clad all in black make his way out of the large entrance. From trousers to jacket, he wears the color of his choice, his only concession to fashion. I see a white spot upon his arm, which surprises me for a moment until I discover that it's just a bandage. When he exits the hospital, he turns back the last time to bow at some nurses and a doctor before briskly heading to where I stand. I do not call out, or wave; only wait.

"So not even one visit to the hospital from you," Mikiya Kokutō says with

a playful frown on his face.

"Your fool sister Azaka insisted on it. She said she'd kill me if I showed myself in the hospital, and I think she really means it." I return his frown with an expression of disappointment.

"Reliable sort, isn't she?" He nods. "So, should we go? Take a cab, maybe?"

"It's not like there's three football fields from here to the station. C'mon, it's a short walk, and it'll do your legs some good."

"Whatever works for you. I'm blaming you for any broken bones, though," he adds before walking ahead. I bring myself up alongside his right and keep pace with him.

Afterwards, everything settles into some semblance of routine. We talk, like we used to do, as we walk in the journey from one place to the next; in this case, down this gently sloping hill road as we head toward the train station. I chance a glimpse at Mikiya's face. He's grown his hair out, I observe. Well, the left side at the very least. His bangs are just long enough to cover his left eye and much of his cheek.

"Your left eye..." My voice trails off.

"Yeah, it's gone for good. Shizune was right. Remember her?"

"That girl with the future sight we met once, right? Yeah, I remember her."

"She told me something interesting once. That if I stayed with you, I would meet a cruel end. She was right, you know. My 'eye' certainly did." He laughs, seemingly impressed at his own joke. I'm not quite sure what the proper response is to such a stupid joke. "My right eye's all fine, though, so it's not such a big thing. Depth perception's going to be hard to adjust to, is all. Speaking of which, can you move over to my left? I'm still not used to the feeling, so having you on that side would make me feel a lot safer."

He doesn't bother to wait for me to respond and promptly shifts himself so that I'm on his left side, after which he leans heavily on my shoulder.

"Woah, wait, what the heck are you doing?" I say with just a hint of surprise. A frown returns to his face as he glares at me.

"What? Makeshift crutch. Guess you gotta take care of me while I get used to this," he explains, as if it were all natural. I return his glare with a sullen one of my own.

"Oh, come on. Why do I have to be saddled with this?"

"Because I want you to. But if you don't want to, just say so."

Something happened to him in that hospital, I muse, if he's saying all this so matter-of-factly. We stare at each other, and for the first time, it's me who breaks first. I turn away from him, attempting to hide my wildly

blushing cheeks.

"Ah, it ain't that bad," I reply in a grumbling voice. Mikiya looks at me with a wry smile on his face. Optimism must be in his blood. And it's getting to be so bad it's genuinely infectious. "But I do need to go to school starting tomorrow."

"Skip classes for a day. Spring break's coming up anyway. I'm sure your teachers will understand."

"What?" Sir *I-don't-care-you-should-be-at-school* Mikiya Kokutō telling me to play truant? Now I know something *really* happened in that hospital. Maybe I'll even ask him later. Right now, the only reaction I have to his statement is to laugh.

"Hey, I was being kinda serious, though."

"I know, man, I know," I laugh as I explain. "I was just thinking it's still pretty selfish for you." At that, he produces an awkward smile.

"You're right. Years ago, I fell in love with you without telling you. And in that spirit, I'm hoping you'll let me slide butting into your life once or twice," he says, without a hint of reluctance in his face. There's a succinct and witty rejoinder to that somewhere in my head, but for now, I decide to leave it there. Because at the very least, the *Shiki* of the past—

"Hmm? What's wrong, Shiki? Ah, did that make you feel uncomfortable? You always told me that you didn't like lines like that." He sounds a bit disappointed. I'd planned to keep quiet, but what the hell. Just this once, maybe I can just say it outright to him.

"That's not necessarily true." I turn away from him completely now, trying to find the courage to say it without making a complete idiot of myself. "*Shiki* might have hated them once. Now...well, maybe they're alright."

Ah, fuck. I knew it'd be embarrassing. I'm never letting something like *that* pass my lips a second time. I look back at him tentatively now, though it seems he's more surprised than anything, as if he'd just seen a whale flying in the sky. I grab him firmly by the hand to break the spell. I pull him along, quickening our pace as we descend the slope of the hill. The station's just up ahead, and through it, home. The hand that I hold responds with a surer strength of grip than my own, and for some reason, even that small, trivial thing makes me happy. I resist the urge to grin as broadly as my face would allow.

When we reach the station, we take the train back to that familiar, well-worn, well-trodden city of gray towers and glass sentinels, of darkened streets and uncertain existences, where a hundred new stories are born and concluded each day. The way home is long, and winding; distant, and

easy to lose one's way if you don't know your way around. But luckily, I have someone to share the road with.

For once, my hand didn't reach out for a knife. It reached out to the hand I wanted. And whatever the future brings, I don't think I'll ever let it go. And so, my story concludes here. I've made my peace with my past and my present, and now it's time to live the future. All that's left is for this season to end. I've never once truly looked forward to the ending of winter and the coming of spring, not once observed the importance of their passing. But now, I find myself watching, and waiting, with a great anticipation.



Empty Boundaries

At the moment, the city is knee deep into the worst snow it's had in four years, and to make matters worse, it's falling in March. The volume of the snow is so thick, and the temperature so low, that no one at all would be surprised to see the entire city frozen in place. Even at nights, the white spots drift down onto the roofs and streets in a languid pattern, showing no signs of abating, like the sky is determined to drown it in a new ice age.

Tonight, at midnight, is one such frigid night.

Not even the shadow of a person can be sighted on the streets tonight, and the unceasing white veil of the snow is permeated only by the illumination of street lights. It should be dark, but even the darkness can't resist being tainted by the gathering white. In that scene of contrasts can be seen one boy, strolling through the late hours. He has no particular purpose in mind. Something called him out here, a premonition that promised something in a place so familiar.

He walks casually, as if time didn't truly matter, holding aloft his black umbrella as he presses his way through the thick snowfall. And at last, he finally chances upon the girl, standing there, just as she did four years ago. Dressed in her kimono in the midst of the desolate white night, the girl stares blankly at the void. And like four years ago, the boy calls out to her in a voice at ease.

"Hey."

The girl in the kimono turns slowly to glance over her shoulder, and smiles sweetly.

"Good evening, Kokutō. It has been quite a while now, hasn't it?" asks the strange girl, Shiki Ryōgi, as the gentle smile on her lips speaks of a past where he had known the boy so long ago. The voice, however, is cordial, not intimate.

The boy looks at her, seeing the appearance of the Shiki he knows, but it is not her. Not the long-gone **Shiki** either. This one is someone else completely.

"I knew it'd be you. I had a feeling we'd meet each other again here. Shiki's asleep now, isn't she?"

"You may call it such. The words now must be for you and me." The lazy smile lingers on the corners of her lips.

"So who are you, really?" the boy inquires.

"I am me. Two individuals named Shiki reside within, but I am not either one. I am the one that resides in the hollow between two hearts, two minds, two souls. Or perhaps it can be said that *I* am that hollow." Her hand brushes lightly upon her breast as she closes her eyes, almost in prayer. "That which is discordant. That which is hated. That which is intol-

erable. Accept these things and all others, and never know pain. But there is another, in turn. That which is harmonious. That which is desired. That which is permitted. Reject these things and all others, and know nothing but pain."

The boy realizes that she is talking of what Shiki was, once before, when both *Shiki* and **Shiki** existed at the same time inside of her.

"One affirms, one denies," the strange girl continues. "She is complete, but isolated. Alone. Don't you agree? A single color, perfect and unsullied, is only so because it was not joined with others. It cannot change, forever remaining the same color. That was what they were. Two opposites, sprung from the singular primal origin. The gulf between them is empty. As such, it is where I dwell."

"So why call me out then, here of all places, Shiki? Oh, mind if I call you 'Shiki'?" The boy's head is titled, showing confusion, but the girl seems to think nothing of it.

"Not at all," she replies. "Shiki Ryōgi is my name, after all. I would be pleased if you called me by my name. Perhaps it may give me meaning after so long." There is something about her voice, thinks the boy, that strikes him as both childlike and adult.

They talked like that for some time, whiling away the minutes with meandering and fleeting talk: The boy talking to her with a sort of familiarity, and the girl listening closely with an air of vague bemusement, as though nothing had truly changed. In a sense, nothing had. Though the girl knew that she was so hopelessly *different* from the boy.

"So let me get this straight. Shiki doesn't remember what happened on this road four years ago?" the boy asks abruptly. That was the time, he remembers, when they were both still high school students. He remembered that he had asked *Shiki* when they had met again in the school, that they had met before. *Shiki* had only answered that she couldn't remember.

"I am afraid not. I am different from her. *Shiki* and **Shiki** were two sides of the same coin, and their memories were twinned together. But I am a separate existence from either of them, so Shiki will not remember what words pass between us tonight."

"I see," he mutters with a hint of disappointment. It was on March 1995 when he met her. They chanced upon each other on this road, on a day of cold snowfall just like today, when both were on the cusp of entering high school. He had been on his way home that night when he spotted a lone girl on the sidewalk, standing still and staring up at the twinkling stars. His plans to go home and sleep were temporarily forgotten, when he greeted her with a simple "Good evening," as if he were greeting a good and old

friend. The snow was just as beautiful then as they are now, enough for two complete stranger's paths to cross.

"In truth, there is something else I must ask you, Kokutō. Sadly, it will be the most important, the most final of questions I can ever ask you. It is to that purpose that I have revealed myself tonight." The girl stares into the boy with eyes that belie the age that her appearance would imply.

"What is it you desire?" she asks gently. The question comes as a surprise to the boy, and he struggles at first for words of reply. The girl keeps her mechanical, almost amused expression on her face. "Make your wish, Kokutō. The wishes of people are a trivial thing, and it seems Shiki has taken quite the peculiar liking to you, so I grant you this one privilege. What is it you desire?" she repeats.

The girl extends a hand toward the boy, her eyes a transparent well, drinking deeply of the void-like sky, as if it looked out over a vast abyss that knows no end, and it is reflected back in those delicate eyes, separated from the common thinking of humanity. It was like looking into the eyes of some god.

"I don't know..." he answers, his voice trailing off and becoming little as he takes a moment to ponder. He looks into her eyes, not in disinterest, but in something approaching faith. "I suppose...I don't really need one," he finally answers with a certainty.

"Yes," she whispers disappointedly, almost like a sigh. But there is a shadow of relief in it as well. "Yes, I suppose I knew you would say that." Her eyes part themselves from the boy and returns to the white darkness where she seems more comfortable.

"How could you know, if you aren't really Shiki?" he asks, amused. The girl only replies with an appreciative sidelong glance and an acknowledging nod.

"Indulge me, then. Tell me where in a man his character lies," she suddenly asks, as casually as asking about something no more trivial than tomorrow's weather, as if she knew any answer the boy could give would not surprise her in the least. And yet, the boy puts a hand on his chin, and tries to look the scholar.

"Well, if I had to give an answer, I suppose...well no doubt it's connected to sentience and sapience, so it's a matter of the mind, I guess." The doubt in his voice is clear as day. Not surprisingly, the girl shakes her head slowly.

"No. The soul dwells in our memory, and it in turn animates us. But it does not mean that it need only be fed with electricity to continue its dream of fragile reality, deprived of a body that houses it. The mage that Shiki once met spoke as you did, that a man's character is in the mind. A

mistake. You, your character, and your very soul is shaped by travails, given form in your body. A personality does not arise whole-formed from just a mind and the sentience that accompanies it. It is through our bodies, allowing us access to all these visceral experiences, that we take our steps into precious self-awareness, and where we form our characters as extroverts, or introverts, or any number of other archetypes. A ‘personality’ shaped by sentience alone cannot hope to even reflect on what it is. Such a thing is more akin to a calculator, I should think. If there is no personality, then it becomes necessary to create one, starting from the very beginning.

“Yet rather than the body arising from the existence of sentience, the body is crafted well before the emergence of any kind of sentience. But the body alone carries no sense of sapience. The body is simply *there*. But even within such a simple thing, something drives it, something that connects it to a primal origin. I grew from such origins, born from sentience, raised alongside the other two.”

The boy nods. He’s heard of this before; that there are three things any human must have to live: the psyche, the soul, and the body. This girl then, was Shiki’s true nature, what mages had called the origin of a person. A thing of nothingness, of void, the primal nature of someone.

The girl casts her eyes downwards, looking as though she had read the boy’s thoughts exactly. “Such is what I am, a character produced not from the mind but the body, wholly different from *Shiki* or **Shiki**, who arose from her fractured psyche. I am the power behind them, but I am powerless before them. She is the embodiment of the *ryōgi*, of two extremes, the symbol of yin and yang given form, a great continuum of dynamism and entropy. I am of the empty boundary in between, the channel that allowed both to have united thoughts. I am their beginning, and I am their end, connecting them to the spiral of origin. Without me, they would have been nothing but fractured and sundered existences.” The girl smiles a deadly smile, tinged with something approaching a cold taste for blood.

“Don’t be surprised if I say I can barely follow,” the boy mentions, “but I guess the way I’m getting it is that you’re the one that made the existence of two Shikis possible.”

“The essence of it, I suppose. The origin that never reveals itself. In truth, I should have withered away long ago, an unneeded and alien part of the body. My origin is emptiness, and I would never have claimed intelligence or any grander meaning. But it was the Ryōgi dynasty had other plans. They wove their meager Arts and gave me sentience. *Shiki* and **Shiki** arose just as much from the need to protect myself as from their experiences.”

Shiki and **Shiki**; yin and yang; virtue and vice. The boy remembers the

mage Tōko Aozaki saying to him once before: that they were separated not by conflict but by utility; the desire for the Ryōgi dynasty to pursue its mysterious ambition.

"What a perilously unwise game they play, these dynasties," the girl continues. "I should have died before I was ever free of the womb, but instead, they gave me a sense of self. You see, any animal comes into the world with a body and sapience worthy of each other, but I, born of the origin of nothingness, must needs die. I should have never existed for long. Tōko told you of this, did she not? Of reality's uncanny ability to fight what is irrational, and unnatural, solely through consensus. Produced from such an unnatural origin as nothingness, I would have petered out unceremoniously before *Shiki* ever achieved an iota of consciousness. But the Ryōgi dynasty had spells that bid me awake, and so I did, and the origin awoke in *Shiki* as well. Through it, I could see the material reality. I found it too boring, however, and passed that responsibility to *Shiki*. Can you not see? How everything in this reality is so predictable, and how the rules that bind it are so weak and mutable?"

Her eyes are simple and innocent, and yet they seem to almost laugh cruelly and mockingly at everything.

"But even you have your own will," states the boy, looking at the girl almost pitifully now.

The girl nods and says, "Indeed. Not so large a surprise. All have an origin that carries some small spark of intelligence, but it never comes to fore at the beginning of life. It is the mind of a person that must carry that first burden, and transmute that along with the body to a personality. Thus does the little intelligence of the origin lose meaning and fade. Yet a man's personality, knowing nothing of the body that made it whole, will assume in his ignorance that his personality formed from sentience alone. The order seemed to be wholly different in my case, however. Still, at least I can thank Shiki for our little chat tonight. Without memories to tap into, I might not have understood words let alone hold a conversation. I would just be a little spark, worth next to nothing."

"I see. So without Shiki, you wouldn't be able to perceive the outside world because—"

"Because I am but a simple mechanism operating on the instructions of something inside me, yes. Just a vessel with sight turned inward, a body connected to death and entropy, and what mages call The Akashic Record, or the spiral of origin. A worthless connection, as far as I'm concerned." She takes a single, small step forward, extends her hand and lightly touches upon the boy's left cheek as light as a feather. Her pale fingers brush back

the bangs, revealing the vicious scar beneath. “At this moment, however, it may prove of use. I can make this wound disappear. I would be able to help someone, and make some kind of difference in the world. But you said you needed no wish.”

“That’s right. I know Shiki better for destroying things, and it feels sort of weird and just a bit suspicious for you to be asking.” The boy gives a plain smile, not truly knowing himself how serious that statement is. The girl turns away from him then, as one would turn away from glaring sunlight, and retreats her hand, holding it close to her chest.

“An understandable observation. Shiki is very much a creature of destruction. I suppose you still cannot see me as anything else but her, in the end. My origin is emptiness, and because of this, Shiki can see the death of everything. When Shiki slept for two years, her senses shattered and dead, she gazed into the emptiness inside her for so long that she came to know the welcoming embrace of death. Shiki floated on the vast abyss of the spiral of origin, alone inside the void, where she awoke. And no matter how much she denied it, her soul called out to that base drive, that voice inside her that told her that she could kill. Her power stemmed from that. Much like Fujino Asagami, her Arcane Eyes made her play an entirely different game than common men. Her Eyes expressed their connection to the spiral of origin through death, calling forth the destined entropy of all things and manifesting it. But my connection to it is far more profound. And it allows me to see everything so...*differently*.”

The way she says this last word was a mixture of delight and sadness, and the boy got the distinct sense that even though she explains, she knows her words would never truly reach anyone. “The spiral of origin is the primordial beginning of all things in this pattern of reality. All things pass through the great wheel, their natures and their histories—past, present, and future—are connected to it. It is thus a vast and empty place. It reflects what I am, in a way. I am connected to it, and I am a part of it as well. *I am* it. Which is why the greatest feats that mages can only dream of are allowed me. I can change the very structure of elementary particles. I can transmute evolution itself, changing everything into something wholly different. All creation dances to the tune of magic and the melody of the arcane Art. I can bend the rules of this lie of a reality, this prison that keeps so many minds in sleep. I can break it as easily as a twig. I can remake this world. I can unmake it. I can make a new one whole cloth.”

And, as if seeking the most inappropriate punctuation to her statement, she giggles slightly, a snicker of contempt as sinister as her smile. “But there is no meaning in such feats. The destruction of lies is tiring work, and

I find it no different from dreaming. And so I choose to see nothing, to think nothing, to live in dreamless slumber and in self-imposed quiescence. A decidedly different dream than Shiki had, clearly. The girl is so transparent sometimes, don't you think so? I see right through her, just as I do with everything. Her, reality...even myself."

Her voice becomes a whisper in the infinite night, her eyes affixed to it with such an intensity, it feels as if she would never have the chance to see its like again. Perhaps she never will. "But what can I do?" she asks herself. "I am but a body, bound to her dream. Hers is the material, and mine the soul, sharing a body connected to the great Akasha. I know everything that has passed and will pass, and it is a bitter, meaningless tedium, enough to close your eyes to the entire affair. And so it will be as before. I shall sleep, undreaming, unthinking, in eternity. I pray only that when entropy claims this body, that the dream live on, and I with it." Snow falls tranquilly upon her words with the weight of a burial.

The boy says nothing, looking only at the side of the girl's face as she looks up and over the night. Noticing this, the girl speaks in a restrained voice, but almost scolding. "Silly isn't it? It is nothing to fret over, I assure you. But having you hear this makes me happy enough to tell you one more thing. Shiki misunderstands herself. She has never truly loved murder. Her impulse stems from me, her origin. So fear her not, Kokutō. She is no murderous monster. Only me. Always me."

The grin, never far from her face, seems to say to the boy in slight and sly motions that it is a secret kept between them only. The boy is left to puzzle out how anyone would believe him anyway. How can he tell anyone a secret kept between himself and a soul, born from primal intelligence? Who would even believe him?

"I must leave soon, I fear," the girl says. "I ask again, Kokutō, do you wish for nothing? Even in when you crossed paths with Leo Shirazumi, you chose the path of temperance, and didn't waver from it until the end, when the choice to be made was clear. It is a wholly strange choice, I must declare. Do you not want something better than this?"

"Nah. Here, right here, like this...it's fine, I think."

"Maybe it is," the girl whispers. She looks at him then with almost envious eyes, and she thinks. Humans tear and scrabble for answers, creating a never-ending spiral of conflict. Shiki Ryōgi personifies this. And yet here is this boy, of a character that puzzles the girl. Hurting no one, even himself, taking nothing, and asking for nothing. He stands amidst the battering winds and waves, melting into the flow of time as his own until he breathes his last. A common life.

Could it be possible to live such a life? Surely not from the start. Perhaps that too is some different kind of “special.” So in the end, everyone is still distinct, leading lives whose meaning comes entirely from their own self. The seed is always the same, but it is they who chart different courses, becoming margraves of their own empty boundaries, guarding their own normality. Sometimes, across borders, people reach out, sometimes they don’t. And yet they live.

There is a long stillness from both the boy and girl. The great white expanse seems to call toward her as she ponders.

No one will ever try to understand him, no one to ever give him the time of day. Always normal, no one to see into him deeply. Unhated, with no one to draw close to. And yet, to Shiki, a symbol of happy times. Who among them is truly alone? No one might ever truly say.

The snowflakes drift about in the air, the girl as entranced as she has been the entire time. Yet in her eyes is a quiet regret. And then, she murmurs something under her breath, so silently that it almost seems as if it was meant only for her, and that it was never meant to escape her lips.

“He will live ordinary, and die ordinary. What solitude,” says Shiki Ryōgi, as she stares out at the darkness that holds no beginning and no end, words of parting barely heard.

The boy saw the girl off, knowing that they will never meet again.

The snow did not abate, burying the darkness in little white shards, fluttering gently like the wings of tired butterflies, falling to the ground.

“Farewell, Kokutō,” the girl had said before she left. The boy could say nothing.

“Silly me. I know we’ll meet again tomorrow,” the girl had said before she left. The boy could say nothing.

And after that, for a long while, longer than he could say, he stood out there in the lonely street, looking out into the winter night sky. It was only when dawn broke that he concluded his vigil in place of the girl.

Yet here, even with blue-yellow light peeking out of the horizon, the snow does not weaken or cease. And when it seemed like the whole world would be buried in white, he finally started to make his way home, each step a crunch of snow crust underfoot. The black umbrella sways in the long path, the boy holding it aloft the sole shadow that plies the way.

In the midst of white winter, the black-clad figure is the only thing that contrasts the day. And it sways slowly, shuffling from side to side with each

step, until alone, it becomes difficult to spot. There is no loneliness that darkens his step, and the boy does not stop on the path.

All is as it was before, as it was four years ago, when he met her for the first time in this path. Two lone figures, sharing a solitary road, their souls cold and sweet and tinged with the songs of winter.