

- Like a Gun. -

- o -

There was the shout, the words were mingled, but the feeling of dread in them came through loud and clear.

She could feel the fear in the voice... And then she realized that it was her voice that sounded so terrified.

And she noticed that she was running... But she didn't know how or why. She just was.

And then there was a bang. A feeling of pain and her world went blank.

She woke up.

- o -

## **- Chapter One: The empty Box. -**

- i -

Picking his way slowly through the drawers and boxes of paper, magazines and various other objects, the young man desperately tried to ignore the thundering rain outside. He looked at each and every item, studied it, and gently weighed it in his hand as he focused on a point only he could see, apparently reaching a decision.

"Green Box..." he muttered, throwing an old fashion magazine into the described container.

The publication was quickly followed by a couple of other issues, some random leaflets and scraps, a small red purse and it's matching belt, some more periodicals, and a small stuffed White Lion doll on a key ring. He had stared at the soft toy quite a while before deciding where it went. He remembered it, although he didn't remember seeing it often. He remembered being quite sarcastic about it...

He never did understand why she did certain things...

Curses. Not that train of thought again.

The rain outside was battering down seriously now. The insistent dripping of some annoying leak into a bowl underneath it reminded him that he was going to have to empty it soon.

Good, anything to stop him thinking too much about Her.

Dumping "Leo" into the green box, he headed to the cupboard, pulled out a bigger bowl, went to the leak, changed recipients, and emptied the smaller bowl into the sink.

There he sighed, rubbed his forehead and got back to work, still ignoring the pouring noise from outside.

This time there were quite a few items for the other box, the black one. Mainly science magazines, some news articles, a few books, including a rather complex one on advanced chemistry if he was to judge, some computer disks, a few boxes of pills, sachets of powder and bottles of chemicals...

Then his hand reached out for a pile of photos.

He stopped before reaching it. Then cursed himself for being such a wimp, and picked up the pile.

The top one stared up at him reproachfully, he winced. It was a copy from the article on a certain Hirota Masami's suicide. 'Suicide, my foot!' he thought.

On the photo could be seen a body, lying on the ground, as teams of policemen and ambulance doctors could be seen arriving in the background. Beside the body, was the figure of a young woman, crying as she hugged the small boy beside her. The small boy simply stared in front of him, his expression guarded, and hidden by his overly large glasses. His tiny taut fists were the only indication of his inner turmoil. He was the only one to know what had really happened. He had seen the dead woman die, he had been the only one to hear her last words, to know of her murderers. Hirota Masami, no, Miyano Akemi rather, had been killed. And he, Edogawa Conan, had arrived only seconds after the shot.

Kudo Shinichi stared at the image, mixed emotions boiling inside him. Why was it always like that? Why was he always too late to save the victims?

He remembered his helplessness, the sadness. He remembered the tears, and his determination to see them pay.

...The tears...

"Black Box..." he muttered as he put the photo into it, passing onto the next.

The rest of the photos were mainly group shots. Five small children more or less grinned up at the camera. The small boy with glasses, Conan's smile was a bit forced... The auburn haired child at his side was generally either amused or stoic. The other three seemed very childish indeed compared to those two... Although there were enough shots of the two 'not-so-childlike' children actually being childlike to even that out. These images made it into the green box. But only after a long consideration.

A voice called him from upstairs as he opened the next drawer.

"What?" he shouted back. "Oh, lunchtime? Already?"

He looked at his watch. Indeed. He closed the drawer and headed to the door of the lab. Shinichi hesitated a moment, as if there was something he was trying to figure out, before going upstairs.

-i -

When they entered the room, the patient had been staring vaguely out the window. At Doctor Asami Herschel's greeting, the girl merely nodded, before returning her gaze to the rain outside. It pained Ran to see her gaze so blankly. It was as if she was a hollow doll. No thoughts, no emotions, nothing. The three children she had brought along expressed their innocent concern long enough for her to turn her gaze away from the glass pane. The doctor checked a few things with her patient, before leaving the visitors and their friend alone. The children chattered on as the Sleeping Kogoro's daughter pasted a comforting smile onto her face. The bigger of the two boys had pulled a Get Well card from his satchel, and handed it to the cute girl with a head band beside him. Ayumi took the card and solemnly presented it to the person on the bed.

"Here!" she said, her sweet face showing off it's cutest smile. A bandaged hand hesitantly took the proffered piece of cardboard...

"What is it?" she asked.

"A get well soon card!" said Genta.

The -Duh- thought was visible even on her face.

"We got all the class to sign it! So did Ran, and mister Mouri, a couple of teachers and even the professor's neighbour!" Went Mitsuhiro.

Ran smiled at the thought that Shinichi had actually been able to sign the card... He hadn't been home that long in ages! The only thing that really was unsettling were the circumstances of his return.

"Oh. Thanks." said the girl, her eyes drifting down to the card with that sad glint on them. Maybe Kamen Yaiba hadn't been a good choice after all.

"It's a pity that Conan couldn't sign it..." murmured Ayumi to no one in particular.

Ran flinched. The patient looked at Ayumi, a perplexed look on her face.

"Conan who?"

Oh, yes, that's right. Haibara Ai had lost her memory. That did explain her blank look.

Ran tried not to sob thinking that Conan was no longer there... She desperately tried not to think about Shinichi appearing out of no where, the Professor Agasa's young charge bleeding in his arms. She didn't want to remember Shinichi's face when Doctor Herschel had declared her amnesic.

"Are you all right, Ran?"

She sighed, and simply shrugged off the children's concern with a half-felt smile, while Ayumi proceeded to tell Haibara all over again of Edoawa Conan's great exploits... The one question coming back again and again: "Don't you remember, Ai?"

-i -

Lunch consisted of some sandwiches, fruit and a cold drink. The professor hadn't felt able to do more than walk to the local convenience store. He wasn't that bad a cook, but it was slightly disturbing to walk into the kitchen unit and wonder whether one's amnesic charge would remember cooking there. He sighed, looking at Shinichi Kudo's blank expression. One would think he was the one to have lost his memory, the way he simply stared out the window at the falling rain.

"Are you alright, Shinichi?" he asked.

"Hmm?" The teen answered distractedly. There was a sad gleam in his eyes.

"Shinichi! Is something wrong?" The professor asked louder this time.

Shinichi's face turned as Agasa's voice jerked him from where ever his thoughts had taken him.

"Wrong? Oh, no. Nothing wrong, don't worry." He smiled up at the professor. The professor had trouble remembering the last time he had seen Shinichi so unfocused. It was both unusual and out of character. Agasa was worried.

"Are you sure, Shinichi? " He asked again.

"Yes professor, I'm sure. " Shinichi sighed. " I was just thinking... "

'What about is what I'm wondering.' thought the professor. Seeing that Shinichi was obviously not in the mood to share, he decided to change subject.

"How is the sorting going? " He distractedly nibbled at his sweet potato bun. He noticed that his young friend hadn't touched his beef sandwich yet.

"Oh, fine! " He answered, a bit too cheerfully. "Only a couple of drawers left and I'm finished... What about the data?"

Shinichi was referring to the files Agasa was supposed to read through.

"Nothing yet. The passwords you gave me work, but so far it's only been trials and basis formulas. No final yet."

Agasa looked thoughtfully at Shinichi as it occurred to him that the youth might have been worrying about the antidote. Ai had finished it and made the necessary pills. Shinichi was now tall enough to prove it's efficiency, and normally she had kept a pill for herself somewhere safe...

Where was the question.

Shinichi hadn't found it anywhere, and Ai hadn't kept any surplus in the lab... So, in case it was needed, Agasa was trying to find the finished formula in Ai's files.

In case it was needed...

Professor Agasa looked thoughtfully out the window.

It seemed such a reasonable idea...

Shinichi pulled his chair back.

The professor continued to stare at the falling rain.

" Oh well, I guess I'd better get back to it. Thank you for lunch professor. "

Agasa answered absent-mindedly, before realizing what it was Shinichi had said.

" Oh! Oh... Yes, you do that... "

Shinichi was already at the top of the basement stairway when the old man called out to him.

" Hm? "

" You... Just take it easy, okay? Your arm is still damaged. " He said.

" Sure thing professor! " grinned Shinichi, flexing said arm before going down stairs.

Agasa looked out the window again, slightly annoyed to notice Shinichi's sandwich had been left untouched. He sighed, returning to his thoughts.

It was such a reasonable idea... He thought. Yet why did he feel deep down that it was somewhat wrong?

- i -

She blinked.

Somehow she must have fallen asleep again some time after lunch. Must be all that medicine, she thought. She groggily sat up on her bed and mentally asked herself the questions that were now becoming routine.

Who, What, Where and Why.

-Who am I?

'I am Ai Haibara...' That was what they called her at least. She didn't know why it felt odd though.

-What am I?

I'm a small eight year old girl...' That answer felt strange too, but she didn't believe she was a dwarf either.

-Where am I?

That question was easy. 'I am at the Beika Central Hospital.' And she'd been there, as far as she could remember, for four days already.

-Why am I here?

'I am here to be treated for some burns and injuries, as well as amnesia...' The last bit was both bothersome and annoying... And she wasn't even going to try answering that question metaphorically either.

She wasn't...

'Why am I still here...?'

She looked up, slightly startled, as the phrase treacherously slammed itself into her thoughts.

She remembered hearing it before... She believed she was the one to have said it... But why?

- Thump - Thump -

"Owe..." Stupid headaches were back. She should stop thinking so hard.

Rubbing her temples in an effort to alleviate the pain, she glanced towards the window. It had stopped raining. That was a relief of sorts. The rain had been niggling at her every waking moment. Something important was associated with it. At least now she could try not to think about it until her headaches passed.

The dwindling light outside suggested that it was late. She looked around to see what time it was...

And saw the card. She smiled, as she looked at the garish picture of a man with a giant Y down his front. With this kind of thing, it was the thought that counted, not the appearance.

She opened it and re-read the good wishes of various strangers...

The "Detective Boys", Ayumi, Mitsuhiro and Genta, had visited her quite a few times, so it was easy for her to put a face to their scrawled names. Their message was friendly and obviously heartfelt.

It was harder for most of the other names. Childish scrawl after childish scrawl, and even one by the form teacher that had been written for those who hadn't quite mastered spelling yet. Their get well wishes were rather general and non specific, so she had the feeling it wasn't that bad that she couldn't remember who they were. The same applied to some other random names.

The only exceptions were as follows.

One very messy scrawl, rather carelessly phrased, was from the 'Master Detective: Mouri Kogorou', who, she had been told, was Ran's father. She felt somewhat relieved the man hadn't paid her a visit. Ran's neat scrawl and encouraging message underneath was quite contrasting. Ai liked Ran, although she always had this strange feeling when Ran was around... As if she reminded her of someone... Someone else. She tried not to think too hard about that.

Then there was Agasa's note. The kind looking old man had been quite preoccupied by her health on his visits, and she really felt bad about not remembering him. Especially since she was, apparently, staying at his place. She had the nasty suspicion this was because her parents were dead...

As intriguing as these entries were though, her attention was drawn to the last one.

Crammed in one of the seemingly last corners of space left, was a defiant and bold handwriting.

The text was most confusing...

"I wish for you to be happy. Get well soon!"

It was signed Kudo Shinichi...

She had inconspicuously asked Ayumi to remind her who he, amongst others, was. She had said that he was Ran's boyfriend, and that he was an ace teenage detective. She also mentioned that it was him that had saved her from the explosion... Wherever that had been.

"I wish for you to be happy."

What a strange thing to write down in a get well card. She remembered vaguely seeing the famed detective. She had barely awakened from a drug-induced nap, some short time after she had been diagnosed with amnesia... Her head had been painful, and she had the remnants of some dreadful dream still in mind. She had glimpsed his face when doctor Herschel had been talking to him and some others, before drifting off again...

His face..

'Kudo...' A voice in her mind said.

-THUMP-

"Ah!"

She gripped her bandaged head with her hands, as a nauseating feeling rose in time with the migraine.

It seemed quite a while before the pain receded... Haibara Ai then sank back into the restoring depths of sleep.

- i -

- End Chapter One -

## Chapter Two: Refuge. -

- ii -

The professor opened the door. He offered a hand to help her out of the mini, but, for some reason she wasn't quite sure about, she refused and climbed out of the car unaided. The professor didn't seem to mind. She must have behaved similarly before. She let a nervous smile reach her lips and looked up.

So this was her home... Where she lived...

The professor's home was pretty unusual, especially when compared to the old occidental mansion beside it. It had an overhang with a window just above the front door, that reminded her, heaven knows why, of the head of a tortoise, surrounded by it's shell. The curved walls were covered in window panes like just as many shiny scales.

Even it's white walls contrasted with the neighbouring climber-infested house.

'The Turtle Shield of feng shui. A refuge. That's what it feels like...' She thought to herself. 'A place where I can feel safe.' She really smiled this time, despite the sad glint in her eyes.

And no, she wasn't going to wonder what she felt the need to feel safe from.

"Welcome home, Ai-kun." Said the professor, opening the door to let her through, a warm smile on his paternal features.

Well... She wasn't going to. No.

Not just yet, at least...

-ii-

"Hey Ran!"

Ran Mouri turned her head, startled by his voice. She had to keep reminding herself that Shinichi was back, that he wasn't going to run off anymore... He had promised. It was normal for him to call her name once more.

"Yes Shinichi?" She smiled, fighting the thought that yes, he was back, but he had yet to explain. Shinichi grinned.

"Care for some lunch?" he said.

Ran's eyes sparkled happily.

"Sure!" she answered.

Maybe he would finally tell her about this case of his... And... No, she wasn't going to think of that again...

Shinichi, standing at the entrance to the agency, drenched from head to toe, a stained bundle in his arms.

No! She wasn't!

A frightened look in his eyes, he whispered the words hospital and ambulance, ignoring the gash in his own arm. Ignoring her questions. Ignoring his own fatigue...

Oh, damn it!

Thankfully though, Shinichi had started once again talking to her about his famous idol, and her mind automatically switched into 'Listening to Shinichi-geek mode', cleansing it of any thoughts of sudden reappearances and mysterious injuries. She couldn't help but giggle when the dinner Lady had to call his name three times before he realized it was his turn. God, was he cute when he blushed. Just like a certain Conan...

Dang, now it was that train of thought again.

She concentrated on her own order, in a desperate attempt to fight the wave of sadness she felt at the sudden departure of her adopted little brother. Once she had her own tray of food, she went to join Shinichi at his table. Some girls who had come to chat with the famous high-school detective quickly walked away, leaving her to talk, at least for a few minutes, alone with her child-hood friend.

"Hey, isn't today the day Ai leaves hospital? At what time is the professor going to get her? Maybe we could pop in to say hi, what do you think?" She asked. She mentally kicked herself for her choice of topic.

"What time is it?" went Shinichi, his dark hair revealing his eyes that had been glued on his lunch for a second there.

"Twelve thirty, you silly boy. You know, lunch time?" She playfully swatted at him. He ducked, smiling back.

"Then the professor has already brought her home." He answered. "He told me he would pick her up at twelve."

He had a happy expression on his face. Ran smiled. A happy Shinichi is contagious.

"Maybe we can go and see how she's settling back in after school." offered Ran.

"Sure!" Shinichi happily munched on his bun. Ran couldn't help but notice that he hadn't bought much to eat...

She was going to ask him about this when another group of fans came to hassle him.

Oh well... Later perhaps.

- ii -

Sitting down on her bed, the little red head sighed.

She was glad to be out of hospital. It wasn't that the doctors and nurses weren't kind, but she felt the need to get out, to gain some control on her life. Yes, she felt the need for some space, some time to try and sort things out. She was finding this whole amnesia business very troublesome.

At times she had the impression she was on the brink of remembering everything, that she only needed to pull back some veil for all the memories to pour forth... But something was stopping her. What was the question.

And there were the other times, when her mind felt like a blank slate, and somehow she felt that she wasn't the person she appeared to be, she wasn't who she was supposed to be... Or that she no longer was.

It annoyed her... And being annoyed didn't help with her physical injuries.

She gingerly flexed her wounded leg, turning her bandaged head towards a green box on the bed beside her. After lunch, the professor had shown her around the house, before leading her to their room and showing her the box. He said it had been Shinichi's idea to put all her things together for her to rummage through, in a hope, perhaps, to help her remember who she was.

With her wrapped up hand, she gingerly pulled out the first item she could reach in the container. It was a small stuffed white lion... On a Key Chain.

She smiled. It was cute. And although she didn't remember anything much by looking at it, she didn't mind. This container held some real clues to her identity, not just theoretic baits for her memory.

She rummaged through the rest of the box's contents. She was slightly disappointed. Magazines, a purse and a belt, and a few random objects she suspected were gifts from a certain Ayumi...

This didn't help her with her main worry.

She was seven, right? How come there weren't any toys, (except for the stuffed lion) ? How come there weren't any dolls?

What was worse: how come she felt relieved at there not being any?

'Stop being silly...' she scolded herself in thought... 'They are probably packed away somewhere else, just like my clothes... The Professor will know where.'

She felt slightly sick at that prospect...

The small metallic Badge gained her interest. It had 'Detective Boy' written on the front, and an interesting emitter-receiver system on the pin side. Oddly enough, she understood by instinct how it was supposed to function. After that, she looked at the small packet that was left.

It contained photos. Now that was interesting!

She recognized Ran, the Professor and the kids, as well as herself in some of them. Settling herself more comfortably on the bed covers, she proceeded to looking through the photos, hunting for a hint to explain her malaise, something to trigger her memories.

It wasn't too long after that she fell asleep, due to the medicine she had taken at lunchtime. The child's breath eased, as her puzzled expression faded, for that of the bliss of unconsciousness. Under her now limp hands, the photographs laid scattered across the duvet.

One of her fingers rested on a print of a small boy with glasses...

- ii -

-Splash!-

"Ouah!"

"Watch out, Takagi!"

A firm grip got a hold of his arm, before he could land rear end first into the water.

It had been raining on and off for a week now... Ironically, ever since the day Kudo had reappeared at Mouri's.

Takagi muttered something under his breath, whereas Sato pretended not to notice, too occupied trying not to slip herself.

The ground was a miniature lake: small puddles had grown and interlinked to form a single mammoth. The police force was spread out across it's muddy surface, some of the officers finding themselves knee deep in it. So much for finding footprints and such... They would be lucky to land on a clue, and it would be a very soggy one at that.

"Aah!"

Now it was Takagi's turn to catch Sato.

"Are you all right?"

She blushed ever so slightly as she nodded, before returning to investigate.

Takagi felt something flutter in his stomach... Before shaking his head and returning to the task at hand.

It had taken the police force days to figure out where this place was. Kudo's indications had been vague, mainly due to his injury and shock, and they had to backtrack his steps and guess a lot. But once they had found it, it had been unmistakeable. It's kind of hard to miss a crater of twisted metal car frames and blasted walls and trees.

The small slope above it was now impossible to climb... It's steepness had been accentuated by a mudslide, making it unsteady under foot.

The neighbouring area was pretty much void of inhabitants, explaining why no one had reported the blasts...

No one who survived at least.

They had found bodies.

Takagi jerked his head back up, hearing Megure call them back out of the deep puddles. He felt some drops of rain start to land on his head. He attempted to pull his parka hood back up at the same time as he followed Sato... A tad too fast.

His foot skidded in the water. His hearing was soon deafened by a mighty splash.

It was a good thing. He didn't get to hear Sato's squawk as his mighty splash drenched her from head to toe. He got pretty drenched himself. Cursing under his breath, he reached out to grab what it was his foot had slipped on... He tried to ignore the unpleasant sensation of the cold water soaking through his clothes, as Sato helped him up.

Pushing his hair out of his eyes, he stared at the object in his hands...

"Oh no..."

Five minutes later, Megure was on the phone, calling a certain High-school detective who had a lot to answer for.

-ii-

It was raining again.

The professor sighed as he watched the leak in the basement drip. He should probably get that fixed. The stain on the ceiling had grown considerably larger over the past week, and the weather forecast had been rather pessimistic. He wiped his oil covered hands on a nearby rag, before emptying the bowl.

He'd worked enough for today. He hang his lab coat behind the door, before going upstairs.

'I should go and check on Ai-kun' he thought. He'd been in the lab for three hours already, and she'd been dreadfully quiet...

Of course, in her normal state, he wouldn't have been worried. She was probably busy reading a



book somewhere, or watching TV. Oh well. It wouldn't hurt to check in on her, after all, would it? He smiled.

He found her in the bedroom, where he had left her after lunch. She was sound asleep on her bed. He quietly tiptoed nearer, to take a closer look. Apparently she had been looking through the box Shinichi had sorted out for her. It's contents had been scattered over the bedspread. Carefully, so as not to wake her up, he put the box on the floor, and put the magazines and such back in it. He reached out to gather the photographs into his hands, and stopped, seeing the one she had her hand on.

Heh, trust her to put her finger on what was missing. He grinned, sadly, as he slipped this onto her bedside table, putting the rest of the pack away. That done, he gingerly lifted her up, minding her wounds, pulled back the sheets, and tucked her into bed. The small girl muttered inaudibly as her head touched the pillow.

The professor sighed. She looked so innocent when she slept. It was hard to imagine her as anything else than a small seven year old girl at times like this. His face took on a grim expression as her bandages reminded him of how dangerous her life really was. He wondered when Shinichi would come round to telling him precisely what had happened that night. His young neighbour's near silence annoyed him slightly, but his preoccupied expression whenever he mentioned the topic unnerved him.

Next time...

He would ask him about it next time...

"Sweet dreams Ai-kun..." he finally whispered, before leaving the room.

He felt that a warm drink of chocolate (no sugar, Ai-kun's orders, it would be unfair to profit from her amnesia by disobeying,) was very much needed.

And, as he left, Ai Haibara's mind swam in the dark depths of sleep, and started to dream...

-ii-

It was a dream... She knew it. In the same way one knows that one is awake, she could tell that she was asleep...

It didn't matter really... She plunged head first into the land of nod, waiting to see what the dream would bring.

Slowly, blurred faces began to appear in sequence to her mind's eye... Some she recognised, others remained nameless, yet each and every one was familiar. They all seemed to cause an emotion to flit through her thoughts.

Fear, Hatred, Friendship, Love, Kinship, and others... Each to varying degrees...

The faces continued to shift, as she tried to place a name on each one.

Wait! There! That face... !

The vision stilled, and gained focus...

That face... It was the face of that boy. What was his name already?

'Kudo...' whispered a young voice.

... Kudo? Wasn't it Edogawa? Wait a minute...

Suddenly, the image shifted. She suddenly saw the back of the short, bespectacled child, as he faced a figure in the distance.

"Edogawa Conan. Detective." he said smugly. She could see his smile, victorious and daring as his voice carried on. She no longer understood the words, but it didn't matter... His image was already fading into another.

Detective...

She saw him again, this time his features were less clear. She'd never seen such a sad look on such a young child's face. She tried to reach out, to ask him why, or to comfort him... She didn't know which.

And then she saw him being picked up... And growing!

A sharp stab of pain filled her, as she stared at the young man in front of her.

A handsome young man, with a cocky grin. His sharp, shrewd eyes giving away his intelligence. Those eyes...

He was saying something, but she couldn't hear. Her mind swam with pain... and, was it regret? She closed her eyes, waiting for the feeling to go away. When she opened them once more, the young man was gone.

In his place, was a young woman. Tall. Pretty. Severe looking. Her eyes stared at her, like two pricks of ice... yet...

It can't be...

She knew who this was. She recognised the emotionless mask. The lab coat she was wearing seemed all too familiar. The lady stepped forward, towards her, her arm outstretched...

Is that really me!

She peered into the palm she had placed below her eyes.

In it, she held a single pill.

"NO!" she cried, swiping away the hand.

The vision rippled, and pill, hand and young woman all vanished. She found herself alone in the dark.

Don't crack. Be strong. Poker face, don't show your weakness... She tightened her fists.

"You're on your own..."

Startled, she swivelled to where the voice had come from.

Nothing... She squinted into the darkness. Wait... There... There's someone there.

Cautiously, she approached. A trickle of noise reached her ears... Sobbing?

Suddenly, a small child appeared before her. She couldn't be more than 7 or 8. Her red-brown hair was cut in the same style as the young woman from before. No... She couldn't be? That can't be me, she thought. The child was obviously crying. She could see the tears rolling down her cheeks... yet...

Her fists were clenched, her stance defiant, she nervously bit her lip as the tears flowed on.

"You're all alone..." Said the deep voice.

"No I'm not!" cried the child. Her eyes glared at the darkness.

"You are, child! Your parents are dead. You are an orphan. Alone, that's what an orphan is!"

The child flinched, at the mention of the deaths.

"Sis..." She whispered. "I still have my sister..."

"Oh..." went the voice... She was starting to hate it. "Then tell me, why isn't your sister here with you?"

"She's... Because she's..." The child stammered.

"Well?" The voice sounded positively smug. A feeling of dread had started to make itself known to Ai.

"Because Akemi is..."

Akemi... Akemi!

The child vanished before she even finished her sentence. Another young woman was in her place.

She smiled down at her, her long dark hair sliding down her shoulders as she knelt beside her. Her smile was warm, comforting. Her eyes were a soft melancholy.

And then there was a bang. A feeling of pain and her world went blank.

Akemi... Akemi was gone...

The completed sentence traitorously escaped her mouth, as she felt her eyes sting.

"Because Akemi is dead..."

She felt like screaming.

She woke up.

-ii-

"Ai-chan!" Ran exclaimed.

As if the dream had suddenly reached it's worst point, the young girl's eyes flipped open, as she bolted upright.

"Ai! Are you alright?" Asked Ran, looking alarmed. She was sitting on the bed, beside her stood, worried, the professor and Sonoko.

Ai didn't answer. Her face was dreadfully pale. Unacknowledged tears were running down her

cheeks, as she took deep, panicked breaths. She didn't seem to see them.

"Ai!" Getting no response, Ran pulled the young girl towards her, into a hug.

The sudden contact, associated with the jolt of pain from her injuries, seemed to bring her back to reality. She stiffened in the taller girl's grip. The dream was already beginning to fade from her memory...

"It's alright, Ai. It was only a dream..." Whispered Ran, in an attempt to soothe her.

A dream. A really bad dream. Ai looked up at Ran.

She... The woman... The one from the dream... Ran somehow looked like her. But she was dead.

Even though the memory of who she was had already faded, the pain remained. She was dead!

'I want to forget! I don't want to remember...' she thought, desperately.

She allowed herself to be pulled into the refuge of the other girl's embrace.

-ii-

- End Chapter Two -

## - Chapter Three: Realisation. -

-iii-

Shinichi Kudo cursed mentally to himself.

It really wasn't like him to want to avoid a crime scene. Any crime scene, however gruesome, however personal. He would always make abstraction of the horror in benefit of finding out the truth... And having the culprits taken to justice. He'd even been back to tropical land without any problems, apart from a slight sense of sadness and regret perhaps... And there were some crime scenes that made him feel anger, or disgust... But never, ever, dread...

Yet this crime scene...

Damn, get over it! The dead can't bite.

Precisely... The dead.

He felt a terrible pang of regret, as names flitted through his memory. Masami Hirota, Seiji Aso...

People who were dead, yet he could have saved. He knew he had another name to add to his list. He was just glad it wasn't Haibara's.

Haibara...

Thinking of Haibara... Ran was probably already at the professor's, with Sonoko. He wondered a bit how it was going... And how Haibara was. The rare times where he had brought himself to go and visit her in the hospital, she had been too out of it to notice him.

He still wasn't sure how he should act towards her, now that she was amnesic...

He sighed as Takagi's car slid to a halt. The rain continued to batter the roof of the car.

"This way," said the investigator, pointing towards a makeshift tent.

The police force had obviously arranged a local headquarters amidst the tortured landscape.

Shinichi smiled uncomfortably. This didn't bode well at all. Several prepared answers jumped into his mind... Prepared lies. As he got out of the car and followed Takagi, Shinichi hastily put his satchel above his head to protect himself from the onslaught of rain.

Boy, is it muddy!

The Inspector had reached him just shortly after he had turned his mobile back on after the end of class, while he was waiting for Ran. He had a feeling he knew what it was about just looking at Megure's name on the small screen. He had been right. Yet he hadn't expected it to be so urgent. Apparently they had found some piece of evidence that required his immediate input. He only realized then that he'd been delaying. It had disturbed him more than he would like to admit. He readily agreed to have investigator Takagi come to collect him.

He'd just finished the call when Ran and Sonoko arrived. He explained, feeling slightly apprehensive, that the inspector had called to ask him for his help. This meant he couldn't accompany Ran. Ran had the grace to only seem slightly disappointed, but she had smiled encouragingly.

Sonoko, on the other hand, didn't let him off so easily, saying things about him having no heart, living only for his mysteries, insert also a guilt trap for being away so long (Ran had frowned with her on that), and that if he couldn't find room for a small visit to the small girl, then she, the great Suzuki Sonoko, would accompany Ran in his stead. He countered that the mystery he had been called on had all to do with Haibara's present state. That silenced her. But he did say it would be great if she could go with Ran.

Shaking his head, both to set his mind back on the present and keep his dripping wet bangs from blinding him, Shinichi followed Takagi into the tent.

"Oh."

A depressed looking professor Jodie and sombre Akai Shuichi were also present. Well, well.

He nodded to them in a mute greeting, and turned to face the inspector behind his improvised work surface. He had to force himself to not stutter or look stunned at the sight of the familiar object on the table.

Conan's tracing glasses...

Oh shoot... How did they get here! He definitely had a bad feeling about this.

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Ran held the shaking girl tight, as she cried in her arms.

The room was quiet with the exception of her muffled sobs, and the rain outside.

Uncomfortable, Sonoko, who had been standing to the side, lifted her hand and opened her mouth.

"Erm... Perhaps I should go and make some tea?"

With a relieved look, Ran nodded to her friend.

The professor, who had been looking both concerned and at a loss, decided to go help Sonoko to find her way around the kitchen, and to carry the mugs.

It wasn't long before Ran found herself alone with Ai.

She was finding the whole situation very unsettling. It wasn't that this was the first time she had to comfort a crying child, it wasn't. Ayumi had had a few fits under her custody, and there were also some other children she had baby-sat.

It was just... She couldn't remember ever seeing Ai cry.

Ayumi could go from smiling cherub to crying fountain in a blink, and she'd seen both Genta and Mitsuhiro bite back some tears every so often. Still, sometimes they would forget they were supposed to be boys and they would let the tears flow. Conan would every now and then get a tear in the corner of his sweet blue eyes, but that was understandable since her Dad had this dreadful habit of hitting him on the head.

But Ai...

Not once. Not once had she seen her tears.

At times she could seem a bit sad or melancholy, and at other times she would be extremely quiet, but never had she displayed such open grief in front of her until now.

Somehow, she doubted that what had caused this outbreak was as simple as a bad dream.

Not really knowing what to do with herself, she rubbed the girl's back and uttered soothing nothings in a hope to help her calm down. It helped her calm down too. After a while, Ai calmed down enough to pull back from the hug. Ran smiled as she watched the small auburn-haired child compose herself. It was cute in a way... How she acted like a miniature adult.

The professor and Sonoko soon returned with the hot drinks.

"You feeling better Ai-kun?" asked the professor. His round and jovial features still showing a touch of worry.

The girl nodded, her face schooled into its usual calm expression.

It suddenly struck Ran that the girl may have always hidden her feelings behind that face. It suddenly frightened her. Perhaps Ai and her should have a private talk some time soon...

Meanwhile, since she obviously didn't feel like talking about her nightmare, it might be a good idea to change subject.

"So Professor? How's your latest project coming along?"

Agasa, taking the hint, was soon lost in the description of his work, whereas Ran and Sonoko both asked him questions, and Ai absently sipped her tea.

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"Humm" thought Takagi, scratching his head.

Kudo was acting weird. Takagi usually wouldn't worry about it. Kudo always seemed to act on his own agenda during a case. But this time was different... Takagi stared, lost in his thoughts, at the young teen detective as Inspector Megure talked. The boy's face was grim, which was normal, considering what the Inspector was telling him. He was also fidgeting a bit, but that was probably to counter the shivers the rain soaking his school uniform was bound to cause.

In fact, to put it straight, he was acting like any eighteen year old involved in a case would act in front of Megure...

Wait, what did he just think? Damn. That is just so wrong!

Kudo was not any eighteen year old, especially when involved in a case.

He usually bounced about, a cocky grin or puzzled frown on his face. He'd buzz around, as if he owned the crime scene, look at everything, listen and march ahead. It was usually Megure who had to follow his lead. He always seemed excited by the challenge, and he'd make everything look so

simple! Which was one of the reasons why Megure was so fond of letting the boy investigate on his turf. Not many private investigators could achieve that.

Takagi shivered considering this. He wondered what was so different about this case to affect the young detective so.

He couldn't help but notice the brief glances Kudo kept shooting at the glasses they'd found. He'd found... He was certain he was going to come down with a cold thanks to that dip in the water. Who would have thought the mud in the bottom of that deep puddle could be so slippery?

Who would have thought they would find Conan's glasses there...

Takagi had to shake himself as images of the young boy, dead, abducted or who knows what decided to plague his imaginative mind. No. Conan was fine. It's just a coincidence that his glasses were there... His unmistakably Agasa-customized glasses... In the middle of nowhere... Only a coincidence...

Stop being stupid!

Okay, okay, perhaps not such a coincidence. Perhaps it was Kudo or the young Haibara girl who brought them there, whatever... Had the boy been in anyway involved, he was certain Kudo or Mouri would have let them know. Wouldn't they?

Perhaps that was why Kudo was acting weird. He did look a bit pale. Conan was a relative of his, wasn't he?

No. Somehow his policeman's instinct wasn't convinced. Although Kudo's behaviour was weird, it held too many resemblances to a behaviour he was often confronted with...

Kudo looked like he felt guilty.

Guilty, but what of? Certainly not the explosion... His guilt didn't seem that great.

Damn it. He was hiding something, at any rate.

The Inspector had finished his exposé by now. He was now confronting Kudo with his own questions.

"Alright, Kudo. I understand that you have been under quite a lot of stress of late..."

He was referring to his prolonged absence out of town.

"...And that both this case and what happened to young Haibara must have been somewhat of a shock to you, but I believe it is long time now that you gave us a decent explanation."

Megure leaned forward.

"Miss Jody and Mister Akai here, have both given me their theories about this incident, and to tell you the truth, they scare me. I want to have your version, now."

He picked up the still slightly muddy glasses, and used them to emphasize his point.

"I want to know who, what, how, and why. I have seven corpses on my hands, and some of them aren't near identifiable, I need information!"

Kudo, who hadn't been reacting much during the whole of Megure's talk, jerked his head up suddenly.

"Seven you say?" A twinkle of urgent worry could be seen in his eyes.

"Yes, that's what I said... Why?" Megure seemed unsettled by Kudo's outburst, and so did professor Jody.

Takagi didn't like the predator's look Akai's face had taken on. Kudo slumped his shoulders back, put a hand to his face and sighed.

'He's going to tell us what he's hiding, then...' Thought Takagi.

"I guess it is time I told you what happened here last week." Shinichi leaned onto the camping table that had been set up as Megure's desk.

And he told them.

Takagi couldn't help but mentally swear as he heard Kudo's testimony.

And he'd thought Jody and Akai's theories were scary...

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The splashing of water, crinkling of paper, tingling of kitchenware on the work surface, all these sounds were mundane, soothing and safe from any thought of bad dreams and pain. Except for the sound of water perhaps, but it was better than the pattering of the rain. She was absolutely certain

the persisting drops would drive her insane if she didn't concentrate on something else. That was part of the reason why she had insisted on helping Ran with the house cleaning. The older girl had refused at first, reminding her that the doctor had told her to rest, and that she had a leg injury, amongst others, to take into account. But Ai Haibara would have none of it. She was damned if she was going to let this girl, however nice and good meaning she was, do all her housecleaning

for her just because she was a little battered.

This was an odd feeling of course. It wasn't as if it was her home really, and even if the professor was messy, she should not have felt that it was her responsibility to help clear up his mess. Heck, most eight year olds should rejoice in making a mess, not take it upon themselves to make sure the adults clean everything up.

No. Stop. I am not going to think complicated thoughts. Think dishes. Nice, simple, dishes...

And, with practised ease, the young girl opened the dishwasher and started loading it with the pile of dirty dishes from the sink. Behind her Ran smiled, as she cleaned the table and dusted the shelves.

Sonoko had already gone home, mentioning something about being late and a dinner party. As for the professor...

A little slip of the Suzuki girl's tongue, and a thorough inspection later had been sufficient for Ran to take it upon herself to do some house cleaning and kick a thoroughly embarrassed Professor Agasa out to do a big food shop. Really, how could the man expect to take care of a convalescent child with an empty fridge and messy kitchen?

As a result, Haibara Ai and Mouri Ran were alone in the house.

Ran watched as the young girl picked up a small pile of bowls. It was fascinating to see how the young girl still seemed to know where everything went. She was completely concentrated on the task at hand. Not a touch of doubt, hesitation or self-pity...

The taller girl finished wiping the table clean and went to the sink to wring her cloth out.

"You know Ai..." She said, looking towards the bay of windows to her right, "You're really amazing."

The auburn haired child froze at those words, but did not comment.

"No, really, I mean it." Ran continued, turning towards her. "You hardly remember a thing, you've been injured in what must have been a terrifying incident, and yet you still manage to put on a brave face and behave like everything is normal."

Ai couldn't help but mentally disagree, as she slowly closed the dishwasher door. She wasn't brave. Nothing was normal. Some dreadful things had happened, she could feel it, even if she couldn't remember them. She was a coward, clinging to what must be normalcy in a selfish attempt not to remember who she was. She only needed to think of how she had woken up in tears from a horrid nightmare to find a fault in Mouri's reasoning. But she didn't say a word. She was afraid that if she did, she'd let her mask slip, show the other girl how afraid she was. How afraid of remembering that one dream had made her.

And to think that she had gone to sleep wishing she could remember.

"I hope you can remember all the good memories soon..." Whispered Ran.

"Huh?" Ran's whisper had jolted Ai out of her deep thoughts.

Mistaking her interjection as an inquiry about what she had said, Ran simply waved her hand and said "Oh, nothing. Forget it." She could see the memory issue was troubling the young girl. She'd noticed her features freeze again. The same mask as before.

But Ai hadn't misheard. She was intrigued. Ran hadn't said it as a simple get well soon wish. There had been something in her voice hinting at something else, something personal. Despite her own fears, Haibara Ai's curiosity was piqued. Unfortunately distracted by all this, she bumped her bad leg against the cupboard beside her, sending a jolt of pain through her nervous system. She gasped and fell onto her knees. The clean plates she had been taking out crashed to the floor as she clenched jaw and fists against the discomfort.

Ran immediately stopped what she had started doing to come to her side, asking whether she was

all right and reaching out to pick Ai off the floor. She stopped as she heard the younger girl speak softly.

"What about good memories?"

A near maternal smile graced the young adult's features. And, after she had put Ai on a chair and started collecting the broken shards together, she spoke of good memories. She spoke of how she could remember her parents' love, her friends, her favourite games, and her favourite places. The time when she won the karate tournament, that time she first got full marks in Japanese, or that one picnic with her parents and Shinichi, under the cherry blossoms. She spoke of times where she had felt happy to be alive, and others where she had felt proud and special...

And then she mentioned amnesia.

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Blasted rain.

Huddled in his anorak against the onslaught of wet weather, the professor made with all haste back to his home. He'd already taken way too much time at the convenience store to his liking. The last time he had seen Ai so upset was at the Masami Hirota case... When she had finally let the tears and pain from her sister's death flow.

Luckily Ran seemed to have managed to help her calm down, but he couldn't help but wonder whether...

But of course, it was only natural, wasn't it? Her memories must be haunting her subconscious...

And he wasn't certain what exactly to do about it...

One thing was sure, he wasn't happy about it. About what Shinichi had asked him to do...

Thinking about the devil!

He stopped in his stride as he saw a car depart from the property beside his home. From the Kudo property. Shinichi Kudo had just come back.

Alright... I might as well have a few words with him before I return home.

He resumed his run and caught up with Shinichi at his gates. The younger man had just stood there, ignoring the rain, and the odd rumble of thunder...

Agasa thought it was nice of him to wait for him, albeit very stupid. He was startled by the surprised look the youth gave him when he spoke his name. He was soaked, literally, shivering in his now water-heavy and clinging school uniform. His satchel was held loosely at his side. His face was dreadfully pale, and his eyes had lost their usual sharpness. Agasa couldn't remember ever seeing Shinichi in such a state.

And all of a sudden, a change took over Shinichi. Upon seeing the Professor, he gasped, his eyes opened wide and, as if his attitude had never been abnormal, he cried out.

"Professor! You're soaked! Quickly, come inside, or all your shopping will be ruined."

Not knowing what to say, Agasa was manhandled by the youth towards the Kudo household's main door. Once the door was slammed behind them and the teenager's now-sponge like trainers were splashing onto the floor alone, Kudo chuckled kind-heartedly at the professor and helped him with his bags.

"We had better sort this out a bit before you go back to your house. Even if it isn't her home, Ran would be irked to see you create a river inside thanks to these." He demonstrated by lifting up a plastic bag, pouring water out of its bottom and onto the floor in the process.

"But... But... How do you know Ran's still there?" Stammered Agasa.

"Tch, tch, tch..." Went the boy, knowingly. "You've been buying a lot of ready made meals of late, and only a couple at a time whenever needed. Just by looking at the amount of shopping you have here, I can easily deduce that Ran must have made you do a full grocery shop, and is probably at your place with Haibara, getting ready to make you a decent dinner."

Impressed, the professor stared. This was typical Shinichi behaviour all right.

"And of course..." Continued the young high-school detective. "The fact that Sonoko just sent me a text message saying so helped quite a bit."

He grinned. His neighbour let out a sarcastic laugh.

Maybe he had just been imagining things when he had seen Shinichi outside.



"I'll go get some towels."

Hiroshi Agasa watched as the youth headed towards the bathroom, tripping his satchel over in the process. He stared at what had fallen out of the satchel, as Shinichi rummaged in drawers beyond his sight. Conan Edogawa's muddied Tracking glasses. He picked them up. Some of the mud had dried, indicating it had been kept out of the rain and humidity long enough.

Of course...

"Here." Shinichi handed over a purple towel.

"How did it go with Megure?" He asked.

Shinichi's jaw line hardened as his eyes took on the distant look they'd had outside. So he hadn't been imagining things.

"It went okay I guess..." He said, as he sat down on one of the kitchen chairs he'd just brought through.

"Did you tell him everything?" The professor had sat down on the other, dabbing at his face with the towel he'd been given.

"Nearly. I told him everything he needed to know."

"Would you... Would you mind telling me, Shinichi?"

The professor's nervousness facing this unnaturally serious Shinichi was only equal to his apprehension as to what the answer could be. Shinichi sighed, and smiled sadly.

"Sure I wouldn't mind. I should have told you days ago."

And, ignoring the bags of shopping, the young man told his older friend about the events of that infamous day.

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- End Chapter Three -

## Chapter Four: A Confession. -

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Shinichi Kudo stared at the puddle of water on his entry hall floor. His face remained neutral as he related the events of that night to his trusted friend and neighbour. The professor looked at him slightly worried, noticing, as all who cared for Shinichi would, that the spark of youth and ambition was no longer glistening in his eyes.

Conan and Haibara had, some time back, -Agasa already knew this part,- found and successfully acquired, some pills of the Apotoxin responsible for their size. Agasa and Haibara had worked hard on making the antidote for the best part of a month, during which time Agasa had also tried, unsuccessfully, to create new gadgets for Shinichi. Conan, meanwhile, had started seriously thinking of a way to bring the organisation down.

Once the antidote ready, the three had gathered at the professor's to discuss strategy. Conan had refused point blank to involve Hattori. If their enterprise were to fail, (he wanted to be realistic about their chances,) there had to remain someone in the know who could pick up the pieces and continue their battle. Hattori was far enough geographically not to be directly investigated by the organisation, and Conan had already shared most of his information with him. Same went for Kogoro Mouri. Conan had no wish to involve Ran's father, and, if possible, would much rather face members of the syndicate in his true guise. And what about the F.B.I. ? Could they not provide help? After all, it was thanks to them they had managed to get their hands on the Apotoxin, was it not? No, had said Haibara. In an operation such as this, the less people involved, the better. The F.B.I. had been led astray before due to too many agents being involved. Haibara, Conan and Jodie had all risked their lives that one night. There wouldn't always be an Akai to save them at the last second. They should act alone, inconspicuous, and by surprise.

But how were they to do this? How could they insure fail safes?

Aha. Conan had a plan.

Conan kept the details of the plan mostly secret, at least as far as the professor was concerned. Conan had come to the professor's that fateful morning to put his plan into action. He took the antidote, which, despite Haibara's worries, worked beautifully, and soon was back to his good old self. Haibara had already made clear she was not going to take it until their plans succeeded. If Shinichi were to fail and survive, having an adult Shiho Miyano around Beika would only serve to condemn him.

And then, Shinichi had left, in disguise, by the back door, taking out his mobile phone and dialling. He was out of sight by the time the professor had shut the door.

Then there had been the wait. The long, anxious wait, made even more agonizing by the surprise visit of the detective boys. They were sweet and innocent, but what the Professor and Haibara wanted was to know whether Shinichi was safe, whether his tactic had been successful, whether that day would spell the end, once and for all, of the Men in Black.

And here, Shinichi picked up the tale, telling his neighbour of how, using that compromising e-mail he had discovered, he managed to arrange a meeting following his terms, where he should, if all went well, be able to subdue and safely arrest the main top members, as well as the head of the syndicate.

He managed to reach the meeting place without being shot or spotted. There, Shinichi had inspected the area and then prepared his tools. Then everything had gone wrong.

Some "idiot " from high school had somehow followed him, for a purely stupid reason, accidentally bumped him on the head, destroyed some of his preparations, by accident of course, and nearly blown his cover! After an argument and a quick compromise, Shinichi managed to make the high school student hide in a safe place and promise not to move.

Agasa couldn't help but notice how exasperated and annoyed Shinichi seemed when he mentioned the other boy.

"But what about Ai...? " asked the professor. "When did she get involved? I recall it must have been around then that she vanished from the house... "

"I haven't reached that bit yet. " sighed Shinichi. The youth ruffled his wet hair with his towel again, before continuing. "Anyways, by the time I managed to get rid of that idiot, it was already time for the 'meeting'. I no longer had the time to fix my prepared tools, nor call Megure as had been my attention, so I crossed my fingers and prepared myself to meet them. "

There had been eight of them, all together. Several important members and the boss in person. Shinichi still managed to smirk in his superior fashion as he told the professor that he had guessed right both on who the boss was, and on what would bait such an important figure to come out in person.

"I see now why Haibara never wanted to tell me of him. He is quite the Moriarty... Or was. He's dead now. " And with that Shinichi stared at his feet.

"Has that anything to do with the explosion? " whispered Agasa, dreading and yet still wanting to hear the answer.

"Oh yes. Sadly. "

Once confronted with the youth who had so cleverly manipulated them, the raven-clad criminals had been furious. And doubly furious when they realized who the youth actually was.

"Kudo Shinichi, private detective!" " quoted Shinichi. "'One you had thought dead and long buried in silence. You were so preoccupied with Sherry, you didn't think to question why my body wasn't found after I'd been given that product of hers, did you?' Maybe that was my biggest mistake. I shouldn't have mentioned Haibara so soon. "

"What do you mean, Shinichi? " The professor had completely forgotten that he was supposed to dry himself.

"Gin was there. And so was Vermouth. Upon hearing my mention of Sherry and realizing that he had failed in eliminating me, he... He tried to shoot me. "

"What! " The Professor was startled. "Shinichi! "

"Don't worry! I said tried. Vermouth prevented him. " He said.

'By taking the bullet in her leg' he added mentally.

"Gin, the Boss, and the others questioned Vermouth about this strange behaviour. Apparently, Boss put aside, she had gained a lot of dislike among her peers. She argued that they didn't want me dead until they figured what I knew, who else knew and where Sherry was. "

A short silence followed, as Agasa tried to picture all this in his head.

"But you didn't tell them anything, did you? What happened then? " he asked, prompting the young detective to continue his tale.

"She stepped forward. " Seeing that his neighbour seemed to have misunderstood who 'she' was, he corrected himself. "Not Haibara. Vermouth. "

"Huh? "

"She stepped forward, as cool as anything, despite her bad leg, and said she had a confession to make. Both to me and the syndicate members. " Shinichi nervously rubbed his hand against his arm, where it had been wounded. "And the worse is, I believe Haibara heard all of it. "

"What do you mean? " asked the professor.

"Vermouth's confession, amongst other things, had a lot to do with Haibara. A dreadful lot. I guess it's a blessing she's amnesic now. I have no idea how she would otherwise have stopped Vermouth's words from tormenting her."

Shinichi looked so serious and sad as he said this. Agasa was now extremely worried.

"What... What was it Vermouth said? "

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"You've had amnesia too? "

"Yes." Answered Ran. The tall teenage girl was now seated opposite Ai, at the kitchen table. "If you weren't amnesic, you would probably remember. You and the other four Detective Boys were all saying you'd protect me. "

Ran blushed slightly, as she remembered how protective Conan in particular had been.

"We said that? But protect you from what? " Asked the small girl.

The broken plates now lay in a plastic bag on the counter, ready to be put in the bin. Any cuts the

child had received from her fall had already been cleaned and band aided.

"It was another one of those dreadful murder cases..." sighed Ran. "I'd witnessed a murder attempt and, thinking it was my fault the murderer had managed to hurt inspector Sato, my memory just blanked out. It's kind of embarrassing really..." She brushed her bangs out of her eyes before pausing.

Ai Haibara said nothing.

"When mom and dad found out, they were so shocked. Mom even decided to come home, despite her wish not to live with Dad anymore. If I hadn't been so out of it, I'd probably have been overjoyed. But fact is, I was completely unable to remember anyone. Be it my parents, Sonoko, I remember she spent a lot of time crying because of that, Conan or even Shinichi. Who I'd been, what I'd done or liked... It all escaped me, and I spent most of my time staring into nothingness wondering, trying to remember."

"It was kind of painful really... The worst was when I seemed on the brink of remembering something, but it was all so painful and dark and horrible, I'd just clutch my head in pain. But what was really worse, was being surrounded by all these people who loved you and who were worried about you, and not being able to reassure them, or remember anything about them. Not remembering whether or not you had loved them too..."

Ran sighed, as the memory of those moments when her thoughts about her amnesia had tormented her...

"But you remembered, didn't you?" whispered Ai, somewhat uneasily. She didn't know what to think of all these names Ran had mentioned, and that she knew she should remember.

"Yes, I did." Ran smiled. "And thanks to the silliest of things."

"Huh?"

"Well..." Here Ran hesitated. But then decided there was no reason to. After all, there was no harm in saying it really. "It's thanks to Conan in fact."

"Conan? As in the boy you were looking after?"

"Yes. I asked him why he was being so determined to protect me from the murderer. And he answered with the exact same phrase I'd heard my mother say before, a quote from a phrase my dad had told her to show how much he cared. And his face as he said it suddenly seemed so familiar. And then I remembered Shinichi, and then that I cared for him, that he had been my best friend since childhood and that Conan was just like him. I could suddenly remember everything about the ones I cared for. I realized that there was this stupid man who was trying to hurt us, to hurt me, and all those who cared for me. Whatever had caused my amnesia had just been blown away, and I took charge. I was back to normal again."

"Really back to normal? Just because you remembered someone you cared for?" Ai's eyes were large and questioning.

"Okay. I've got to admit I didn't remember everything in one go." Ran leaned forward across the table, her long hair falling from her shoulders. "But it was all coming back, in a steady flow, within the following days. I'd look at something and suddenly I'd remember all about it, as if a tap had been turned on." She winked, and sat back.

Ai looked back at the elder girl, slightly suspicious. It was all very nice and interesting, but she didn't see how it would help her. She still didn't remember a thing, and all it had helped her was to discern better who Ran was. She sighed, before looking down, slightly miserable. Had she actually hoped all this talk would help her remember? But she didn't want to. Every time she thought back to that dream, to the feeling of dread, horror and sorrow she had felt upon awakening, she was that much sure of it.

"Ai-chan." Ai looked up at Ran. "There's a reason I told you all this. It's because I truly hope you'll be able to remember your special someone soon."

Ran's face was so full of compassion.

Ai couldn't stand it any more.

She unconsciously schooled her face into an expression of cold detachment, and looked up at the teenager.

"But what if remembering that one person brings me pain? What if they were the reason I had tried to forget? "

"Ai, what..? What do you mean? " Asked Ran, suddenly surprised by these questions.

Ai continued on, knowing by saying this she was expressing the thoughts she'd had about that dream. Knowing she'd probably have to go and lock herself away soon, to stop herself from crying in front of this woman again. This knowledge filled her both with anger and self loathing.

"What if remembering that person meant remembering something bad that happened to them? What if it meant remembering that they were dead! "

Suddenly Ran seemed to realize what Ai meant. Surely she must have known something about Ai's parents. After all, they hadn't shown up at the hospital, had they?

Ai jumped off the chair, no longer daring to look at Ran's face, no longer caring that by doing so, her leg ached in pain. She ran up the stairs, and into the room where her bed and things were. There, she closed the door and locked it. It wasn't long before she heard Ran's steps following hers up the stairway, before she heard her knock at the door and call out her name. She couldn't care less. She sat huddled on the floor, her back to the door, drowning in feelings of misery and painful ignorance. She knew that what she'd dreamed about had held some truth. She knew that what she remembered about it was pain and sorrow. She remembered the word 'dead', and the notion that there had been a girl involved, just like Ran, for whom she had cared. She was certain about only one thing. Whatever had caused her pain in that dream had been so terrible that she wouldn't be able to let herself remember it. She had no wish to relive such sorrow...

And why was she called Ai? Why!

Why did her name have to mean sorrow!

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The door banged as a gust of wind knocked it against the wall. The two men walked in, and while the slimmer of the two closed the door, the elder cried out to the house in general as he put down his bags and took off his coat.

"I'm home! "

Helping him with his bags, Shinichi followed the professor towards the kitchen area. The house seemed so quiet. Shinichi couldn't help but brood as the patter of the rain on the roof ate away at his already unhappy mood. They came upon the kitchen area to see Ran at the table. She was softly crying, wiping away the odd tear and looking miserable.

"Ran!" exclaimed both Shinichi and Agasa.

Realising that they were there, Ran bit back her tears and wiped her eyes. She looked up, slightly embarrassed and went to took the bags from the professor, in order to put their contents away.

"Sorry about that. " she mumbled, trying to pretend they hadn't really noticed.

"What do you mean sorry about that? Sorry about what Ran? What's wrong?" Asked Shinichi. He was suddenly rather worried, and so was the professor.

"Where's Ai? " he asked.

Shinichi tried to ignore the new undertone of worry he could detect in the old man's voice. Maybe he shouldn't have told him the whole contents of Vermouth's confession. But he had, indeed, owed him an explanation. There wasn't anything he could do about it now. His attention returned fully to Ran.

"She's upstairs, in her room. " Ran said. "Look, professor, can I ask you two things? "

"Of course Ran. What about? "

Shinichi leaned forward, curious. Ran finished putting the groceries away, muttering, "2 seconds." before closing the fridge door. She had left out the groceries she was going to use to make dinner. That done, she sat back down into her seat, and looked the professor straight in the eye.

"First of all, have you contacted Ai's parents? "

The professor looked both embarrassed and taken short. Shinichi, who had seated himself as well, lifted his eyebrows.

"You didn't tell her anything professor? " He said, feigning slight surprise.

"Well, erm... " mumbled the professor. He wasn't sure what to say really.

"Told me what? That they're dead?" replied Ran. She looked slightly unhappy about this. Shinichi understood. Ran was a sensitive person, and, having talked with Haibara this evening, she must have naturally wondered why no Haibaras had come to inquire about their daughter.

"Yes. That's it." Sighed Shinichi.

"But when? How? I thought her parents had placed her in the professor's care just as it was for Conan. They didn't...?"

Ran was waving her hands at a loss. Shinichi caught one as Agasa worriedly wiped his brow.

"Look Ran. They've been dead for years. Haibara never really got to know them. They had nothing whatsoever to do with that explosion." His blue eyes were sincere, and his hold strong. Ran felt herself calm down.

"You sure about that?" she whispered, as her remaining doubts fought back.

"Certain. I believe her parents died in an accident shortly after her birth. That's partly the reason why her name's written with the character for sorrow." He lied. But it wasn't really a lie. She had chosen that name after the death of a loved one, had she not? "Her mother was British as far as I know, and her father was a Japanese man who was brought up not too far away from here. She's been staying with various relatives ever since."

"Yes." confirmed the professor. He was somewhat relieved at having Shinichi save him from another bout of 'improvising for Ran', but he was also a little sad, as he sometimes was when talking about Ai's parents. Knowing that one's little charge had no real family left was saddening.

Ran smiled, with a sad glint in her eye.

"Hey, maybe someone should tell her that." She got up and started reaching for a pot on the kitchen surface. She had promised to cook dinner for the professor after all. "She and I had a little talk about amnesia, and she seemed worried that remembering would mean remembering an important loss. She might not be so anxious about it if she knew it was normal she couldn't remember her parents... At least I hope."

'Worried about remembering an important loss? Oh shit.' Shinichi suddenly realised what Haibara must have been thinking about. 'She doesn't want to remember her sister's death?'

Professor Agasa shot him a look. He'd understood this too.

"Maybe I should go and check on her then..." The owner of the house stood up and headed towards the staircase.

"Hey, Shinichi?" said Ran. Shinichi eyes reverted from the professor's disappearing figure to his childhood best friend. He couldn't help but notice how similar she seemed to all those times she had seen her cut vegetables as Conan.

"How come you know so much about Ai?"

"Eeh!" He gaped at her, uncomprehending.

"Oh come on, you tell me all that about her parents and you expect me to believe you don't know her? You haven't been around for months, Shinichi! For all I know, you met her the night of that horrid explosion! And yet you know more about her than I do." She turned to look at him, suspicion clouding her features.

'Think fast Sherlock, think fast!'

"Mail." He blurted out.

"Huh?"

"I came back to the professor's to collect my mail every so often, remember? That's why I know her. We've talked, and the professor talked to me about her family. There's also the fact that I've had to deal with a few of her relatives in this case of mine." He scowled slightly at the mention of his case. The syndicate had been Haibara's foster family after all.

"Right." Said Ran. Returning to her chopping board, she asked another question. "That case of yours is definitely solved, right? You're not going to vanish again, are you?"

Shinichi smiled sweetly at her.

"My case is solved, I guess one can say that. I am definitely not going to disappear again. Whatever is left to happen, is in between Megure and me, and it happens right here in Beika."

Ran blushed happily.

Shinichi didn't need to hear any answer to know how glad this made her.

"By the way, you said you had two questions? " He spread out on the table, his mind slowly going numb. Too much thinking today. Too much emotion.

"Yes, but it can wait till the professor's back."

Shinichi cringed. He recognized that disillusioned tone of voice. There was a note of sadness there, and longing. That voice she would get, when she would let slip how much she missed Shinichi within Conan's presence. She was thinking about Conan, and his absence.

Crap. Now that he thought about it, he still hadn't organized some story about that. What had he been thinking of all week!

He sighed and straightened himself.

"Hey Ran. "

"Umm? " She had just put the vegetables into the frying pan. They hissed gently to the patter of the rain, accompanied by the odd howl of wind. She turned to face him as he made her wait for his query.

"Look. Not today, nor tomorrow, but after tomorrow... Some time this week at the latest. I have got to tell you something. Will you be willing to listen to me? " He put his hand on the back of his neck, in a worried gesture so typical of him.

Ran couldn't help but notice that he seemed so serious about it.

'Finally!' she thought, thinking of the only obvious possibilities. 'Finally he's going to tell me.'

At long last, she could hope for the answers to all her questions. To what had happened that dreadful night, to why he had been away and what had taken him so long, and maybe... She blushed and smiled at him.

"Sure!"

She whistled as she turned back to her cooking.

The professor returned from the stairways. He still looked bothered and worried. Obviously he hadn't had much luck.

"So?" asked the young detective.

"She won't talk to me. " He shook his head. "I can't help being worried, but I guess we have no other choice but to wait for it to pass. "

Ran nodded, wisely. She'd had the same response.

"By the way professor, any news from Conan? "

Both Shinichi and Agasa laughed nervously together.

This was going to take some more bluffing, right...

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- End Chapter Four -

## - Chapter Five: The key. -

-v-

"Why are you guys laughing?" Ran scowled at Shinichi and the Professor.

"All I asked was if you had any news from Conan..."

Both Shinichi and Agasa stopped immediately, and stared desperately at each other.

"You... You mean that kid forgot to call you back?" ventured the young detective.

At the very next possible opportunity, he was going to fish out his bow tie and remedy that.

"Call me back? Last I knew he was coming over here to see his parents again, right professor? He never mentioned that he wouldn't be coming back to the agency..." Ran added, a little quiver of worry in her voice.

"He probably was frightened to tell you..." Answered the Professor Agasa, glancing sideways at Shinichi, a slight twinkle of sarcasm in his eye. "I saw how hard a time his parents had convincing him to get his stuff together..."

Gee, thanks a bunch professor!

"You're not missing that... brat, are you?" said Shinichi, after a quick glare at Agasa.

It was strange to him how it now seemed easier to talk admiringly of his adult self as Conan, then depreciatively of his younger alter-ego in his true voice...

It had been the other way round before his 'return'. He hated Conan, this other face he had been forced to live behind. Shinichi was only too glad to be rid of Conan.

It had to be a trick of his emotions, this sudden hesitation to refer to "Conan" as the brat, like he had done over the phone. He had never intended Ran to grow too attached to Conan Edogawa. In fact, he had jumped at every occasion to make sure Conan didn't overshadow his true self... Trouble was, his true self had kept shining through, and now that he was back as Shinichi, he was only too conscious that Conan was a part of who he really was now.

He had worn the mask too long and too well.

And now the Conan side of him was thinking only too clearly this following thought.

Please don't say you miss me too, Ran...

"No." For a moment his heart sunk, hearing Ran's answer. "Not really, I guess..."

She sighed, as she turned back to her cooking, shielding her eyes. "He could have said Goodbye."

"I'm sure he'll be calling you soon." Said the professor. "He and his parents called me upon their arrival in central America on Monday. I guess he's just been busy."

He discreetly patted Shinichi's shoulder in a comforting gesture. Shinichi tried not to sigh too loud.

"Central America, huh..." Ran jerked her head up. "Did you tell him about Ai?"

The sputter of her cooking and gentle tumble of rain answered her query.

"I'll take that as a no then."

-v-

The tears had stopped shortly after the Professor had knocked at the door. She had ignored him, and felt guilty about it.

But then like now, she had not felt the courage in her to go back out and face him. She didn't feel ready to apologise to miss Mouri either, if she was still here that is...

But of course she's still here... The Professor said she was cooking dinner...

Oh joy...

She needed something to distract her thoughts, quick.

Wincing as she gingerly stood up on her weak and injured leg, she noticed a magazine on one of the wide windowsills. It was a science review, probably the professor's.

She took it, lit the bedside lamp, and opened it at random. It was darker outside now, and the rain was still falling, pattering rhythmically against the windowpanes, thudding inside her head in a way that was fast becoming a perpetual nuisance. She focused on the glorious impersonal fonts of the printed word, her mind becoming a blank canvas on which the sounds or ideas of the words she was reading would bounce, drowning out any background observations. The words didn't need to have meaning; it was simply a form of displacement activity.



It took her three pages of an in-depth article on the proprieties of RNA and enzymes before she noticed something was wrong.

She stared at the text, then at one of the supporting illustrations that were intended to help the casual reader understand what the author of the article was talking about. She glared at the name written on the first page of the article.

"No wonder you complain that people are doubting your work. You've given what is widely known and proven as an incorrect explanation of the workings of RNA in this context..." She muttered, before leaving her sentence unfinished.

Her eyes grew wide as she suddenly realised what had happened.

She threw the magazine away from her and clutched her head.

Images of textbooks, chemistry implements, a laboratory and white mice were suddenly plaguing her mind. The image of a woman in a lab coat flashed by, dreadfully familiar. That woman too had been in her nightmare.

No! Go away!

The images were no more, but she was still shivering from their impact.

"Why..." she whispered. "Why am I, an eight year old, familiar with the basic workings of RNA...?"

She had absolutely no doubt as to her knowledge. It seemed as natural to her as how to open a door, yet she knew that this was not natural knowledge for a first-grader. And also, those flashes... Maybe she'd just imagined them. Thinking back, her memory of them was hazy, but she had no doubt that they were a part of this new mystery... Of who she was.

"Damn it..."

This amnesia was fast becoming nightmarish. It was a poisoned blessing. She didn't remember the cause of her pain, but that did not mean she escaped the pain. What was worse, now that she had realized the existence of the pain, the sorrow that lay in wait in the shadows of her past, she was terrified by the idea that it could leap out at her at any time.

Maybe remembering might just be worth it, just to get rid of the fear.

To live in hiding, with the fear of being found is a terrible thing.

She grumbled at this new and intrusive thought. Another stupid flash. A sentence enigmatically pronounced by a voice way too similar to hers.

Why was the veil of her memory so tentatively close, yet so dark and foreboding?

Why did it keep flapping at her, scaring her so?

She reached out and grabbed the stuffed lion on the key-chain. She cuddled it, in an effort to comfort herself.

Why did she get that dreadful dream?

What had brought it on?

She gasped, as she remembered what she had been doing before she fell asleep.

"The photos!"

She dropped the Lion back on the bed, and looked around. Obviously the professor had packed them away, back in the green box. She was about to reach for them in the box again, but then she glimpsed the one print she had had in mind on the bedside table.

The boy with the bowtie and glasses.

There he was, exactly as Ayumi Yoshida had described him to her in the hospital. This boy called Conan Edogawa. This boy who had supposedly been her classmate... This boy who had recently vanished from their lives.

Looking at the image, Haibara Ai had no doubt at all that he was the key to both her amnesia and her memories.

Now she had a focus for all the conflicting emotions that were brewing inside her ever since her 'return' to the professor's.

On the one hand, she had wished to remember everything swiftly, so as to no more be a source of worry for those who cared for her; and on the other, she was terrified of remembering, she knew it would bring her pain, suffering, perhaps even guilt...

But somehow, Ran's words had given her hope that there might be good memories too. She glared at the image of the boy in her hands... The boy who was oh so conveniently 'not here.' Maybe his absence was meant to be her chance to forget... Or maybe, his absence was because she had forgotten.

She noticed suddenly the sounds of someone coming upstairs again.

Probably the professor, come to fetch her for dinner as he had said earlier.

She sighed and slipped the photo into one of her pockets. She would have to decide on this 'memory' issue later.

She rubbed her hands across her eyes and face, hoping she no longer looked as miserable as she had felt.

Gingerly, she approached the door, getting ready to unlock it as she expected Agasa to knock any second now.

-knock- -knock-

"Haibara...?"

She froze still, upon hearing this unfamiliar voice.

"Who's there?" She said. The only persons she recalled to have called her Haibara since she had woken up with amnesia were Kojima Genta and Tsuburaya Mitsuhiro. Most adults seemed confident enough to call her by her first name, and the voice behind the door was most certainly not that of a first-grader.

She heard some shuffling, as the stranger seemed embarrassed by the question.

"Kudô Shinichi." The voice answered. "I'm the Professor's neighbour, a friend of Ran's...? Agasa invited me over for supper, and since I haven't really had the chance to talk with you since that... Explosion, well..."

She pondered at this.

So this was Kudô Shinichi, the famous teenage detective she had been told about.

The one who had been with her during that explosion, who had saved her from it and brought her to safety...

Strange.

His voice didn't have that nagging effect on her that other peoples' had.

It was strong, confident, yet still lush with a seductive youth, and, most importantly of all, she didn't have the impression she ought to remember it.

She liked that voice all the more already.

"So? Are you going to join us for dinner?" Kudô asked. He sounded ever so slightly annoyed.

Haibara, despite her tired state, smirked.

"Why not." She reached up and unlocked the door.

-v-

Outside, in the rain, a teenager ran past the house.

Their head covered by a hood, it was hard to determine whether it was a boy or a girl.

The person sneezed, tripped, managed to prevent a fall into the puddles of water littering the pavement, before, unluckily, hitting their head against a lamppost.

"Ah! Ouch..." Came his voice, as the person rubbed the sore spot gingerly.

He... Well, one presumes at this point it's a he... looked up towards the professor's house. He approached the gate cautiously, looking left, then right, and then, with greater care, at his feet.

When the teenager reached the gate, he laid his right hand against it and glanced through the metal bars. The garden lights were on, and a couple of the numerous windows were alight. He glimpsed the shapes of a woman and a rather large man through one of the lower windows.

Dang... Wrong house...

He looked up at the overhang with its round window for further confirmation, before turning his eyes to the ivy-covered house just next door. It must be there.

He pattered across, sneezing a couple of times, and reached the gate. No lights on in this house.

Compared to its neighbour, it stood like a terrifying and brooding mass of shadow. Hesitant, and slightly afraid, the young man looked up at the house plate... Then he fiddled in his pockets for his

phone, switched it on, and used it as a light source to read the plate.

Kudô...

Well, this was the right house, at any rate.

He swallowed, audibly, then, with a hand shaking as much from the cold rain as anticipation, he opened the gate. The young man stared at the opened gate a moment, as if he had not expected it to open, then, before he could change his mind, he slipped in and shut it behind him. He walked in rapid strides towards the main door of the house, restraining another sneeze. He knocked, thought about going back to the gate to ring the doorbell, then knocked again, louder.

No answer... Dang it!

He turned and rested his back against the wall, shivering while he considered his options. He pulled his hood down, the overhang of the house protecting him now from the rain. His hood hadn't been doing a good job, really... His short hair and fringe was plastered down on his head like a form of body paint... He looked miserably out into the night through two large round lenses. And sneezed. The poor lad was obviously drenched to the bone.

He turned back to the door, and knocked again... The splatter of a vehicle was heard from the road. The teenager froze as the motor roared past the house. He waited until he heard the car no more before heaving a hearty sigh. He mumbled something as his hand went down to rest on the door handle. The door slipped open, letting him fall heavily onto the mat inside. He glared at the door, before realising just how lucky this was for him.

He shrugged off his anorak, and closed the door.

Hopefully the owner would be coming home soon. The unlocked door was a good sign, at any rate. He jumped gratefully onto the towels that had been left, drying, in the vestibule...

Maybe he would be lucky enough to get a bit dryer before Kudô came home!

-v-

Ran squinted out into the rain.

What was that shadow she had seen peering through Agasa's gate?

She shrugged it off, as an illusion, but couldn't help but feel slightly edgy as the memory of the dreams she had had upon Shinichi's return surfaced. Dreams of pain, adversity, cruelty; an atmosphere similar to that occasion when she had stowed away in professor Jodie's car, but with a much more frightening outcome.

She turned back to face the Professor.

Dinner was set for four on the table, and the old man had sat down in his seat, looking with slight nervousness towards the stairwell. Ran closed her mobile phone and slipped it into her pocket. She had just called her father to let him know that she would be home later tonight, and that he should probably eat at Poirot's, like he usually did when she couldn't cook his dinner.

Professor Agasa had also thanked her for cooking, admitting that he hadn't felt the courage to do it himself ever since that night.

Ran smiled upon hearing two sets of footsteps coming down.

The professor sighed with relief, before slapping on a joyous face, pretending that nothing had ever been wrong.

Shinichi and Ai approached the table and took their seats, while Ran quickly finished off serving the meal before sitting down as well.

"Enjoy!" They said together, before attacking with their chopsticks.

The food was good, and soon everyone seemed to have forgotten the heavy atmosphere there had been before. The little girl, who had stayed very quiet, managed, after a while to look up at Ran, and say:

"Sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't worry. I'm the one who should apologise." Ran intervened.

"Just promise me not to worry about things too much on your own, is that okay?"

Shinichi grinned.

"Exactly what I just said upstairs. If ever you have any questions, Haib- er, sorry, Ai, just don't hesitate to ask."

Ai looked at him dubiously, before smiling.

"Okay. I do have a question in fact..."

A fair few more than that, to be truthful, but the others could wait.

The professor leaned forwards, his hand paused above his plate.

"And what would that be?"

Why does Kudo seem to be in the habit of calling me Haibara? came forth to her mind. What happened that night, to make me forget? was another.

But, despite, or perhaps because of the cosy ambiance that had installed itself around them, she decided to voice the following.

"What can you tell me about myself?"

Had she tried to ask this before the dream, she would have been full of hope and desperation, at the idea of finding a way to remember. After the dream, the question would have been one she would have dreaded to ask, fearing its consequences. But now, it was simply a question asked out of impersonal curiosity. All she expected of them was to give her facts, and they would remain simple facts. Maybe she would reflect on them, maybe they'd help her make slightly more sense out of the random flashes of memory she randomly had...

Or maybe she'd just stash them away, and simply enjoy what conversation would come of them.

Seeing the hesitation of the others, she shrugged, and added.

"Just anything would do. My family, what I usually do in the mornings or on outings..."

"Well..." began the professor. "You usually spend your mornings yawning until it's time to go to school."

"Yawning?"

"You find it very difficult to get out of bed."

"And I remember that once when I came over and you were sick," went Ran, smiling as she joined in, "that you were awake one minute and sound asleep the next!"

"Really?"

Shinichi grinned, as he nibbled on his food, watching over the other three.

He couldn't really join in the conversation. He knew a lot more about Haibara than he had let on to Ran. He couldn't truthfully join in without seeming suspicious.

He could, however, look down at the young woman turned child, pleasantly surprised. He rarely got to see this look on her face before.

Confronted with the stories the other two were telling her, she looked like a true child, who's parents were telling her anecdotes of a time before she could remember.

Now that I think of it, I should probably call my parents tonight as well...

Mentally noting this down for himself, he listened as Agasa and Ran mentioned stories of Conan and Haibara together.

Shinichi let the nostalgia of past moments take over his thoughts.

-v-

## Chapter Six: Dreams and Towels. -

-vi-

When at last Shinichi and Ran left the professor's home, it was late evening.

They had finished dinner, and talked pleasantly for quite a while afterwards, only noticing the hour when Haibara had started dozing off. Shinichi couldn't help but wonder whether this was because the medicine she'd taken had made her drowsy once more, or whether it was the absence of her usual dose of caffeine. Both probably.

He smiled as he shrugged the thought away, and helped Ran dry the remaining dishes. The two childhood friends finished swiftly, and it wasn't long before Agasa, who'd just carried Haibara to her room, accompanied the two to the door and thanked them for their help. Agasa yawned as he bade them goodnight, leaving the two standing on the threshold in the street light.

"And here I was hoping the rain had stopped." Ran looked whimsically at the falling heavens before them. Shinichi sighed, as he too peered out.

It was raining then too, how could I forget... But no, I don't want to think about it now. Not when I haven't felt this good since.

"Yeah. I guess it would be too much to ask for wouldn't it?" He smiled at his friend. "I guess I'll see you at school tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I guess..." The young woman half-opened her umbrella and slung her school bag over her shoulder.

"You sure you don't want to tell me now?" She added, looking hopefully up at him.

"Tell you what?"

She swatted him with her umbrella.

"What you mentioned while I was cutting the veg', you dolt. You said you wanted to tell me something sometime this week."

Oh. That. Crap.

"I'm certain." He answered. His good mood dampened just at the thought of her possible reaction to what he had to say.

"Heh. I guess you need to check a thing or two before, right? Oh well." She smiled, trying not to show her disappointed hope.

"Hey, you take care walking home okay?" Shinichi winked at her, trying to lighten the mood again.

"I don't want to hear you catching a cold because you slipped in a puddle."

"Hey!"

He chuckled.

"That reminds me, I have another thing to ask of you."

"Uh? What's that?" Shinichi leaned against the doorframe waiting for her to elaborate.

"Eisuke Hondou."

Oh, no. That guy didn't rat on me, did he?

"He's been missing school for a week. I tried calling him this weekend but..."

I was wondering whether you could try and find him when you have a moment?"

Shinichi stared at her.

Missing? How could Hondou...? Wait... Was this a trick question? He wasn't supposed to know Hondou!

"Hondou?" He asked, hoping for once that he had inherited some of his mother's talent.

Ran slapped her forehead.

"Of course, I'm so stupid." She muttered. "Hondou's a new transfer student in our class, he arrived only recently, and so it's no wonder you're not familiar with him. If he'd been in class today I'd have introduced you but..."

It's true, now that she mentioned it; he hadn't seen Hondou Eisuke in class today, and considering that boy's tendency to outright clumsiness in public, he should have stuck out like a sore thumb.

Had he really been missing for a whole week? Ever since that day...?

"Here!" Shinichi found himself with Ran's mobile phone under his nose. "This is what he looks

like."

And there, on the small screen, was a photo of the effeminate teenage boy with his large glasses. He didn't seem to have noticed his picture was being taken. Shinichi had a feeling that if he had, his eyes would have been closed. Shinichi took the phone from Ran's hands to take a better look, pretending this was the first he'd seen of the teenager.

"Ran..."

"Yes?"

"You have a photo of this boy on your cell phone?" He deadpanned.

"Oh all right! I should have known better than to ask you." She took the phone back from him and stuffed it in her pocket, her eyes looking anywhere but at him.

"Heh. Don't worry Ran. I'll keep my eye out for your friend." He smiled warmly at her. He wasn't lying this time. If something had happened to Hondou because of him, he wanted to know.

Ran sighed with relief.

"Thanks! And now I'd better be going, or Dad will wonder what became of me."

'That's if he's not out playing Mah Jong, as per usual,' thought Shinichi.

He accompanied her to the gate, thankful for the little shelter her umbrella offered him from the downpour.

"See you tomorrow!"

He waved as she waved back, before rushing to his own front door, not caring to get soaked again, just to watch her walk down the street. He yawned as he closed the front door behind him, locking it with the keys he'd forgotten to take when he'd left with Agasa earlier. He headed straight to the bathroom to get ready for bed, not noticing the slight sound of breathing and moving cloth from the living room as he passed by.

-vi-

Falling asleep had been pretty straightforward.

It had been the first time in a week he'd managed to fall asleep upon his head hitting the pillow, without the aid of some sleeping drug or soporific novel.

His day had indeed been busy, giving him lots to think about, to plan and act upon... Which might explain the dreams that followed swiftly his surrender to the land of nod.

At first thoughts of Ran bounced around his head. Various flashes of intimate moments he'd shared with her, both as Conan and Shinichi came to mind.

Ran holding his hand in the roller coaster. Ran winning the karate championship, strong and magnificent, her smile directed at him.

His childhood friend, bandaging his head, when he'd found himself beaten up as Conan, her caring and gentle side...

Her tears.

He recalled what had happened when Doctor Herschel had told them of Haibara's amnesia.

"She really can't remember anything?"

The doctor merely nodded, saying sorry in a small voice.

Shinichi just stared at the sleeping girl, the child on the bed, wrapped in bandages. A vague memory of a phrase in his mind. His expression must have been intriguing, for after a while he'd noticed the teary-eyed look Ran had given him.

"Hmm...? Ran?" He'd said.

Startled, she had turned away from him, shaking her head and focusing on the bad news Herschel had given them. He hadn't really given the incident much thought at the time; he'd been too busy recalling what Haibara had once said, and the shock of Vermouth's revelation...

Now that he thought of it, what had been Ran's expression? One of shock and denial? But at what? Haibara's memory loss? ...What else could it have been?

Haibara...

"So, she still can't remember anything?" A voice rang out in his dream.

He recognized the voice as Haibara's. Another flashback, a different time. Hazily he could make out her shape, her lithe shoulders bare in the summer sun. They were standing in front of the Café

Poirot.

"Maybe it's better for you this way... Kudo. You won't have to worry about her discovering the truth."

He recalled how angry that statement had made him. How desperate and helpless he'd felt then. It seemed like the conversation had taken place in another life, but it had only been what... Last summer? He'd been Conan then. He'd grabbed her by the shoulder, turning her to face him, daring her to look him in the eye and repeat what she'd said.

How could she? How could she think of Ran's amnesia as being beneficial to him?

Thank goodness Ran wasn't amnesiac any more, thought Shinichi. He had no idea what he would have done if Ran hadn't remembered who she was, who he was.

But now he was reliving the following part of that discussion.

Haibara had turned her face away, annoyed by his brusqueness, avoiding his eyes, looking down and away.

"If I..." She had said. "If I... Lost my memories... I wouldn't have to know about my sister's death. Or my making of a poison."

He knew how sad and earnest she'd sounded then. It had been one of those rare moments where he'd felt she was about to confess something to him, to open the door into the inner world of the real person behind Ai Haibara.

"I could be like the next person." She'd continued.

"Merely Haibara Ai, an elementary school girl..." And not Sherry, a scientist who had worked for an evil mafia.

"I would be happy. And..." At this she'd turned to face him.

Teal blue eyes bored down into his own. Her fringe swayed as she continued her sentence, not a single hint of deviousness on her face.

"I would be able to spend the rest of my life with you. Just with you."

What...?

Stunned, he had breathed in. It seemed so obvious then.

"Haibara, you...?"

But then, of course, the spell had shattered, with her grinning in that annoying way of hers, cheerfully lowering her head to look up at him with those two words magically appearing out of nowhere.

"Just Kidding!" What the...?

"Feel better now?" She had added, blatantly ignoring his 'is-this-girl-ever-serious!' look.

"Feel better now?" He recalled waking up to Ran's voice saying the same thing on a couple of occasions as Conan, after the odd sick spell. Then the phrase would hold the bitter sweet taste of gratitude and guilt. Gratitude for her love and caring, and guilt for his making her worry not only as little sick Conan, but also as the eternal absent Shinichi.

But Shinichi was back for good now.

"You feeling better, Shinichi?" This time his mother's voice. More precisely his mother's voice at the one time he'd been hospitalised after a dangerous fall. How old had he been then? Nine? Ten? Then he had felt loved. It didn't matter any more that the bullies he'd been chasing had gotten away. He hadn't cared whether or not the one who'd pushed him had been caught.

All that mattered was that he was alive and well, able to reassure the ones he loved.

"Sorry to make you worry..."

Wait, that voice, that face? Ran?

"If only I..."

If only what, Ran?

Ran?

Ran! Where are you!

Suddenly Shinichi felt himself running around in his dream, desperately kicking a soccer ball, as he ran down the football pitch. The heavens were crying, and no one was in sight. Still he kicked and ran after the ball, not caring whether or not he reached the goal. But he had the feeling that if he lost

the ball, he'd lose much more.

He shouted out, his lungs heaving with exertion, calling out her name, looking around for her, wondering why she wasn't watching from the sides as always.

Where was she? Where! Why wasn't she answering him?

He tripped.

He'd lost the ball.

He was falling, down, and down... The ground opening beneath him, into a void of darkness.

He grunted as his fall stopped; as he found himself being pulled up into a standing position.

Someone, somewhere, was playing the violin. They were playing their dreaded song. The song of those black crows.

He opened his eyes and gasped.

A lighter flickered, as he stared into the eyes of Vermouth, alias Chris Vinyard, alias Sharon Vinyard, alias ad nauseum... The woman was smiling at him, but her eyes were cold, glassy, dead. Then why could he feel her grip on his arms tighten?

Ah, yes. Dreaming. He was dreaming.

This was a nightmare.

He shoved the dead woman away from him.

He turned towards the lighter, which he now saw to be in the hands of Shuichi Akai.

The lighter closed. He was in the Dark again.

And curse that violinist, the song was still playing!

But the music didn't stop him hearing, or dreaming that he heard, a bullet being shot and it's ricochet. He felt his neck prickle, as the steps of a tall man seemed to thunder in the space behind him.

"Kudo Shinichi..."

Gin's voice.

Another shot rang out. The rebound sounded much closer than the previous one. Shinichi squinted into the darkness, looking for his foe, looking for an escape.

That's when he noticed the door. A faint outline of white, barely perceptible in the black night of his nightmare.

He made for it, ignoring the shots aimed at his feet.

The door was beginning to open, letting a rectangle of white light form itself in front of him.

When the door was fully opened, he noticed a silhouette standing in the light. Ran?

No...

Finally he reached it, Gin running and shooting at him from behind.

"Hurry!" Cried the figure at the door.

It was Eisuke Hondou, with his huge glasses, stupid haircut and girlish coat.

Shinichi nodded, and jumped through the opening, turning to help Hondou close the door. He smiled at the boy, who, for once, seemed to have dropped any clumsiness he'd learnt to associate with him. Hondou sighed, nodded and smiled, before pointing into the white mist that had come upon them... And disappearing.

"That way then?"

Shinichi was beginning to wonder if there was a point to this dream at all. Well, it wouldn't hurt to find out what Hondou had pointed him to.

The Violin had stopped now, and the only noise reaching his ears was that of his steps and the sound of splashing water. In fact, it wasn't long before he found himself wading through it, the water reaching his knees, nice and warm and steamy.

That would explain the mist. He must be dreaming of a hot spring of sorts. He squinted as he thought he saw something in the mist. A figure standing in front of him.

"Ran!"

The mists parted slowly as he approached.

And there she stood. Smiling happily at him, despite her nakedness.

"Ran! There you are! Thank goodness, I found you!"



He reached out towards her, but then her smile saddened, and the surrounding warmth suddenly turned to cold.

A blast of white blinded him for a second. His surroundings changed. The mist had turned to snow, and the naked body in front of him had found itself covered by a pair of men's overalls...

The woman's legs buckled beneath her, as slowly she collapsed to the ground, smearing blood the same colour as her hair on the grey wall behind her.

Shinichi felt his throat tighten as the pair of glasses the girl had been wearing fell onto the snow beside her face.

"Mi... Miyano!"

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"Miyano!"

He'd jerked awake from his dream, sitting up, sweating, in his pyjamas. He brought his hand to his forehead. He felt hot and clammy. A Fever? Or just an after effect of his dreaming? He recalled that this last dream had been one of a series of strange dreams he'd had since going to sleep.

He looked at the time on his alarm clock. Five am.

He sighed. There was no way he was going to go back to sleep now. He was way too alert to let himself go to slumber again; all he'd do was ponder until his head hurt. Shower... A shower felt like a good plan. He kicked away his tortured sheets and made his way in the dark towards his parents' ensuite bathroom, where the western style shower unit had been fitted.

Shivering, (the night air wasn't that warm,) he dumped his pyjamas into the dirty clothes bin, and stepped into the shower.

The wound on his arm hurt as well, so he'd stripped it of its bandages, blatantly ignoring doctors orders a) not to take it off, and b) not to get the wound wet.

It was healing well, and he felt certain that a wash and a bit of fresh air wouldn't do any harm. He gingerly felt some of the other areas where he'd been cut or grazed, and was glad to see that the tenderness was nearly gone. It wasn't long before he found himself under a warm jet of water, gratefully feeling his sweat being washed away from his skin, his hair. He let his mind go numb as he surrendered himself to the feeling.

Once satisfied he was clean, he shut off the water and stepped out of the shower.

Blinking through the water dripping from his bangs, he went to get a towel out of the cupboard where they were stored.

"Huh?" He stared at the empty shelf that faced him. No towels. "Ah. Yes. I must have forgotten to bring them up."

He'd taken them down to help himself and Agasa dry them from the rain earlier that day. He usually used the other bathroom to wash, so he'd totally forgotten about them until now.

'I'd better go and get a towel from the other bathroom, then bring the others up again.' He thought to himself.

It wasn't hard to find a decent towel to wrap around his waist and another to rub his hair dry in the other bathroom.

Stretching himself, he went down to the front door to collect the forgotten towels and then return to his room, probably to read a book.

All trace of sleepiness had definitely abandoned him, but somehow, he felt all the better rested for it. Or maybe he'd call his parents? What time was it in Los Angeles already...?

"Hm?" Strange. The towels weren't by the front door where he'd left them.

Scratching his head with a perplexed look on his face, he looked around him, in case he'd missed them by accident, and then started to look in the neighbouring rooms.

Nope, not in the library... Not in the Kitchen or broom cupboard... He'd have noticed the towels had they been in the downstairs bathroom. They had a different design.

"Ah!" There they were, in the living room.

Meep. His mom would kill him if she found out he'd dumped damp towels on her favourite sofa.

Oh well, what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her... And anyway, he was certain he hadn't put them there.

Hum... A mystery, heh?

He grinned as he swiped up one of the purple towels in his arm, glad to feel that it was now nice and dry...

And then he yelped.

A hand reached out from the remaining pile of purple fluffiness and grabbed at the blue towel wrapped around his waist.

"Oye!" Shinichi kicked out at the offending arm while holding on tight to his cloth.

What the hell? What in the name of Doyle was this guy doing sleeping on his couch under his towels?

"Hrmn...?"

The purple mound on the sofa stirred while Shinichi silently glared at it. A head popped out for a second, blinked short-sightedly at the world, before snuggling back under the improvised blankets. Shinichi's hand quickly fished it out again, holding it by the ear.

"Askfgldk!" That got more of a reaction.

The teen reluctantly sat up and rubbed at his eyes, before feeling around him for a pair of glasses that ended up being handed to him.

"Hmn... Thanks..."

Eisuke Hondou looked up at Shinichi's stony expression, still slightly bleary from slumber, his normally flattened hair sticking out at odd angles.

Ye gods, Ran asks me to find this guy and he just happens to be sleeping on my couch...

The boy must have entered the Kudo home while Shinichi had been over at Agasa's helping with dinner. He'd be damned if he forgot to look the door behind him again. Still... One question remained to be asked...

"Oh! You're back mister Kudo!" Eisuke's smile was nearly as annoying as the cheerily unselfconscious tone he had just used. Hondou wiggled his glasses as he peered at Shinichi's nude torso and towel wrapped hips...

"Oh." The boy's face coloured slightly. Shinichi's darkened.

The teenage detective of the East took a deep breath, crouched, grabbed Hondou by the shoulders and, staring into his eyes asked his question.

"Hondou Eisuke, why are you here, in my home, uninvited, sleeping on the couch?"

After a moment's silence, the intruder opened his mouth to give forth his answer.

"Because it's dry and warm. Heh."

Shinichi's forehead met his palm.

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- End Chapter Six -

## - Chapter Seven: Silver. -

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When she awoke that morning, it was once again from a nightmare.

She didn't recall waking from a happy dream since the incident, and if she ever did before then, she couldn't remember.

She sighed, then looked bleary eyed at her surroundings. It was a small room, with a small but comfy bed, above which a square window let in the morning light. The light was only yet just coming through the electric shutters in front of the larger windowpanes.

It was the same room she'd been in yesterday, but now she noticed more about it, the novelty having started to wear off.

There was dust in the corners, on the table, and even on the shelving units the professor seemed to use as wide windowsills. Someone had tried to dust, but had obviously been rather distracted or unmotivated in doing so. There weren't as many random objects as in the rest of the house; and what little there was seemed to have been here a while. With the exception of her green box, and maybe her clothes. She recalled the old man saying they were in the short shelving-units. Even the magazine she'd been reading last night, now that she actually thought to check the date of it, was at least a couple of years old.

To be honest, the room felt like a rarely used guest room. A quiet and cold guest room.

A sad smile flew across her lips. A guest room fit for a fugitive. How ironic.

She shook her head. Her feeling like a fugitive was only because of that dream; she wasn't really one, as far as she knew. She shivered at the thought of the silver-backed beast that had scared her enough to wake up, and yearned to forget that vision in the fastest way possible. She had the feeling that her fear of it could and would haunt her day if she let it.

At any rate, if what she'd been told last night was true, it was strange she was sleeping in an unused guestroom and not where she'd been sleeping before... She'd have to ask the professor about that.

Yawning, she slipped out of bed. Despite her bad dream, her body seemed well rested, and she felt better than she had all week, nagging worry in the back of her head set aside. She just needed to get herself washed, dressed, and re-bandage her wounds. This was quickly handled, thanks to the ensuite shower room and first aid box the professor had forgotten by her bed. That done, she gingerly opened the door and headed downstairs.

The house seemed empty and quiet. She wondered what time it was. Looking out through some of the window curtains, she could see the sun was still low on the horizon.

Hah! I can get up early.

This pleasant thought was only enhanced when she noticed a digital clock nearby stating the time as quarter to six. She also noticed the sound of the old man snoring.

She smiled fondly in the direction the noise was coming from, but refrained from investigating before she'd headed to the kitchen. There, she put some water to boil and, crouching behind the counter to reach the cupboards but still being cautious because of her convalescing leg, she hunted for some instant coffee.

She knew that seven to eight year olds weren't supposed to drink coffee, but at the moment that was what she craved, and she'd decided not to question her urges too deeply today.

Once the coffee and mug were found and the hot water poured, she hunted around for some bread to make toast while her hot drink cooled. That done, she decided to go sit by the windows nearby and look out at the new day starting; the electric shutters having automatically and diligently opened.

The new day seemed to promise more rain, but the clouds looked willing to hold back on that for a bit yet, leaving sufficient gaps between themselves for some of the sky and sun to peep through. She sat on the wall unit while munching on her toast. Her food finished, she decided to walk around the house a bit, her mug in hand, sipping at the warm drink as she investigated various rooms and areas.

The kitchen area and eating area she was familiar with by now, since they'd spent quite a while in there yesterday. The TV and lounge area was pretty simple and comfortable looking. She could see

herself sitting there and reading magazines. She walked past the sofas and table to head towards the front door. It was beside this door that one could find the downstairs bathroom and the stairs she'd taken to come down barely half an hour before. The professor's shoes were still there, soggy from the rain last night. She put them somewhere close by where they'd be more likely to dry properly, before continuing on her round.

Now the prof's snores were even louder. She'd reached his sleeping area, which also seemed to be his computing corner. Not too far from the circular kitchen counter was a desk with a personal computer and related tools and gadgets (some recognizable, such as scanner, printer, phone, others less). A bit further off was the man's bed. She could see a large lump hiding from the morning sun under the blankets. On the small night side table blinked a digital clock with a little dot showing the alarm was set. Since it hadn't rung yet, she decided the dear man probably deserved to not be stirred just yet.

She noticed the indoor balcony running by the windows above her head, forming a first floor of sorts. With a smile she decided to find her way up there.

It wasn't that hard to locate. There were some stairs on the other side of the kitchen area that led up to it, just beside two doors that led one to the basement, and the other up to some sort of tower above the house. The turtle's head, she mused. The indoor balcony allowed one a nice overview of the bottom floor. She could see the Professor sleeping from up here; she could see the cooking area and the lounge. She could also see the stairs leading up to her bedroom, which also seemed to be attached to the balcony. Whoever designed this house had a lot of fun.

But it wasn't to look at the inside of the house that she'd climbed those stairs.

Sipping her coffee, she went around slowly, looking out the windows at the neighbourhood, the morning sky, and the delivery vans passing by. She stopped not far above the snores of professor Agasa, and leaned back against the railing with a content smile on her face, observing the manor like house opposite her and the last shreds of night sky she could see behind.

She'd finished her coffee now, and felt more awake for it and that toast.

She wondered what she was expected to do with her days. Sure, she was supposed to rest, which was fine really. She could sit back, watch some television perhaps, read a newspaper, book or magazine, and then proceed to be thoroughly bored... She could also anguish over her amnesia or try and remember things, but that didn't feel productive. Yet again she wondered at the lack of children's toys clearly marked hers, and at why she didn't feel sorry about that.

What kind of child had she been before her amnesia?

Sure, they'd talked about that last night, but all she'd got out of that was the picture of a clever, knowledgeable but quiet little girl, sometimes sarcastic and critical, who liked to read, play on the computer and had trouble getting up in the mornings.

The computer mention had confused her. Playing computer games seemed as futile as playing with dolls to her at present. When she'd asked for specifics, the Professor had stuttered and changed the subject while Ran had merely shrugged.

Maybe she could ask again later on, once he was up; maybe even use the computer and see first hand.

By then the last shreds of night had definitely vanished from the view in front of her, presenting her with the brilliantly lit windows of the house opposite. She was just about to leave and return her mug to the kitchen area when some movement caught her eye.

She peered out the window at the front door of the house.

Yes, it had just opened. Someone was coming out.

With a start she realised it was Kudo.

She remembered him saying he was the Professor's neighbour.

So that was his house.

Quite a big house for only one young high school student... She recalled something about Kudo living there alone.

But she didn't get to ponder that thought further, as she noticed another person being dragged out of the house by Kudo.

A young man with round glasses. His coat and trousers seemed stained with mud, and his face seemed terribly pale compared to Kudo's. The latter seemed to be shouting at him, his face flushed with anger.

She watched on as the strange drama took place.

The stranger, who for some reason seemed familiar to her, had ripped himself away from Kudo's grip, and was staring at him... looking worriedly towards the gates before snapping back at the professor's neighbour.

Seeing the two boys go rigid, she assumed whatever he'd said had to be serious. If she hadn't been pretty convinced Ran and Kudo had some sort of romantic relationship, she would have toyed with the idea the two were having a lovers' spat.

... Although there definitely wasn't anything tender in Kudo's facial expression.

She stared as the high school detective shoved the bespectacled boy back into the house before slamming the door behind him...

What was that about?

Tapping thoughtfully at the side of her mug with a finger, she slowly came down the steps, barely noticing the sound of an alarm clock.

She put her mug in the kitchen sink, greeted the professor and smiled at him, ignoring his surprised "You're up?" look, before heading downstairs to the lab.

The lab felt like a nice place to be. She didn't know why it felt so homely to her, and wasn't going to ponder it.

She sat on the couch there, looking idly up at the small window near the ceiling.

And she thought.

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"What do you mean, 'he' will be after us'? What 'he'?"

His angry shout rang out in the entry hall. The person it was directed at shied away.

Shinichi stared at the boy in front of him, taking in the pale complexion, fidgeting hands and furtive eyes. He didn't like these signs.

"You know," replied Eisuke solemnly, after a long silence. "You know exactly of whom I am speaking, don't you?"

Shinichi ignored the question, and started stomping towards the library, Eisuke following as expected.

Damn. Damn it all to hell.

He'd guessed all right, and as he had previously thought on many occasions, Hondou Eisuke wasn't what he seemed to be at first glance.

After his sudden finding of the unexpected guest that morning, he'd kicked the boy off his sofa, sent him to have a wash while he went to get dressed (why Eisuke had to 'accidentally' manage to make his towel fall off his hips at that point he did not want to ponder) before going to make some breakfast while he tried to make sense of it in his head.

So... Hondou had, after the face off with the black operatives last week, disappeared. Shinichi hadn't really noticed, being too wrapped up in his anger at him, among other issues. It had taken Ran's pointing out of the boy's absence at school to alert him to it. Had something happened that day, after the explosion, for Hondou to skive school? He didn't seem to be wounded. Shinichi had taken great care to make sure Hondou was out of the way before the black ops had arrived. He hadn't wanted the boy to ruin his plans more than he had already. But then, why hadn't the bespectacled teenager returned to school then? Why had he decided to show up at the Kudo house, of all places? Shouldn't he have shown up at Mouri's if he needed a detective?

No. Chances were that the klutz was involved in something he couldn't go to Mouri about.

Something he knew Mouri couldn't handle... Something that had very much to do with Shinichi and what had happened last week.

Shinichi shuffled through some of the papers on his father's desk, looking for the file he'd put amongst the ever-mutating stack a while ago.

Hondou merely stood back, waiting for him to say something, glancing at the shelves upon shelves

of crime novels surrounding them. He didn't say anything, the thundercloud above Shinichi's head an obvious sign that any comments on bibliophilic tendencies were very unwelcome.

And anyway, the serious expression on Hondou's usually amiable face showed that he too wasn't in a hurry for a topic change.

Curses.

Shinichi found the file he was looking for. He turned to face Hondou again, but spent some time fiddling with the papers, remembering sourly what he'd been told by Megure the night before.

They'd found bodies. Some unidentifiable. Seven dead bodies.

... He had expected eight.

It had only taken a quick check of the body descriptions and a word with Jodie and Akai to figure out who the missing number eight.

They'd found the bodies of Vermouth, the boss, Vodka and some other high-ranking members. None of them had the most recognizable feature of the eighth.

Long, silver-blond hair.

Gin.

Akai had seemed glad to know Gin wasn't amongst the dead.

Shinichi couldn't quite recall why the two FBI agents had been allowed in on the investigation, but suspected that they'd guessed enough to force themselves upon Megure. After all, Conan Edogawa returning to his adult self was quite a big hint.

Jodie had had little trouble identifying Chris Vinyard, aka Vermouth The Chameleon. The FBI had known from that point on that the other bodies were most likely syndicate members too... They had been surprised when he'd told him the real identity of one of the less recognizable corpses. Now they knew who the boss of the organisation had been. James Black and his underlings were probably scouring the dead man's home for information first thing this morning. That was their job. They had the resources for it that Shinichi did not, and the Japanese police was there to second them.

That left the questions of Eisuke and Gin.

Since Gin's body had not been found in the surrounding area; that meant he had, in all likelihood, not only survived the explosion, but also found some way to get away.

Shinichi clearly recalled seeing Gin exposed to the blast. It seemed improbable that he'd made it out completely unscathed. He doubted he'd be able to drive in that condition, so...

It was time for Shinichi Kudo and Eisuke Hondou to have a talk.

"Gin. Isn't it? Tall man with scary eyes and silver-blond hair?"

The bespectacled teen shivered and nodded.

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Evil. The Devils playing in the house of the living.

Sadistic. Those toying with the dead.

The man grimaced as the song played on in his head, the voices slowly drifting away into silence, the music lessening its nightmarish beat.

His body heaved, as he slowly rose to full consciousness. He felt cold, but his clammy skin reminded him how he'd been burning from a fever these past few days. He shivered, and opened his icy blue eyes.

The daylight hurt, but he wasn't seeing ghosts this time.

He was in a strange room. He tried to recall what had happened, as he sat up. He blinked as he noticed something odd. His hair, it wasn't sliding over his shoulders like it should. Had he tied it up? Reaching for the back of his head came up with a negative regarding hair ties. Instead his fingers came across ragged ends, unevenly cut and perhaps even singed hair.

Ah.

Now he recalled the explosion. He was fortunate to have made it out alive. His long platinum mane of hair was a small price to pay, even if he hadn't gotten out completely unscathed... The bandage on his right arm needed changing, and now that he felt for it, it seemed the one around his head had become dislodged during his slumber. He rummaged around the mess around him, looking for clean

bandages, before heading to the bathroom in the corner. He did not forget to take his gun with him. When Gin saw his reflection in the mirror, he glared at the pale shadow of a man he was presented with. His hair was a mess, his face white and more taunt than normal. He didn't like the dark bags under his eyes, or their unusual sheen. However he knew that he was feeling better than yesterday, and was now on the healing bend.

He squared his jaw in determination. Maybe now he could seriously consider taking action again. He took a shower, put on clean bandages, and swallowed an aspirin to get rid of any lingering headaches and fever. He didn't want his pain numbing his processing powers. Once he returned to the room he'd been sleeping in, he searched in the set of drawers for clothes to wear, his own being filthy.

He grunted, realizing that the twerp who lived here had hardly anything in his size... And thinking of the twerp...

Gin turned to scan the room, his expression urgent.

Damn. He'd passed out on the twerp yesterday, hadn't he? The kid could have gone anywhere since then... Fled to some friends, to family, to the cops.

Pulling on the baggiest clothes he could find, he threw on his shoes and coat, picked up the first-aid kit, his gun, and checked for his wallet before fleeing the boy's flat.

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Shinichi Kudo invited Eisuke to sit down in one of the library's armchairs, as he dragged his father's desk chair out so he could sit facing the other teen.

"We both know that Gin is the codename of a cold blooded murderer, a henchman for a crime syndicate with a fondness for black, am I right?"

"Yes," answered Eisuke. He'd stopped shivering now, and his eyes were starting to fill with a flame Shinichi easily recognized as hate and loathing.

"And I am fully aware that you are conscious of my involvement with them," added Shinichi.

A spark of worry showed behind the round glasses on Eisuke's face, as he squared his jaw in apprehension. Apparently he'd misunderstood Shinichi's words.

"And by involvement I shall be clearer later on... But that would require some clarity on your part, Mister Hondou." He handed over one of the sheets from the file he'd been holding. A sheet with a photo and description of Eisuke Hondou, as well as some relevant newspaper extracts. Some on his father, some on a famous TV presenter...

He watched as Eisuke's face shut down, only showing briefly his alarm at this information. He was good at playing a role, but now the act was over.

"What do you mean, by clarity?" he answered, keeping his face a blank sheet. He studiously avoided commenting on the information on the paper in his hands.

Shinichi grinned.

"Clarity. As in not acting like idiots and telling half-truths and lies, white or not. As in making clear and avoiding quid pro quo one's intentions."

He crossed his legs and swiveled his father's chair a bit, adding for emphasis...

"And I know that you are about as clumsy and cursed as I am. Less even. You put on quite a strong act."

"I see... And how do you know all this?" Eisuke's smile was amused, even if his eyes did not share that spark yet.

"Don't you know? Ran asked me to find you last night, and surprise, surprise! You end up on my couch the very same evening. You've looked me up like a very good detective. What do you think I did? The same."

"And what do you want from me, high school detective Kudo Shinichi?"

"I want to know what you want. And what there is between you and Kir, or should I say Rena Mizunashi? I want to know that too."

There was a sound of crumpled paper at the mention of the now absent-from-public-life newscaster's name. Hondou had lowered his head, effectively hiding his facial expression. It was hard to tell whether he was taut with anger and frustration or holding in some grief. Both probably.

"I'd also like to know what it is you know about me. And how Gin made it away from the blast scene, as well as why he'd be after not only me, but you too."

He didn't have the time to accommodate for any hurt feelings.

"Heh." Hondou sighed. "I guess I can't play stupid anymore, can I?" He let out one of his annoying, clumsy and nervous sounding laughs. Although this time, it probably wasn't intentional.

Shinichi kept quiet, waiting for the teenager to continue.

"Yes. I do know quite a bit about you, although probably not enough. I had no idea, for a start, that you'd compiled this much on me... I presume that folder's not just full of bluff?"

Shinichi nodded his head, indicating that indeed, the information in his hands was very real and relevant to Eisuke... And Kir.

He hadn't shared it with the FBI. Hattori was the only other person who knew of the full contents of the file... Agasa and Hai... Agasa only knew of its existence.

Hondou slumped back in the armchair, closing his eyes under Shinichi's quiet stare. For such a chatty detective when it came to sharing his knowledge, Kudo sure knew how to be disturbingly and yet encouragingly quiet.

"To be truthful, it wasn't you I'd planned on looking up. At first it was detective Mouri... Sleeping Kogoro as he is called." Eisuke pulled off his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose.

"I'd only found Rena's trace a day or so after she'd vanished from the public scene. My only hint was that she'd been last seen with the detective Mouri, presumably for some minor case that didn't make the headlines."

"Detective Mouri was suspicious. He'd shot up to fame in a fortnight or so, solving cases by the dozen. Of these cases, he hardly remembers any, and when asked about them he jokingly claims they were like a dream. I suspect they were. He wasn't called "Sleeping Kogoro" for nothing, as I soon noticed after meeting him... But that was not what I was interested in. I wanted to find Rena... Wherever she was..."

"What's the link between you and Rena Mizunashi?" Shinichi interrupted. He wanted to get this straight.

"I said so before, in front of Ran Mouri, Sonoko Suzuki and Conan. She's my elder sister... Rena Mizunashi isn't her real name."

"Did you know she was a member of the organisation? Under the name Kir?"

Eisuke's face darkened at Shinichi's question.

"I didn't know then..."

The two lapsed into silence, one waiting for the other to continue his explanations, the other trying to repress some painful memories...

Just about as Eisuke was about to speak again, they found themselves frozen on the spot by the noise coming from the front door.

... Someone had pressed the buzzer.

A glance at the other confirmed that both feared it might be a certain assassin coming for revenge.

"Crap..." Jumping from his chair, Shinichi darted passed Eisuke, through the doorway and into one of the rooms near the front of the house. From here, he should be able to discreetly check on who was at the gate, or near the front door. He gently parted the dusty curtain so as to peek through. An audible sigh of relief poured from his lips, as he ran to the intercom from which his friend's voice soon came through. It was Ran Mouri.

Eisuke tentatively appeared in the corridor, hearing Shinichi Kudo's relieved voice.

"Yes, I'm fine. No, I'm sorry. I don't think I can make it to class today, something popped up..."

...No I'm not going to leave on a case ag... Wait a minute!

... Yes, it has got to do with that case, but I'm not leaving Beika. Also... No listen...

No. It also has to do with Eisuke. Before you fret, I've found him. Or should I say he found me...

... Fine, come in, but I'm not going to make you miss class because of me!"

Pressing the buzzer to let Ran in, Shinichi went to the door to greet her, a warning glance at Eisuke saying clearly that they weren't finished...



After he'd had breakfast, the Professor, instead of beginning his usually round of "Work in Progress" checks, puttered around worriedly. Come to think of it, he hadn't really done a proper round of work in progress checks for at least a week. The incident had shot his routine, worry for his protégée and Shinichi interfering with his thoughts of inventions and other ideas. His imagination had been pretty overactive of late when it came to thinking of worst-case scenarios. But being the optimistic man he liked to be, he'd done his best to put a clamp on it, usually by messing around with some project or other when he felt like it's what Shinichi had told him last night that had him worrying like this... Maybe it's the fact that Gin had survived the explosion... Or maybe it has to do with what Vermouth had said that night... With the fact that Ai had actually got up early...

But no, he shouldn't be fretting like this. It was normal for Ai to be up at this hour... After all, she had spent most of yesterday asleep. Maybe he should go and check on her?

It's already eight am... She's been downstairs for nearly an hour. What could she be up to?

Putting his now empty breakfast bowl in the kitchen sink, he headed towards the basement stairs leaving the TV he'd turned on in an unsuccessful attempt to steady his nerves.

That was when he heard Ai's startled scream.

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## Chapter 8:Seven children. -

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The song was playing on the small portable radio.

At first it had seemed innocent enough, really. She had found it on the desk, beside the computer that seemed to have been shunted to the recesses of the basement. She had had a feeling that she would like this room. The feeling had proven to be right, at least for a time. She had puttered around the room, looking at this and that, smiling at the odd test tube, staring at the random broken -or rather, unfinished?- gadgets littering the shelves. After a while, she had decided to settle down on the couch there with a book she had found, and turned the radio on. It was more to have some form of noise to chase away annoying afterthoughts than to listen to anything in particular. Her leg had started to ache, so it was a chance to rest it and read some poetry at the same time.

The poetry was interesting to say the least. Somehow, it seemed to match the slightly sad tones of the music channel she had set the radio station to. She also felt she could relate to it. She had no trouble picturing the scenes and emotions hinted at, interpreting the different possibilities for each turn of phrase. Oh sure, she knew she was reading totally different things from what the poet may have intended. She enjoyed it nonetheless, in a mellow sort of way. It seemed to her that this was something she could recall doing, a feeling that strengthened when she found a bookmark as she turned the page.

Somehow, the idea of this room having been some sort of secret hideaway appealed to her. Maybe the black box she had found this book in had been one she had chosen herself to stash some treasures in? Perhaps she should go and give it a closer look. It looked a bit like the green box the professor had handed her the previous day. But not just yet. Read another few pages first, then investigate it. Looking at it from that angle, her amnesia became just a game, a puzzle for her to unscramble step by step.

And that's when she heard them. The first few notes of a lullaby that did anything but put her mind to rest. She bolted upright, the words of the song spilling forth in a treacherous whisper.

Karasu naze nakuno?(Crow, why do you cry?)

And why did she have normally non associated symbols and numbers springing to her mind at the mere opening lyrics of the song? What did "#969#626" have to do with a crow? And why was all of a sudden her mind awash with pain, her chest constricted from a sudden anxiety? Having fallen from the sofa due to the shock, she glared, one-eyed, at the transmitter that had deceived her so.

Karasu wa yama ni- Kawai nanatsu no- Ko ga aru kara yo; (Because I have seven cute children, high in the mountain;)

She remembered feelings, emotions that seemed to belong to someone else. A corruptness that tasted bad in her mouth, a fear that froze her to the spot, that sent shivers along her spine, a guilt that made her clench her fist tighter against her heart, as a determination as ardent as a furnace kept her eye on the instrument of her pain. This song...

Kawai kawai to- Karasu wa nakuno- Kawai kawa-... ("Cute! Cute!" this mother crow cries. "Cute! Cut-...")

It ended just as the Professor appeared by her side. If the concerned tone of his voice was any indication, she must have inadvertently cried out, causing the man to run to her side. She felt his hands protectively hold onto her shoulders, as he asked what was wrong. She pointed at the radio. "Switch it off. Please..."

He didn't question her, and he reached out to kill the music that had followed the lullaby. She sighed, and tried to get a grip on herself again; but the silver-backed creature from her nightmare last night had returned to haunt her mind. She tried to break free from the professor's hands, but in the end, found herself leaning against him, holding onto his arm. She felt weak, she looked as white as a sheet. After only a moment's hesitation, Hiroshi Agasa had scooped Ai Haibara into his arms, carried her out of the basement and into the main landing, where he headed for the phone.

As the professor dialed a number that he seemed to know by heart, Ai's mind was awash with crows in black clothes, children who weren't, a woman with many masks, and a silver-haired beast.

She remembered the beast's name now. It was Gin, like the alcohol.

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Gin stumbled across the street, trying to avoid being noticed. It wasn't working.

Usually, he only needed to glare at someone to get them to want to do anything but notice him, let alone get in his way. Somehow, in his weak state, he had lost the ability to do that at a glance. Oh, sure, he still glared, but somehow the reaction he got was no longer one of fear.

The children would look at him curiously, eyes big as they ogled his disheveled platinum hair. As soon as they thought that he wouldn't notice them doing so, they'd turn to comment to each other, pulling faces and laughing, fingering their clothes as if it were a comment on what he was wearing. He hadn't needed the reminder. The tight fitting sports pants were reminder enough, and he was slightly upset at how damaged his favourite coat was. He should have left it, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. It was a part of him, part of the cloak that had made him no longer Kurosawa Jin but Gin, the assassin, the dealer, the right-hand man of the boss of the crows. Besides, he would most likely need his wallet from its pockets. And his car keys. Gingerly he tried to fish them out as he approached his Porsche, ignoring the pitying looks some early morning shoppers were giving him.

He stopped just a meter away from the door. His eyes seemed to lose their focus as he took in the damage. The paint was scraped all along the right side, and one of the front lights had been smashed. The left rear view mirror looked about ready to snap, and the roof was covered in small scratches. It was a wonder it hadn't been already dragged away, and a fine stuck under one of the sweepers told him that it had only narrowly missed being clamped down to the spot. He growled at the fine. Normally traffic officers were too impressed by the car to dare fine it for parking too long in one spot. The coloured sheet of paper soon found its way into the nearest bin. Gin successfully managed to glare down a man who had had the cheek to not-so-subtly sneer at watching him do so. He climbed into the car and sat behind the wheel.

After only a second of pause, he started the motor. He didn't feel like driving, and his right arm was already complaining; but this was too public a place, he needed somewhere remote, where he could collect his thoughts in peace. Cursing the twerp for abusing his car so, he couldn't help but think that maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to threaten a kid into driving in his stead.

But that had been the only option, hadn't it? The telling absence of Vodka in the passenger seat was too strong a reminder of what had happened.

Vodka was dead. The boss was gone. That woman was burning in hell alongside them; he had made sure of that.

His hand shook a little on the wheel, as he started to whistle a tune he had memorized only to keep in touch with their superior.

What was there left for him? What state was the organisation in now, after the death of its most important members? Should he attempt to do anything about it?

He paused, as he prepared to drive across into a quiet parking area he remembered from a previous mission. He remembered the colour of auburn hair, dancing before his eyes.

Humph, why should anything have changed for him? The only thing he needed to add to his list was another reason to find Sherry...

And now he had one very vital clue with which to do so.

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As she stepped into the Kudo house, ecstatic at the news that Eisuke had been found, Ran couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her spine. Despite Shinichi's face appearing neutral, she could sense great tension in the air, mostly between her childhood friend and the bespectacled teenager. Did this have anything to do with new information on Shinichi's case? The one Shinichi had claimed would prevent him from accompanying her to school that day? But no, how could Eisuke be involved with that? They didn't even know each other! But thinking of Eisuke... He was here. He was here!

"Oh Eisuke! Where have you been? I was so worried after that mes-..."

She had moved forward, her arms moving to embrace her friend, her reassurance and surprise discarding her usual composure. Eisuke stepped back.

"I'm sorry if I worried you, Ran. It's okay now. Really. Forget about that message. Ha ha."

Her classmate waved his hands around in what was meant to be a reassuring gesture, as he smiled nervously. A glance at Shinichi's face was enough to render the words empty. The danger was obviously still real. Somewhere, out there, was someone who continued to threaten her friends, and their safe return to her side, who threatened the length of Shinichi's continued stay in Beika.

Ran bit her lip and clenched her fists, obviously upset and angry at the thought, but also feeling rejected because, once more, she was being left out. Shinichi wanted to keep her out of the loop.

Just as he had done when he had vanished. Just as he had throughout his whole damn case. Just as he was still doing, even now, when the supposed conclusion of said case was nigh or past.

And now he had apparently gotten even Eisuke in on it. How? Why? What about her, his childhood friend? Unfair!

She recalled the email she had received from Eisuke on her mobile phone. Something about being in a spell of trouble and unable to attend classes for a couple of days, alongside an apology that asked her not to worry. She had only received it the night prior, just as she had got home after leaving the Professor's and asking Shinichi if he could look for her missing friend. Contrary to Eisuke's intentions, Ran's concern for him had only grown upon reading the pessimistic unertones and noticing the hurried typing of it; and she was glad she had asked Shinichi after all. Discovering her friend at Shinichi's had been such a relief, but now it seemed a poisoned blessing.

"It's okay? Really?" she asked the two boys. She watched as Shinichi sighed and Eisuke struggled with a clumsy grin meant to reassure her.

"Don't worry Ran. It's nothing you need to concern yourself about, nothing yet." Her childhood friend smiled politely as he scratched his head. Obviously, he had had a long night. He led the way to the living room, letting Ran and Eisuke pass first. She didn't notice as he hissed a query about the message she had mentioned into the bespectacled teen's ear, nor did she notice Eisuke's restrained "Later..." in reply.

"Say, Shinichi..." Ran could feel the awkward atmosphere between them. She had obviously interrupted something tense. It was nothing like the peaceful moment she had spent with him on the professor's porch the night before. Even Eisuke, who had been such a good companion for the short time she had known him, seemed to be avoiding her gaze. From her seat on the sofa, she had to deal as best she could with her inner feelings of betrayal and alienation.

"When are you going to explain to me what it is you've been up to all these months?"

"Soon..." Shinichi said, his voice a whisper. "Soon. I just need some time to finish untangling the knots."

He then added, his voice now more akin to his usual, prior self: "Anyway, I don't want to make you late for class. Last I heard from the small twerp-" He paused, as if taken aback by some memory or other... "You already had a warning from the school this month, due to your dad's cases, right?"

"Look who's talking." She couldn't resist the childish urge to poke her tongue out at him. Seeing the effect it had on the two boys, she didn't regret it for more than a blush's worth either. Shinichi laughed, Eisuke chuckled, and the tension she had felt when coming in, the barrier she had sensed between them and her, vanished into thin air. "If it means I can get some answers at last, I'm more than willing to risk any amount of warnings."

She watched as her childhood friend hesitated, along with her newer class transfer friend, but felt relieved once more as the latter smiled and Shinichi grinned. She would have to remember to burn some incense to thank her ancestors for whatever magical luck they had graced her with today.

"Sure Ran. I guess it is as good a time as ever." The high-school detective glanced wryly towards the other boy in the room. "Maybe mister Hondou will do us the honours."

"Haha. Why not..."

Of course, it would have been too much luck for Ran's wish to come true then and there. Just as Shinichi had seated himself, ready to let Eisuke talk, the phone rang. He could have let it ring, he could have chosen to hang up on whoever it had been or switch it to the answer machine... Instead he answered.

Ran felt something in her snap as she overheard the brisk words "I'll be there" and "right away".

She watched, her jaw hardening, as Shinichi motioned for them to stay there while he ran out of the room. Not a word as to what the call was about, nor where he was off to or how long. The Mouri daughter decided that enough was enough, and it was time she gave Shinichi some of his own medicine. She grabbed her satchel and Eisuke's arm, and left the room before he could argue or Shinichi could notice. She ignored Eisuke's panicked look and protests, too intent on exiting the house, reaching the street, and resuming her morning walk to high school to care. It was only as she glimpsed back, half expecting to see her favourite teenage sleuth run after them, that her forcibly enlisted companion seemed to understand and forget his own issues with leaving Kudo's living room so brusquely.

Ran was crying.

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"Dammit," Shinichi thought as he ran out the side door of his house. "This is the worst start to my day I've had in a long while. Please don't let it get any worse."

He rapidly climbed a couple of crates and jumped over a clumsily erected fence. It had attempted to make up for some debris and a hole an oft reckless neighbour had accidentally left in the wall one morning many months ago. He gasped as somehow his hand didn't quite catch hold of the wall as he had expected it to, and found himself landing in a series of clumsy trip-ups. He grabbed his arm but didn't stop, running towards the back of his neighbour's house, down the drive, and unlocked the garage door to let himself in.

He didn't see the two teenagers exit his front door. He didn't see them go onto the main street, nor did he notice Ran turn her head back to his gate with tears in her eyes. But then, neither did they get to see where he had gone, and that was exactly why he had taken that route: so as not to be seen from the street. What Hondou Eisuke had told him, along with his recently acquired knowledge that one of those he had confronted was indeed not dead, had worried him more than he had wanted to let on. So naturally, when he had got the call from the professor...

Shinichi! Come quick, it's Ai-kun; I don't understand what is wrong. I think something has happened. I...

Naturally, he was concerned.

He paused at the bottom of the stairs leading up into the main house, taking care to lock the door behind him. One never knew. He used this time to compose himself, knowing full well it would not help to present himself all frazzled to the professor and Haibara. They didn't know about Hondou yet. Whatever had happened hadn't been anything immediately threatening. Threatening in the close present, maybe, but certainly not in the immediate. He'd be able to think clearer if he, and coincidentally they, stayed calm.

He wondered, for a brief moment, if this was what it felt like for Haibara, before her amnesia. To bury one's conflicted feelings under a mask, to disguise one's guilt behind a smile, to hide one's fears in silence. There had been a time he had considered that being Conan was exactly the same, but now he wasn't so sure. Had Sherry, no, Miyano Shiho been forced to hide aspects of herself like this from her sister, someone who knew her for who she was? Conan had been a mask, yes, but during that time, Shinichi had been able to pin the discomfort inside him on that mask. Now, there was only him, only him to face the disquieting feeling that maybe, just maybe, he was really losing the thread of who he was. He thought back to Professor Agasa, he thought back to Ran, her father, his classmates... No more did he want to feel this pang of secrecy, of alienation from his own self. Soon. Soon it would be over. Of that he was sure.

Once satisfied that he had doctored his expression to what he imagined to be the face of one who followed Holmes, Shinichi climbed the stairs rapidly, but calmly. He felt so tired now, even though a glance at his watch told him it was only eight thirty in the morning. His arm hurt where he had been wounded, and his stomach was a ball of nerves. But he needed to forget all that, and focus only on the case, on what it was that caused his optimistic and good natured friend to call him sounding so distressed.

He quickly found the professor and his young charge by the settees where he and the detective boys had so often sat for an afternoon tea or a newly devised game. There was no abnormal chaos in the

room, nothing to indicate any extraordinary behaviour or intrusion, just the stillness of the house, not even disturbed by the sound of a blaring television, radio, or even the turn of a page.

"Professor."

Professor Agasa turned his head to face Shinichi, relief and confusion displayed on his face.

"Shinichi! How di-"

"I used my key, the back door..." the teen detective provided in lieu of an explanation. "So, what happened?"

He sat down opposite the two, and only then noticed that Haibara, who he'd assumed to be merely sitting by the professor, had a hand holding tightly onto Agasa's sleeve. She had her knees up and huddled by her other arm, under her chin, and he couldn't help but notice the tremor running along her shoulders. She looked pale, as pale as he recalled her being whenever she had sensed the organisation in the past. Shinichi felt concern, and a big twinge of guilt and regret as the bandage on her leg reminded him why his lies now felt so different from Conan's lies.

"Well, I..."

"N-Nothing happened." Haibara interrupted the professor's reply, but none of them seemed convinced by the way she said it.

"Nothing at all..." she added, in a quieter voice. After all, how could it have been anything... It was just the feeling of a memory, the lingering image from a nightmare making her quiver.

After a moment's silence, Agasa resumed his answer, his tone subdued, half apologetic, half concerned. The voice of a caring parent.

"I heard her cry out from the lab room downstairs. The small radio had been on. She's been... A little shaken since."

"The radio?" Shinichi's query was met by a nod from his neighbour, whereas Haibara merely looked away, not wanting to acknowledge anything of the event, obviously. Shinichi let his mind return to the still recent day when he'd been sorting through the things in that very room, putting them into either a black or a green box. The black box...

"Professor!" At his startled explanation, Agasa looked at Shinichi's pleading eyes, obviously not quite getting the message the teenager was trying to carry through them. Giving up, the high-school detective sighed and chose the next best option.

"Mind if I... Go down there to check it out? I shouldn't be long."

"Oh. Sure. Of course... Go ahead." And without waiting any longer, Shinichi did so, taking the steps down two at a time.

At the bottom, he paused before opening the door opposite the one he had used to get in. This was the door to the lab room Haibara had spent so much of her time in, looking for the antidote that allowed him to stand there now without hiding behind glasses, or flexing to reach a door knob above his head. He had purposely helped the professor to clear the guest room for Haibara in the hopes of keeping her away from this room for a little while. Apparently it hadn't worked. Oh well, Haibara wasn't about to change, was she? Always making life difficult.

Once in the room, he glanced around. It hadn't changed much from when he had last been in it. The shelves were still the same mess of gadgets and gizmos, and the computer stood resolutely inert on its desk. The rest of the room actually looked tidier than he was used to seeing it. The professor hadn't been feeling up to working on much this past week. He could understand the feeling.

Shinichi went and knelt beside the only two objects out of place in the room: a small battery operated radio and a book.

He picked up the radio first. He was fairly familiar with it, having used it on multiple occasions, borrowing it along with a pair of headphones on the occasional case. One of them had been the case following Itakura Saguru's murder, when he'd been wary that the announcement of the man's death on the news might have cut short a trail he had found on the men in black. And what a trail that had been. He smiled, as he remembered the face Haibara had made when she had discovered him in a locker in the train station. She never did find out how close he had been to getting caught that one time. Nor could she remember now if she had.

He bit his lip as he stood up, put the radio on the desk, and looked at the book he had picked up in

the process. It was a fairly light book, much to his relief, but his relief did not last, as he noticed the title and author name. It was a collection of poems written by Elisabeth Wittelsbach, of Bavaria, also known as princess Sissi, a nineteenth century Austrian empress. He remembered curiously flicking through it, wondering why Haibara had such a book among her things. He quickly figured out the why as he read one of the pages, and the suicidal thoughts he had found expressed in the poetry had quickly convinced him to put the book in the black box. It had been one of many difficult moments for him as he had gone through her things. It had felt half as if he was mourning a deceased friend, half as if he had been killing her himself; and the finding of objects he hadn't expected there had only reinforced this.

But that didn't matter now. What this meant was that she had clearly had access to the black box, which he had most certainly not wished for. He turned his head this way and that, trying to recall where he had last left it. He found it behind a stash of boxes in the corner, where he had tried to hide it initially. Obviously, something had driven Haibara to find it despite his efforts. He returned the book to it, picked up the box, and chose a different hiding place for it, this time one up high. As he had finished doing so, he heard the professor come down the steps and picked up the radio again. "Shinichi... Do you know what...?"

Shinichi shook his head and held up his free hand. He was still investigating the cause of Haibara's fright. Even if he had considered the book best out of Haibara's reach for the time being, he doubted that it was the cause of her current state. Curiously, he looked at the dial on the radio, pulled a pen and pad from his pocket, and jotted down the station it had been on.

"Haibara?" he asked Agasa.

"Upstairs. I... Shinichi, I think we need to tell her the truth."

The teenage detective frowned at this. It wasn't the first time his neighbour had expressed this opinion, and though he momentarily felt a twinge of doubt himself, things like princess Sissi's poems reminded him of why he didn't think the time was right. Not yet.

"May I?" Shinichi gestured towards the computer. The professor nodded, though his face was still a picture of unhappy concern.

After a moment of silence as the computer's system loaded, the high-school student conceded to acknowledging Agasa's concern, albeit indirectly.

"She found the black box." He had sounded terser than he had intended to. For some reason, he now felt slightly angry that box had been so easily accessible by her, so soon. And he knew he only had himself to blame.

"Reason more to tell her the truth now!" exclaimed the professor.

"Professor, we've been through this before..." countered Shinichi. He quickly entered some address into the computer's internet browser as he went on. "You know what it is she will find in that box. Pain. Confusion. Regret. You said yourself that you wanted to protect her from all that."

"Yes," the old man replied. "I did, but I do not think I can protect her this way any more. All we are doing is postponing the inevitable."

Shinichi flicked his wrist to look at the time, clicked a few links, then bit his lip as the website he was on seemed to challenge his surfing skills.

"That may well be, but I'm still convinced that we need this extra time." Shinichi raised his head as he seemed to find the web-page he was after. "I told you that Gin escaped the blast, didn't I?"

"Yes..." The professor didn't seem too convinced of the relevance of this to his young neighbour's point.

"Well, I think I've found an explanation as to how he could have left the area despite his injuries."

"What, truly?" For a moment, the professor's doubts seemed washed away by his surprise.

Obviously, Shinichi had mentioned something that had the potential to alleviate them somewhat.

"Yes. Hondou Eisuke found me this morning. Or should I say I fell upon him. I suspect Gin may have threatened him somewhat to get him to assist in his escape." He momentarily muttered some numbers as he scrolled down a page. "...Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Tell me again what happened with Haibara this morning?"

Puzzled, the professor did so:

"I heard her cry out as I finished with breakfast; I came down the stairs to find her on the floor. She looked so pale Shinichi, she was shivering, and it was only barely that I heard her tell me to switch the radio off. That seemed to do something to calm her down, but I don't think I can stand the idea of having to go through this again without warning. I don't think she can either."

"At what time?"

"Huh?"

"At what time did she cry out?" Shinichi repeated his query.

"It had just turned eight, I think. Why, was there a news cast on at that time? You don't think that Gin..."

"No," interrupted Shinichi. "I'm afraid it's not something as drastic as that." He pointed at the computer screen, inviting his old friend to read a line he had singled out.

"Eight am, Nanatsu no Ko... The song Seven Children?"

"Yes." Shinichi stood to look Agasa in the eyes. "That's probably what did it this morning, but you are also right to be concerned about Gin."

The professor stayed quiet for a moment, as he processed what his young neighbour had just told him. From the expression on his face, it was clear he did not like the conclusions he was coming to.

"And you're telling me, Shinichi, that we still should not tell her the whole truth?"

Shinichi had to stop himself from flinching as the tone in Agasa's voice dropped dangerously close to disappointment and cold anger. Not the frustrated anger he usually directed at his harder projects or unhelpful colleagues, no. It was an anger he had never before associated with the professor.

He went to open his mouth, but the professor's hand was up, signaling that he had not finished with him yet.

"You can give me your arguments all you want Shinichi, my mind is made up. You go and take care of her for the rest of the morning, see how you like to witness such turmoil in her soul. I shall be out of here, before I decide to tell her everything myself. I think I need to go calm down first anyway."

Fear gripped Shinichi as he watched the professor, his face an unfamiliar mask of disdain, turn from him towards the door. A weak "Professor" escaped his lips, and for a brief moment he recalled that night.

He heard her shout out from nowhere, and then suddenly she was there. There when she shouldn't have been, there in the last place he had wished her to be. He watched, terrified, as she placed herself between him and the oncoming blast, in the place that should have been his in relation to her. His legs automatically moved, as he jumped to prevent the worse from happening, all the while dreading that it would all be for nil, fearing that he'd lose her.

Shinichi hated the gut feeling that came with that memory, the slight nausea he felt at the mere idea of losing Haibara all over again, of losing the Professor's friendship. This was why he wanted to protect Haibara from her memories, to protect the Professor from Gin and Haibara's pain.

His step strangely uncertain, he tripped after the professor, out of the basement lab, towards the garage door the older man had already gone through. He couldn't think of anything to keep him back, he couldn't think straight at all. He heard the Beatle start and the garage doors open, the car leave, and still nothing came. He'd been standing, stranded by his strangled emotions by the stairs, for a good minute before he noticed the shape sitting next to his leg. It was only when he felt a small hand grasp tightly at his calf that he realized Haibara had been sitting there, as pale as when a certain doctor had boarded a certain bus.

Somehow, that contact helped him to get over his own moment of weakness. There was something more important than his own panic. There was a child in need of reassurance. He knelt down to her height and pulled her into a shaky embrace... But not without a pang of guilt at seeing her for the first time as truly a child. Not without the nagging worry that maybe, just maybe, she had heard all that he and the professor had said.

It didn't help that she seemed to be trying to reassure him as much as he intended to reassure her.



## -Chapter 9: Explanation. -

-ix-

Eisuke Hondou had, ever since he had first set eyes upon her, been in love with Ran Mouri. He loved her smile, her bravery, her strength. He understood her weaknesses, her fears, her worries, and all he had ever wished to do was to protect her from them. That was why he had chosen to leave for America, those few months ago. He had already determined what her feelings were: so obviously pining for her missing hero, Eisuke knew he stood no chance if said hero felt the same... And he had confirmed that the day before he boarded his flight. Yet now...

Now something was different.

Something had snapped. He could see it in her face as they had left the Kudo household. The strength with which she was pulling him along by the wrist, he was certain he was going to bruise. And now he could see the tears... They weren't mere tears of frustration. She wasn't sad. He could tell. She was disappointed, highly so. She was furious.

Was Shinichi Kudo really that clueless?

"Enough's enough..." he heard her rasp, between two sobs. She was beautiful. Her face, amok with tragic tears and flustered with an angry glow, was that of a vengeful angel. Her hair kept swaying to and fro, getting in the way of the startling sight. He'd never seen her show such emotion so openly around him. He tried desperately to keep up with her, if only to continue drinking in the vision, while thinking of ways to cheer her up, to bring back the smile he so treasured. Only he tripped. Her legs had always been longer than his.

"Ah! Owe."

"Oh! Eisuke! I..." As suddenly as he'd fallen, she stopped. Ran quickly knelt beside him, helping him to sit up and checking his knees. The fury had left her face, and for that he was somewhat glad... But her tears were still falling. Oh, the pang in his heart had nothing to do with his illnessprone

childhood. She whispered softly as she examined his grazed cheek. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what..."

"He hasn't explained anything to you, has he?" Eisuke interrupted. He couldn't help the blush on his cheeks or the sadness in his voice. He felt like an outsider desperately wanting to be let in, included in her world. He felt like he knew too much to be kept at bay much longer.

At the blank look that followed her startled response, he knew that he was right. He also recognised another emotion in her face, one from his childhood: mourning. It shocked him to see it there. It was almost as if...

Her love for Shinichi was dying.

"Let's just skip school..." she said. "I think we need to talk... privately. Fancy a coffee?"

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After a couple of minutes, both Shinichi and Haibara had mastered their emotions enough to terminate the awkward hug. With a sigh, Shinichi stood and went to close the garage doors. Without a word, Haibara went back inside, to the kitchen unit to put a kettle on. Sometimes Shinichi had wondered if this was part of her English heritage that had always caused Haibara to resort to a hot drink following moments of stress... Even if she tended to stay clear of the drink that shared the colour of her hair.

"Tea?" She asked as he strode towards her. She'd just put away the coffee grains she'd used for her own beverage.

"Tea, thank you Ai-chan," he replied. He noticed that she didn't need to ask before putting in the two sugars and milk that were his usual. Trying to keep his anger at himself in check, he gripped his head between his hands as he sat at the counter. He soon had a hot beverage to glare at.

"I take it the professor needs some time to himself?" Came the small voice, the additional question of the reason laced through it by her intonation.

"You could say that." Shinichi was in no mood to elaborate.

After a long pause, Haibara continued.

"I understand... He's been worrying too much." At this, Shinichi lifted his gaze towards the young girl perched on the next stool. "I know, because he's been snacking an awful lot. And you... by the look of things, you haven't been eating enough."

"Huh? I... How do you come to that conclusion?" Baffled by her strange comment, Shinichi somewhat forgot about his frustrations.

"Your skin is looking awful dry; your fingertips are brushing against your mug but hardly seem to react to the heat from the freshly boiled drink inside, and even though it should've healed more than that by now, you still seem overly cautious with the joints in your right arm, when it was the muscle that got damaged." She'd started enumerating the symptoms on her fingers, in a way that sent shivers down his spine. "These are all symptoms of malnourishment. Besides, the professor's been worrying about the amount you've been eating of late, as I got to witness last night. One would think a genius high-school detective would know to take better care of himself... Especially when it is Mouri Ran who's doing the cooking."

Astounded, Shinichi could only stare as he got an astounding reminder of how not like a child Haibara could be... despite supposedly not being able to remember where her knowledge came from. Her scientific upbringing, it seemed, would forever be an intricate part of her, however much Shinichi wished it weren't so. Now he knew for sure what it must feel like to strangers whenever little Ai-chan had let out a cynical remark or overly mature statement.

Noticing the bags under the teenager's eyes, the young girl added. "You didn't get much sleep last night, did you?"

"... No, no I didn't." He answered truthfully. Remembering the cause of his sleepless night, beyond the bad dreams, he stood up. Taking a hasty sip from his burning hot tea, he explained that he had something to check on back at his house. Hesitant to leave Haibara alone, but hesitant to bring her to what had promised to be a compromising conversation, he hesitantly told her to wait here for him. Obviously, with the professor gone and the threat of Gin hanging so heavily over the professor's home, said conversation with Hondou and Ran was going to have to wait.

"I... I won't be long Ha-Ai."

Leaving the amnesic not-child and his tea at the counter, he trotted back out the way he had come in, this time taking his time over the broken bits of wall that had been his shortcut. Haibara's comments about his physical condition had somewhat stung. Returning to the living room, he apologised.

"Sorry for taking so long... I..."

The room was empty. Tears welled up in his eyes. Ran had left, without even waiting for his answers. Had she believed that they would never come...? Had she... Lost her trust in him? Taking some deep breaths, he forced himself to think rationally. Hondou must have left with her. He had no reason to leave otherwise. This meant that she'd probably get half the story from him... Hopefully it wouldn't be half too much. Shinichi would have wanted to hear what was said, but... Just now, life was too complicated. Texting an apology to Ran while sinking into his sofa, he only realised how long he'd been staring at nothing when Haibara appeared at the door, having obviously come through the side door he'd forgotten, once more, to lock.

"Fancy watching some TV?" he asked.

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In one of the more surprisingly quiet and narrow alleyways of Beika, an unfortunate salary man was doomed to an early grave. His first warning had been the badly damaged Porsche parked at the corner leading to the shortcut he took to work each day. He never noticed the occupant. He was too busy making assumptions about rich youths with no appreciation of how to properly care for such an antique beauty. In fact, Inoue Jiro was so affronted by the state of the car that, despite being a lover of antique vehicles, he could not find it in himself to look upon it any longer. His steps down the lane were so swift, that he nearly would have got away... Had he actually been listening to his surroundings.

A car door clicked open, only to be smoothly slammed shut. A pair of feet made themselves heard: large, deliberate strides, clanging out loud as the soles of lacquered shoes hit the tarmac. As ice cold

eyes scout around the alleyway for any possible witnesses, Inoue Jiro shudders when the gaze brushes across his shoulders. Thinking of it as a cold breeze, he pulls his coat on tighter. He doesn't look back. If he had, he would have seen the soon-to-be instrument of his death.

Pulling out the trusted berretta from his tattered long coat, the villain adjusts the silencer and takes aim.

The first sharp snap of super-heated air from the gun puts Inoue Jiro to his knees. Blinking, he drops his case. His legs aren't responding. He feels something wet and warm on his lower back. It hurts even to keep himself upright. He falls down to the ground, his arm an uncomfortable cushion for his sides. He feels dizzy, as the footsteps get nearer. Not understanding, he feels tears come to his eyes. He is afraid. Somewhere within his soul is an animal whimpering, trapped...

The stranger stops, towering above him. All he can see is black birds. Their shapes, oddly still, hover around the face of a man with a sullen, murderous glare, his short, silver hair wrapped in blood-stained bandages.

"God?" Inoue asks. He feels ready to faint at any moment.

"No..." answers the man. His hand comes up from his sides, pointing an object at him with a metallic glint. "Devil."

The second shot puts an end to the questions. Knowing that his time is short, Gin strips his victim of his suit before tossing the body into a large bin at the back of a recently bankrupt restaurant. He returns to the car before putting the clothes on. The unfortunate soul had the exact same build as Gin: the clothes fit him perfectly, even if he disliked shirt collars. The black coat the salaryman had been wearing was, if not perfect, an adequate replacement for the tattered mess his own had become. Bundling up the remains of his long coat and the horrendous tracksuit he had stolen from the twerp's flat into the boot of his car, he proceeded to drive towards the outskirts of the city. He needed to change car, and as much as dumping the Porsche displeased him, his best chance of getting it fixed up again was to abandon it in an empty warehouse somewhere and wait until the opportune time... With the boss now dead, there would be plenty of those. Meanwhile, he had his mission to think of.

"Wait for me, Sherry..." He breathed huskily, while lighting up a cigarette. "I won't be long."

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"Beep!"

Ran's phone protested loudly at being turned off, but she knew that if she didn't turn up to school, Sonoko would be certain to call her about her whereabouts at the first opportune moment. There was no way she was going to allow an explanation to elude her today.

"So," she said, staring at Eisuke as he sat uncomfortably opposite her. "This explanation?"

She had deliberately avoided the Poirot Café. Sat underneath her father's agency, it was a fairly sure bet that he would be there for an early morning coffee at some point or either. If not to calm his nerves, it would be to meet some client. The last thing she wanted was for her father to be the one to interrupt her, so she'd dragged poor Eisuke all the way to the Haido district, to a small shop called the Black Coffee Café. It was a rather sombre building, empty bar for the odd customer in a black suit and American tourist. No one she knew would dream of coming here.

The teenager opposite her waited for their drinks to be served before beginning. With a sigh as the waiter left them, he began.

"First of all, I want to make this clear: most of what I know is guesswork, things that I have deduced, witnessed or heard of from another party. Kudo Shinichi hasn't actually explained anything to me." He stirred his tea as he took a moment to compose his thoughts. "You remember the time when I first came to Beika Highschool, and I was looking for my sister, right?"

Ran nodded, she remembered well. He had disappeared overnight then too, but unlike this time, he hadn't sent her any message explaining the circumstances. The two had grown closer since then. He had even passed by the agency to let her know when he was going away after that. She had missed him while he was away in the States, and she and Sonoko had both been very glad when he'd returned to the school. All she knew about his disappearance back then was that he'd been visiting various hospital wards looking for his lost sibling.

"Well, in the end, I did find her. I... She..." His voice croaked a little. He took a moment to breathe and compose his self. When he resumed talking, it was in soft, hurt tones. "Turns out you and Sonoko had been right. Rena Mizunashi was my sister."

Ran held back a gasp of horror. Rena Mizunashi, the news reporter she had met once alongside her father in a case, had only died a couple of weeks back. She had been missing from the public eye, presumed on leave, since said case, before suddenly her face had been plastered all over the papers. They had found her body. The press had made a big thing of her death, which in the end had ruled out to be a suicide. It suddenly occurred to Ran that Eisuke's return had strangely coincided with this time.

"But... You'd seemed so adamant at the time that she couldn't be!" She recalled this quite vividly, remembering the time she had spent secretly rooting that his resemblance with the star was anything but coincidence. It had seemed such a sweet story back then. Now it sounded like a sordid tragedy...

"My blood type... Was changed from O to AB. I was too young at the time to realise what was happening but... When my sister shared her blood with me as a child, I'd already been given some of her bone marrow to cure my leukaemia. At the time you and I watched those videos of Rena Mizunashi, I was still convinced my blood type was O. I only got told the truth when I finally found her."

Rendered mute by the revelation, Ran waited patiently for Eisuke to go on, while wondering what his sister had to do with Shinichi.

"It turns out that the reason my sister had kept this truth from me back then, and had made sure to keep her distances from me... was to protect me. She... Before she died, she was CIA."

"C-Cia?" Ran was quickly shushed after her outburst. Clapping her hand over her mouth, she desperately tried to keep herself from interrupting again.

"Not so loud, Ran! And yes, CIA, as in the States' Central Intelligence Agency. Apparently, my father was an agent of theirs too... And both died while trying to infiltrate the criminal organisation Shinichi Kudo has spent the last year investigating."

Suddenly silenced by the seriousness in Eisuke's voice, and the dangers implied by his revelation, Ran thanked the stars that Shinichi had returned to her at all. Taking some time away from his explanation to drink some of his brew, he let Ran sort out her emotions for a minute or two. Her hand shaking, she managed to cleanse her mind of the worse of her thoughts by taking a sip from her own cup.

"And..." She finally prompted him again. "What is... Shinichi's involvement in all this?"

"As I said, I only know half the tale. In fact it was upon finding out his involvement that I found the courage to go to America in the first place. I wanted to become a CIA agent too, and assist my sister in bringing said organisation to justice. Unfortunately it seems she was discovered while I was away. There was nothing I could have done, and nothing Kudo could have done either..." At this, Eisuke wiped away a tear that had been running down his face. "As far as I know, Kudo has his own reasons to be investigating them. He's even been working with the FBI to try and pin them down. He's good. Very good. The night before I sent you that message, I... I got to see just how good." Warming his hands on his cup, Ran leaned forward the better to hear this part of the tale. His eyes fixed upon the dark auburn liquid in his cup, he recalled that night.

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"The referee calls foul. Yellow card! Yellow Card!" The voices blaring from the Television are full of adrenalin. "As expected, this is a vicious game between Noir Tokyo and Big Osaka! Let's see that fault again..."

The two leaning forward on the settee winced as once more they saw the nasty kick that had downed one of Big Osaka's players. Another incident like that, and it was likely that Noir Tokyo would be down a player. It was not a pretty game to watch, but Shinichi was somewhat glad of how good a distraction it had been. He hadn't expected to find much on to distract Haibara and himself from their worries, but when the Noir versus Big match had come up on the guide, he'd instantly thought of it as perfect. Haibara had been reluctant at first but...

"I... Vaguely remember watching him play before." She had said while pointing at the Big Osaka's

centre field player. Recalling that she'd been a good fan of the player before her amnesia, Shinichi had grinned.

"You probably watched a few matches with the detective boys. Professor Agasa would tell me that he'd taken you lot to see the odd match in town."

The two had soon settled down to watch. It was a repeated showing from a few days prior, and even if he'd already heard the result on the radio, Shinichi enjoyed seeing the energy with which Higo Ryusuke was playing. He'd certainly improved a lot since breaking his no-goal strike at the beginning of his transfer to Big. Most of Noir's players' foul play seemed to be targeted at him, but not only was he scoring goals, he was masterfully avoiding their attacks.

That said, Shinichi's mind wasn't completely at peace. His mobile phone in his hand, he was still waiting for a reply from Ran. As the first half ended and the adverts interrupted the commentary, he sat back and pondered upon his plan of action.

They weren't safe. Neither he, nor Haibara were safe as long as they stayed in his house. It would be the first place that Gin would check, once ready to come after them. The Organisation knew full well his address, and even if Gin had lost access to such information, a quick visit to a local phonebook would provide it readily enough.

It was a dilemma. It would be easy enough for him to convince the professor that he and Haibara should find refuge somewhere, while he attempted to lure Gin into a trap but... It wasn't certain that Gin would start by going after him. He could easily raid Beika Primary's files, track down one of the detective boys, even their teacher, Miss Kobayashi. Whatever would ensue would not be pretty. Shinichi had made a point of acting alone on that night. He couldn't stop the flashes of recollection: his great deduction, his offer, the trap... Maybe it was time he involved someone else again. After all, the organisation was now beheaded, left leaderless and quickly being dismantled police raid after police raid. Numbers would be anything but a hindrance if Gin was on his own. Yes, maybe he should give Jodie a call... He...

"Shinichi? Kudo? Oye, you okay?"

"Huh? Haibara?" He blurted out, mentally kicking himself for using the wrong name.

"The game's started again. What were you thinking of to have such a serious face on?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing..." He waved her concern away, before coming up with a lie. "I was just thinking about how much of a threat to the Tokyo Spirits Big Osaka might turn out to be after this match."

"Spirits fan, eh?" Haibara leered. "In great trouble indeed, I'd say. Higo just scored a hat-trick."

"Huh?" Surprised that Haibara would remember such a term, he turned his eyes to the screen. Big Osaka had indeed added another goal to their board. He let out a low whistle as the goal got shown again. Shinichi had to admire the dexterity and quick-thinking put into it; he'd have had a very challenging time himself if in that situation. "Nice one!"

He did not notice Haibara's suspicious stare as he returned to his viewing of the match.

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"After returning here and seeing Shinichi Kudo in the street, I immediately connected the dots and decided to follow him." Eisuke resumed his explanation to Ran, though he had to continue with a small lie. "I had, hm, come across him a couple of weeks before and seen him tailing one of them, a person from the black organisation. I naturally assumed that he was onto something when I saw him going ahead with a frown on his face and a loaded backpack. Secretly I hoped that he'd lead me to my sister again, that her death in the papers had been faked. Only it wasn't. I... I was there when Kudo was setting up to face them. He'd set up some gadgets the professor must have made for him or something. I must've accidentally undone a lot of his preparations when he spotted me, because he was furious. I..."

After a small pause, he confessed. Ran held her breath.

"I was a coward, I'll admit it. When he told me to buzz off and hide in a location he pointed out to me, I did pretty much that. But I couldn't leave without at least finding out what was going on. I sneaked back out and hid behind some trees not too far away from the clearing he'd been setting up in. It was then that I heard them coming. Cars were driving into the woods where we were. One

even parked not far from me: a black Porsche I think it was. Thankfully, none of the occupants saw me as they were getting out, but I got a good look at them. They were talking as they got out. Seemed aggravated that they were in the position they were in, whatever that was. They didn't want to be there, that was clear, and the taller man there seemed very keen to get his pistol out to confront what I presumed to be Kudo. There was another man who pretty much followed his lead and a woman... She... I believe she was actually Chris Vineyard, the famous actress from America."

"You must be kidding..." Ran whispered, drinking in all the details.

"No, I'm not, though it was odd that she got referred to as Vermouth. She sounded, looked and acted exactly as the actress is known to. She followed the two up into the clearing. I couldn't follow them to see what was happening but... I did hear some things."

"Such as?"

"Kudo pretty much told them straight out that he knew who they all were, that they were some of the top members of the Organisation. He even called out to some by name, asking that the ones known as Korn and Chianti come down from their perches in the trees. He said something about the area being staked out and having irrefutable proof that would bring them down. Some of them seemed disbelieving, until he mentioned someone called Sherry. That's when I heard the first gunshot. That's also when I saw the small auburn haired girl appear." Swirling around the remains of his cup of tea, he took a quick sip. "She had glasses on, like Conan's. She seemed terrified when she saw the Porsche, but proceeded on anyways. I think upon hearing the gunshot, she must have feared the worst and ran forward. Only it wasn't Kudo that got shot. I think it was Vermouth, because after shouting out in pain, she berated the one she referred to as Gin and started rambling on about some confession."

"A confession?" Ran sounded puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I'm just saying what it sounded like. I think the wind had started to change at that point, but she went on about angels and demons and how the hells angels' daughters had been her assignment or something. I couldn't make much sense of it: it had started to rain and half her words were obscured. I nearly gave up on my hiding place when shots started to ring out again, and I heard the small girl shout. That's when the explosion happened, a big explosion."

Ran recalled the photo from the papers of the crater left in the forest. Though she was aware that the police were trying to keep the case quiet while they investigated what had happened, she'd seen the hole the blast had left, the wreckage wrought upon the trees and the small building there.

Apparently the site had been a fuel station of some sort in the past, or so the journalists had surmised. It would explain the extent of the damage.

"I couldn't hear much after that at all, let alone the rain." Eisuke pushed on. "The force of the blast had blown me out of my hiding place and it took me a minute or two to clear my head. By the time I came to, the tall man who'd been driving the Porsche, the one with silver hair, had me by the neck. He looked in bad shape, but not in bad enough a shape that he couldn't threaten me at gun point. It took me a few seconds to realise why he hadn't shot me dead on the spot... He..."

Horried at the turn of events that Eisuke's tale had taken, Ran could only listen, flabbergasted, as he finished his tale.

"He forced me to drive him away at gunpoint. He's been staying at my flat for the past week, keeping me on a pretty tight leash, so to speak. I only managed to get away last night, and my phone pretty much died as soon as I finished texting you. I thought about going to the police first, despite his threats to hurt you and my friends, but something told me... Something told me Kudo Shinichi would know what to do."

"Eisuke..." Ran started, worry clear as day in her eyes.

"Agk! Not again." Eisuke fell onto the floor upon tipping over the jug of milk. "Cold! Cold!"

Avoiding Ran's gaze, the bespectacled teenager quickly ran into the Café's toilets. He didn't want to let Ran see his teary eyes. He was worried. He hadn't actually had the opportunity to explain to Shinichi exactly how and why Gin would be after them. He needed to come up with a plan.

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Eisuke Hondou was not the only one worried. Standing before the Kudo mansion, Jodie Starling,

also known as Jodie Santemillion, was worried too. She had spent most of the prior evening hunting down information on the boss of the black organisation and trying to figure out where the threat of the surviving Gin would make himself known.

She rang the doorbell. Obviously Eisuke was not the only one to visit that day.

Upon seeing her, Shinichi seemed to give the first broad smile she'd seen on his face since the start of the entire mess. Obviously, she was more welcome than Eisuke had been.

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## Chapter 10: For Protection. -

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The match had just finished when the doorbell rang: a satisfying victory for the Osaka team. Ai remained seated while Shinichi went to answer the door. She could glimpse the unexpected guest through the doorway when the teenage detective guided her through the entrance hall. An American lady, hair cut short, serious expression upon her face. Upon seeing Ai in the living room, the stranger gave her a sad smile. Obviously another who knew her that she could not recall. Hearing Shinichi call her Jodie, and indicate that they could go to the library, Ai got the hint.

"We'll be back in five..." The young man called out to her. Ai didn't believe him, and when five minutes had passed, she gave up flicking through the TV channels and went to see if they were anywhere near the end of their obviously important discussion.

It took her a small while to find the library. The house was foreign to her, and its layout had nothing in common with the professor's house. Ai felt a certain degree of foreignness, a sense that she was intruding, as she went by the stairs... And yet, it felt somewhat familiar. Running her hand along the top of the stair rail, despite the fact that she needed to step on her toes to do so, she inspected the thick layer of dust collected by her fingertips, too thick. She could see that it had last been dusted a couple of months back, but even so, a lived-in house should have enough hands gliding along said stair rail to at least halve the amount of dust left. She could glimpse only a couple of handprints left amongst the dust. Obviously, Shinichi Kudo had been away for a long time before his recent return. Ai felt like she had been there before, examining the dust, maybe going through drawers... She hadn't been alone in intruding at that time. And yet for some reason, as she came across the ground floor bathroom, she could recall looking up to him, the occupant of the house as he grinned into the mirror, school tie around his neck. She felt warmth wash across her cheeks at the mental image. Yes, she had to admit that he was a handsome man. She had to hold her hand against her chest as some phantom pain made its presence felt.

Finally finding the library – at the very back of the house, strangely enough, Ai saw that the door had been left slightly ajar. Tilting her head in such a way that she could eavesdrop without announcing her presence; she leaned against the doorframe to listen. The voices inside were, as expected, Shinichi Kudo's and the Jodie woman's. By their matter-of-fact tones and querying sentences, she could tell that they were still in full debate over whatever it was they were discussing, even if it was in hushed voices. She could only make out so much of what was being said.

"... You sure that would be your best option?"

"You said yourself..." The sound of a map being unfolded covered up half of what was being said.

"We don't know how much intelligence he has access to... Until we..."

Sighing, Ai gave up on listening. Whatever the two were discussing, she'd heard enough to know that they were still going to take a small while to hash it out. She could tell that whatever they were talking about would give her a headache if she tried too hard to understand. Glancing at the clock in the hallway and feeling the pain in her leg stir, she decided it was time to go back to the professor's house for a bit. It would be lunchtime soon enough and somehow she didn't think Shinichi would remember about her medicine for her leg. She hobbled back out of the house through the living room, where the latest Gomera movie was hogging the small screen. The young girl continued out the side door and, gingerly as her injured leg complained, Ai clambered over the debris that served as a shortcut between the two properties. She wondered what had caused the wall to collapse in the first place.

She didn't feel the need to leave a note. After all, it wouldn't take a detective to figure out she'd gone back to the turtle-shaped house.

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Shuichi Akai, ignoring Jodie's plans to go and talk to Shinichi Kudo directly, was prowling around town. He was on the hunt. Ever since hearing from the young teenage detective's mouth that Gin had survived the misfired trap that the high school student had laid out for the top members of the



organisation, Shuichi had been combing the city for any sign of the lone operative. A week had passed since the blast. Knowing that his target had indeed been caught in the blast before making his getaway, Shuichi was prepared to believe that he would lie low for that time, but not much more. Caressing the remnants of scarred skin on his own face, he pondered upon the many things he and the silver-haired killer shared... all because of a young scientist going by the code name Sherry. Every time he thought of her, he could not help but remember Akemi. The trust the young woman had put in him, and yet the protectiveness she had over her little sister... It had been sad to see such a happy young woman stuck in a desperately lost situation. It had been heart-breaking to see how life had separated the two siblings by such extremes... It had been heart-wrenching when he'd learnt of her death, after she'd sent him such a hopeful message. He hadn't even needed to guess to know who her killer had been.

He checked his pistol-holder as he went around asking people about a stolen Porsche 364A, possibly damaged. Upon finding with inspector Megure's crew that the boss's car and a number of other vehicles most probably owned by the remaining victims of the explosion had been found nearby, Shuichi had instantly noticed the conspicuous absence of Gin's trademark vehicle. He'd also found traces hinting that the car had collided with a number of trees and bollards on its way out of the woods. He couldn't quite say why he was persuaded the assassin would be hiding away near the Beika area, but his instinct told him that his arch-nemesis would go little further.

The hunt was on.

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"Right, so it is agreed then?" Shinichi stood, folding up the map he had pulled out of the local area. The professor's electronic map had been surprisingly efficient for the conversation. "We ask Ran and her father to accommodate Haibara for a short while, with FBI protection around the building just in case, and during that time I'll come up with a plan to lure Gin into custody."

"I still insist that you stay at the Mouri home too, you know." Jodie intervened. She glared at him with all the righteousness acquired from being an English teacher to one of the more challenging classes of his high school. "You've been through a lot these past few weeks. Leave the capture of Gin to us. There is no reason to knock at death's doorstep by taking unnecessary risks."

He sighed. It was a shame that the FBI bases in town were either too far away or possibly compromised by the organisation before it was beheaded. As much as Shinichi agreed that his house wasn't the safest place to stay, and that the professor's was possibly even less so if Gin were to do an enhanced internet search on small auburn haired girls living around Beika. Blast Agasa's YouTube and blogging addiction. As much as the detective was determined to keep his promise to Ran about not leaving again, he felt really awkward at the mere concept of asking to live at the agency for however short a time as his adult self. Even if it was indeed the best positioned building for the FBI to stake out without being too conspicuous, he still thought of the place as Conan's home. He was done being Conan. He was done with the charades... And yet, what better place to end them all?

"Fine," he replied. "And I'll make sure the Professor finds some safe place to stay for the meantime..." So long as he deigns to read my email to his phone, he added in thought.

"Have you decided on the pretext yet?" Jodie added.

"Oh, simple enough: explain that both my house and the professor's are undergoing works to check for dry rot or something. I'll easily enough persuade my dad to get some company in for appearance sake. Maybe he'd even find a bona fide excuse. As for the professor, I'll just say that I offered to let him go visit a friend to rest for a bit, while I watch over Haibara."

Jodie paused as she considered Shinichi's response. He waited to see if she could find any flaws or ways to improve said pretext, but he had not expected the response she gave instead.

"Why do you call her Haibara? As far as I'm aware the only ones to call her that are the kids..."

Caught by surprise, he stuttered a bit.

"Ha-ah? I... I guess it's because I associate her with a deceased relative of hers I meet in a case..."

The explanation sounded a bit lame to his ears, but it wasn't entirely a lie. He knew that Jodie might have had her doubts about Conan before hand, but he saw no reason to confirm them, especially if it meant she would connect the dots about Haibara's true age... It would defeat the whole point of

accepting her amnesia.

Little did he know that Jodie was thinking exactly along the same lines: She could only recall too well the picture of an adolescent pinned to Vermouth's dartboard, auburn locks surrounding a melancholy face. It had been all too similar to the child that said organisation agent had attempted to kidnap and then shoot. Nevertheless, she accepted Shinichi's explanation at face value and decided to prod no further at the current time.

"Right, I had better get the arrangements made then..." She said, whisking her mobile phone out of her pocket. "Can I have your number to let you know when we're ready? I'll give you mine so that you can confirm things on your side."

"Sure..." After a quick exchange of contact details (not that he would admit already having hers), Shinichi guided Jodie out of the house and waved her goodbye. He knew that he'd have a big job ahead of him convincing Ran to let him and Haibara stay over after what had happened that morning, so he decided it was time he sorted out lunch for the two of them. He was still mindful of Haibara's remark about his nutrition. He might as well get some more toiletries for staying over at Ran's in too.

He recognised the end song of the latest Gamera film as he returned to the living room. How many times the Detective Boys had dragged him and Haibara to see it, he'd lost count. He was surprised that she'd even consider watching it, amnesiac or not.

"Yo, Ha-Ai!" He said as he strode in. A cold hand gripped his heart as he noticed that the room was empty. She couldn't be... Could she?

Forcing himself to think logically, and with his knowledge that the rest of the house had been conspicuously vacant as well, he decided to do the obvious thing and return to the professor's home to check there first.

"Dammit, Haibara..." Shinichi muttered as once again he painfully vaulted over the broken down wall. "Please be safe."

-x-

After having explained to Ran what had happened to him on the night of the incident, Eisuke wasn't quite sure what to do. After having cleaned himself of the spilt milk, he'd returned to his seat opposite her and, naturally, they had started talking about what he would do next. He wasn't prepared to go back to his flat: he did not know if Gin was still there or not. He did know, however, that he ought to get someone to check. Ran was adamant that he should go to the police. He was reluctant. He had actually hoped to use Shinichi's contact with the FBI, but wasn't certain how much he could tell Ran of Shinichi's secrets. There wasn't enough of a CIA presence in town for him to call upon them, not that they'd listen. He hadn't gotten very far into enrolling before his sister's news had brought him back to Japan in a rush.

"Listen Ran, I..." He tried hard to think of the best way to phrase it. They'd spent a long time talking over the subject again, after the long awkward pauses where Ran had sat and thought things through. The café was starting to get busy and it was obvious the staff were waiting for them to leave. Their beverages had long since gone cold. "From what I understand, it's not a hundred percent certain that going to the police would be safe at this moment. They were conspicuously absent when Shinichi faced this organisation. I... I think he'd know who to go to, to be safe."

Standing up as yet another waiter rolled their eyes at pair; Eisuke hinted to Ran that it was probably time for them to depart. Pulling up his hood, he continued.

"Meanwhile I just want to find some place to stay, to hide out while we figure out what to do. If that guy has left the flat, and he sees me, I'm pretty certain he'd be only too happy to get rid of me." Seeing Ran's face ashen in colour at what he'd said he felt the need to reassure her, but she spoke before he could.

"In that case, I know just the place."

Grabbing his arm, she dragged him all the way to a street that he found all too familiar. It didn't take him too long to figure out exactly where they were headed.

-x-

Even though she had had quite an early breakfast, Ai didn't really feel all that hungry when she saw

the clock flashing noon at her. Responding to the pain in her leg, she went for her medication that was kept in one of the kitchen cupboards. With a sigh, she took the pill and drowned it down her throat thanks to a glass of water. Leaning against the kitchen unit, she pondered a bit about the nature of her injuries. Beyond her amnesia, there was her leg. She'd received a couple of cuts and burns after whatever explosion it was that Shinichi Kudo had rescued her from. She had a big bruise that was only just starting to swell down, possibly a weakness in some tendon near the knee. As far as Ai could tell, she had very few injuries above her leg. Even her head, bar the small bump, seemed fine. Shinichi, on the other hand, seemed to have a number of scratches down his back that she could infer. His arm was still thickly bandaged and she could not help but wonder if his appetite problem might also be a side-effect of the incident. Now that she pondered it, she hadn't really thought to find out more about what had happened then. She had been much more preoccupied by other memories.

"Hum, nothing in the paper..." She muttered after flicking through one the professor had left on the small table beside the television, unsurprising really, considering it had been a full week. After a moment's hesitation, she continued her thoughts out loud. "Maybe there'll be something about it on the internet."

Ai went down the stairs to the basement carefully, one step at a time, hand guiding her along the wall. She could have used the desktop computer the professor kept on the ground floor, but somehow she felt more comfortable with the idea of using the one in that small room near the garage. Even if it meant a little discomfort getting there; she winced a little as her weight shifted painfully upon reaching the last step. Massaging her knee, she hobbled passed the door into the room.

The small study was pretty much identical to the way it was that morning. Discarded toys and gadgets still littered the shelves; dust still plagued the various nooks and crannies, thankfully to a much lesser extent than at Kudo's house... No sign of a silver-haired beast at all. Ai sighed and gave herself a self-deprecating smile as she spotted the small radio sat precariously next to the keyboard. It had been nothing but a bad day-dream. The computer itself she found to have already been turned on. Curious, she brought the screen back to life. The computer had been accessed using an account that was obviously the professor's, and required his password to access. She pouted a little as she clicked the button to start a session as a different user, hoping there was a guest one. To her disappointment, there wasn't. However, there was one that, thought oddly named, she recognised as obviously being her own.

The username was fairly mysterious sounding, but rang a cord as she whispered it out loud; the user image was one of her amongst the detective boys, cropped down to show only herself and the one called Ayumi. Two little girls, smiling happily while on some camping venture. Ai couldn't help but share that smile as she hovered the mouse pointer towards the password input box. There her smile faltered. She had no idea what password she would have used. The more she clawed at her mind and willed her fingers to automatically type in the asterisks, the less she could think of the answer. Her mind a complete blank, she clicked on the hint prompt.

"Get out, Kudo." It stated simply. Her eyebrows knotted themselves together in confusion. She was under the impression that Kudo had been out of town since before she'd came to stay at the professor's. Why would she...? Then again, it had been hinted that Shinichi Kudo would sometimes stop by to collect mail. Still, why would she feel the need to protect her computer account from him? It wasn't something she pictured herself needing to do for an occasional visitor... Unless... Disheartened, she swivelled the chair away from the disappointing display. She glanced around at the floor and sofa, looking for the book she'd been reading that morning. She had felt a connection with its contents; maybe it had a hint as to her password...

The book was nowhere to be seen. Puzzled, she examined the desk, drawers and shelves. She had no reason to believe either Agasa or Kudo would have removed it from the room. Someone must have put it back in the box she had found it in. Puzzled, she stood and went to the corner full of boxes she had investigated only hours before. She frowned as the distinctive black box turned out to be missing. It was deliberately moved, and it didn't take a genius to guess who. Though she had no

proof, her gut instinct told her it was Shinichi Kudo. There was something in that box that he didn't want her to find. Well tough, she thought. She was going to find it, and that was that.

Knowing that the bulky item could not have left the room, she turned and examined the immediate area. He wouldn't have hidden it at a height convenient for a child, so naturally, her eyes went up. With plenty of shelves and a good cupboard or two reaching the ceiling, there was plenty to look at... And that was while dismissing the possibility he might've hidden it above one of the ceiling tiles.

With a grumble, she climbed onto the sofa, careful to steady herself using the back of it. Needing just a little more height, she clambered on to the arm of the furnishing. Feeling her blood pumping behind her ears as her precarious position and angry confusion had her adrenaline flowing, she slowly and carefully observed the higher contents of the cupboard that she had opened and the nearby shelving. It took her two turns, but she spotted it.

"There you are..." Spotting it within the cupboard, deep upon the very top shelf, she hopped off the sofa and puzzled over how to access it. With sudden insight, Ai shuffled over to the side door of the office that led to the garage. Opening it, she quickly found the object she was after: a rather tall step ladder, folded up and leaning against the wall. Steadying herself as she prepared to lift it towards the cupboard she was after, she listened out for sounds of either the professor or Kudo returning. Hearing nothing, she proceeded to moving and setting up the ladder. After several minutes of clumsy tugging and pushing, she succeeded. Her leg being a nuisance, she required another minute while she waited for the pain to pass. Finally feeling the numbing effect of the tablets kicking in, she climbed up.

Sat upon the top step of the ladder, Ai was just at the right height to look into the box and, so long as she braced one hand upon the top of the cupboard, she could rummage within. It was a little tricky to see the contents. Though the covering blanket had been removed, very little light actually reached the higher shelves. It didn't take her long to find the book she had been reading earlier. It was small and square, and fairly near the top. She grinned as she found it. It had naturally opened upon a page that could explain why someone would have felt the need to hide it away from her. But to judge a book by one page... amused and somewhat underwhelmed, she returned the book to the box. Curiosity overcoming her, she decided to sift through the contents some more. Most of it seemed to be paper, small plastic containers and disks. The latter intrigued her, not because of what they were, but that she recognised them at all. For a child of her age to know of a floppy disk as more than some strange image on a toolbar, but an actual method of storing information and transferring it from computer to computer... Then again it wouldn't surprise her if professor Agasa still used such things on a regular basis. He seemed to be of the generation that would have come up with them in the first place.

It was then that her fingers grazed an object that sent shivers down her spine. Cold, tubular, metallic... It felt like...

"Like a gun..." Ai whispered.

Carefully extracting the unseen device from the container, she found that her hand flawlessly wrapped itself around the item's handle. Grip, she mentally corrected herself. Small, black and heavy, it did indeed feel and look like a proper semi-automatic pistol, a Beretta to be precise. She could see the model number engraved along the barrel, along with the word imitation. The weight distribution felt a little strange to her, it was as though... Checking the magazine, she saw that it was a custom made hollow construction. Without removing it from the copy, she immediately felt a certain sense of security upon finding the branding "Flower power Ltd, magician and prankster's tools" on the ammunition's casing. She decided not to question her familiarity with the weapon. The silver-haired beast from her nightmare earlier was gnawing at her thoughts once more, and she had the feeling that she would need all the protection she could get.

Her heart pounding away, Ai slipped the replica gun into her belt, careful to hide it under her jumper. Deciding that she had done enough snooping for the day, she went to climb back down the ladder when a scrap of paper caught her eye. Hanging half out of the box, the unfolded sheet looked ready to fall. She didn't want either the professor or Kudo to figure out that she knew of the black

box's current location. She would have to put it back in first. Taking the paper, a copy of a newsprint by the looks of it, the girl was about to put it back when a loud noise stopped her.

She heard a door slamming, nearby. Too near, she thought. Holding her breath, she waited for the inevitable footsteps. Loud, powerful strides announced the presence of a certain teenage detective. She knew who it was before he even started to shout out her name.

"Haibara! Answer me!" Ai could hear his muttered swearing as he rushed past the small basement room, through the corridor between the garage and the stairs leading up to the ground floor. She could also hear him ascending the steps two by two. Cursing herself for her curiosity, she quickly slid down the ladder, folded it up, closed the cupboard and replaced it in its proper place. It was only then that the auburn-haired child realised she still had the sheet gripped within her fingers. Aware that Kudo might return to look for her in that room at any second, she quickly folded it up and pocketed it as she sat in front of the computer screen.

Ironically, she only had to stare blankly at the screen for a split second before the password came to her. Her fingers flying across the keys, she typed in the name Watson. All it had taken for her to recall it was a Holmes-geek detective, how typical.

The session had only just finished loading when the door to the room flew open. Ai dared not look towards the doorway. She felt flushed, and somehow the way the young man behind her was panting was not helping.

"Th-There you are!" He gasped. "What took you? I mean... Why did you come back here?" She could hear the confusion in Kudo's voice.

After taking a small moment to regain her composure, there being nothing on the screen to warrant her ignoring him, Ai swivelled her chair around. She could see him standing within the door frame, leaning against it as he massaged his injured arm. She could see that Kudo had been running, and that irritation was threatening to replace worry in his eyes. Though he hadn't got a coat on, the young man appeared to have acquired a small backpack that hung limply from his hand.

In answer to his question, she pointed at her own wound. Despite the continuing cold and wet weather, she'd chosen to match her thick jumper with nothing more than a pair of tan shorts and long brown socks. Her bandage around her knee showed quite clearly. Needless to say, she hadn't been expecting to leave the house that day, there being another couple of days of convalescing to go through before she was expected to return to school.

"I came back to take my tablets for my leg. I need to take them at regular intervals to keep the swelling down and prevent an infection." She didn't add that the pain-relief component of the medicine had been more than welcome. She was swinging her foot around with only minor discomfort. Shinichi Kudo looked like he could do with taking some of his own. She smiled warmly at him.

With a sigh, he returned her smile, getting her subtle point and straightening up. It was amusing to see him suddenly pretend that his arm wasn't bothering him at all.

"Cool. Let's get them packed then. You can show me where they are kept."

"Packed?" Now it was her turn to be perplexed.

"Yes packed. We're going away to stay with some friends." He grinned. "We'll need to get some supplies on the way as well... Come on!"

Intrigued, she shut down the computer and followed. All thoughts of Internet searches were forgotten.

he beetle stalled as Hiroshi Agasa lifted his foot off the pedal too fast. He hadn't braked fast enough, but it did not matter. He had stopped at the lights, no pedestrians were hurt... And he still had his anger to work through. With a sigh, he rested his head upon the driving wheel. Dangit Shinichi, he thought. Why are you running, now of all times? Why are you refusing to look the facts in the face, while pulling an illusion of safety and normalcy before the eyes of the ones you had sworn to protect? Hiroshi had thought it for the best at first, but now...

Raising his head to take stock of the traffic and check the colour of the lights, the professor could not help but freeze at the sight on the sidewalk. A vision from what had felt like years ago came back to him, fresh as morning dew and winter snow.

At the Haido Hotel, he'd seen the Porsche 356A pull up. He had witnessed the two men coming out of the car not far away from them as he panicked about the safety of his protégée, the very same little girl who'd just been captured by an unknown operative. He had felt the shiver of terror run down his spine as the silver haired criminal had turned to look at the net book guiding them to the location of their ally, and, unbeknownst to them, little Ai.

Hiroshi Agasa felt the very same terror fill him once more as he looked at the man standing by the traffic lights. Still as tall and cold as ever, somehow the fact that his hair had been chopped away and clumsily masked with blood-stained bandages had only made him more imposing. Gin grinned at him, his eyes gleaming with malice. Seeing the lights change, Hiroshi's subconscious took over, automatically driving the beetle away, down a couple of blocks before he could bring himself to park it on the side of the road.

Oh. Now he understood.

For the first time in years, Hiroshi Agasa felt himself cry.

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## - Chapter 11: The Detective's return. -

-xi-

Auburn locks fluttering slightly in the breeze, the girl pulled her red coat tighter around herself. A small backpack containing about a week's worth of clothes was saddled upon her shoulders, as she stared into the house. The weather was no longer wet, but it wasn't that warm either. Ai didn't want to be out there, soaking in the dampness, when there was a perfectly decent and dry house before.

She watched dispassionately as the neighbour, the young man called Shinichi Kudo, balanced his own travel bag upon his shoulder and scooped up the spare keys that Professor Agasa must always have left in the gangway of his house. The teenager, still in his high school uniform that he'd clumsily hidden under a thin jacket, switched off the lone light bulb that lit up the small entrance lobby. Now, more than ever, the house looked like a turtle to little Ai. A great gaping maw of shadow, the overhang above looked gloomily down at her as she left its comforting presence. Kudo led her away by the hand, never once looking back.

"Where to, then?" she asked. "You mentioned supplies..."

"Oh, not far... It's just on the way, really." Kudo grinned down at her, pretending that his shoulder wasn't bothering him too much. She could tell because he was constantly adjusting his bag's strap. "We're just going to drop by the convenience store. What do you fancy for lunch?"

For all reply, she just shrugged. Ai didn't much care what she had for lunch. She just wanted to get back indoors already.

-xi-

"A hat..." He thought to himself. "A decent hat is all I need..."

Dressed in the salary man's clothes that he had ruthlessly acquired, Gin was now walking away from the abandoned warehouse where he had ditched his car. His hair, once long and luscious, was now short, dishevelled and still a mess. He'd changed the bandage in the car, so that it didn't look quite so dirty, but it still caused some undesired attention. He gritted his teeth. Maybe he'd find a decent one in a nearby convenience store, though he wasn't sure they'd be to his taste.

Luckily for him, convenience stores are a dime a dozen in Tokyo, so he did not have to walk all that far to find one that looked like it did the odd garment and accessories in addition to the usual food, throwaway entertainment and necessities. He squared his shoulders up and focused on getting the item he was after while attracting the least attention possible... This generally meant walking purposefully, not bumping into people, but also avoiding eye contact at all costs. The moment someone looked him in the eye, they would be able to remember him, and he didn't want that. He wanted in and out as quickly as possible.

Dodging a child with a backpack he barely glanced at twice, Gin strode through the automatic doors down through the snack food aisle to loiter a little in front of the magazine rack. Several other people were there already, examining the day's headlines or latest release, most of them students or stay at home moms by the look of things. Picking up a business review, the better to fit in, Gin enjoyed the luxury of glancing around the shop behind the anonymity of a stack of printed pages. No one ever looked twice at someone who was obviously engrossed in the printed media offerings of such a store, even if they looked worse for wear. At most, they'd remember the bandages, but never the

face, nor the clothes. Gin grinned. The hats were kept on a small circular rack two aisles down. The shop attendants were clearly being submerged by the lunchtime rush of local warehouse workers and office ladies dashing in for their quick fix lunch, and the aisle in question was fairly busy as well, a number of the shop's more weather-wary customers being after the disposable umbrellas right next to the hats and gloves.

Feigning disappointment in the contents of his magazine as he turned it over in his hand, he returned it to its rightful place in the shelves before strolling down the side aisle, looking deliberately disorientated at the junction near the hat rack, before heading for the exit, hands deep within his pockets and head down.

Gin didn't even allow himself the merest hint of a smile until he was well a block down from the shop, standing at a junction waiting for a yellow beetle to turn off before he could cross. With a smooth gentle motion, he pulled a black woollen hat out of his pocket. Child's play, he thought as he picked out the remains of a label tag. He hadn't shoplifted since his mid-teens, but clearly he still had the knack in him. The convenience store had been too small and busy for anyone to have been watching the security cameras too closely, and even then most employees would have just assumed one of the many hats had fallen to the floor, out of sight. All it took was a quick, deft hand at the opportune moment. With a satisfied grin, he pulled the hat down over his bandaged locks. Gin's resemblance now to a certain FBI agent wasn't lost on him. The boss may have died and Gin may well have lost his most loyal sidekick, car and colleagues to the events of that night, but he too would be reborn.

"Now..." he whispered to himself, his hand fondling the grip of the gun hidden beneath his jacket, "time to find Sherry."

-xi-

The local convenience store was bigger than most of the little corner shops bragging the title, but not so big as to be daunting. At its busiest rush hour, it only had room for the four cashiers, plus one or two self-service tills manned by an assistant. Currently only two of the tills were available, though a third cashier appeared to be getting ready to man another. Both self-service tills were out of service, with a message indicating that the shop was waiting for an engineer to come and fix them. The two cashiers on duty were regularly looking towards the entrance in the hopes that he would come soon and help them shrink down the queue... A dozen or so salary men and women were already lined up with their choice of juice, boxed lunch or supplies in hand. Unfortunately for the store's employees, the ones who entered the store then were none other than Shinichi Kudo and the little Ai Haibara.

Ai had a vague flash of recognition as she entered the store. She could remember being there, pulling along the professor as he held out a shopping basket, ready for her to deposit various vegetables in as he eyed the red meats and sweets with envy. She couldn't recall much more than that, but as she and Shinichi walked past the fresh fruit to the sweetbreads section, Ai never felt that the shop was unfamiliar...

"Humph..." She thought with a shrug. "Maybe it is just that all convenience stores look the same."

It didn't stop her from thinking fondly of the professor who had taken her in. She couldn't help but worry about the circumstances which had led to the old man leaving his own home in such a huff, all of which had led to her being in this outlet, dragged along by the strange neighbour that never spoke to her like a child, and who was bringing her to stay elsewhere for the night without any stated reason whatsoever. Eyeing the teenage detective, she couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear



run down her spine. What if he... What if Kudo Shinichi wasn't what they all told her he was? What would happen if...

Something caught her eye, no, someone.

Turning her head sharply to look behind her, she stared at the people in the food-to-go aisle with them. A young, secondary school boy in uniform simply ignored her as he chewed his gum and checked his Smartphone while thumbing through the various sandwiches. An office lady nudged her glasses into place as she sorted through the contents of her wallet. More worrying was the man holding a can of iced coffee; tall with a flat cap pulled low on his lank-haired head, he wore a black turtle-neck jumper under a long flannel coat. He wasn't letting his eyes wander an inch away from Ai's temporary guardian. Noticing the small smirk forming on the stranger's face was enough to turn Ai's attention back to Shinichi. He didn't seem to have noticed the other man's interest in him, and was instead focussed on grabbing a couple of sweetbreads off the shelf seemingly at random. When she turned back to look at the strange man, he had already walked off, one hand in his pocket and can in the other. Maybe she was worrying too much. Her day hadn't really been peaceful so far. With a sigh she followed Shinichi around as he strolled over to the hygiene aisle to get some toothpaste.

Ai took a moment to observe this person she had found oddly familiar and foreign at the same time. He was handsome she could not deny that, even if he was showing signs of lack of sleep and recent weakness. His eyes darted around the shop intelligently, picking out not only the layout and the products he was after, but also the people. She could tell: he would smile at a toddler peering up to him, shake his head at the poorly dressed housewife putting a book in her trolley on how to save money when she walked past the more obvious bargains without a second glance. Sometimes he would look down to Ai with an enquiring glance followed by a melancholy smile as she pulled a quizzical face at him.

"Come on," Shinichi said at last. "Let's go pay for all this. Are you sure you're fine with the peanut-butter and jam atrocity?"

"Certain," Ai stated. She couldn't understand the detective's strange aversion to the sandwich when he'd come across it on the shelf. It was only upon Ai's exclamation that he'd even considered offering to buy it for her.

They joined the queue, debating various merits of their chosen fillings as they waited their turn. The self-service machines still weren't operational and the three cashiers were clearly doing their best to rush on their customers while maintaining the expected standard of service: welcoming smile, would you like a bag, it comes to this many yen and have a nice day. It was only between customers that the cashiers could get the time to breathe and let loose any stress. Shinichi couldn't help but observe their various habits and telltale gestures as he inched towards the front of the queue. The first cashier, a young man fresh out of school, was sweating obviously as he clumsily scanned the various items through. After bidding the latest customer goodbye, his hand would go straight for his pocket, pulling out a damp looking handkerchief to mop his forehead with. The second cashier was a tall young lady who would have been considered pretty if not for some painful looking scars above her eyebrows. She would flatten down her fringe to better hide it before her next customer arrived, putting on her best smile while nervously adjusting the top of her till as they put down their basket. The last cashier, the one looking the most frequently towards the door in the hopes of seeing the long awaited engineer, was a man nearing thirty with overly styled hair. He hardly seemed to go a minute or two without chewing his nails. It was as Shinichi and Ai started to walk towards his till that it happened... It was inevitable really.

The cashier chewed his thumbnail, gagged, coughed and then collapsed on the ground, his body convulsing before going unerringly still.

Ai just froze to the spot, her mind cataloguing all the symptoms, going through all the possibilities as to their cause. Shinichi ran forward to see if he could assist him, dropping his groceries on the spot. Before he even reached him he knew it was too late. It only took a sniff for him to decipher what had happened. As the screams rang out through the convenience store, both Ai and Shinichi whispered the name of the cause of death...

"Poison."

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Atsushi Mori smiled at what he was witnessing. It was a shame, really: the snuffing out of a young life in front of dozens of everyday citizens, children and elderly alike. A sudden, traumatising death, bringing everyone's daily schedule to a halt as a high school student prevented anyone from leaving until the police and possibly paramedics had arrived. Having gotten the shop's staff on board, he actually achieved that. Atsushi was impressed. There was plenty of drama and scandalised customers, followed by the displayed proficiency of what he presumed to be a teenage detective genius. Really all the ingredients needed for the perfect Memento Mori story.

He couldn't help but let loose a chuckle. He'd been behind the detective in the queue, bidding his time. He had been right to message his colleague from the office when he had. Atsushi had forgotten to take his gear with him, and upon seeing the young detective in store, had got a flash of the perfect headline: Return of Teen Sleuth. Taking off his cap, he grinned, signalling to his usual partner in crime who had barely got in before the doors had been shut. Leaving behind his would-be purchases, lunch could wait till after the scoop, Atsushi took three strides towards the crime scene.

Whizz, flash, snap, the perfect shot. A dead body, lying, hands clasped painfully around the throat of an otherwise handsome man. His face was obscured by the subject of the photography, the detective's own head only not quite hiding the studied locks or sharp chin of the victim. The detective himself was fully focussed on the unfortunate fellow's hands, sleeves, pockets... He hadn't noticed the photographer until it was too late. Nor did he seem to notice the little girl beside him, hand clutching at his sleeve as Shinichi Kudo's bag lay at her feet. She had turned to face Atsushi and the cameraman just in time for him to capture her look of puzzlement and fear. This was the story that was going to shape Atsushi's career.

"Shinichi Kudo... I heard you were dead!"

Upon hearing his name, the teenager swivelled to look at the reporter, his eyes wide with apprehension before narrowing as he seemed to recognise him. Atsushi wasn't sure how though. Maybe the boy had heard of him from his friend, the girl who had solved that case in the mountains involving the primary school teachers... Ran Mouri, the sleeping detective's daughter.

"You... You're a reporter."

"Yes, I am." Atsushi grinned. "Atsushi Mori, freelance reporter, it is nice to meet you at long last. Mind if I cover this story?"

"I..." Kudo stuttered and the auburn-haired child behind him tightened her grasp of his top as she hid behind him. The boy looked as though he were caught in the headlights of an oncoming van. "I don't..."

Whatever the once rising star had been about to say, it got drowned in the commotion from the door, as the remaining two cashiers were forced to enrol the assistance of the only available shelf stockist to prevent upset customers from leaving the premises. The police had just arrived, and a disgruntled police inspector was leading the charge into the building. Wearing a skirt and suit jacket ensemble, the woman known as Miwako Sato whipped out her ID as she approached the huddle by the body. A bespectacled and bedraggled paramedic stumbled along beside her, glancing nervously at the small crowd of onlookers as he knelt to examine the victim... Her glares as she took in Shinichi Kudo, the little Ai Haibara and Atsushi Mori along with his photographer put a stop to any conversation. This was to be strictly business...

Atsushi vaguely remembered having encountered her before. From what he could tell, she was looking royally peeved.

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Miwako Sato was not having a good day. She had had an argument with Takagi first thing in the morning, brought on by Yumi who had teased her about a date that had, in fact, not happened. That was because mister Takagi had been roped in to help the night prior with Megure's investigation at the last minute. Said investigation was another sore point with her as, upon seeing the FBI agents get involved, Megure had chosen to dismiss her from it while keeping Takagi on... And Takagi was forbidden to share any intelligence on it with her until the case was closed. All this while she was relegated to clearing up the other more mundane cases showing up while the big boys got to have fun with the important one... And from what Shiratori had squeaked out upon her questionings, it was a big case indeed – with more than one or two bigwigs involved.

She was seething at having been kicked out of the case, even more so when Megure, a man she looked up to nearly as much as she once did her father, had explained that it was for her own protection. If anyone ever needed protection, it wasn't her, but Takagi! All she longed to do was to go vent her frustration in the firing range... The murder-inclined population of Tokyo seemed to disagree with the mere thought. She had found herself with case after case of homicides to solve, while all the other inspectors in the division seemed to have been mysteriously roped into some unnamed task. Her anger was fuelling her intellect to go into overdrive and she was solving one murder after another in no time, barely giving her associates the chance to breathe. This did not help her blow off steam though, and when she came across Shinichi Kudo, well, let's just say that she was not in the most charitable of moods.

She had remained professional of course, and, having only ever witnessed Shinichi Kudo at work once before, she let him help out through sheer curiosity. It didn't stop her thinking back to that day she and Takagi had come across Conan's glasses hiding in the mud amongst the craters left by a frightful explosion. Nor did she forget that he had surprisingly proven to be quite unhelpful in the follow-up inquiries. She still had some ways of making Wataru talk, thankfully... Observing Kudo did help her make her own mind up on what she currently thought of the teenage detective. He seemed a lot more subdued, distracted even, than the boy she recalled having met, and whose reputation preceded him. It struck her as she watched him question the witnesses, round up the suspects along her, that maybe, just maybe...

Yes, she thought as she saw Kudo glance warily at the reporter... What was his name already, the one she considered a pest at the best of times? She was certain of it as the student put his hand protectively around young Ai's shoulders, keeping her away from the lens of the camera. Whatever had occurred on the night of that explosion, it had frightened Kudo more than anything he had encountered before. Which, considering his portfolio of solved cases, must have been frightening

indeed.

"So..." Sato said, as the case was narrowing down. "We've wound it down to these three suspects... The lady that the boy, Shingo Tsukino, twelve, witnessed arguing with the victim, namely Chiyoko Kawashima, fifty-eight. Upon the death of Jouji Shibue, twenty-nine, she was found outside sipping a freshly bought cup of coffee. Then there is the man that Jouji Shibue was serving before he collapsed, who it turns out taught him at university before being stripped of his position, Souichi Tomoe, sixty-six years old. Lastly we have his ex-girlfriend, Masako Katsuki, thirty, who dropped him off, only to return shortly after to give him his keys, three short minutes before he collapsed."

"Yes," replied Shinichi Kudo. "These three all approached him within five minutes of his death, and are the only ones with any form of motive, or indeed any connection with Shibue outside of this shop."

"That might be the case, Detective," interrupted Astushi Mori. Sato shot the newspaper journalist a glare. "But that doesn't rule out a disgruntled customer, or a random killing by a mass murderer."

"No, but these three are the most suspicious never the less."

"Yes," agreed Sato, somewhat grating at jumping to the teenager's defence. It irked her that the swift and professional manner in which he had led this investigation, despite being lacklustre and distracted, caused her to blush in admiration uncontrollably. "These three are the ones with the most suspicious behaviour..."

"Indeed. Ms Kawashima deliberately chose to go to Shibue's till, letting other customers pass in front of her, despite having only spoken to the victim ten minutes before hand, as he was about to go on shift. She parted with him on poor terms no less. Why would she seek him out then, when she could easily use another cashier?" Turning to face the suspect in question, Kudo asked her directly. "What do you have to say to this, Ms Kawashima?"

Flustered by the young detective his direct manner and accusing tone Chiyoko Kawashima's hand fluttered to her breast as she looked away before answering his question.

"I simply thought of another thing I needed to say to him while shopping... I didn't want to leave without having told him how I felt."

"And you are still refusing to tell us what it was you were arguing about?" Sato couldn't help but pipe in. She was the one in charge after all. "This is despite the fact that your unwillingness to cooperate can cause you prejudice?"

The elderly woman stayed stubbornly mute. Astushi Mori's smirk was hammering another nail into any of Sato's hopes for a good mood.

"As for you, Mister Souichi Tomoe," Sato turned onto the next suspect who cowered before her crossed-armed stare. "You seemed to think it was perfectly acceptable to shout at the man as he served you, calling him an incompetent among other, ruder names, and you were grabbing at his till!"

"The boy was a thieving scumbag..." The elderly gentleman adjusted his glasses as he leaned backwards. The demoted professor clearly had no wish to use a gentler term. "Always has been... He tried to rob me of half my change!"

"And that is completely unrelated to the fact that he exposed you for fraudulent transactions at the

University of Tokyo eight years ago."

Clamming up instantly at Kudo's remark, Souichi Tomoe merely quipped. "I think you'll find the investigations thereafter were inconclusive."

"You still lost your job over that whole affair." Sato pointed out, before looking to the last suspect. "Miss Katsuki, I understand that you and the victim only recently broke up, but did you really drop him off here voluntarily, before fetching him his keys? After having had such a falling out with him as we have been described?"

Masako Katsuki, a woman with the looks of a top model and the pride of a lion hardly let anything slip through her composure. One could only read her concealed fury through the iron infused into her eyes and the whiteness of the knuckles with which she held onto her purse-strap.

"Jouji and I have a... complicated relationship at the best of times. Besides, we shared a flat... At least until today." A sigh escaped from the woman's lips. "If I was dropping him off, it was to avoid making him late on my account. Goodness knows he blames me for enough things already. I... He helped me move flat this morning, at short notice. As for the keys, well, they were his to begin with. I was returning the copies he had given me."

"So it was you that chose to break up with him, not the other way around?" Kudo was asking this with the most innocent expression in the world. "Mind if we ask why?"

A little surprised by the question, Masako Katsuki took a moment to think through her answer. "I found someone else. As simple as that."

"This someone else... Would it be their flat that you've moved into? Do they have any known connection to the victim?"

The answer came sharp and harsh. "I would rather my partner not be brought into this, thank you very much."

"Anyway," the old man piped up, "how do you even picture us as suspects when you can't even find the weapon of the crime? The boy died of poisoning right? Did you even consider that it might be suicide?"

"Jouji would never consider suicide!" His ex-girlfriend butted in.

"I'm with mister Tomoe on this." The older woman, Chiyoko Kawashima had her hands on her hips as she advanced on Sato with the air of a rather frightening matron. "If you can't even tell us how any of us could have committed such a crime, then asking us these questions is a waste of time."

Irked, but remaining calm, Sato sighed and turned to Shinichi Kudo. She let her body language do the talking, really. Come on, Detective genius. Tell us how it was done. Show us that you are still the saviour of the Japanese Police force as they always claimed you to be.

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It was strange how right, how comfortable this feels, thought Ai. There she was, a child, caught in the middle of a crime investigation, clinging to the leg of a young man still in his school's blazer. A greasy haired journalist spied on proceedings as an angry looking police woman led the interrogations and processing of evidence. Most of the other customers had been allowed out after

Miss Sato's officers had taken down their contact details. A sign was put on the door to prevent any new customers from entering while police work took place. Ai didn't feel any fear, any sense of alienation from all the proceedings. She just seemed to enjoy, what was it, cataloguing the various elements? She noticed that she was analysing every word that was said, trying to find links in between the turn of events and possible causes. Most of all, she was enjoying watching the teenager with her do the exact same thing.

It was like discovering a completely new person: a person who wasn't some stranger, but a close friend, a person that she could rely on to surprise her, to charm her with his childlike focus and enthusiasm as he decorticated every aspect of the case. Traces of the poison, cyanide had been found on the victim's left hand, right index finger and till. They had also been found along the bottom of his shirt, and on one or two of the shopping bags he had handed out to customers. Nowhere had they found the source of these traces though - every instance of the toxins being in the shape of a handprint. Naturally, there were signs that he had ingested the poison directly, rather than breathed it in or been administered it via needle. As Shinichi worked through all this evidence, Ai could see the cogs turning, his hands mimicking slight gestures as he pictured them in his mind. She could see the corner of his lips twitching as things seemed to take on a recognisable shape for him, as she could see him connect the dots in this invisible puzzle.

Ai loved every single second of it.

As Shinichi was once again going through the contents of the victim's pockets: keys, loose change and cash, ID card and mobile phone, something twiggged at Ai's memory... Something recent.

"That reminds me..." She whispered into his ear as he was crouched down at her level checking Jouji Shibue's sleeves. "That woman, Ms Kawashima, she was in the same aisle as us while we were choosing our sandwiches, wasn't she?"

"Yes. So, what of it?" Kudo asked, raising his eyebrow at Ai's sudden involvement in the case. She had spent most of the last hour just observing as the investigation took place. "The boy Shingo said the same, as did the reporter..."

"It's probably nothing but it just struck me as odd..." She paused as she saw Kudo turn to face her with an expression both puzzled and expectant. "Her wallet... She had it out from her purse and was looking through the banknotes. It was clear that she had plenty to cover her purchase of lunch and a coffee, but... I recall seeing her flick between the notes, and there seemed to be a bit of paper or plastic between some of them."

"Really now? Thanks Haibara... That is very useful." And sporting the first true smile she'd seen on his face, he rubbed his chin in careful consideration of some obscure theory only he seemed to perceive.

Ai smiled too. She liked the way he had smiled, loved the way he made her name seem natural and unlike that of some stranger. The thought struck her that she'd enjoy watching him solve crimes all day, no matter how grisly or sordid the case. Despite being in amongst dozens of strangers, with the evidence of death so close to her feet and nothing approximating comfort... She felt at home.

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Yes, he thought, it all makes sense now.

Shinichi Kudo stood up to his full height, adjusting his thin jacket over his uniform. His travel bag

lay at his feet, Haibara looking up to him as she limply held onto its strap. He had nearly forgotten the heady rush of solving a case, the euphoria of being the one to figure out the whole truth, of finding both evidence and method that would allow him to single out the murderer for what they were. He remembered the many tastes of victory and joy that his hunt for truth had given him, from his first reading of Sherlock Holmes where he had matched his idol's reasoning to the day he had managed to figure out at long last who the leader of the black organisation was. How could he have ever thought of giving it all up?

"Inspector Sato! I've figured it out. I know who the killer is..."

"Really, Kudo?" The police woman asked. Miwako Sato regarded him with a slight frown but an expectant gleam to her eyes. She swept her arms across the three suspects as the shop staff gathered around expectantly. "Who is it then?"

"The criminal..." The teenage detective began slowly, letting his bangs cover his eyes dramatically as he slowly lifted his arm. The cameraman was taking multiple shots, but he no longer cared. Although he was no longer the fame hungry boy he was before he got shrunk, and knew in the back of his mind that it still wasn't quite yet safe for him to show himself to the world, he was too intent on delivering the truth of the case to think of anything else. His sole focus was the criminal standing before him, the one that he fully intended to bring to justice.

"Is no other than..." A jolt of pain ran through his right arm as he straightened it out, getting ready to flick the wrist of his accusing hand up. He ignored it, merely clenching his jaw as a result.

"You." The index finger was up now, pointing directly at a specific suspect. Gasps came from within the immediate vicinity as the person in question recoiled from the simple gesture.

"You are the one, Ms Chiyoko Kawashima."

Teenage detective Shinichi Kudo, saviour of the Japanese police, had well and truly returned.

It was an accumulation of things that led to Masako Katsuki leaving Jouji Shibue. The young man, with his pampered looks and self-absorbed personality probably hadn't been aware of half of them when he died. As far as he was concerned, his Masako had been swept off her feet by a girly looking chap with too much money. At least she had the decency to be civil about it, even after he had sabotaged her wardrobe.

He never had an inkling that she had found his diary of misdeeds.

Appalled by the illegal nature of his entries, and the absurd detail he'd gone to in some of them, Masako had simply seen the true face of the one she had thought of as, until then, a mere thrill-seeker addicted to extreme sports.

She kept quiet on the principle that what goes around comes around. Thankfully, he hadn't targeted her as far as she could tell, or she would have reconsidered.

Little did she know of the comeuppance awaiting him.

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## **- Chapter 12: Retaliation.-**

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No, he thought, this was a terrible idea. Blushing furiously, trying in vain to stay rooted to the spot, Eisuke knew that this was not going to end well.

"Ran," he said sharply, as the young girl pulled at his wrist. "I just told you that a very bad man is after me. Do you realise how dangerous it is for you to bring me here?!"

"I don't see what's wrong with it... It's a busy part of town, we've got good curtains and sturdy locks on the door. Besides, my dad has had police officers in quite frequently these past few days."

Rolling his eyes, Eisuke let his glasses slide slightly down his nose the better to peer over the rim at her.

"What makes you think that's not going to cause you more danger? I will not have you get hurt because of me."

"And unless you can think of a better place to stay, I am not going to let you slum it on the streets." The iron in the karate-champion's voice and the determination in her eyes left no room for argument.

Still, Eisuke could not allow himself to surrender that easily. This was the woman he loved. Even if the sentiment was not returned, he would not let her get harmed because of him.

"Ran..."

"I'm not asking you to trust or tell the police anything... Nor my dad. I... I just want to know that I can help you stay safe, if only for a little while. I don't want you to be alone." At this, Ran let go of his wrist. Hair fluttering slightly in the cold breeze as she took the first step up to the agency, she half turned away from him as she continued on, a sad smile on her face. "Besides, you look like you



could use some cheering up."

Defeated, Eisuke stood for a moment, hesitantly looking up to her. The young man could think of nothing to retort, nor any argument against. It struck a chord within him, and he could not help thinking of his sister and his father. Both lost to a fight they barely gave him a chance to learn about, let alone distract them from. If he were in Ran's place...

"Fine..." He chuckled as he fought against the dampness in his eyes. "You win."

He trotted up after her, only half tripping on a step or two. He could never ever doubt the kindness of Ran's heart.

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Ms Chiyoko Kawashima stared blankly at the accusing finger pointing to her. The other two suspects stepped away from her, eyeing her warily. Masako Katsuki, the deceased's ex-girlfriend seemed somewhat unconvinced. Souichi Tomoe, the elderly ex-school lecturer, looked as though he understood the accusation to be a fact, and was ready to say that he'd known all along, he'd have you know...

"What makes you say that?" The reporter, Atsushi Mori asked of Shinichi Kudo. His pen was hovering above his notepad, ready to jot everything down. "Have you figured out the method used to kill our unfortunate cashier, Jouji Shibue?" He smiled, eyes eager.

"Indeed I have." Shinichi stood with his back against the victim's till, a triumphant smile on his face. He appeared relaxed, but not complacent. "Our culprit merely took advantage of one of mister Shibue's nervous habits."

Miss Katsuki, seemingly understanding what the young sleuth was implying, covered her mouth to prevent a small gasp from escaping. Ai, however, was more interested in observing the accused elderly woman. Ms Kawashima did not bat an eyelid, nor did she flinch. She merely watched through her spectacles, unmoved, resigned. A shiver made itself felt along the top of Ai's spine.

"Which habit?" asked Inspector Sato, curiosity etched upon her features. Her arms were crossed as she supervised the proceedings.

"I was watching him a bit while we were queuing." Shinichi explained. "He was chewing his fingernails quite frequently."

"He was?" Sato turned to the cashier currently in charge of the convenience store, the young woman with the scarred forehead who seemed to be wishing she had never gone for the deputy manager position.

"Shibue has been known to do that a lot yes. Goodness knows our manager tried to make him lose that habit."

"Even foul-tasting clear nail polish never made him quit." His ex-girlfriend added quietly. She was looking at the body lying on the floor, head low.

Atsushi Mori chuckled. The newspaper reporter asked the obvious question.

"So you're saying that Ms Kawashima here managed to coat his fingers with poison, in front of a

busy queue of customers during rush hour. Excuse me if I demand how?"

"The reporter's right," Sato said, eyebrow arched. "We've checked everything he would be likely to touch while interacting with all three, from till money, to his keys, even the suspects' purchases. We only found traces at best, not enough to be guaranteed to coat his fingers."

Chiyoko Kawashima no longer looked demure. She was now looking at Shinichi with eyes as sharp as daggers, assessing, anticipating...

"Mister Tomoe wasn't wrong when he accused Shibue of being a thief." Shinichi went on. The lecturer looked somewhat pleased at being vindicated, though confused by why this was being brought up. Miss Katsuki snapped her head up, eyes wide. Obviously she knew what the detective was implying.

"For us to not have found the murder device is quite simple really..."

Kneeling down while pulling a glove onto his hand, Shinichi Kudo deftly snapped up the crumpled note among the victim's change that had been in his pocket.

"The victim put it somewhere he shouldn't have."

"I knew it!" the younger cashier exclaimed, as he pointed at the deceased. "I told you I wasn't counting up my till wrong!"

"Oh Jouji..." The disappointment in Masako Katsuki's face said it all. She cast one last, cold and pitiful gaze at the deceased, before turning away.

As Sato asked the technician to confirm whether the note was indeed coated in poison, Ai's eyes grew wide as she watched Chiyoko Kawashima. Though her guilt had not yet been proven, she now seemed to sport an almost serene expression on her face.

To Ai Haibara, this bade ill. She wasn't quite certain why, but as she looked on, she could feel some thought, some vague recollection telling her that such a reaction was wrong.

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It wasn't hard for Gin, once his wounds had been hidden beneath a woolly hat and proper clothing, to slip into the crowd unnoticed. It was a little tiresome not being able to impose on fellow pedestrians at a glance, but he felt that this was a worthy compromise for feeling under the weather as he was and still having the ability to remain unremarkable. His injury was smarting again. His head felt a little woozy too. It was, he decided, time to invest in some more bandages and cigarettes. He could kill for a whiff of tobacco. This time he did not bother with the sleight of hand. He walked into a pharmacy, bought what he needed for the next couple of days to keep himself right, and then went to make himself comfortable in a small eatery where he could sit comfortably at the back, smoke and plan.

There were, he decided, too many of his adversaries who had shown a recent tendency to come back from the dead. The elusive Shuichi Akai, whose death at the hands of the mole Kir he had so deliciously orchestrated and observed was clearly an opponent worthy of the nickname silver bullet. When Rena Mizunashi's failings had been uncovered the month prior thanks to the young fool Bourbon, Gin hadn't so much minded being unpleasantly surprised. It had just proven that Akai was worthy of playing against him on a level footing. Kir's execution had been nothing more than a

petty retaliation, as far as Gin was concerned. Sherry's reappearance, on the other hand, he had been both delighted and astounded by. He had always secretly hoped that Vermouth had failed in killing the girl, if only because she had denied him the pleasure of seeing the fireworks in person. He had suspected that Bourbon, the soft touch that he was, would have had some hand in her surviving if it had occurred at all. He had never suspected that she might have survived by hiding in the body of a child.

Proof, if ever there was, that Sherry was her parents rightful successor in the domain of drug making.

Shinichi Kudo, on the other hand...

Gin scowled darkly at the glass of fortified wine before him. Gritting his teeth, he pulled towards him the daily paper he had just bought. He barely recalled having ever dealt with the boy before, but he knew it to be true. He had recognised the insolence with which the boy had put forth his deductions that fateful night. Vodka had gasped loudly upon hearing the twerp's name. All Gin could manage to conjure up from the depths of his mind was an impression of the teenage sleuth, in the dark, black blood spilling down his forehead as he force-fed him one of Sherry's damned pills.

The paper had a small article on the death of one of Tokyo's greatest men. The police had only now released information that his body had been one of the several found at the site of an explosion in the mountains. No explanation had yet been given, investigations were still underway. Unwritten was the fact that the head of the black organisation was officially no more...

Curse that woman, he thought. I am going to find her and make her wish she had never been born.

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"What is it that makes you say that Ms Kawashima is the culprit?" Miwako Sato's voice rang out clear and true. "From what you have shown us, any one of the three suspects could have given him that bank note."

Shinichi nodded solemnly. He had been expecting that query. The small crowd gathered around him peered at him attentively, Atsushi Mori, the reporter, most of all.

"As I said, the execution of this trick required good knowledge of the victim's habits. This would make Miss Katsuki the most obvious suspect, however the act of returning his keys to the victim was always bound to lead the police to her in any following inquiries." Shinichi smiled at Miss Katsuki's glower. "As for mister Tomoe, the act of calling mister Shibue out on his more dishonest habit of robbing people, at the risk of making a scene, would only point more clearly to the nature of the item used to poison the victim." Mister Tomoe nodded happily at the teenager's conclusion. "This by no means makes either of them determinedly innocent of the crime, however..."

Stepping forward towards the accused Chiyoko Kawashima, the high-school student extended out a gloved hand towards the elderly woman. Eyeing his palm with quiet distaste, she waited for him to continue, arms tightly held across her breast, knuckles whitening on the strap of her handbag.

"Ms Kawashima, let us save you the embarrassment of a search. Would you please hand over your wallet as evidence?"

A quiet sigh escaped her lips as, defeated, she hang her head in shame and proffered the object requested. The other two suspects gasped as Shinichi deftly pulled out two wafer-thin sheets from

which drifted the remains of a poisonous powder.

"But this doesn't tell us why Ms Kawashima would have committed this crime. What motive could she possibly have had?" The reporter queried as he pushed up his cap to a jaunty angle.

"Hah!" Mister Tomoe interjected derisively. "I bet young Shibue did a number on her career as well. I've seen her working in the temping agency across the road. I'd heard that the young fool had been seeking out assignments there... Never would I have thought..."

"No," the elderly woman replied, her voice as soft and quiet as an autumn's breeze. "It was not about my job."

Raising her head once more to lock eyes with the detective that had uncovered her deed, Chiyoko Kawashima made abstraction of all the others in the room to speak to him and him alone.

"I had a beautiful grand-daughter. A little addled in the head, mind you, and frail of health, but with a heart of gold the likes you never would have seen." She held her hand to her chest, as if trying to recapture a feeling now gone. "Her parents both work hard at their jobs, to pay the medical bills. Little Emi wasn't allowed to school, for fear of a fit, so she needed carers to look after her. I would provide myself, when I had the time. When I was at the office, I always made a point to choose which carers my agency would send to her side personally."

Shinichi listened quietly as inspector Sato ordered the technicians to get the wallet and papers checked. He kept an eagle eye on Ms Kawashima's hands.

"Jouji Shibue came along, telling stories of great honesty and putting others before himself. His references were hard to get a hold of, but seemed to corroborate with his presentation. I took him on, if only because I thought his tendency to bite his nails was a symptom of a sensitive mind, one likely to accommodate my little Emi's worries."

A pause came, as the elderly office lady seemed to revisit these memories with great regret. Her tone shifted, no longer that of a simple and factual confession, but to that of a heart-broken parent. Her breaths were short, her cheeks became flushed.

"We soon found out that Emi's parents had been robbed. Someone had hacked into their bank accounts, stealing all their savings which were swiftly withdrawn. The bank was at a loss as to how they had done it, and as a result, Emi's health seemed to quickly deteriorate." A cruel edge came into her voice now. No compassion or sadness, just anger. "It took me days to get to the bottom of Emi's anxieties, to realise just why she had taken the whole thing so much to heart. When Jouji Shibue had come on shift, he had not only delved into my son's private papers himself, despite Emi's protestations, he had also locked her up in a cupboard so that he might raid the house in peace. She was so traumatized by the ordeal that no one could get a straight story out of her. Her parents would not believe her when she said it was the carer, putting it down as an attempt to seek their attentions."

Shinichi noticed that the young woman, the victim's ex-girlfriend Masako Katsuki, had eyes as wide as saucers upon hearing this part of the tale. She was gripping her own handbag strap awfully close to her throat as she processed what it was she was hearing.

"Need I say that by this point, Emi was so ill with worry and self-doubt, she died of her condition? Because of the callousness of this man?" The bereaved grand-mother pointed sharply at the corpse before them. "Afterwards, full of grief, I decided to check up on his references. They proved to be

fake, sent by proxies that he had set up himself. Naturally I'd already fired him from the agency at this point, but my manager was dissatisfied. He said he was being threatened by this young fool with lawsuits for unfair termination of contract and defamation of character. He was pinning the fault on me, calling me doddering in my old age. Ha!"

At this, Chiyoko Kawashima pulled a handkerchief out of her coat pocket, ready to wipe a tear from her eye.

"He didn't believe what I'd learnt from my Emi either, nor did my fickle son. It's probably for the best though... They won't miss an addled old cow."

"Don't!"

Chiyoko Kawashima froze as the little voice came from her hip. In shock, she turned to the little girl standing there, eyes focussed on her handkerchief.

"What would little Emi say?" Shinichi stared, astounded, as he watched Ai do with mere words what he'd been prepared to do by manhandling the poor woman.

The culprit dropped her handkerchief and the sachet of poison it contained. She dropped to her knees and cried all the tears she had been holding in. Rocking back and forth as inspector Sato clasped the iron bracelets upon her wrists, all she could see was a little girl, eyes big in wonder at the world, just wanting to be let in.

"Come," Shinichi whispered to Ai as he picked up his sack. "We'll have to do without the shopping I'm afraid." Nodding silently, she allowed him to pick her up. He put up her hood as she held onto his neck. The reporter and his photographer were busy taking photos of the culprit that Sato was trying to console. Now was Shinichi's chance to leave without the eye of the press following him. With the mystery now solved, Gin's shadow was bigger than ever in his mind.

It wasn't to be though... As he slipped through the doors that the younger cashier inched open for him, a dozen flashes dazed him from the street. Cursing the technology that had allowed such a gathering of reporters and journalists to camp out in front of the convenience store, Shinichi couldn't help but imagine how sordid they looked. His hood was up as well, as Ai's bandaged leg hang limply at his hip. She squinted from the shadow of her arm at the crowd, but Shinichi did not want to let them get any good photos in.

"Sorry! No comment!" he shouted at the few that seemed to recognise and call him by name. "Gotta run..."

Taking a detour through the back alleys, he ran hard until his legs ached and his lungs hurt. Dropping a concerned Ai to the floor, he breathed a word at her.

"Thanks..."

"What for?" she asked, puzzled and somewhat wary from the encounter with the photographers.

"For saving that woman's life." He grinned down at her, sweat and damp from the air dripping from his fringe. "Come, I'd better take you where we're headed."

Still somewhat confused and sad by what had occurred in the store, but feeling somewhat refreshed and more trusting than ever of the stranger called Shinichi Kudo, Ai nodded and followed in his

steps.

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The Detective Mouri agency never seemed to change, Ran reflected as she entered. The desk stood before the great big window panes, littered with mail, files and the rather recent addition of a computer with internet capacities. She had hoped to find her father there, backlit by the afternoon sun and autumn leaves drifting through the city's streets. He had left his little television on, obviously to record the latest Yoko Okino show. Switching it off, Ran was amused that a man so smart seemed to think that switching off the screen would prevent the program from being taped to VCR. Shyly following her in, Eisuke looked around the rest of the agency. The mellow nostalgia upon his features warmed Ran's heart. With how short a time the bespectacled teenager seemed to have spent in the area and how quick he could be in disappearing elsewhere, Ran had sometimes wondered if Eisuke Hondou treated his sojourn in Beika as a mere blip in his existence. She was glad that it was not so.

"Looks like Dad's not in yet..." she said quietly, upon finding a note near the phone. There were a couple of messages left on the answering machine, but none that needed urgent action. She left them lit up for her father to hear for himself. Pocketing the piece of paper with her father's untidy scrawl, Ran led Eisuke back out to the stairwell and led him up to the flat proper. He seemed a little nervous at the prospect, but smiled happily enough when she grinned at him.

Once in, she quickly showed him around the flat before making him a cup of coffee. More relaxed then she had seen him all day, now that he was in private and given a chance to relax, Eisuke smiled warmly up to her and said with heartfelt emphasis.

"Thanks."

"No worries..." A moment passed in content silence.

"So, what now?" Eisuke queried, once the fog from his drink had cleared from his glasses and the bottom of his cup was dry. Seeing him sat in the spot that until very recently had been allocated to a boy half his size made Ran's heart quiver.

She missed Conan terribly. It was strange, she thought, how much. The pang in her breast, the nights she had spent, lay awake, wondering, awaking from nightmares with a tear in her eye... When Shinichi had left town without a word, she had thought herself lovesick. Now, it made her reconsider...

"I..." Seeing Eisuke awaiting patiently her reply, Ran spoke tentatively. "I guess we just need to wait for my Dad to be back."

Family... She thought to herself. Conan had felt like family.

"I guess so..." Eisuke leaned back as he passed his mug from one hand to the other. "Say..."

Whatever he was going to ask next was lost in the sound of the doorbell to the flat. Springing to his haunches, ready to flee or hide should the person at the door prove to be a much unwelcomed stranger, Eisuke watched as Ran sighed and went to open the door, bemusement at Eisuke's reaction plain to see. He hadn't even noticed the mug he'd been holding fall to the mat below and crack, she chuckled to herself. It was only her dad after all...

"Welcome home!" she said, putting on her sweetest voice in preparation for a possibly difficult conversation whereby she would convince her father, the great Kogoro Mouri, to let her friend crash on his bedroom floor, with no explanations required.

However, it was not her father that stood there. Kicking herself for even thinking that he'd bother to use the bell when he had a key, she looked with mixed feelings at the one standing before her.

"Hi..."

Shifting awkwardly from one leg to the other, Shinichi Kudo scratched at his head in embarrassment. Holding onto his trouser leg was little Ai, one eyebrow arched as she observed the strange tension between the two childhood friends. Ran could not help but notice the travel bags upon their shoulders. Alarmed at the thought that Shinichi might now be leaving town, with a small amnesic child no less, Ran tried to ask with as little ice as possible in her voice their business.

"Ah, no," Shinichi was quick to rectify her misconception. With the most humble expression she'd ever seen on his face, he bowed his head down to her and explained. "I, we... Could the two of us possibly stay over at your place for a couple of nights? The professor's house and mine have been scheduled for some unavoidable maintenance work. Professor Agasa thought it might be better for Ai to stay with you than share hotel accommodation, seeing the nature of her condition."

The blank, emotionless stare Ran gave him in the long drawn out minute where she left him with his insides churning, would surely be retaliation enough for whatever fault he committed that morning... At least, that was what Shinichi hoped.

A cold slab of stone supported him as he sat, his short hair fluttering in the breeze. No more hats, no more wigs, just Shuichi. He fought the urge to ask someone for a cigarette. He'd spent months undercover, going without. Akemi had always asked him to stop smoking. Now he had.

"Another bust..." he sighed. With a fed-up swing of his arm, he sent the message to his FBI colleagues. It wasn't a complete red-herring at least. They knew for certain that Gin's car had been parked up in the area for several days, badly scratched, drawing attention. The neighbours had sworn they'd seen an injured man go into that flat with the young boy that lived there. A handful of delivery men had confirmed dropping off supplies of both food and bandages to a nervous looking occupant. Now that they'd accessed the flat with the local police forces' aid, Shuichi Akai could confirm it one hundred percent.

Gin had been here. Only he'd just gone and found a new roof that was all.

With a smirk, the FBI agent stood back up. The chase was still on.

-0-

## **- Chapter 13: A new roof. -**

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It had been a long day, Ran reflected. Too much had happened, she needed time to think, to straighten out her thoughts. So she shut the door behind her as she went inside her room, pulled out the spare futon from the cupboard, and plonked herself down with a pencil and notepad. It was the one in which she usually worked out her homework. She wasn't all that convinced that it would help her sort her jumbled feelings. Still, she scribbled away, taking note of what had happened and trying to summarize her thoughts in short, easy to understand phrases.

First and foremost: Shinichi had found Eisuke.

She was happy about this. She hadn't expected him to appear so soon.

Second: Shinichi had once again been saved from explaining everything to her by circumstances.

Sometimes it felt to her as though the entire world conspired against her ever finding out where her childhood sweetheart had vanished off to. Sometimes it felt as though Shinichi did not want her to know. Why wouldn't he? As various ludicrous and terrifying thoughts came to mind, she found that she had scribbled over an entire page about this. With a frustrated sigh she tore the page out, crumpled it up and chucked it in the wastebasket, moving on...

Third: She had missed school in order to get Eisuke to explain his side of the story.

And explain he had. Eisuke had kept to the bare facts where he could, indicating when it were preferable that she ask Shinichi directly, but still, she had got a good idea of what had gone on, of why Eisuke had been missing for over a week, what had happened in the explosion that had injured Ai.

Shinichi faced off with a group of organised criminals. Ai and Eisuke were caught in the fallout. No idea why Ai was there, but Eisuke had been looking for answers as to his sister's supposed death.

Rena Mizunashi had been his sister - now presumed dead at the hands of the same crime syndicate.

One of the criminals had survived the blast. Eisuke had been forced at gun point to tend to his wounds for the past week. Now he had escaped, but was still in danger.

Ran circled the last word. Danger, the criminal was still free and dangerous. A thought occurred to her...

Four: Eisuke was offered to stay at hers. Shinichi brought Ai asking if they could stay too; the Kudo and Agasa houses being out of commission for repairs.

She had thought it a bit big to swallow, their houses needing to be vacated so suddenly; especially with the professor opting to stay in a hotel himself while Shinichi brought Ai to hers.

Maybe this was a good thing, she thought. This was more opportunity for her to figure out what exactly Shinichi was hiding and avoiding, to help Ai break out of her shell and shed the mask.

Whatever the reason for their stay, she was going to make good use of it.

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"So..." Shinichi Kudo said with uneasiness plain to see in every fidgeting move of his fingers and feet. "You're staying here as well?"



Ai turned her head to look at the other young man present. He looked tired, stressed, but overall friendly enough. She recognised him as the youth that Shinichi Kudo had been arguing with that same morning, when she had spied them from the professor's balcony.

"Ran sort of insisted..." The bespectacled teenager replied. He scratched his head, eyeing Ai with curiosity. "So... Your house is undergoing works?"

It would have been nice, Ai reflected, to have been told that was the case. The professor hadn't mentioned it, and Kudo only thought to speak of it in front of Ran, the girl whom he obviously had some feelings for. Ai felt certain that he would never have made such an apologetic request otherwise, though it did hint at something that she felt was odd. Had the two had a spat since they parted ways last night? They had got on so well during the meal at the professor's...

"Yeah," went the teenage detective, his hair falling around his eyes as he stared darkly into the other's face. Ai's eyebrows knitted up as she tried to figure out the strangeness in his body language. The houses being fixed up for dry rot wasn't, as far as she was aware, a laughing matter, but it didn't warrant such seriousness either. "Oh, about our conversation this morning, Hondou..."

So that was his name. Ai glanced at the young man with the round frames and girly hair. His eyes seemed alert at Shinichi's tone.

"Yes?" He asked.

"I hope we can continue it sometime, in private..." Shinichi said simply, standing up. The cushion he'd been sitting on shifted away as his long legs nearly collided with the table. "Ouch. I'll be right back, toilet..."

Both Ai and Hondou watched him saunter into the corridor Ran had disappeared into. Without a second's thought he turned left, clearly illustrating how long he'd been Ran's friend for. Ai idly wondered how often he'd visited the Mouri apartment and agency.

With a sigh, Eisuke Hondou leaned backwards and offered Ai a friendly smile.

"Hi, I'm Eisuke Hondou. It's nice to meet you."

"Oh." It took Ai a moment to realise that just as he hadn't been introduced properly to her, she hadn't been to him. She'd gotten used to the people around her somehow knowing her when she couldn't remember them.

"Ai Haibara," she answered simply.

"Ran's taking quite a while getting the spare bedding out..." Eisuke pondered out loud.

It was true. Ai could see that night was beginning to fall outside, streetlights and advertising banners filtering through the half-drawn blinds. The blinking light on the box beneath the television indicated that their host had been away a full ten minutes now.

"Maybe she's lost the blankets?"

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Kogoro Mouri swept the sweat off his brow as he left the Office Block in which he had been assisting a rather exhausted looking Takagi. It wasn't a warm day, but his perspiration was the result of the concentration and focus that had been required of him since the morning. Hunting down all the various incongruence in the paperwork of the criminal organisation that Kudo brat had stumbled upon was hard work. He muttered a few chosen swears under his breath as he dropped by the convenience store to grab a six-pack of beer and a few goods he thought Ran might appreciate. What with the number of hours he'd been aiding and was going to be expected to aid Inspector Megure for, his cash flow for the next two months promised to be quite sweet. Still, hidden among the pretences of a legitimate business had been several files full of horror. What little they had managed to see on the computers before a mysterious virus fail-safe wiped the contents before their eyes hinted at much more.

Girls kidnapped, ransomed, blackmailed and used. Guns not only made and sold but also used with deadly accuracy and frequency... Tenebrous programs, from the development of new poisons and bio-weapons to the more mundane but sophisticated manipulation of computerised systems in banks, corporations and government. This spider looked dang ugly.

Kogoro was going to need not only his beer, but also several reruns of his favourite Yoko Okino shows to help him sleep at ease that night.

Grabbing a sneaky pint at one of the bars down the road from his place, he watched the sun set upon Tokyo's busy streets as he loosened his tie. It was one of those rare moments where he would, without a fight, allow himself to fully experience the weight of responsibilities being an adult forced upon you. He had a family to protect; he had a role to play in society... He had a duty to serve the common good. Looking around him he wondered how many of the men and woman in the bar and walking past his window in the street were secretly one of "them". That woman in the black turtle-neck, was she a spy? Was she a killer? That old man with the black coat and white beard, his hat hiding his eyes as he sneaked in forty winks over his sake cup, was he a gun-totter or an evil scientist? Kogoro's determination with regards to the case grew stronger and harder as he watched a pair of young siblings, a boy and a girl, trot happily down the street chasing autumn leaves. His anger was getting colder and sharper by the second.

He'd found out that young Amuro had been one of them. His official assistant, a cheerful, generous and sometimes girly detective wannabe had turned out, at the mere age of twenty-nine, to be one of "their" top agents, his codename appearing time and time again in the files where his deductions had served their nefarious purposes. Kogoro felt used, and could only hope for the younger man's sake that they never meet again. The fact that the organisation had even infiltrated his own life unbeknownst to him sent shivers crawling down his spine.

He worried about Ran the most... Not that he thought the young "Bourbon" would dream of sticking around now that Shiratori was heading a taskforce whose job it was to hunt down known members of the crime syndicate. No... He was worried because for Kudo to have survived such a confrontation with the very heads of the monstrous evil that had been uncovered, it meant the brat had been on their tail for a long time. Now that their operation was being slowly taken apart by the authorities, Kogoro, remembering his past as a police officer, knew full well what risks now loomed around the boy: Retaliation.

Checking his watch, Kogoro pulled up his trousers as he left his seat. It was about time for Ran to be home from school. As he came within sight of the agency he felt warm reassurance full his gut as he saw the light on in their apartment. Time to act as if he never had any worry in the world...

Letting the alcohol he had just imbibed flow from his undernourished stomach to his head, Kogoro started singing a little ditty about the easiness of some lady as colour flowed to his cheeks. Daddy was coming home...

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"So..." Shinichi said, as he nonchalantly leaned against the frame of Ran's bedroom door. His right hand was scratching the back of his head as it often did when he was feeling slightly awkward. "Are we friends again?"

He noticed the touch of pink colouring Ran's cheeks as he surprised her. He'd known it had taken an awful long time for her to do the preparations she'd mentioned, and though he'd enjoyed the tea she'd made them and was keen to talk with Hondou in private, Shinichi knew full well where his priorities lay.

She was, as she had declared, unfolding a futon onto her bedroom floor. A spare one lay next to her, still folded up, obviously ready to go on her father's bedroom floor once his approval had been gained. The cupboard they'd been stored in was still ajar. Shinichi couldn't help but feel slightly disorientated at the different perspective he now had of its contents. Goodness he'd been short as Conan...

It was obvious that Ran had only just got around to setting up. Shinichi had deliberately gone the wrong way down the corridor, not needing the bathroom in the slightest. One glance had been enough to tell him that Ran had been truly upset by his behaviour that morning, but she refused to talk about it. Instead she had pandered to Haibara, given a cautious "let me think it over... Yes, so long as Dad agrees. It should be fine for Ai though!" and then avoided eye-contact as she gave them tea and tried to talk of the weather. When it became obvious that she could avoid the topic no longer, she'd escaped to her room on pretence of domestic necessities.

Oh Ran... he thought.

She was pretty, kneeling on the futon as she smoothed the blanket down. It reminded him of a time

when they were kids, play-acting valiant kings and fair queens in a far off land. She had frozen then too, embarrassment overcoming her as her mother had interrupted, demanding her daughter to put that futon away and hauling Shinichi off the top of the table by the ear. They'd only been setting up a stage for a duel, soft wooden swords at the ready. Amusement at the memory gave Shinichi a fond smirk. Things had been so innocent and simple back then. No awkward hidden meanings or secrets then.

"Of a sort," Ran replied at a long last. She finished straightening the blanket and fluffing the pillow before rising to sit on her own bed. As their gaze crossed, Shinichi felt a terrible pang in his heart. Disappointment, deeper than he'd seen when, having turned back into Conan, he'd had to tell Ran that "Shinichi had to go off on an urgent call". A lack of emotion even more worrying than the tears she had shed when they'd "met" in London. Concern taking over his features, Shinichi took a few hesitant steps into the room, his hands held awkwardly at his sides.

"Ran, I..." He didn't get a chance to continue.

"Listen," Ran interrupted. "I know full well that being a detective means everything to you. I know that this case that's had you away so long has been tricky, and that you've never really wanted to tell me anything about it."

"That's not true Ran!"

"I'm not finished! What I'm saying is that I know all this... I understand. I... I care for you Shinichi; you know that well enough I am sure..." At this, the two of them felt their cheeks warm considerably. Ran lifted her chin the better to look Shinichi in the eye as she continued. "I'm just so tired. I am fed up of waiting. I am sick of the broken promises, the lies and things left unsaid. I don't want to worry anymore, or be left behind without an explanation."

Kneeling in front of her, Shinichi whispered her name as he reached for her hand. She was crying again. She could feel the tears running along her nose. Seeing Shinichi's face peer up at her, the spitting image of a young boy now returned to his parents, she couldn't help but chuckle.

"We're not children anymore, Shinichi. I can take the truth. If that means you telling me that you'll never be up to explaining things to me, so be it. Just don't expect me to be happy about it, okay?"

With a frown, Shinichi grasped her fingers tightly within his. When he replied, it was with earnestness in his voice that she hadn't heard in a long time.

"Because you think I'm happy, hiding all of this from you? Ran, in the last twelve months, there hasn't been a single day where I haven't wanted to just turn around and tell you all. The only thing that has ever stopped me doing so has been the thought of what could happen to you if I did, if I failed. I..."

Ran felt a shiver run down her spine as she saw Shinichi's face take on an expression she would never have pictured there. Grief, all too similar to the despair she had seen upon his features when, soaked in blood and mud, he'd shown up with an unconscious child.

"Ran, to me, losing you would destroy my world."

Rendered mute by shock, Ran didn't quite know what to say. Just as she thought she had managed to get all her emotions in check, Shinichi just had to go and send them whirling wildly across the planes of her heart once more. Embarrassment colouring his ears, Shinichi averted his eyes as he stood up.

"Thanks for letting me stay, anyway... I'd better get back to the others." His demeanour wooden, he went to leave the room only to bang the top of his arm against the cupboard door. A gasp fluttered out from his lips as he crumbled to the floor, his face scrunched up in pain as he grabbed his shoulder.

Awkward declaration forgotten, Ran leaped to his side, motherly instinct at the ready to inspect the nature of the harm to his arm. He hadn't been swinging his arms wildly and the door wasn't sharply angled, so all that remained was...

"Ah..." Ran said, as she forcibly revealed the bandaging on Shinichi's shoulder. The teenage sleuth seemed somewhat pale as his childhood friend had tugged his collar to the side, unbuttoning part of his shirt and stretching his undershirt to the point where it must have been quite uncomfortable. The bandage was looking worse for wear, loose and bunched up it was doing a poor job of helping

the lacerated skin and bruised muscle underneath to heal.

"Oh Shinichi..." The detective's daughter whispered. "You never were good at bandaging your own wounds."

Their faces mere inches apart, Ran was acutely aware of Shinichi's every breath, gulp and wince. Shinichi, gulping air in hungrily as he tried to abstract away the pain, was being overwhelmed by her warmth, her scent. It was surprising that it took them that many seconds to take notice of each other's lips.

"I'm home!" The sound of footsteps, followed by the enthusiastic opening of the flat's door by a near forty year old man in a suit with a moustache was all it took to ruin the mood. The two high-school students looking contrite, Ran dragged Shinichi to the bathroom so that she could sort out his bandage for him before her dad could ask any awkward questions.

"It is official, Shinichi..." She muttered.

"What?" He quipped, visibly annoyed in turn.

"You have the worse luck."

"Tell me about it. Ouch!"

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All in all, Ai thought, this had turned out to be a very interesting day. Deftly using chopsticks to lift rice from her bowl, she watched as Ran and her father argued to vanquish the private detective's last reservations over having his bedroom floor space occupied by two teenagers. Two teenagers that had somehow at the same time found themselves in need of a roof and been offered to stay under his by his somewhat overly generous daughter. The fact that there didn't seem to be any pre-determined number to the nights they'd be crashing over didn't help. When asked, Hondou had only a blank look to offer and Kudo shrugged. Give Ran her due though, she was making short work of convincing her dad.

Ai had felt a hint of relief when she'd seen Kudo return from the bathroom, a contrite Ran in tow. The young neighbour of the professor's had been flexing his arm, pleasant surprise on his face as it moved up, down and around. It had taken Ai mere seconds to figure out that Ran must have helped him sort the bandaging on the arm that had been bothering him. It had also meant that the homeowner's confused glare that had been directed at Hondou and she had snapped away, thank goodness.

The awkwardness and cold anger between Kudo and Ran had vanished, leading to a much more natural looking request to Ran's father with regards to their stay there. Even Hondou, sensing that the storm had dissipated, had cheered up and relaxed noticeably, allowing for some conversation that Ai could sink into.

"Oh, that's right!" Kogoro Mouri stabbed the air with a prawn-wielding pair of sticks. "You're one of the brat's young friends."

After a tale of the detective's day, an administrative slog by the sound of it, and a short reminiscence about a murder case he'd solved a while back, Ai was somewhat surprised to be the new focus of the man.

"Huh?" was all that she could say. She wasn't quite sure which brat he was on about.

"How is the Conan kid doing, anyway? I'm guessing that his parents picked him up, but they could at least have let us know. It's been a week. You heard from him yet?" The moustachioed man's attitude seemed to betray little care for the child's actual wellbeing, but, Ai sensed, his apparent disinterest may have been partly for show.

"Dad!" Ran interjected as she filled up his bowl of soup. "Don't you remember? That's Ai that Shinichi brought in, as in the card I got you to sign?"

Hearing the teenage sleuth's name, Ai looked up to the young man sitting next to her. Shinichi Kudo was, fortunately perhaps, completely oblivious to the conversation around him. His head resting upon his breast, rice scattered upon his cheek and bowl merely resting upon inert fingers in his lap, he was obviously sound asleep. Ai also noticed Eisuke eyeing up his fellow absentee classmate. Uneasiness managed to make itself known to her in the form of an uncomfortable knot in her stomach.

"Oh..." Mouri senior's response sounded somewhat muted. "Oh yeah... You're looking a lot better." "Thanks?" Ai replied, unsure. She was greatly relieved when Eisuke managed to broach a new topic.

The innocent banter over a sweet she no longer felt the appetite for allowed her the opportunity to excuse herself from the table. Leaving the dozing Kudo, emphatic Hondou and chattering Mouris, Ai made her way to the room she'd been shown earlier where a futon awaited her on the floor. She stopped by the bathroom for her tablets and necessities. Her leg was starting to bother her from having sat at floor level for so long. She secretly hoped that the futon wouldn't prove to be too hard. Once in the room, she closed the door behind her and gave herself a minute of peace, just her alone. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes. The questions hadn't gone away. She was still afraid to find out who she really was, but she couldn't help wondering. All the evidence others had pointed out to her seemed to describe a fairly normal eight-year-old life. She shouldn't have anything to be afraid of in remembering... Yet there were little hints, small discrepancies that just kept cropping up. She felt nothing like the small innocent child they described. She knew that there were shivers sent up her spine by a fear other than the unknown, more primal. One that even amnesia couldn't wipe away.

Remembering about her nightmare and her outburst caused by that song on the radio, Ai gingerly felt for the heavy weight hidden under jumper. There was something both comforting and dangerous about it. Listening out in case the Mouri girl was coming to check on her, she pulled it out of her belt. The small revolver, with the word "imitation" written in small on the side, felt more familiar, more comfortable in her hand than it ever should have. What was more unsettling was that she felt she might just need it. Her mind made up, Ai gently lowered herself down onto the futon and slid the fake weapon into her pack placed by the pillow. She hid it carefully under a few layers of clothes, in such a way that she could whip it out quickly if need be. As she sat back up, she heard a crinkling in her pocket. It took her a moment to remember what it was...

The young auburn haired child pulled out the sheet of stiff paper from her pocket. She hadn't had much time to examine it when she had come across it. Afterwards, she had simply forgotten. It was a piece of paper that she'd only lifted to avoid having the black box moved again, no more and no less. Now though, as she gazed upon its worn matte surface, she could feel her heart thumping in her ears. As she squinted to decipher the copied image formed by the dots of a printed newspaper, she felt something boiling in her heart.

This image...

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To be continued...

*Exhausted, the smell of sweat and dust still permeating from him despite the can of deodorant he'd finished off before coming over, Wataru Takagi fumbled with the key that his angel had so graciously given him a couple of days earlier. Entering the Sato home, he thanked the stars once more for Miwako's mother having found a strange and new enthusiasm for visiting friends and relatives all across the country. It meant that he could come over without fear of subtle hints or outright demands that only caused them embarrassment. It also meant that he could enjoy some alone time with Sato without having to worry about appearances or the other police officers contriving ways to ruin the mood.*

Not that he was in stellar form that evening, nor was Miwako...

"One of my cases is probably going to be in the paper tomorrow," she'd said soberly after the compulsory greeting and kiss. "Front page too."

"Oh..." Reading the sour expression on her face, Wataru correctly surmised that it wasn't something she was happy about. Taking the beer she passed him, he asked the obvious. "Nothing too bad I hope?"

If it wasn't a case she wanted publicised, it could only be one of two things: one where she, "the police," had clearly been stumped, or one that had all the juicy gore and gossip that the media adored.

"It was peddling as far as murder cases go... It's just..." Miwako took a gulp of her own beverage before letting loose. "It's that blasted Mori journalist again! He was on the scene, camera man at the ready before I'd even arrived. And what with Kudo being there... I bet you Mister Momento Mori is going to make a big thing of it, while making snide remarks about the force. Damn the man."

It took Takagi a moment, exhausted as he was, to make the connection. When he did it was with the image of a horrified young detective in mind. Concern for the saviour of many an investigation caused him to drop his can.

"Wait... Kudo's going to be in the paper?!"

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## **- Chapter 14: Stories. -**

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Ran sat back, truly relaxing for the first time since she'd stormed out of Shinichi's house that morning. Dinner had been eaten. Plates were all piled up, ready for her to whisk away to the kitchen and wash. Just as she was considering getting up to do so, Eisuke, who'd been sitting quietly contemplating the empty nature of his glass of juice, stood up and volunteered. He'd done so with such a charming smile that Ran couldn't hope to object. Her father had grunted his approval while asking his young guest to bring him a fresh beer while he was headed that way. Shinichi had already excused himself, citing a sleepless night and desire to attend school the next day. With only Kogoro and his most recent Yoko video for company, Ran rested on her elbow, letting the day wash over her and the distant tinkle of soapy dishes appease her nerves. She wasn't totally happy yet, but she enjoyed, if for a short time, feeling content.

Ran thought back to the small guest her home was now without. She missed the boy, she truly did. He was the little brother she had always wished for. His quiet enthusiasm, oft too sarcastic grins and sweet solicitude would have been more than welcome on a night like this. She tried to picture him reunited with his parents. He would run off ahead, as always with some obscure goal in mind, his poor stocky mother chasing after him as best she could. Ran didn't know Conan's father, had never met him, but she could easily imagine an overly erudite intellectual, pushing up his glasses in that distinctive way Conan had adopted, frustrating his son with witty retorts. She was glad to know that nothing bad had happened to him, his family had managed to find him a place in their busy lives. If only he would call so she could say goodbye in the decent fashion.

And then he did.

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His head aching from fatigue, Shinichi was curled up on the toilet seat, facing a locked door that, thank goodness, had managed to hide many a secret phone conversation before. A tiny bowtie held

between his fingers transformed his voice as he spoke into his mobile phone... The one he used to answer to as Conan. His hands were shaking. What was the best approach to lying through one's teeth when one is so tired of the whole charade? And then he forced himself to stop thinking of it as a charade, to think back to when he was Conan, when the lies had been the shield protecting those he loved from harm. He made himself think of it as a story. No, not one of those tragic crime novels he loved to read from cover to cover every night, but one of those stories that children like Conan and his friends were expected to like. What good ending could he give to the fairytale that had been his life as young Edogawa?

He took a deep breath.

A small tweak of a dial, a long ah, and he'd found the voice. After a few seconds of quiet beeping he heard an answer, and replied in kind. His voice now deeper and gruffer than normal, he made himself sound like a complete stranger.

"Hello, can I speak to Detective Mouri please?"

"Yes, mister Mouri will talk with you right away!" Shinichi had to stop himself chuckling as he heard the old man's grumbling at Ran's enthusiastic response. She continued in the professional tone she must have learnt from her mother. "Might I ask for a name before I pass you on?"

"Certainly, the name is Edogawa."

The silence that descended as Ran whispered the name, passing the phone to her father, was uncharacteristic, but not unexpected. Somehow, Shinichi sensed, she hadn't expected ever to hear from the little twerp, let alone from the brat's father.

Kogoro Mouri was very understanding and courteous as he listened to Mister Edogawa apologise for the unexpected and sudden departure of his son from the detective's care. Even more so once, sensing the old man's nervousness, Shinichi thought to mention money.

"Oh," Mister Edogawa said, making an effort to lengthen his ohs and pace his speech patterns differently. "Naturally we will be sending you a check by the post, as a thank you. It should be with you in the week."

Shinichi rolled his eyes at Kogoro's predictable outpouring of thank yous and self-flattering compliments then fell quiet as he heard the final question the Detective had for him.

"Say, how's the boy doing anyway? I hate to admit it, but I miss having him around. He's been a big help."

After a lengthy pause, in which Shinichi could feel his breath caught in his throat, he finally managed to croak back a reply.

"Fine, thank you. He..." He had never thought the old man had liked putting up with Conan much.

"He's missing you all too."

"Good." The energetic relief he could hear in Ran's father's voice was a balm to the soul. His next request Shinichi had expected to come much sooner. "Can you put him on? I think my daughter Ran would love to have a word."

"Certainly..." After making a show of shouting his younger self's adopted name and tweaking his voice modulator, it was as Conan that he spoke. He hoped for the very last time.

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It happened as Ai was about to take a closer look at the picture and the faces of people that had managed to make her feel so... Close, certain, unbearably within reach of her true nature?

Whichever it was, the moment was interrupted once more as Ran tapped on the door, making Ai jump in her skin as, suddenly terrified, she scrambled to hide the paper under her pillow. After catching her breath again, she quietly answered Ran's calls.

"Yes?"

"Hey Ai. There's someone on the phone for you," Ran gently nudged the door open, a soft, motherly smile on her face. "It's Conan."

And with that simple name and a small smile, Ran left the young amnesiac girl with the cordless phone.

Staring haplessly at the door, it took Ai a minute or so to hear the muted "oyes" and "Haibara" coming from between her hands. Still slumped upon her futon, she raised the wireless receiver to

her ear and listened to the muttering coming from the other end of the connection.

"Honestly... Oye? Anyone at home?" That sarcastic tone, gruff manner in such a young sounding voice, it was all so familiar.

"Edogawa." She replied sharply, a mirthful smile crossing her face. At long last, she had remembered something honest, something normal. It wasn't anything precise; it was just a feeling, a sense of the rightness in talking to someone whose voice you knew without being told you had heard before. "Where have you been hiding?"

"Ah... I..." Ai chuckled upon hearing the flustered response to her question. "Th-That's what I should be asking! I heard you'd been in a spot of bother, and then couldn't reach you at the professor's. You alright? What happened?"

Conan Edogawa's voice felt like home.

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With a crick of his neck and a long stifled yawn, Shinichi shoved the phone and voice transforming device back into his pocket. It felt good to have gotten that last goodbye from Conan out of the way. It was a big weight off his shoulders, even if he still had the burden of the truth he intended to reveal to Ran. It had been a much needed farewell not just for Ran, but for himself as Conan too.

His conversation with Haibara had been surprising. It had startled him just how much he'd missed sharing the usual banter with her in the last week. She had slipped right back into her old patterns of teasing him, as if her memory had never gone... Yet it remained clear that she didn't remember much. She had stated it clearly when answering Conan's first question. She was still very much amnesiac, and, Shinichi suspected, had she not been he would have gotten much more of an ear full... After all, she'd been there when he'd solved that case in public that afternoon. If ever she suspected that Gin was still on the loose...

Shinichi exited the bathroom, rubbing his temples, only to find himself face to face with a cross-legged Kogoro.

"You took your sweet time..." The older man grumbled as he darted past Shinichi into the water closet.

"So-Sorry..." The teenager stammered his reply unheard. He hadn't quite expected his phone calls to take as long as they had. Shaking his head and muttering about old geezers being too full of beer, he crossed the corridor into the room he was going to share, one time too many he felt, with the old man for the night.

"Hi." A face now lacking its usual large round frames looked up to him as he entered. Down the corridor he could hear Ran humming as she started switching off lights. Hondou Eisuke had been quiet all evening, to the point that Shinichi had nearly forgotten he was there to stay over too.

"Hi," he replied, seating himself next to the other young man who was already wearing a pair of borrowed pyjamas a size or two too large. "I reckon the old man is going to be watching his videos for another hour or so. I'm guessing it's now or never for our quiet chat."

"Yes." Hondou's eyes gleamed with a steely look sharper than any scissors, sending a shiver down Shinichi's spine. It was clear they both had the same silver-haired dark shadow in mind. "Let's."

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Gin slept fitfully that night, but it was still the best sleep he'd had since his boss's demise. He'd had dreams, dreams that lingered as he rose in the early hours of the morning to gulp down more pills and puffs of nicotine smoke. Gin never dreamed. As he looked out from his window into the stillness surrounding the dodgy short-term let he'd acquired for the night, the eerie silence that ever so rarely occurred in a busy city like Tokyo pawed at his thoughts until he gave in and stopped trying to uselessly push all memory of his dream away.

The ash fell like snow from the end of his cigarette as he stared, unseeing, at a small shrub a mouse had just darted under. How many mice had he hunted down and killed in his long career with the Organisation, two, maybe three hundred? And that number didn't even include casualties, family members of traitors and targets who'd known too much. Nor did it include bystanders who'd simply had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Gin had the blood of thousands smeared across his hands.



It had never bothered him before. Nor did it really bother him now. He examined his long bony fingers against the dull light of a street lamp, barely seeing the odd scar from a burn or a cut he knew to be there. His dream had shown him faces. He didn't remember the names, or even the circumstances, just that they were the faces of people who would never see a face again, because of him. Gin had always taken great pleasure out of a kill during which he could look the victim in the eye, mere seconds before delivering their doom. The faces in his dream had all exhibited different emotions: fear, incomprehension, defeat, misplaced determination and startled puzzlement, just to name a few. All emotions, contorted features he had seen before.

What bothered him about the dream was not the fact he was recalling the faces of the ones he had killed, but what had happened to them after they had finished re-enacting the grimace of a past death.

They had laughed. They had returned to their living states and laughed at him before running off as the next victim came to have his turn. The dream had been a circus, and somehow he'd become the clown.

As irritation coincided with the burn of a cigarette stub on his fingers, Gin realised with a start that the neighbourhood was starting to come to life. Early commuters stumbled out of their front doors, delivery men on bikes and in small vans started to fill the street with noise. Remembering abruptly that he was a man on the run, he quickly snatched his woollen hat off the windowsill and shoved it onto his scalp, not without eliciting a strong twinge of pain. As Gin reached out to pull the window shut once more, a small goods van on the corner of the street caught his eye.

The morning paper was already being delivered. Good. His urge to kill had never been stronger. Hopefully he'd find some clue in the daily rag as to the whereabouts of Sherry and that detective brat.

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Sherry, as she'd been called in her dream, awoke that morning from a strange, but not particularly nightmarish reverie. Ai let out a sigh of relief. She had fully expected the silver-backed beast from the night prior to reappear. The previous day had been all but free of trauma: not only had her nightmare given her a panic attack, she had also been the witness to a murder and an attempt at suicide.

Not that she hadn't had bad dreams during the night, it seemed. She realized with drowsy puzzlement that she had been moved onto Ran's bed while she'd been sleeping. Either the young woman had a strange habit of sharing her bed with small children, or Ai must have cried out in her sleep, causing the teenager to lift her onto the mattress where she could cradle her back into a fearless slumber. Now that she thought back on it, she did vaguely recall waking up during the night, her heart thumping and breath ragged as Ran caressed her forehead and put her arms around her, surrounding her with reassuring words.

Ai had woken up quietly this time, and could feel the warmth of an arm across her chest, listen to the slow calm breaths of her host and look into her peaceful sleeping face. Ai felt a tear come to her eye as she thought to herself how very sisterly Ran was. It was a nice, if overwhelming feeling. She could see, as she lay there, contemplating her bizarre dream that daylight was starting to creep through Ran's blind and shutters. As she watched the brightness in the room grow, she tried to figure out what exactly it had been about her dream that had puzzled her enough to wake up. There had been that woman from the convenience store, the culprit, Mrs Kawashima. The two of them had been sat on the bus, having some conversation or other. The elderly lady held a handkerchief in her hand, a rice-paper sachet of poison perched between two covered fingers. She'd been calling her Sherry, and Ai, as Sherry, had been debating the pros and cons of taking one's own life with her. She remembered there being a ski bag on the floor, ticking ominously at her... And then he'd appeared. That was it. Though her lack of fear or panic in the dream had been odd, it was his appearance that had struck her as the strangest: Conan Edogawa, the bespectacled seven-year old in the pictures that Professor Agasa had put aside for her. He'd appeared, telling her off in the same way he had when she'd been on the phone with him before going to bed. Anxiety was written all across his boyish face as he unceremoniously pulled her off her seat and leapt as he cradled her in his small arms. As

the front window of the bus shattered around them explosions coloured the dreamscape red and gold, pushing the two further and faster forwards. What was it he said, as they'd recovered from the rough and tumble landing? What had the words been that had woken her up so fully?

"Don't run away..." His face had seemed so real then, the scratches on his face so detailed and his voice so quiet. "Don't look away from your destiny."

Ha, she thought to herself. It was nothing but a dream, a story her mind had made up. No way could something like that have truly occurred. And with that thought, Ran's alarm clock went off.

As the Mouri household burst into life along with the rising sun, Ai sat and ate breakfast while cartoons played on the living room screen. Around her Ran and Kogoro seemed to argue with Shinichi, Eisuke and each other. One wanted the Professor's neighbour to go to school with her the other was demanding that both Shinichi and Eisuke accompany him to help at his work, if only to make up for the difficulty of their sudden stay. Kogoro knew well enough that neither had been seen at school for a good number of days, and didn't think that one extra day out of class would make that much of a difference.

"But Dad," Ran countered, while tugging at Shinichi's ear. "We need someone to stay back and look after Ai, let Eisuke do that, please. Besides, Shinichi has been off more than long enough as is."

It struck Ai as an odd counter-argument. She vaguely recalled Doctor Herschel saying that she should be clear to go back to school herself by the Friday, so it was obvious that she didn't require the baby-sitting. Besides, Ran didn't seem the type to encourage any form of skiving, so it was quite obvious that there was a different, hidden meaning behind her wish for Eisuke Hondou to stay within the flat. Kogoro let it slide, but nevertheless continued his petition for Shinichi to help him out.

"After all, he seems to be the one with the most knowledge about the bleeding mess we're dealing with in the first place!" Kogoro's arms were thrust towards the ceiling at this point. Ran, not finding anything to reply to that, let go of Shinichi and gave him a searching look. It seemed all too clear to her that what her father was saying was the truth. Ai could read it on her face.

Straightening the tie of his uniform that Ran had somehow got him to wear, Shinichi rubbed at his ear, irritation etched all across his features.

"My apologies, Mister Mouri, but I'd like to help inspector Megure in my own way, rather than delve through piles of dusty old records." Upon seeing the hopeful look on Ran's face, he added, "and no, that doesn't mean by going to school, Ran. I've come across some information I'd like to act upon, that's all."

"And what information could that be, Kudo?"

Ai noticed that Eisuke seemed to shrink into the background as a young brunette lady appeared at the door to the flat. It took Ai a moment to remember her name. Sonoko Suzuki was it? Dressed in the same uniform as Ran, she seemed particularly unimpressed.

"When Ran didn't turn up at school yesterday, I thought the two of you had finally decided to elope."

The expression on Mouri senior's face was particularly priceless, Ai found. As, having made her point and adding several more, Sonoko Suzuki assisted Ran in shoehorning Shinichi out the door and whisking her friend away to school with her, the three remaining people could only stare in mild fascination at the process. Kogoro Mouri muttered something about his daughter's friend not being the daughter of a multimillion corporation for nothing, and that was that.

Sighing as he buttoned up his coat, the middle-aged detective gave Eisuke a prep-talk with regards to everything in the house before going to leave in turn. Only his departure was much less swift than the students' had been after the arrival of Sonoko.

"Detective Mouri! Detective Mouri!" Three high-pitched voices called out to him as he opened the door. A girl and two boys, their faces now more familiar to Ai than they had been a few days back, had been poised, ready to knock when the Detective had turned the door knob. "Please! It's an emergency! Our friend is missing, you must help us find... Ha-Haibara?"

"Hi guys," she said simply, raising her hand to greet them. Hondou seemed to have escaped to the bathroom, and Mouri could only watch in confusion as the kids swarmed past him.

"Right..." Checking his watch, the moustachioed man frowned. "This time I'm going, for real!" The children barely seemed to pay him any heed as he rumbled down the stairs.

"Haibara, what are you doing here?"

"We were so worried! We thought something bad had happened to you and the professor..."

"There was no one at home when we came by yesterday after school. We assumed..."

"Guys? Guys!" Getting the three of them to calm down long enough for her to get a word in edgewise, Ai proceeded to reassure them. "I'm fine. The professor is fine," at least so she assumed, she'd have to find a way to get in touch with him while she was staying here, "The professor had to go somewhere while some workmen came to sort out the house. I'm staying here along with his neighbour till everything is sorted out."

The happy gasps and smiles accompanying her explanation brought a grin to her own face. These children were really good friends of hers after all it seemed.

"So, how's the memory thing now then?" The biggest one asked, eyes wide as he examined her like one would a fish. It took her a moment to recall his name.

"It's coming on as best it can, Kojima." The big grin on the boy's face was worth the effort. She made a point of using the other two's names as well. "So, Tsuburaya, Yoshida, don't we have school to go to?"

The self-proclaimed Detective Boys cheered as she grabbed her coat. She hadn't thought to bring her satchel when she'd left the professor's, but the kids were more than willing to lend her their books once they were in class. It would be, Ai decided, a nice change of pace to join them for the day. She hadn't particularly fancied spending the day alone in the flat with the quiet Hondou anyway.

She picked up the key Mouri had shown her and Hondou before leaving, locked the door behind her as they left, and went out into the street best foot forward. Her wounds weren't bothering her too much just yet, and, all things considered, they must have been going at a good pace, as they managed to walk past Kogoro Mouri within minutes. The older man had stopped at a Newsstand to pest about the day's local front page.

"Damn that detective brat, not back even a week and he's already on the front page."

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*The Saviour Returns.*

*Shinichi Kudo, teenage sleuth widely known this time last year as the Saviour of the Japanese police force, has returned from a several month long absence to his home district of Beika. The Tokyo born high school student, despite proudly wearing his blazer, decided to continue forgoing his classes this Thursday in order to keep doing what he does best: solve some of the toughest puzzles our criminal investigators face.*

*It occurred yesterday, in one of Beika district's busiest convenience stores. A young man (29), working at one of the cashier desks, dropped dead while performing his duties. It did not take long for Tokyo's best police force to arrive. It took, however, even less time for Kudo, who'd been among the customers when the unfortunate death happened, to do their job for them. Within minutes the young genius had determined the cause of death, now officially confirmed by the coroner, narrowed the case down to three suspects, and began the process of finding out method and motive.*

*Yes dear readers the mysterious death was indeed a crime. Our unfortunate cashier was cunningly poisoned, and the culprit none other than one of the customers he had just been serving. Teenage Detective Shinichi Kudo made quick work of the case, leaving quietly after suavely confronting the death-bringer, who then surrendered willingly to the police. The case is another brilliant addition to Kudo's budding career, a retrospective of which can be found on page 10.*

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Astounded and horrified, Professor Agasa stared long and hard at the morning paper he'd asked for with his breakfast. The inn he was staying at had been diligent, and seemed rightly puzzled by the dismay so clearly visible upon the elderly gentleman's face. They could not understand what was so disturbing about the picture of a famous teenager obscuring the view of a dead body, a scared looking but otherwise unharmed girl in tow.

The inventor's expression was in stark contrast with Gin's as, on the corner of a Tokyo street where dawn had just begun to break, he picked up an early issue of the piece. The delight in his face was matched only by the murderous glint in his eyes. The news vendor, not one normally prone to being intimidated, was so startled and frightened that he forgot to charge the tall, strange man in the woollen hat, wishing only that he would leave. And leave Gin did, his step swift and deliberate. He'd been looking up information on the teen sleuth the night prior, trying to figure out how and when he had managed to evade his reaping ways. Amongst the data had been the boy's address and that of his school.

Gin decided not to bother staking the high-school. There would be too many kids that all looked the same, besides, the paper mentioned that the brat had been skiving. The house appeared to be the better, if more dangerous option. He would have to be careful, in case the FBI or police were waiting there for him.

He smirked as he looked back at the front page photo feature. Sherry was right to look scared, he thought. His only wish was to find her back in her adult body. Next time, he wouldn't miss.

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It was strange, Eisuke thought, but not unusual for him to once again be left all alone. He had expected at least to have the amnesiac child to keep him company in the flat for the day, but he couldn't fault her for wanting to go to school with her friends. They didn't really have all that much to talk about together and, from what he'd gathered, she had already spent a number of days cooped up indoors. Eisuke was going stir crazy by lunchtime, and that was after a good week locked up in his own studio by a murderous madman.

It wasn't as though he hadn't been left on his own before. After his mother's death, loneliness had pretty much been his constant companion. His father had always been working on some assignment or other, taking him to dark watering holes where he could explore while Ethan Hondou talked to yet another shady character, as for his sister...

A lonely tear slid down Eisuke's cheek. He had received confirmation from his own jailer. Gin had killed her in cold blood. The man had been raving about it during a bout of fever. Eisuke's obvious likeness to Rena Mizunashi had reminded the delirious Gin of Kir.

No brother should ever have to hear of a sibling's demise in such heartless words... Especially not one that fate had parted from you for so long. Eisuke had tried to join the CIA, so that he might be able to work alongside her, and now...

He sighed. What would Ran think if she saw him so morbid? A small smile etched its way onto his face. He'd spent such a large chunk of his teenage years scheming and plotting, building himself a facade behind which to hide as he desperately searched for his one remaining relative... He'd barely spared a thought for love. Ran Mouri was the most wonderful mishap he could ever have wished for. She had reminded him of the little boy he used to be, running about a mansion, little care in the world as his mother coddled his every bruised knee. She had reminded him of the man he'd always aspired to become, whenever his sister had been visiting, reading him stories of brave knights and just kings. Even now, Eisuke still had aspirations of becoming Ran's prince, despite her heart already being clearly spoken for.

It suddenly occurred to him. Eisuke was in her flat. Her bedroom door had no lock, and was mere feet away from the living room he now sat in. Blushing furiously, he allowed himself to indulge in an imagined visit of the room. Out of love and propriety, there was no way he was going to abuse his position within her home. Having spent most of the lunch hour on the fancy, Eisuke found he was much more relaxed and able to think back clearly to the discussion he'd had the night before with the teenage detective Shinichi Kudo.

It had been crystal clear to Eisuke, pretty much from the offset, that the house works had been a facade leading to Kudo and young Ai's sojourn at the Mouri's. Their private conversation had allowed him to confirm it, and its cause. Gin was on the loose, and Kudo had every reason to believe it meant that he, Ai, and their friends were in jeopardy. He didn't elaborate much on the reason for Ai's implication, but he did go into some detail about what he was planning to do about it.

"I've spoken with some of my contacts in the FBI who've been after the man," he'd whispered, pausing just a moment to make sure that Detective Mouri, who could just be heard leaving the bathroom, was indeed returning to his recorded TV shows and beer. "They're arranging to have some of their men keep watch on this flat, just in case. I'm hoping to get in touch again tomorrow, to help hunt him down. The longer Gin is free, the more likely he is to get away or harm us."

"Agreed," Eisuke had voiced back. "I've seen him injured, and he's fearsome even then. I'll provide you with what information I've got, his health, his equipment, what little he let loose in his ravings. In exchange, could you...?"

Eisuke had hoped Kudo could arrange a meeting between him and the Akai fellow he'd seen briefly when he had, that one time, found his sister Hidemi. Failing that a CIA agent who'd been in touch with her would suffice. While being forced to nurse Gin without any means to escape, he had heard the tall silver-haired man mention Akai several times. If Gin was to go down, Akai would be sure to be involved. Kudo had promised he'd do his best.

Meanwhile, all Eisuke could do was hide behind the blinds, watch and wait. If ever Gin were about and saw him leaving from the Mouri agency...

Eisuke shivered. He had already spent the night having open-eyed nightmares of what the man might do to Ran if they got caught.

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Gin, meanwhile, was huddled amongst the trees and bushes of number 22, an empty looking home of Beika's second district. His woollen hat was pulled down low over his eyes as he glared at the neighbouring mansion and its gates through a partially demolished section of wall. Ensconced in his long coat, he missed his trilby that would have kept the autumnal drizzle out of his eyes. He missed his long hair that would have kept the nape of his neck dry and warm. He held on tightly to the grip of his trusted weapon, hidden inside his coat. There was nothing quite like a gun to remind him of his purpose, of who he was as he sat there, in hiding, the organisation that had been his family lost, his pride shattered to smithereens.

All that thanks to Sherry and a brat named Kudo.

It was with intense disappointment that, having stalked the house since sunrise, he resigned himself to the fact that Sherry and Kudo were no fools. Gin had been hopeful when it was clear that no FBI agents were watching the property. He'd been very aware of how vague the media had been with regards to the incident he had fortuitously survived. Having an opponent believe you dead as Gin had so dearly learned was an advantage worth utilizing fully... And if there was any chance that Kudo and the traitor believed themselves safe, had returned to his home to start life anew...

Gin's empty stomach growled its scepticism. The meagre sandwich he'd acquired for lunch felt like it had been eaten a very long time ago. The last of the high-school kids and children coming home from elementary school had passed the gates a good half an hour ago. None of them had been his targets. The Kudo household had remained resolutely quiet and deserted.

Resignation and ice-cold fury took hold of the assassin. As he drew a cigarette from his pocket and made his way back to the road, a cruel smirk made its way onto his face, the pain from his wounds giving his expression a crisp and manic quality. A nearby cat hissed as he lit his lighter.

So, he thought, you want to play this the hard way, do you Sherry?

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It took Ai a while to make her way back to the Mouri flat. Her leg was in agony. Her head hurt a little. She had forgotten to take her lunchtime medication with her to school. She also required the kids to help her remember the way. Though she did vaguely have a notion of the route taken that morning, she kept stopping at junctions, feelings of déjà-vu confusing her. A little voice in her head hinted that she was starting to remember things. The looks on the Detective Boys faces when they noticed her pausing at the various corners said it all. Those must have been roads that led back to the professor's.

She missed him. She missed the old man and his caring mannerisms. She missed Conan Edogawa too. With just one phone call he'd made an impression. Although she couldn't remember much if anything of him, the way she'd felt while talking to him... She knew that he'd been an integral part

of her life. The empty desk next to hers in class had said it all.

She waved goodbye to Ayumi, Genta and Mitsuhiro. They left, cheerful once they'd been reassured that she had a way of getting in, that she was going to be alright. Despite knowing for a fact now that she loved them dearly, she wasn't sad to see them go. Upon seeing how desperately bored she'd been during the lessons, they had smothered her with kind attentions. Now she just craved some alone time.

"Hi," she said, entering the flat and putting the key Kogoro Mouri had lent them down on the entrance ledge. "I'm back."

Eisuke Hondou, who'd been sitting near the window in a patch of shadow, looked up. A kind smile on his face, he returned the greeting.

"Welcome back. How was school?"

"School was alright." She replied. The young girl didn't think the teenager would care much for a detailed synopsis of exactly how tedious it was being asked to add two and two beans together, or how mind-numbing it was to have to wait while fellow classmates struggled to draw the simplest of hiragana. She helped herself to a glass of juice and some of her pain-relief tablets. "Is anyone else back yet?"

"No, not yet..." The bespectacled young man replied. He sighed.

Something told Ai that his day hadn't been much better than hers. I wonder what he's hiding from, she thought, as he leaned back into a cushion, cradling his cup of coffee between his hands.

The auburn haired child was slightly disappointed that no one else was about. She had secretly been hoping Shinichi Kudo, with his soothing presence, would help alleviate her headaches somewhat and get her the professor on the phone, Ai reverted to plan B.

When you're an eight year old that clearly outclasses the rest of your age-group with regards to bare bone mathematics and literacy, you end up with a lot of thinking time on your hands. When you are amnesiac, you worry a lot about how you could get your memories back. When all your factual observations with regards to what might be hidden in your past flies in the face of the anxiety you suffer, you want answers.

And so, at about two in the afternoon, having zipped through the story the class had been asked to read before Genta had reached word three, young Ai Haibara had come to a conclusion.

Returning to the room she'd been sharing with Ran, she pulled the sheet of paper acquired from the black box out of its hiding place. Ai no longer cared if anyone caught her in possession of it. There was only one way to find out the truth once and for all. She had thought long and hard about it. The half-Japanese and half-English girl was certain. The key to her true self lay in her hands.

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The picture, obviously copied from a newspaper, depicted a scene in a rain-soaked portion of a docking yard. Metal containers framed the area, as a crowd of policemen watched from the background; their sharp uniforms a stark contrast to the dismay on their faces. Two ambulance men were placing someone on a stretcher as three civilians stood watch. She recognised them now.

Kogoro Mouri stood tall, anger barely concealed in his face as he kept himself in check. Next to him his daughter, Ran, was crouched, eyes hidden as she held on with all her might to the little boy before her. Young Conan Edogawa, it could be no other with that outdated jacket and bowtie. The boy stood rigid, his fists bunched up, the knuckles shining white. All she could read from his face was profound sorrow, the misted glasses on his nose making it impossible to tell if the wetness on his face was rain or tears. As for the victim being carried away...

A shard of ice struck her in the heart. The pale whiteness of her skin, the unnatural position of the head and the growing pink stain on the blanket covering her made it all very clear. The woman was dead. She was also dead familiar.

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"A..." The name came, unbidden, straight out of her lips. "Akemi?"

That was all it took. A name, the memory of her long black hair, swaying in the breeze as she left the cafe they'd last met in. It all came pouring back in one terrifyingly cold burst. She remembered the nature of the silver-haired beast that had been plaguing her dreams. She knew now who Ran

reminded her of. She recalled the frightening nature of what was, she now realized, her forced second childhood. Names, feelings, visions all tumbled through her mind, a dizzying mess bringing only more questions and pain.

Gin, Akemi, Dai, Guilt, Sorrow, Mourning, Anger, a need to rebel and break free, all fought for her attention. She remembered vividly not being able to attend the funeral. She could still feel the cold bite of irons on her wrist as she swallowed a bitter pill. She recalled a strictly regimented upbringing, lonely, dull, covered in black.

Sherry remembered what she was. It made her angry. She felt betrayed. She ached for the one thing that, she knew, would allow her to fully demonstrate her feelings to a certain fellow guinea pig, something like a gun...

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*To be continued...*

-0-

*Shinichi Kudo had prepared for many outcomes, but not this.*

*The saviour of the Japanese police force was good at improvisation, but not that good. When he saw Ai Haibara, the one person he thought to have rescued for good from their evil clutches, he could but pray...*

*Gin's aim was deflected, but not by divine intervention or Sherry's appearance. Vermouth, glorious Vermouth had grabbed onto his arm. The shot went wide, the noisy clap of the projectile whistling dreadfully close to Shinichi's ear. It caused a spark to lick at a recently spilled fluid. Knowing all too well the volatile nature of it, the young detective made a dash for his protegee.*

*He barely managed to wrap her in his arms before the first wave of the blast hit them, sending them flying away from their foes... And then all he could hear was noise.*

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## Chapter 15: Urgency.

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Shinichi Kudo, seventeen year old high-school student at Teitan High, was looking distinctly pale. Several of his classmates had seen him dragged into the school grounds by his childhood friend and her accomplice. The young Suzuki had seemed overly pleased with the achievement: Kudo had barely protested or fought back the two women pulling at his sleeve. The kind-hearted Mouri girl, however, had seemed somewhat concerned.

The two had spared him the embarrassment of appearing weak in front of his football playing pals. They gave him some space once they'd arrived at the school lockers, but didn't let him out of eyeshot. Sonoko wanted to prove a point, Ran was still wondering why he hadn't made a break to go investigate his all important case yet.

Truth be told, even Shinichi was wondering what was up with his self. He felt ill. The teenager's stomach made him feel queasy, his head spun, and every now and then he coughed. The Detective simply put it down to too many sleepless nights in a row at first. Now that he was back to full size, Kogoro Mouri's floor didn't seem anywhere near as comfortable as it used to be... Especially when sleeping next to another teenager who seemed just as restless. They had cracked heads a couple of times during the night. After dozing through most of lunchtime, forcing himself to eat more of his rice than he felt like, the Detective began to suspect that it might be more than stress and fatigue running down his immune system.

With a shiver running down his spine, he considered the possibility. No, it couldn't be. It had been a week. Surely there would have been signs before now. For her to have appeared so confident, one who normally stressed out every possibility of failure... There was no way. How could it be?

That was decided then. The antidote couldn't be faulty. If he still felt as miserable at the end of the day, he would give professor Agasa a call. He felt at his pockets. Drat. He had left his phone in yesterday's trousers, both of them. He would need to return to the flat first then. Oh well...

Meanwhile he could... He could what? His skin feeling clammy, he looked around at the chattering masses that were Teitan high's cafeteria. He could barely distinguish Ran asking him something, waving her hand at him with a concerned look on her face. For a moment his ears rang as they had on the day of the explosion.

"Heh," with a resigned smile, Shinichi waved Ran's concerns away. "Just tired," he lied. He had hoped to sneak off after lunch to help the FBI track down Gin. Now he doubted he could do much more than reassure Ran for a while and suffer through his classes. Gin could wait one more day, right?

-xv-

It wasn't until after his classes that it came to dawn on him just how wrong he had been. As he left the school, Ran and Sonoko finally giving in to letting him have some peace on the promise that he was going to get some rest, a familiar looking person caught his eye. As the two girls walked away, the allure of some after school shopping trip being mentioned, he swivelled around, eyes searching the crowd for the mop of light coloured hair that had caught his eye. It wasn't hard to spot, a good



head taller than most of the other young woman walking about, Jodie appeared like a beacon, eyes solidly fixed on his.

"Professor Jodie," he said simply, nodding in her direction. "I was hoping to catch a word with you today."

"Follow me," Jodie answered tersely. Her hand gently clasping him on the shoulder, she led him towards a small nook in the wall near the high-school. It wasn't an ideal spot for a discreet conversation, but at least it dramatically decreased the odds of someone bumping into them.

"Kudo..." The American lady began, a slight twitch in her eyebrow. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"What do you mean?" A small surge of irritation made itself felt behind Shinichi's temples. He could see the incomprehension in Jodie's eyes, sense the fear and worry coming from her body language. He knew full well that he was meant to keep a low profile. Was Jodie implying that he didn't know how to?

"You haven't seen it then, have you?" She sighed deeply, rubbing her forehead. She looked tired.

"When Black called me to say you'd been spotted coming to school today, I had hoped it was a mistake. I came to relieve agent C-"

She was interrupted mid-sentence by a deep churlish voice. Shinichi recognised it readily as Eisuke Aizawa's, one of the boys from the football club. He winced as, upon hearing the teenager call his name and turning, he received a rolled up newspaper straight to the chest. Aizawa had never been known for being gentle.

"There you are, Kudo!" The grinning giant cried. Taller than most of his classmates by at least a head, Aizawa's tranquil face sometimes made it hard for people to remember his strength. "Been looking for you everywhere. Check out the paper I bought this morning on the way to school."

"Huff..." Momentarily fighting to get his breath back, it took Shinichi a moment to unroll the daily journal. "Oh. Oh..."

"Thought you'd like it," Aizawa had misread the expression on Kudo's face as one of approval. He didn't stop to chat long though. Grinning, he gave them a wave as he walked on past. "Keep it if you want. I figure it's been a dog's age since you last made the front page after all. Gotta shoot. Nice seeing you too, Miss Jodie!"

It took Shinichi Kudo a long minute to overcome the vertigo caused by what he saw in the paper. He had barely thought about the case in the convenience store since, he had had too much else on his mind. Back in his heyday, this sort of case didn't tend to make it into the paper until at least a week had passed... Then again, he hadn't been in the public eye for a long time. He should have known the media would lap it up. Jodie piped up quietly.

"We've been watching the school and your home since this morning. Teitan primary and the agency are under observation too, but we're a bit stretched as it is. Luckily there's been no sign of Gin around here, but..."

"But?" Fear gripping his heart, Shinichi turned to face the FBI agent.

"I just heard from Shu. Gin was spotted leaving your Neighbour's garden not too long ago." She finished.

A choice swearword spilling forth from his lips, Shinichi started running towards the agency. He let the Beika paper flutter to the floor, its main feature glaring up at him insolently. Calling on Jodie to follow, he proceeded to inform her of the extra details he had garnered from Hondou the night before, only slowing so that she might hear the more technical details.

"Quick," he said when he had finished, the agency just a couple of turns away, "Would you be able to find and keep an eye on Ran, just in case? I think she and Sonoko have gone to the Beika mall."

"Got it." With a curt nod, Jodie lengthened her stride and turned the corner, her mobile phone uncovered with a flick of her wrist. She was out of sight before Shinichi could see her utter a word. He slowed down as the Agency neared. The initial rush of emotion, at hearing how close to finding him and Haibara Gin must be, was beginning to wear off. Now his thought processes were starting to kick in, strategies were starting to form. Slow down, breathe normally, act normal just in case he's there, waiting, looking for any sign that you expect him to be there. Mush your hair up a bit, try

to make yourself look like someone else. Try walking next to that group of people there. Keep your eyes wide open.

It took all of thirty seconds to walk to the staircase. That was the tensest half a minute Shinichi Kudo could recall in quite a while... Bar one. The image came of Haibara, wounded, drenched in blood and barely breathing in his arms. The time it took between handing her over to the emergency services and finding out she would be alright... Shinichi didn't want to go through that ever again. There was no sign of a dishevelled assassin, thankfully. Shinichi thought he spotted Agent Camel and Akai, though he couldn't be sure. It didn't matter, his priority right now was ascertaining Haibara's safety.

His pace quickened as he climbed the stairs, fumbling in his pocket for the spare key, Conan's, that he had instinctively picked up that morning. The door was fine, unmarked, locked as it should be. As he turned the key and heard the click, he allowed himself a moment of relief. The thought of it's going to be okay, however, was shattered as, just as he opened the door, Eiusuke Hondou barged through to storm down the stairs passed him, with barely a glance. The intense focus on the bespectacled young man's face had Shinichi's heart hammering once more.

It was with a litany of choice offensive terms racing through his head that he ran into the flat, one name fully occupying his thoughts.

Please be okay, Ai.

-xv-

The first time she had been given a gun to hold, young Sherry had been hesitant to take it. It wasn't loaded, it didn't even fire deadly rounds when filled, just rubber balls, but it had still been a gun. She had been given lessons before hand though, designed to emphasize the weapon as a tool, to reduce it to the sum of its parts and distance it from the deadly reputation it had, both in cowboy films and on the news bulletins she had witnessed during her educational stay in the States.

She hadn't been afraid of it though.

As the young man called Shinichi Kudo entered the flat, Sherry smiled. Gripping her weapon tight, she hid in a cupboard, waiting to ascertain that he was indeed alone. She had managed to get rid of Hondou easily enough, and just in time too, so long as the Mouri girl wasn't in tow, Sherry would get her alone time with Kudo.

Her firearms tutor would have been proud, she thought, her eyes full of melancholy as she watched the teenage detective dart from room to room. She was gripping the butt of her pistol with both hands, arms straight, nozzle pointing down and away. The knowledge had never gone away, only difference was that now she could remember once more the silver haired mentor that would force her elbows back into the locked position, his large hands reminding her just how small she was. He had always struck Sherry as deadlier than the weapons he had taught her to wield.

She could hear Kudo muttering now, choice swearwords flying back and forth from his lips as he barged into the master bedroom. She was now certain that Shinichi Kudo was no longer expecting to find an eight year old child in the flat. Sherry let the cupboard door creak open before stepping out.

Sherry had made a decision, that day now quite a few years back. She wouldn't be deadly with a gun. No, she would be better than Gin. She had worked hard at it too, between lab work assignments and research trips.

Sherry was a good shot, and she was fully prepared to remind Kudo of that fact.

-xv-

Shinichi Kudo's first thought was a simple, pure interrogation. Having been interrupted by its cold metallic touch as he'd been searching his clothes for a phone that he had now found, it was really quite an obvious question. It didn't, however, adequately describe in any way the sheer terror and surprise he had felt upon its discovery.

By the man of twenty faces! He swore inwardly. Where on earth did Ai find a gun?

It took him a moment to catch his breath, to take in the small child wielding the death bringing tool. She looked so small, her short bob of hair nearly reminded him of a small kitten she had once sought to rescue along with Ayumi. She was also without any obvious emotion. Her poker face was

the equal to the one she had shown young Conan a number of months before, after a gun wound had landed him in hospital. Shinichi could but hope this was a prank on a similar level. His fear and incomprehension was, as it had been then, inimitable.

"A-Ai?" He asked tentatively. "Wh... What are you...?"

"So now you call me Ai?" She said with a smirk, her gun remaining steadily pointed between his eyes. She did not give in to chuckles or shrug her shoulders with an insolent wink. If anything, Shinichi could detect a hint of anger in her voice. "Kudo, honestly... I thought you knew me better than that?"

She just called him Kudo. Shinichi's blood ran cold, but his heartbeat slowed, his jaw tightened. He knew what he was up against now.

"Would you rather I called you Sherry?" He asked, his voice quiet and sad. The charade was over. The professor had been right. The whole pretence had been a terrible idea, and Ai was bound to want some answers. He could but hope that the pain and emotion of remembering would not cause her to do anything regrettable.

"... No." The ex-codenamed member replied, her eyes hidden beneath her hair. Tilted forward as her head was upon hearing her old appellation, Shinichi found it hard to determine what emotion was fighting to be seen. "Tell me..."

Bracing for what he believed to be an obvious query, Shinichi tried hard not to think about how dizzy he was starting to feel after being surprised, as he was, kneeling on the floor.

"Tell me," the form of Ai Haibara said again, louder this time. "Why hide the truth from me!?"

There was a desperate earnestness now, a tremor going from her lip all the way down to her wrists. The detective could see tears welling up. If it weren't for the gun pointed at his head, he would want to draw her into a hug and reassure a child that all the demons were defeated... Instead he could but turn to sit on the floor, shame and sadness stewing in his gut. He knew she was no child, and now she knew too. The illusion had been shattered. Shinichi should have known he was no good at magic tricks.

"Do you remember?" He finally replied, after a short sigh. "The note I put in your get well soon card?"

Her eyebrows shot up as she nodded her recollection.

"I wish for you to be happy?" The miniature Sherry whispered, but the wariness did not leave her gaze. Her weapon was still steadily aimed at his forehead.

"I remember," Shinichi went on, closing his eyes the better to recall the moment. "I remember a time when you told me as much: that if you were to lose your memory, you would prefer to stay that way... Without your past haunting you, the shadow of the organisation, what they made you do and what they did to you. That you'd be able to live as a regular elementary school-aged girl..."

"I also recall," the auburn-haired child now shared a sad smile with him, "saying shortly afterwards that I had been joking. I don't think a joke in poor taste is enough for you to encourage my amnesia, mister 'don't run from your fate'."

"Heh," a dry chuckle escaped the young man's throat at recalling that event. He still had a scar on his arm from leaping out of that bus. "Then tell me this... 'Sherry', I don't think your amnesia was caused by the explosion alone."

Looking straight at the barrel of her gun, Shinichi Kudo was vividly reminded of that night, a week past, when a silver haired assassin had been all too keen to shoot him. He also remembered the words being said at the time.

"What..." Sherry, as Shinichi was now starting to think of her, looked fearful. "What do you mean?" Straightening up in an effort to alleviate some discomfort and to regain his dramatic composure, he locked his gaze with hers. He had no actual proof to back up his deduction but... When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains must be...

"The truth. The one that Vermouth seemed so determined to share. You heard it all, didn't you?"

Surprise etched itself onto the girl's features. With resignation she lowered her arms, gun now held only loosely in one hand. A small, timid laugh seemed to be her only response as she glanced at the floor, apparently uncovered.

So I was right, Shinichi thought. He took no delight in this victory. If there were ever one piece of knowledge that he would like to spare her, it was that one.

But then Ai changed.

"Kudo you fool!" She cried out as she lifted the gun to his face, anger and tears marking her face. With only one hand supporting the gun, she pulled the trigger less than a foot away from his nose.

-xv-

Ai Haibara, Sherry? Shiho Miyano was tired of the pretences, of hiding. Though she still had the body of an eight year old child, she was anxious to remind Kudo that he wasn't the only one wanting to return to a normal life... And though, misguidedly, he had done what he thought best to offer her a pretence of a normal life, his plan had backfired when her amnesia had proven short-lived. She was grateful, in a sense. She got to live out the very reasons why her once short-lived envy of Ran's temporary memory-loss had been ludicrous. It did not, however, mean that she was going to forgive Shinichi that easily... Or let him continue in the thought that she was so weak as to let an inconvenient truth like the one Vermouth had mentioned rob her of her memories. No...

"You're an idiot..." She choked out as several roses emerged from her weapon, a toy made to impress. She barely noticed a small speck, dust perhaps, bouncing off of Kudo's forehead. "I already knew about that. I have known for ages."

Hmph, she thought, as she noticed how pale the detective's face had become. Was it that galling to be proven wrong?

"H-how?" He stammered, wavering slightly. She used to go out of her way to see Conan pull a face like that, to remind him of the danger they had been in. Now that that danger appeared to be behind them, it seemed somewhat cruel.

"My mother's tapes..." She whispered quietly, wiping a tear off her cheek. With a sigh, she went to take the roses out of her toy. "How else?"

"Oh. I..." Kudo seemed to have been silenced, if for a moment. "Then what..?"

Shiho smiled. She knew full well why she had blacked out her past. Should she tell him? She wasn't certain that he was ready to hear it. She glanced at him, making eye contact as she pondered whether to keep him guessing a while longer or be out with it. His eyes, so blue, were fixed upon hers, dark eyebrows knitted in patient confusion. The handsomeness of his face was something she had never truly got to enjoy when he was Conan. With the organisation more or less beheaded, maybe now was the time for new beginnings...

"I..." She began, slowly, her heartbeat drumming in her ears, her cheeks starting to feel warm. But she never got to finish.

Just as she had started, Kudo's eyes had popped wide open as a wracking cough took over his body. Doubling over as he clutched at his stomach and fought for breath, Shinichi Kudo slid prone onto the floor.

"Ku-Kudo?" It was only then that she began to realize that his paleness was not due to her prank alone. He also showed other signs of poor health. Impressive bags hung from his eyes, his bangs hung limply in front of his slightly red eyes. She could even spot a dark coloured liquid staining the side of his mouth. "Are you alright?"

"I..." Another cough, a wheeze, Shiho had never seen Kudo in so much pain. "... Don't feel right..." She fought back the expletives that came to mind in order to rationally figure out what she could do of his ailment. Several precursor symptoms came to mind: his obvious lack of appetite, sore joints, lack of sleep and less proactive attitude. It struck her as she saw his eyes begin to fade in and out of focus. The explosion must have...

"Ai..." Shinichi gasped, suddenly gripping her wrist as she wrestled to get him into the recovery position. "Must warn..."

"Stay with me, Kudo..." She murmured as she stroked his head. Her mind was full of memories of the blast, of how she'd sought to protect him only for the young and foolish hero to jump to her aid in turn.

"Gin..." He whispered. "Gin's still out there."

And then he was out. As much as hearing Gin's codename had chilled her to the core, she was more

desperate to attend to Kudo's condition. Emotions put aside as she focussed on the task at hand, she administered what first aid she could while phoning the emergency services. Her coolness was a skill she had learnt from her former employers, and it was the one and only thing she could think to thank them for as she snapped up Conan's bowtie that had been hiding with Kudo's phone. Not having them question her age as she described his state to them would save precious minutes... On which his life could depend.

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Ran raced through the streets, caring little for what the other pedestrians thought. Her hair and coat trailing wildly behind her, she turned a wary eye to the skies. Dark black clouds were gathering fast. Tight in her fist, she grasped onto a local edition paper she and Sonoko had come by as they had entered the mall. At first it had been an innocent purchase... But then...

She remembered Eisuke's face as he'd told her about the allusive Gin. As much as Sonoko seemed to think that Shinichi's picture being on the front page was a sign that he was back to stay, Ran wasn't quite so sure. The apprehension on little Ai's face, the lack of bluster on Shinichi's in the snap... Had his return to the public scene really been planned?

Ran had tried not to think too hard about it, to enjoy the shopping trip with her best friend and not worry that Shinichi had clearly been needing a rest despite a rather calm and short day. She tried, yet could not stop the thoughts niggling away in her head, her gut twisting, shouting at her to go back and check on him. It didn't take much for her to turn back.

An unfortunate spillage from some young boys misbehaving at a fast-food stall, a puffed out looking Jodie, appearing out of nowhere, a concerned professional gaze directed at her... That was all it took. Before Agent Jodie could even mold her face into one of a bemused teacher, Ran had bolted.

She had only one thought on her mind. As she glanced back at the unfortunate blob of ketchup that had stained her paper, it made itself felt more than ever.

"Shinichi!" The detective's daughter gasped. Please, oh please be alright, she added in thought.

As she rounded the corner, however, the dark-haired maiden's fears were proven true. The flashing gyroscopic lights of an ambulance greeted her from her doorstep, slowing her down to a befuddled trot. Not believing the scene before her, she watched as two of its crew came down the steps leading up to the agency, a stretcher weighing heavily between them.

"Shinichi!" She cried out as she recognised his face. Tears streaming down her face as she saw her bad premonition come true, she ran to his side, the paramedic grabbing her arm as soon as the patient was on the trolley, trying to get her name, what information she knew of the boy lying unconscious next to them. The questions barely registered until the medical professional forced her to look him in the eye.

This was it. She had to help Shinichi fight for his life.

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Left behind, all alone with the recommendation that she go down to café Poirot so that the staff could look after her, Shiho, still to the world only known as Ai, sat on the floor and stared at an empty room. Now that the medical emergency was out of her hands and the fear-fed adrenaline rush was ebbing away, she was starting to reel from the shock. The world spun uncontrollably as she went over and over again in her head all that had gone wrong.

How could I have prevented this? She kept asking herself that question, remembering with hindsight more and more subtle hints that, had she not been under the illusion that everything was as fine as it could be for an amnesiac eight year old, she might have picked up on.

No, she told herself. Stop. Forcing the room to stop revolving, she glared at the spot of floor where he had collapsed. Her eyes were now irritatingly dry. She was too spent emotionally and physically for tears. The thoughts going through her head, the feelings drumming away in her chest... It was all too familiar.

She noticed a small oval red and white object on the floor. Picking it up, the miniature scientist recognised it to be a pill: the permanent antidote to Apoptoxin 4869. With sad eyes but honest mirth, she laughed.

"Ah yes, that was where I hid it..." She recalled it popping out of the flower-gun, like a dud bullet, a seed or fallen fruit. The last time she had felt this, there'd been a pill just like this one to hand... A much deadlier pill.

Yes, she recalled, she had felt the same grief and worry when she had first realized her beloved sibling had been dealing with them. Shiho remembered trying to dissuade her, to get her to talk about it with her over a cup of coffee... Only for Akemi to leave, a smile on her face and a wink sent her way, never to be seen again. The younger sister had had a bad feeling then, one validated when a picture was seen in the paper of the same joyful soul, now prone and lifeless, a lonely victim in the rain.

Shiho had also felt the same despair only a week past... Magnified ten-fold. Seeing one of the organisation's best close-range shooters deliberately aiming at the teenage detective who had managed to turn her life around full circle, it had been too much.

Shinichi Kudo had asked her what it was that had caused her amnesia in addition to the blast. As she gazed at the antidote resting in the palm of her hand, she whispered the answer, praying to whichever god would listen to a lost soul like her that he would live to hear it in person.

"It was the same reason that caused me to leap out in front of you, to shield you from Gin, even though I knew it put me in harm's way."

Sliding up to a standing position against the wall, the auburn-haired girl gently closed her fingers around the small capsule. Her eyes half-shut and voice tender, she went on.

"I just can't bear the thought of losing you, Kudo."

Her fists suddenly tight at her side, and her gaze as strong as steel, she turned back to the door of the room. She wasn't going to just sit back and let Kudo do all the fighting. This time she was going to take action.

Though there was no more she could do to help with Kudo's health, she was going to make sure as hell that a certain silver-haired assassin wouldn't get near him. He had already stolen her big sister. He was not going to steal away from her the most important man in her life. Even if Kudo had his moments... She knew, deep down, that she loved him.

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*To be continued...*

*While the Mouri flat was still empty, she took her opportunity. She didn't expect Eisuke Hondou to return any time soon, and while Ran was away by her knight's side, and Kogoro the detective still at work, she had free reign of the place. That meant access to clothes and shoes that should fit her adult self, and, more importantly, a space where she could use the antidote without fear of being discovered.*

*Ai Haibara still had to be quick though. She took her toy gun, minus its load of magic trick flowers, and Shinichi's phone. She used the latter to give Professor Agasa a call, mildly surprised at seeing so many missed calls and messages on the device... Agasa, Hattori, even Shinichi's parents had been desperate to catch him. She kept the call short though, tersely telling the professor that more talking would be feasible after he picked her up from downstairs. She did so while raiding Ran's cupboards, picking items of clothing that she didn't think the Karate champion would miss much. Once done, she examined her haul with one brief hint of nostalgia.*

*Her time as a little girl was now at an end.*

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## **Chapter 16: A blast of truth.**

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Shinichi Kudo, only a month or so away from his eighteenth birthday, was lying on one of the many beds provided by the Beika General Hospital. His eyes remained closed, his breath whistling softly through his oxygen mask. Ran held onto his hand gently as she had done for a little boy not so long ago, in the very same building.

Looking up to Doctor Asami Herschel, she waited patiently for her prognostic.

"Will he be alright?" Her voice was quiet as she asked this, but Ran's eyes remained strong. Of all the people she knew, Shinichi had always been the one to believe in life the strongest.

"There's hope," the medical professional nodded her approval at Ran's mental fortitude. "But we won't know for sure until he undergoes surgery... Whoever alerted us to his condition knew what to do. They delivered first class administrations of first aid in the initial crucial minute of the crisis. It is just a shame that we never realized the blast he and young Ai got caught in had affected him this much."

"His condition's a result of that explosion?" Startled, Ran couldn't keep her voice low. Her grip on Shinichi's hand tightened. "But that was a week ago!"

Placating her with upraised hands, Doctor Herschel resumed her explanation.

"Blast injuries can cause hidden traumas to the brain... In some cases it can take months, even years to uncover. Mister Kudo also suffered some damage to his intestines which require prompt surgical action... Our surgeons are getting ready this very minute."

Gripping the detective's daughter by her free hand, the older woman locked dark gray eyes with the teenager's worried blue ones.

"Believe me, Miss Mouri..." A pause as Asami Herschel steadied a tremor in her voice. "We will do our utmost best to save his life; we just need to pray he won't suffer any long term effect..."

It was that last sentence that drove home the seriousness of Shinichi's condition to Ran. Gazing down at her childhood friend, she recalled the steel with which he would face every challenge.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do." She whispered.

"We will do."

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Flitting in and out of consciousness, Shinichi had little inkling of what was happening around him. The young man would hear Ran's voice, her worry, and then flit back to a darker sleep, where memories stirred and long ignored questions waited...

He was reliving the night of the explosion as its effects put him under the knife.

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"Damn it Hondou!" Shinichi cursed. He switched off his phone in irritation, his call to Inspector Megure interrupted before he'd even finished dialling.

The other teenager, embarrassed and a touch afflicted by his own clumsiness, held his hands up in

surrender. A jerrican still rocked slightly on the floor next to his feet, the awkward angle its cap was on an incongruous detail amongst the ravage the rest of the pile had caused. All of his meticulous preparation, the gadgets he had set up, the protective measures, it was undone.

Maybe the abandoned fuelling station of mountain loggers had been a bad choice after all. It was too late to turn back now though. Eisuke scarpered to find a safe hiding place as instructed, and Shinichi set about fixing what little he could salvage of his preparations. He recalled pausing a moment, enjoying the stillness before the storm he was about to unleash. Standing straight, a jerrican balancing on the pile before him, he took in the verdant surroundings, brown leaves speckled with reds and gold...

"Like her hair..." The young man whispered, a sad smile on his face, his own black locks fluttering above his eyes.

As soon as he had learnt of its existence, Shinichi Kudo had wanted to bring the Organisation down. But the nature of his urge to bring about their demise, to put them before the righteous scrutiny of their peers and make them face the pain of their victims had somewhat changed since then. On the unfortunate evening that they had struck him down in Tropical Land, he'd sworn to get them back for robbing him of his life as famous high-school genius. His desire to expose them had been purely personal, nearly petty.

Now, after so much time, his goal seemed as pure as it was near. Being forced to live once more as a young child had taught him much, not only as a detective, but also as a person. During his temporary returns to adulthood, many a person who knew him had commented on his new found humility, his added consideration when solving a case or his sudden daring when it came to expressing his feelings to Ran. His time as Conan had also reminded him of who it was that truly mattered when bringing criminals to justice: the victims...

As Shinichi set back to work, the wind rustling the leaves and branches around him, he remembered the faces of many a victim... He recalled those he had failed, those that the system had missed, whose luck had run dry. There had been Seiji Asou, an effeminate doctor who'd given him his thanks through the keys of a grand piano as he set himself aflame, lost in an ocean of guilt. There had been a girl going by the assumed name of Masami Hirota, begging him with her dying breath to foil the plans of two men in black as her voice faded and her hand fell limply to the floor, murdered by her own criminal employers. And then there had been her.

That had been Shinichi's biggest lesson, during his time as Conan. Victims had many faces. Not all of them wanted to show their wounds, share their pain. Some of them had blood on their hands, whether they wanted to or not.

He never wanted to see her tears again. He had promised himself that the very same night he met her. The sobbing form of a little girl, an apparition showing all too well the true nature of the shrunken scientist once known as Sherry, maker of the very poison that had set all this in motion. He had worked hard since, not only to find the men in black and get the poison off them so he could gain his true form once more... No, he had also worked hard to bring a smile to her face.

It was time to put an end to his friend and partner in misfortune's nightmares.

More confident now that his preparations were back on track, Shinichi Kudo grinned. If lady providence were to smile on him, this was to be his finest hour. He already had his body back for, as Haibara had put it "as long as you wish, Kudo, just don't go running to an early grave with it, will you?" Now it was time for him to come out of hiding too, and to show the world that the Holmes of the Heisei era wasn't one you could get rid of easily.

He checked his watch. Three minutes to four, they won't be long. Provided his gambit to get the boss of the organisation and his closest agents all assembled in the clearing worked, they should be starting to arrive any minute now. Shrinking back into the shade of the hut, Shinichi pulled down his cap and waited...

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It had, all things considered, been a nerve-wrecking couple of hours. Ran breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the "surgery in progress" light go out. She knew from previous experience that it would be another handful of minutes before she'd get to hear how he was doing, even longer until



they let her see for herself. She didn't mind however... She had always been the patient sort. Many a time her friends Sonoko first and foremost had wondered how she managed to not fret or worry when waiting for her dad to pick her up, usually late, from school when she was little. They would ask how she could cope with the separation of her parents so well and still keep up the optimistic hope that they would get together one day... More recently the subject of such wonder had been how she could not see the childhood friend that was so dearly missed for so long without calling him all the names under the sun and turning her back on him. Such curiosity had always struck her as odd. She wasn't any different from anyone else. She too would feel frustrated, build up an urge to vent. She wasn't a regional Karate champion for nothing. She just didn't see the appeal in getting worked up over time... Time passed, seconds ticked, lives are lived. It was as easy as that... If there were truly one specific quality that allowed her more than anything else to cope with the many tortures of old father time, the only thing she could think of, the one and most overwhelming emotion that gave her courage in such times... it had to be loyalty.

Ran considered herself loyal to a fault. The dark-haired girl was loyal to her family, whether they got on or not. The high-school student was entirely devoted to her friends; Sonoko Suzuki could attest to that a hundred-fold. As for in love...

Ran Mouri closed her eyes at the memory of all the pain a certain teenage detective had put her through these last several months. The days and weeks spent wondering where he was, why he'd left town so suddenly... She remembered the fleeting phone calls, tasted once more the bittersweet flavour of short returns too soon brought to an end. There had been lies and deceit on his part, she was certain of it. The past week had only further hammered them home to her.

Yet still, here she sat, praying with every breath that he would be alright. He had promised her he was back for good this time, and she was going to wait here as long as she could to make sure he kept true to his word. It was a testimony to how much she loved him, how deeply she cared.

Her blue eyes opened. The operation theatre doors were still shut, so she looked around. A small boy was seated not far. The front wheels on his chair pointed at odd angles, he stared at his portable computer game screen, the odd cough the only source of movement on his part bar the thumbs and index fingers hammering away at buttons and the darting of his eyes. His family sat nearby, chatting away, but Ran couldn't help but be transported back to an eerily similar night, now quite a few months ago. She chuckled a little at the memory. Back then she had been praying with the exact same fervour, the name of a certain little boy seemingly interchangeable with that of a childhood friend as she did so. She had been convinced back then that Conan and Shinichi were the same person. How had she ever...?

But wait... There it was again, that little voice in her head whispering, pointing, and niggling away at her certainties. Doubt had always dogged her adoptive little brother. The similarities between him and her love interest had constantly been uncanny beyond measure. Both physically and mentally, there had been many a time that she had found it hard to tell them apart. When she wasn't suspecting Conan of actually being Shinichi, she had found herself at times envying the boy somewhat. There were days where it seemed Shinichi talked to the boy on the phone constantly, where Conan would feel compelled to get the high-school genius to help out in a case or mention some crucial bit of knowledge he'd learnt, oh-such-a-coincidence, from Shinichi.

Ran was loyal in love, but love had no such loyalty to her. She had hoped to greet Shinichi being rolled out of the surgery room with a serene mind and a warm heart. Instead, it was with confused feelings and a niggle of doubt that she saw him carted through. She had a tear in her eye as she saw how pale his face, how delicate and boy-like he looked. As she turned to speak to the surgeons, forcing her emotional discomfort at bay, she knew that he had not been conscious enough to see her. She could only hope that his dreams were full of nice, clear truths.

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"It won't be long..." he had thought to himself. "Wait a little longer for me, Ran."

The first of them was approaching the clearing. It wasn't hard for the teenage detective to recognise the square shoulders and dark shades of their scout. Vodka stepped confidently into the clearing, a sports bag on his shoulder. No weapon in his hands. That suggested that his back was covered.

Shinichi was pretty certain he knew who by... The man in the black suit paused for a moment at the centre, dropped his bag to the floor, and then walked towards the piles of rotting logs and the fuel shelter. Carefully, but without leaving his refuge of open space, he inspected both of the landmarks. The teenage detective was glad for the awkward corner and bit of tarp that he had now hidden under. He still breathed a sigh of relief when Vodka returned to his bag, mobile phone in hand, giving the all-clear.

As soon as his phone was away, another three shapes emerged from the woods from three different directions. Shinichi recognised one of them instantly, the American actress's long blond hair a distinctive feature from any angle. The other two he had never seen before. One was a dark and tall man in a black ensemble, the other was also a woman, her caramel curls and skin looking familiar enough for him to suspect she had a media role. They were clearly codenamed agents though, and having had a long and hard discussion with Haibara, he had an inkling of a handful of codenames they might be associated with. The three met up with Vodka in the middle, nodding their heads and crossing their arms. They stood and waited, little eye movements and irritated shrugs showing their frustration.

None of them wanted to be there.

However they all stood to attention when another two silhouettes became visible from the woods. One of them, tall, black hat atop long flowing silver hair strode purposefully towards them, eagle eyes scanning the area, leaving nothing to chance. His companion, an elderly gentleman with a gnarled old wooden walking stick sauntered along, a sports cap pulled low on his head, black jogging outfit at odds with his gait. Shinichi grinned. This man didn't have a codename. That, he thought smugly to himself, was the boss.

He was impressed though. As the old man neared the centre of the clearing, Shinichi could make out the tune he was whistling... Seven black birds, their mother crying about how cute they were, up high in the mountains, it was an appropriate song for the setting. The anthem of the men in black, Nanatsu no Ko, rang loudly in his ears. Shinichi could see, as the handful of members around the old man nodded their heads and acknowledged his arrival that this man was indeed loved by them all. He would tap one on the arm, greet the other with a cheer or quip, and nod his approval at Vodka as he pointed out the sack. Shinichi could only wonder at the contents of the sports bag, but whatever it was, he knew it was nothing good for him.

With a purposeful strike of his stick on the floor, the boss faced the small shed and called out. His voice rang loudly through the clearing: he was clearly one accustomed to making himself heard. "Here we are, mysterious Silver Bullet man. Come out and meet us then, as agreed... Show yourself!"

Shinichi blushed a bit at hearing the cocky name with which he'd signed his anonymous missive to the boss. He'd chosen it on a whim, remembering something that Haibara had said when she had handed him the permanent antidote. He certainly hoped to emulate the monster-killing item of legend. Tweaking a setting on the voice-changing bow-tie, he spoke his answer.

"You're still two short..." His voice, deeper and mellower, sounded across the open space. "Namely Chianti and Korn. Once they've joined you, I shall show myself."

Before he had even finished the sentence, a whistling sound was heard. One of the trees nearby suffered some unseen blow as leaves and bark showered down from one of its boughs. The shot had been dangerously close to one of the speakers he'd placed around the glade.

"Nice aim!" He mocked. "Might I request your toys be put away as well?"

The annoyance in the men in black's faces at seeing that the shot hadn't produced his corpse was by far eclipsed by their astonishment when their boss relented.

"Fine," the old man said. With a wave of his hand, he beckoned at the trees. "You heard the man." Irritated and confused, the two snipers complied. Shinichi had never seen them before, but he had known they would likely be there. Vodka walking around unarmed had been the clearest confirmation of that for him. Now he got to get a good look at the two as they emerged from the wood. A big, fair skinned man appeared dark glasses and a cap hiding most of his sour expression from view. His weapon was back in its case, carried on a strap on his back. The other sniper,

however, was far more reluctant to put away her rifle. Cursing, she strode towards the open air, glaring around in an attempt to find their hidden host. Shinichi was surprised by her appearance. Tight fitting leather and a facial tattoo made her stand out quite a bit. He hadn't expected the second sniper to be female. At the boss's insistent look, she complied with the request that the gun be put away, but she clearly wasn't happy about it. Shinichi couldn't quite hear what she muttered as she joined her partner's side, but he suspected it had to do with a great urge to shoot things.

"Thank you." He said once certain the highest ranking members were all present. "We may begin." Putting his bowtie away, he tapped a button on his glasses that he had now put back on, hopefully for the last time. The inbuilt emitter sent out a signal to one of his prepared traps. Counting to five, he patiently waited for it to trigger, praying that Hondou's interference hadn't permanently disabled the fencing in system.

Lady luck must have been smiling on him then, for several brightly coloured fireworks went off together, spraying a circle around the glade with rainbow sparks. Flames sprung up, enclosing the area with fire. There would be no escape now. With a grin Shinichi wondered how long it would take the professor to notice that he'd borrowed the rainbow explosives he'd developed. It had been with a little help from an auburn haired girl, of course. The flames should last all of half an hour. It's all or nothing now.

As the last of the coloured bursts went off, he stepped out from behind the jerrican pile, out of the shed and into the clearing. His blue jacket billowed out behind him from the rising breeze. One hand ensconced in the pocket of his blue jeans, his other was rising past his yellow t-shirt to the cap at his head. Long nimble fingers pulled at the arm of his spectacles, dramatically removing them as the setting sun coloured the sky gold.

As he faced the apprehensive organisation crowd, he pressed a hidden button. Nothing happened.

"Crap."

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Ran was thinking similarly unpleasant words as she sat by his bedside, wiping at the tears bubbling down her face. She was happy. The operation had been a success. Yet she also felt confused. She was relieved but remained anxious. Each time she looked at his face, her vision seemed to blur and change its features.

Shinichi Kudo lay beneath her, sound asleep still from the drugs they'd administered to him. He was still very pale, but his colour had improved ten-fold since she'd found him being carted out from the agency. From the angle at which she sat, she could see how young he looked. His cheeks still had a certain plumpness to them, he barely had the beginning of the whiskers that some of his classmates bragged about. With his eyes closed, he lost all of his usually cocky or all-knowing expression and looked as innocent and unsuspecting as a small boy.

A very specific small boy.

Ran remembered remaining beside little Conan's bed as he recovered from his operation in the very same hospital. His expression, no glasses in sight, as he'd slept off the drugs had been identical. Her worry had been the same. The tenderness with which she would brush away the bangs from his face was unchanged. She realized now that she loved them both to the same degree. Every time she caught sight of the bandage on the right of Shinichi's forehead, she was taken back to that fateful night where he had vanished... and where a young school boy had shown up in her life. Conan Edogawa had had a very similar bandage on his head then.

The young woman now recalled, as she cupped his hand, that she had never answered Shinichi's feelings. She blushed as her thoughts drifted back to that windfall trip to London. He had appeared so mature back then, in that phone box, the chequered shirt and waistcoat had really suited him. The strength of his reaction when she had accused him of not caring, the strength of colour in his face and the tone of voice he had used as he had grabbed her by the hand... She had never seen him so emotional, so concerned. Not even his idol Sherlock Holmes had ever made him look so manly and decisive. She hadn't known what to respond then. She had spent weeks and weeks postponing a decision on the question. But now she knew...

"Wake up, Shinichi," she whispered to him, as she leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek.

"There's something I want to say..."

He didn't wake up straight away though. She had not expected him to. Ran was loyal, she could wait. She was prepared to wait ten long years to tell him these words. She owed him that much. As the minutes ticked away by the dozens, the black-haired girl put her legendary patience to work. "I love you..." She muttered as, after what felt like hours, she drifted into a dreamless sleep at his side... It was exactly as she had done, months before, when her young charge had come afoul of a bullet.

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"There's something I have to say..." The blond woman spat, as she fought the pain overwhelming her foot. She glared up at Gin as she straightened herself up, forcing her now bloodied leg to take her weight as she spoke the gritted teeth. "I have a confession to make."

"This had better be worth it, Vermouth," Shinichi thought. With the thunderous banging of his heart, the cold sweat running down his neck and the split-second he had spent praying as he saw the barrel of Gin's gun drawn and aimed at him in the blink of an eye... He was regretting his fool-hardiness more than ever. When his personal barrier had failed to activate, he had to rely on his bluff to avoid being shot. A tall order against any armed opponent with deadly designs. Thankfully, he wasn't his mother's son for nothing. The blood of famed actress Yukiko Fujimine not only gave him a flair for the dramatic, but also a knack at keeping his poker face up when all his cards had been blown away. For a short while, it had seemed to work. Shinichi and the boss traded quips and intimidating queries, with the young detective doing his very best to impress upon the old man that all of his escape routes were blocked and his moles and allies uncovered. The concerned looks exchanged by the black crows behind him helped bolster the teenager's confidence. The grim look in the old man's face as his grip on his walking stick tightened spoke volumes. After mention of Bourbon's known links with previous and current police officers, the boss gave up all pretence of pleasantness.

"Who are you?!" He spat, swinging his stick in his direction, revealing it to be a hidden blade.

"How do you know all this?"

Maybe he had gotten too cocky when he had seen their leader lose his cool.

"Kudo Shinichi, private detective!" The young man had crowed, pulling off his sports cap with an extravagant flourish. "One you had thought dead and long buried in silence. You were so preoccupied with Sherry, you didn't think to question why my body wasn't found after I'd been given that product of hers, did you?"

That was all it had taken to provoke Gin. In that split-second, Shinichi had gone from confident leader of the encounter to seeing himself dead. He hadn't expected that bullet to end up in Vermouth's foot. The rest of the men in black hadn't expected it either.

"What's the meaning of this, Vermouth?" Vodka in turn had drawn his pistol, training it at the back of the American actress's head.

"Yeah, Vermouth," The sniper with the butterfly tattoo drawled, her fingers twitching as she felt the urge to punch the woman. "Give us one reason not to kill you now."

"Chianti!" The boss snapped, his eyes flashing at the pair. He turned to the rest of the group too, who had been muttering under their breaths. "Enough, all of you."

Mollified, Vodka lowered his gun. Chianti glared daggers at Vermouth as she crossed her arms, her face a storm at being singled out. The rest of the men in black, from Korn, the other sniper, to Gin, turned their gazes to Vermouth who had been waiting for their squabbling to cease.

At a curt, clearly irritated nod from her superior, the woman once known as Sharon Vineyard began. All the while, Gin's bright blue eyes bored into the back of her head.

"I never wondered who this Kudo Shinichi was..." She said, her voice soft, nearly tender. "I caught a glance of you, even, at the Haido Hotel, where Sherry was first spotted after her escape. You looked identical to the photograph I had seen of you, years before."

"Is that so, Vermouth...?" The quiet, gentle tone of the boss oozed with hidden menace. "Go on."

"It struck me as odd really, seeing you there, Detective, with that face. It took me back a good twenty years. I was reminded of what Sherry's parents did to me..."

"Vermouth, enough..." There was a pleading tone to the old man's voice now. Bitter emotions of

regret played across his features as his favourite's face hardened.

"No boss." For the first time since she began the explanation, she turned to face him, to look him in the eye. "It is time for it all to come out, now."

Shinichi watched the odd exchange with befuddlement. The actress, who looked no older than thirty, was conversing with a man at least twice her age as though they had once been partners...

The expression on Gin's face, bitter and confused, the teenager suspected it was not too dissimilar to his own. He was glad to see though that since Vermouth's explosive intervention; he seemed to be holding back, waiting...

"You mentioned Sherry, did you not, cool guy?" Vermouth had turned back to face him. "Let me tell you of her parents... What do you know of them?"

"They were scientists within your organisation." Shinichi shrugged his cap on the floor beside him. A spot of rain landed on his cheek. "They died more than fifteen years ago. You got Sherry to continue what they started."

Dark clouds were beginning to gather, a small gust whistled mournfully through the trees as the first drops began to make landfall.

"Yes, that dreadful project..." Vermouth muttered as her long blond hair fluttered around her head.

"It's the only reason we're still here you and I. The mad scientist and Hell's Angel outdid themselves with it: the failed detective, a wonder pill that could kill without leaving a recognisable trace, one that has killed many, including my husband."

Shinichi's eyebrow arched up at that. He tried hard to remember what he knew of Vermouth's civilian identities. As Chris, she had never been married, but as her older self... Yes, there had been a husband. It was said he had died of an illness, the same day Sharon had...

"It was the day before I won that Oscar... The highs of my acting career never have good timing. I admit, we were foolish back then, believing fully in their project, not knowing the true ins or outs. We were offered the chance of a lifetime, and we jumped at it. All the while, the two Miyanos knew full well how deadly an experiment they had signed us up for." With a nod to her boss, she added an aside. "Did you know, sir that they'd come up with an alternative nickname for that drug: The Silver Bullet?"

She chuckled as the old man glowered at the floor. "Hah, thought not. It was a trait they shared those two, embracing darkness in the hopes of destroying it from within, only to fall to its depths. A trait shared by their daughters, if I'm any judge, though Gin would have to declare his thoughts on the question." The assassin remained stoic in front of Vermouth's taunt. "Hell Angel was an apt name for Helena. All pure and sweet in appearance but..."

The young high-school detective had trouble deciphering the expression on Vermouth's face.

Whatever it was, it was intense. Her eyes wide as her mouth twitched at the memory, all that he could sense was a grand frustration, an anger that he recalled from when she had attempted to kidnap Haibara in the guise of a family doctor, and... Sorrow?

"Seven of us volunteered. Helena wouldn't even look me in the eye as she and Atsushi dispensed their poison. My husband led the countdown; we all bit the bullet at the same time, as they stood to the side with their clipboards." Her voice had grown quiet as the light began to fade from the sky.

She gripped her jacket's sleeves at the elbow as she wavered. The red flicker from the wall of flames Shinichi had set up was beginning to ebb away. He didn't have long to activate his final trap. He felt for the watch in his pocket. "They all died, every one of them but me." Yet Shinichi remained engrossed in Vermouth's story. "When I looked up from the floor, after the agony of a death that did not come, I could see her face. She and Atsushi knew exactly what atrocity they had committed." There was something from it that he needed to hear. He needed to find out. "After all we had been through; I could never forgive her..."

"All that you had been through?" The detective gently nudged the lid of his wristwatch. Asking the question of Vermouth was both a distraction technique and a method to find out what it was that niggled at him about her story. There was an element of truth here that had a distinct significance to a certain acquaintance of his. "Tell me, Vermouth, exactly what happened between you and Ha-" he caught himself just on time, "Sherry's parents?"

As his heart thudded in time with the rain around them, sizzling fires going out one by one as he waited for her reply, the woman known to the world as Chris Vineyard looked him up and down. She fell to one knee as her wounded foot gave out, the white in her face a stark contrast to the black pool on the ground beneath her, still, her eyes did not leave his. There was a fire there that stirred at recent memories. He could not recall ever seeing eyes that looked so old and wise, but he could recognise the hurt, the loss, and the determination to not let it stop her in her tracks. It couldn't be... "Before she married Atsushi, Helena was a Vineyard. She and I were sisters. When our parents separated, she stayed with our father in England, while our mother and I immigrated to the States. We never let that drive us apart... Not until the night our parents died, the night she met her husband." A lonely tear slid down Vermouth's face, barely visible in the flickering half-light of the remaining fires. The sadness in her face, the nostalgia in her eyes was at odds with the venom with which she spat out her next words. "So darn right I killed her for her betrayal. No way was I going to let Shiho live to continue their foolish work."

The boss seemed to want to say something, but Vermouth swung her arm out towards him. As she did so, Shinichi took his opportunity. All the members of the organisation were distracted away from him, he pressed the switch.

"No boss. I know that you hid the nature of her research from me. I told you then as I tell you now..." The detective held his breath as he counted to ten in his head. "Eternal youth is not worth the price. This young man and his angel reminded me of that... And that is why, despite his link with Sherry, I do not wish you to harm him."

Surprised at being mentioned in such a favourable way, Shinichi glanced at the Boss's face. Unsurprisingly, there was bitterness there, but also a sense of astonishment. Momentarily struck dumb, the old man appeared to be assessing his American recruit as he fought for words. He faltered a little as a small glittery shape darted at his neck, but managed to eke out a few words.

"For this young man to have... Turned you at last, my queen of shadows, then it is truly over." With a grunt, he leaned heavily on the remainder of his stick, his blade dropped to floor. "I'd wager he'll have the police and FBI at our necks shortly..."

Shinichi looked over the remainder of the organisation members, a fluttering of hope lifting his heavy heart as one after the other seemed to start suffering from the effects of a sleep dart. Yes, his trap had worked! Vermouth was knocked out, the two snipers collapsed against each other, the two unknown members were stumbling as they tried to figure out what had got them, and as for Gin...

"I don't think so, Boss. If we're to go down, I say go down fighting." The assassin had the young dark-haired man in his sights, a murderous glint in his eyes as he fought the drug coursing through his veins.

"Oh crumbs!" Upon facing certain doom, Shinichi's thoughts were overwhelmed with the memory of a young woman, auburn locks barely hiding the determined glare she'd given him one night, when the organisation had been near and a useful ingredient for the antidote had been fortuitously involved. The same look that Vermouth had just shared with him. The one that he had wanted to reward before facing his end...

Shinichi might have known Haibara a good few months now, he still knew so little of the Shiho Miyano hidden inside. He just wished he could have had more time.

And then she had appeared, Gin's bullet diverted at the last second by the shrunken form of a young scientist he had thought dead.

"Sherry..."

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"Sher...ry..." Shinichi croaked as he woke up. His mouth felt like sand, his head like cotton with a dash of antiseptic. Something in his gut felt tight, the memory of an old wound perhaps?

He lay there a moment, wondering where he was, why, and not really caring. He knew that the information was there should he really need it, but at the moment all that occupied his thoughts were the memories of that explosion, of Haibara showing up, unexpectedly, from the woods to save his neck at the last second. The bullet had flown wide, he recalled, connecting with a spare rocket that he had left in the shelter, barely visible behind the pile of containers. It had sparked, catching

alight on some spilt fuel. He really should have checked that jerrican with the crooked lid... The resulting fire and explosions had sent burning fuel and breached jerricans flying wide, the meagre shed no more as Gin shot off another couple of bullets. Thankfully, the drug had affected his aim, the metal slugs going wide... But the harm was done.

Shinichi felt the pain in his left arm anew, the burn of superheated air, the smack against hard ground. The contents of Vodka's sports bags were, as he had correctly feared, more explosives. He had barely grabbed Ai in time, the blast dwarfing that from the shed as he, Ai and Gin barely managed to leave its immediate area. He remembered the resulting inferno, the crater next to which he had collected an unconscious child... The niece of the woman that had granted him an extra five minutes, the daughter of a woman who'd knowingly endangered her own sister's life, a girl whose sister's death had forever changed her life.

With so much sadness in her life, could Ai ever forgive him for wanting to help her forget? Remembering now fully that he'd collapsed while the young half-English, half-Japanese scientist had confronted him about it, Shinichi surmised that he had been hospitalised. This was quickly confirmed by the oxygen mask resting on his face, the drip connected to his arm and the clinical setting surrounding him. Painfully, he forced himself up into a sitting position... Wincing as joints creaked and wounds croaked, his breath caught short as he saw that he had company.

"Ran..." There was tenderness in his voice as he whispered her name. He had known her pretty much all his life. She'd been there for every scrape, every mishap, and every success. In ways she was the closest thing he had ever had to... a sister.

As that thought slammed itself into his head, a dawning realization came along with it. His face rested in his palm as he wrestled the oxygen mask off, an embarrassed chuckle bouncing out of his cracked lips. He was a fool, and he knew it. He had many apologies to make.

"Ran," he said, pulling at her hand as he called her name. "Ran. Wake up."

"Shin... Shinichi."

She was beautiful, he could never deny that. As her fringe and hair spiked out at random angles, and her eyes slowly began to focus on his face, he was at full leisure to admire her own. The strength of her jaw, the softness of her skin, the pink hue on her cheeks, all added to the elegance echoed by the silkiness of her hair... Yet when her motherly eyes connected with his, he could remember the same blue orbs looking up at him as she bandaged a scraped knee. He could remember them filling up with tears at the mere mention of an injured cat or school bullies... He knew them too well. All along he had just been too blind, too shy and wistful to realize it.

"Hi there." He grinned. The realisation wasn't going to change anything between them though. They were still childhood friends. He still felt for her a love that only compared with that he felt for his mother.

"Oh Shinichi! You're awake! You're okay! You had me so worried. Don't ever do that to me again..." The hug with which she greeted him felt both warm, and more than welcome.

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*To be continued...*

*Jodie Starling, FBI agent by profession and caring woman by nature, had messed up. With a heavy sigh, the blonde whipped off her glasses to pinch the bridge of her nose, trying to regain her composure and think straight. Flushed and embarrassed that she had caused Ran to twig that something was wrong by failing to hide the worry in her face, Jodie was cursing herself. This was the girl Shinichi Kudo had asked her to keep safe as he ran to their agreed safe house. This was the angel that had shown up, unbeckoned and clueless, when Vermouth had foiled Jodie's plans. This was one of the very few people in Japan that were even aware that she was an FBI agent and not just an ordinary English teacher... And one of the sweetest girls she had met.*

*A determined yet slightly irritated frown on her face, she put her glasses back on. The ambulance that she had been following with her eyes was long gone now, taking the girl in question along with the young detective Agent Camel had been in charge of protecting. Where was he?*

*Flipping her mobile phone open for what felt like the hundredth time that day, Jodie was about to contact her boss, James Black, to find out what was going on. Just as she was away to confirm the call, a sharp whisper distracted her.*

*"Who...?"*

-0-

## **Chapter 17: Visiting hours.**

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"I guess it's time..." Ai Haibara sighed.

Placing the little red and white pill onto her tongue, she closed her eyes. With a small thought for three little children who were now going to be without a second friend, she swallowed. It would take a moment or two for the chemical to dissolve into her bloodstream. She used that time to undress, putting the clothes she would no longer need into her little back pack. It was only as the pain shot through her leg when she stood back up that she remembered her bandages, but by then it was too late to think any more.

She gasped as the first tremors raged through her heart. The blood rushed in her ears like thunder. Gripping her chest as she tried to keep it from bursting open, she automatically started thinking of the mantras she'd been taught to resist pain... Even now, the organisation still had some hold on her, the pain-fighting techniques had been one of the many things she'd been forced to learn. It was useful, although it didn't always work... She remembered crying out briefly when she had been locked away in the wine room of the Haido City Hotel, thinking that no one was near enough to hear, that it didn't matter anymore. And there it was: the inexplicable urge to do so just now. She wanted to send all of her mentors' training to hell and vent and scream. They had killed her sister. It was because of them that the man she loved was now in hospital, fighting for his life. Even after the death of its boss, the organisation's shadow still loomed.

As she remembered Shinichi whispering their most feared assassin's name, she let loose. Lying naked, limbs jerking from the pain, she arched back as she finally let out the cry she had been holding back.

By the end of her shout, the transformation was done. As her voiced gained the depth of an adult, her body recovered its curves and the room no longer seemed so large. Physically exhausted, she fought a moment to catch her breath. She winced as she ripped away what little remained of her bandages, her wound still sealed but feeling tender and raw underneath. It was only as the girl no longer known as Haibara went to stand up that she heard them. The blood had finally stopped rushing through her ears. She could make out shouts, a voice.

"Ran! Is that you? Are you okay?!"



Biting back an expletive, Shiho Miyano scrambled to get dressed. Of all the people to walk into the flat at that precise moment, it had to be her!

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Sonoko Suzuki, confused and worried, had chased after Ran, although at a much slower pace. By the time she had left the Haido centre, Ran was already out of sight, and it had taken her a few minutes to fathom where she might have gone. Not quite wanting to resort to her mobile phone immediately, the urgency on Ran's face hadn't been feigned after all, the brown-haired girl had decided to put her Deduction Queen skills to the test. Thinking that her friend might have seen Shinichi or some dodgy character nearby, she checked the immediate area for any obvious signs of the dark-haired girl's whereabouts. There was no one at the café, no sign of her by the bus stop... After squinting through crowds till her eyes hurt, Sonoko returned to the exit Ran had left the mall from and rubbed her eyes.

Irritated, she ruffled her hair as she scowled at some nearby brats. She wouldn't be so annoyed if her childhood friend had at least hinted at the cause for her sudden departure. All that Sonoko knew was that one minute their old English teacher Jodie had been there, and the next Ran was gone... And so had been Jodie, funnily enough. Crossing her arms and tapping her foot on the ground as she thought, it suddenly occurred to her that maybe Ran had simply darted off because she had a bad feeling. The young heiress to the Suzuki fortune snapped her fingers. Of course! She knew Ran had superstitious tendencies, especially when it came to love and, naturally, Shinichi. Their young detective friend had had a distinctly grey complexion by the end of the day, much to Sonoko's dismay, but maybe, just maybe...

"Ran you utter genius..." The young woman pumped her fist in the air. "But of course, you're off to nurse him back to health! What better way to rekindle your love after such a long separation."

Pausing only briefly to consider whether or not to leave her friend to it and resume shopping, Sonoko's curiosity soon got the best of her. Before the kids leaning against the nearby wall could think to mock her for thinking out loud, she was gone, the blue of her school uniform a smudged blur amongst the busy crowd of Haido's shopping district.

By the time the young woman reached the Mouri agency, the road was getting dark and quiet. The staff of the neighbouring café Poirot were bringing in their sign and stacking the outdoor furniture away, slowing down for a quiet clientèle of evening coffee aficionados. No lights appeared to be on in either the agency or the flat above, but she hadn't expected any. A wide grin on her face, Sonoko leaped up the stairs two by two, only to pause, puzzled, at the door to the flat. It was cracked open, unlocked, letting her peer at the dark greys and blues within. For a moment she thought the flat deserted, as she nervously opened the door, holding her satchel ready as a make shift weapon. If the door left open was the result of some ambitious thief, she would be ready to greet him.

A shout came, startling her. It was loud, close-by. The voice sounded female. Her heart faltered as she felt the pain, the sheer agony the cry was letting loose. It sounded nothing like the short outburst she would expect of lovers. The voice was definitely alone. The cry so alien, so out of place, that it took Sonoko a moment to calm her thundering heart and pluck up the courage to call out in turn.

"Ran...? Ran! Is that you? Are you okay?!" She stepped more boldly into the flat now, twirling as she looked around, beneath counters, behind doors. "Answer me!"

The voice had gone quiet now. Somehow Sonoko wasn't convinced it was Ran's. She could feel shivers running down her spine as she entered the hallway leading to the rest of the rooms: If not Ran, then who? And why in Ran's flat? As she glanced into the room that belonged to Ran's father, the one nearest to her, she could see no trace of the obnoxious guy that had caused so much heartache of late. Why wasn't he here? Why were his belongings scattered on the floor?

Her knuckles whitened as her grip on her satchel tightened... If only Makoto were here. Taking a deep breath, she schooled her face into one of calm as her mother had been trying to teach her for so

long. Sonoko Suzuki would face any intruder here with the heart of a lion. Cautiously, one foot after the other, she worked her way down the corridor to the one room with a closed door. It was Ran's room.

"Yah!" With a short yell, she hurled her bag at the door as it opened unexpectedly. Sonoko had blinked in her rush to defend herself, so it was only after her textbooks hurtled to the floor with a dull thud that she got to take the stranger in. Barely taking the time to think, she barked out.

"Where's Ran? What have you done with her?"

The stranger, who had ducked dramatically at Sonoko's response to her appearance, winced at the high volume of her request. The woman, as it turned out to be, straightened up, but still kept her gaze low, the tea coloured bangs under the hood of her top hiding her eyes. She didn't look armed. She only carried a small bag, a child's bag.

"Who are you?" Outrage suddenly overcoming fear, Sonoko prodded the intruder with her finger, her own eyes boring at where she presumed the stranger's would be. There was something irritatingly familiar about this person, familiar and out of place...

Taking a moment to observe her, Sonoko noted the odd choice of attire the woman was wearing. The hood was part of a blue and yellow body warmer, its branding old-fashioned, with a burgundy coloured long-sleeved t-shirt underneath. The cuffs of the latter barely reached the middle of the fore-arm, yet there was no jewellery, no watch on the wrist. Tan short trousers with an ornamental belt that matched neither the tops nor the shoes and socks puzzled the young Deduction Queen further. The stranger's light-coloured hair, its layered cut just visible, and the youth in her jaw all hinted at a personality that actually would've cared about fashion. Noticing the young Suzuki's scrutiny of her face, the stranger spoke at last.

"If you are looking for Miss Mouri, she is with Kudo at the hospital." The voice startled her. Though mature in tone and phrasing, it sounded as young as hers and its accent very familiar. Sonoko stepped back as she took in what the stranger had said.

"The... The Hospital...? Why?" Images of some sort of horrible incident came to mind, as she worried for her friends.

"Kudo has taken ill," the stranger replied, matter of fact, as she strode passed the shocked teenager. Pausing a moment at the door to the main room, the young woman addressed Sonoko once more, lifting the child's backpack for her to see. "When you speak to Miss Mouri next... Let her know that little Ai's family came by to pick her up."

In the half-light from the street-light coming through the living room door, Sonoko Suzuki could finally see the intruder's face properly. A melancholy smile and sad eyes struck her as odd among features that could easily have been on the front of a magazine. Turquoise eyes gleamed at her, allowing her at last to make the connection. She knew where she had seen this person before.

"You're...!" The surprise on the Teitan student's face must have been a sight, for the hooded woman paused just a moment longer to hear what she had to say. "That woman that came along with Kudo at the beauty pageant case, you're her. You're that Hairi person!"

Miss Hairi's only response was a smirk and a nod. With that, she was gone. Sonoko, left on her own in a dark and empty flat, waited for her embarrassment to die down before turning on the lights. Returning to the living room, closing the entrance door and sitting herself down, she breathed a heavy sigh before pulling out her mobile phone. It took her a moment before she could actually dial. Memories of the beauty pageant fluttered through her mind, of Ran's sad face as she watched Shinichi worry about his strange client, who'd appeared out of nowhere. It was only afterwards that Sonoko had learnt her name. Miss Hairi had been cold and aloof all evening. That had been the same night Shinichi had nearly died in an explosion.

Somehow, Sonoko decided, Miss Hairi's reappearance could only mean trouble. And what was the deal with the screaming anyway?

With a huge sigh of relief, Shiho Miyano skipped down the last few stairs out of the agency, only to pause a moment as her injured leg complained. She smiled as she watched the professor's beetle pull up. Sonoko Suzuki had no reason to make the link between Ai Haibara and herself, and hadn't hindered her departure, nor questioned too much. It was the best outcome she could have hoped for, considering the circumstances. Trust her to remember the Beauty Pageant incident though. Cold shivers still ran down her spine at the memory of that close encounter with the organisation, at how close Shinichi had been to having his secret uncovered by Ran.

Her smile vanished at the thought of the Detective's daughter. As Ai, she had very much enjoyed her company. She knew despite her own feelings that Ran had always been the one Kudo would hold a candle for. She didn't envy her the task of sitting by his side, waiting for the doctors to give their verdict. Shiho could only hope it would be a positive one. Meanwhile... Pulling her hood low as she stepped over to the professor's car and opened the passenger door, she silently vowed to herself that nothing bad would happen to Ran. Shinichi had mentioned Gin, and Shiho wasn't going to let her ex-supervisor endanger loved ones anymore.

"Professor..." She said as she sat in the seat, glad to see her mentor. Hiroshi Agasa's face was a study in teary eyed relief and worry renewed. His bushy moustache quivered and his wavy locks bounced as he rubbed a tear out of his eyes. Kindly putting a hand on his arm, she urged him gently with soft words. "Quickly, professor; we need to move."

With a vigorous nod of his head, the older man complied.

In a dark alleyway, next to a street facing bar where drinkers were just beginning to congregate, the man in the black coat and wool cap skulked against the door to an enclosure. His ice-cold blue eyes were squinting in pain as he fought to keep his balance. A day out in the damp and cold had done no good for his head wound. Pushing a strand of his silver hair aside, he forced himself upright, glaring at one of the drinkers who had noticed him. The tippler soon turned around, back to his pals and alcohol. What Gin wouldn't do for a shot of liqueur right now... But he had other priorities. Walking further down the street, he stopped by the light of an electronics store display. The only reason he had walked out of the shadows was so he could fish in his pockets for some pain-killers and something to stop the swelling. It should be there somewhere...

As his hand sifted through the contents of his coat, his gaze wandered over the various screens and gadgets facing him. One particular set caught his interest, his legendary hawk eyes spotting mention of one of his prey. The news item had already rolled off screen, but he kept watching, waiting for it to appear again. It was the local TV station's news report, and as the reporter faded out of view to show footage of one of the nearby hospitals, Gin grinned. He couldn't hear the voice over, but he could certainly read the text appearing alongside.

"Local teenage prodigy Shinichi Kudo admitted into Beika Central Hospital in a serious condition. Nature of sleuth's ailment still unconfirmed at this time."

Had the report just left it at that, Gin might have suspected a trap. However the reporters chose to show a clip of the young man being trolled into emergencies from an ambulance, concerned aides and friend at his side. There was nothing feigned or contrived about the youth's pale complexion or his lack of consciousness as his wheels hit the kerb.

As the news item faded out to one of more mundane concern, Gin popped his medication into his mouth and smirked. A deep chuckle rumbled out of his throat as he turned to face his newly found destination. Beika Central Hospital wasn't all that far from here. He would need to get a few supplies on the way, of course, but...

Fingering the gun hidden inside his jacket, the assassin took a deep breath. It was time for him to set his revenge in motion.

"Oh dear..." Her face white as she watched the flickering blue screen the professor had pulled out Shiho took in the news report with grave concern. "This can't be good."

"I had hoped to be wrong," the professor said quietly, arms resting heavily on the driving wheel. They had parked by a playground not far. "When you said Shinichi had been hospitalised, I couldn't help but think how the media would pounce on it, especially after that piece in the paper this morning..."

"What piece?" Her eyebrows knitted in confusion, she turned to face Hiroshi Agasa. "Professor, what's going on? What is there that I don't know about yet?"

Rubbing his eyes once more, the elderly inventor went to fish in his door compartment for the local newsprint. Handing it over to her, he gave her a sad smile. "Had he not told me the night before yesterday that Gin had survived the blast, I would have been glad of such a headline." Pointing at the young detective's face in the picture, he added. "That's the most like himself I've seen him all week."

Looking down at the daily rag, Shiho was quite unsettled to see her child self stare back up at her, fear in her eyes, confusion written all over her face. It was a startling mirror of how she felt right now: young, confused, kept in the dark... She glared at the investigating form of Kudo for fear that she might start tearing up.

"How come that case made it to the front page?" She asked. She remembered it well enough. It had taken Kudo all of half an hour or so to solve. "There weren't any celebrities involved, nor was the murder astoundingly remarkable..."

"Ah." The knowing tone the professor adopted as she tried to puzzle it out filled her stomach with dread. "I think you'll find, Ai, that where the media are concerned, Shinichi is the celebrity."

It took the portly gent a moment or two to read her silence. His face tired and eyes nostalgic, Hiroshi reminisced for her benefit. "Before he got shrunk," he began, "his name would be in the papers nearly every other day. He was the local pride, our young hero, saviour of the Japanese Police force! He would walk to school through gaggles of fans, and I lost count of how many times I would trip over his fan mail when visiting his house... Photographers and cameramen alike would fight over who would catch a shot of him using one of his catchphrases. If anything, your creation probably taught him a lesson in humility."

"..." After a short pause, Shiho shook her head and allowed herself a small smile. "No wonder he's so big-headed then... The idiot..."

It certainly explained his tendency to rush off ahead, paying little heed to caution whenever a case was involved, chasing glory and the thrill of a job well done. She recalled if maybe a touch too fondly the moment he had given her his glasses, somewhat inadequately comparing himself to Superman. If only...

"So, what else did he tell you, professor?" She asked with a silver-haired beast fresh in her mind. The scars from their confrontation atop the Haido City Hotel twanged with the memory. "Kudo pretty much collapsed as soon as he learnt that I had my memories back. I... All I know is that Gin is still on the loose..." Cold sweat ran down her neck as she considered the possibilities. "What of the others?"

"All dead," the professor confirmed. "The police found their bodies. Gin survived by finding young Hondou and forcing him to assist in his escape at gunpoint." His eyes gazed out the window, barely focussing on the play park's swings. "There is something I know that he doesn't though."

Though glad to know how Hondou was involved, Shiho was perplexed. The young auburn-haired woman had to ask. "Huh? What's that?"

"I know where Gin was yesterday morning." The serious and matter-of-fact way he said it sent shivers down her spine. Panic flowed through her veins as she tried to make sense of what he said. The mere idea of her nemesis being near the one person she would kill others to protect, as she had told Kudo the first time she had used that blasted toy gun, it was enough to freeze her in terror. Looking away from the children enjoying one last play before heading home, he noticed her fright just in time to appease it with a well placed pat on the shoulder. "Don't make that face, Ai. I don't think he knew me to see me."

"Where...? How..." The panicked tone of her questions caused him to squeeze her shoulder tighter in reassurance. "He didn't...?"

"He did nothing, Ai. He stood next to the crossing as I drove up to it, by the seven-eleven at the seaport's Harumi terminal. Near as ran him over..." The slight tremor in Hiroshi Agasa's voice hinted that the experience had been less mundane than he had tried to make it seem. "The man looked straight through me as though I wasn't there. But he's hurt, Ai. His long hair's been chopped off and he had bandages on his head that were filthy with his blood."

Wary after the fright the professor had just given her, Shiho took little solace in the news of Gin's injury. She knew from experience that he was the kind of predator that would be even more vicious for the pain.

"Yes..." The older man whispered, upon correctly assessing her thoughts. "I know that won't stop him. I know he's probably seen this rag..." Picking up the newspaper, he flung it onto the dashboard despondently. "And if he hasn't seen the evening news, I'm certain he'll hear of Shinichi's hospitalisation some other way. I just..."

She watched as his grip on the steering wheel tightened, as the animation in his face gave way to a grim determination. In all her time by the professor's side, she had never had the chance to see him so protective. The kind-hearted man was showing an iron will she would never have associated with him.

"I just think that, you know, we stand a chance now." His voice was quiet, but strong. He spoke with a certainty that she wished she shared. "He's alone. He's not at full strength."

"And he's got nothing to lose." Grinning at her guardian's appalled face she folded away the net book they had used to catch the news. A mischievous glint in her eye and her usual sarcasm recovered, Shiho Miyano clapped him on the hand in turn. "Don't worry professor, I get your meaning. Thank you."

Facing forwards, she cupped her chin in thought as she allowed herself a nervous smile. "Now we just need to come up with a plan."

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"Oh Shinichi..." Ran whispered, as finally they both broke out of the hug. Her voice gaining a couple of decibels, she went on. "Shinichi, you idiot...! You complete and utter mystery-obsessed fool. You stupid, stupid, stupid...!"

Chuckling until his stitches pulled and his stomach hurt, Shinichi caught her hand before she could vengefully thwack him in the thigh. Taking deep breaths until he could speak again, he let go with a shake of his head before sinking back down into his pillow, vertigo having taken over.

"Nice to see you too, Ran." He croaked with his cheeky grin still plastered all over his face. He looked exhausted, but the slight flush in his cheeks did more to reassure his childhood friend than a thousand insults.

"Humph..." Settling back into her chair, she gazed at him with more tranquil eyes than she had all week. "You never change, do you?"

For all response he pulled a face at her. His joy at being alive was making him feel childish, and

having Ran by his side reminded him of many a childhood antic. The pair stayed in companionable silence for several minutes, Ran sorting her hair, Shinichi breathing deep sighs of relief. At last their euphoria at his recovery faded away enough to let them indulge in more mellow feelings. Ran spoke up.

"Say, Shinichi," she began slowly. "Do you remember the words you told me in London?"

The troubled and embarrassed look he gave in response was enough for her to take a slightly cruel pleasure in bringing it up. His cheeks starting to glow, she chose to quote him.

"The heart of a woman that one likes, how can someone accurately deduce that?" She quipped, her eyes taking on a malicious glint before she looked away, embarrassed in turn. "I never did answer your declaration, did I?"

"N-No..." He admitted, pulling his blanket up to his chin in order to hide his face, heavy-lidded eyes giving him the spurned childish look that she so associated with Conan. The swell of sisterly feelings in her breast gave her the courage to go on.

"It's taken me a while to figure out, and for the longest time, Shinichi, I just couldn't... I couldn't face you in London without this knot of feelings in my heart, without my emotions getting the better of me and freezing me to the spot. It was the same afterwards, whenever Sonoko would prompt me, or you'd be on the phone. I just froze, evaded the subject, content in the knowledge of your feelings for me."

Shinichi remained silent. Considering the circumstances that had forced the declaration out of him in the first place, she knew he understood.

"The truth is..." She paused, not completely certain how to phrase her meaning. "The truth... Shinichi, the truth is... I do love you." Ran no longer dared to look him in the face, instead focussing on the rise and fall of his midsection. His breath seemed to have caught in his throat, just as it had in hers. Continuing quickly for fear that she might stall and not get it all out, Ran went on. "And as you said, love has got to begin somewhere... And love beginning from zero means many things."

"Su... Such as...?" The smallness of his voice pulled at her heart-strings. Closing her eyes in order to avoid any distraction, she raised her hand to keep him quiet. Ran didn't want her fear of hurting him to stop her from getting this confession off her chest.

"I... It means Shinichi that love can evolve, take on many forms. Like that for a parent, a friend..." Here she took the risk. Opening her eyes to gaze into his and clasping her hand over Shinichi's, Ran tilted her head as she emphasized the last few words of her answer. She hoped her tender smile would help soften the blow. "For a brother..."

"Ran..." With a small pout and red cheeks, Shinichi seemed to be taking her answer pretty well, considering. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could even detect the hint of a sarcastic grin beginning to form. Blushing in turn, she resisted the urge to thump him for his retort. "So how on earth did you manage to figure out that you love me like a brother?"

"Ouch!" Turns out she couldn't resist very long. Shinichi squirmed. "Hey, it's a valid question!"

Blushing furiously, Ran mumbled a response under her breath, so low that Shinichi had to ask her to repeat herself.

"I said," She went with a touch of frustration, fringe dancing before her frowning eyes, "when little Conan went back to his parents, I discovered that I missed you both to the same degree. I... For me, you're both like little troublesome brothers."

"Humph..." She had expected Shinichi to make some hurtful comeback, to call the young boy names for confusing her feelings like that. Instead, he... "I see."

Looking at him with a puzzled expression, she got her chance to see the mature, collected detective he'd become during his absence. Eyes staring at the ceiling, his expression peaceful, he had a small

smile that, she knew, would make the heart of many a woman melt.

"What do you see?" Curious, the dark-haired woman couldn't help but wonder. Gone were her days of finding that she could read his every move. Instead, now that she had gotten the truth off her chest, she found that she could fully indulge in feelings of pride and admiration for her childhood friend.

"I... Even though I..." Shaking his head, Shinichi began anew, this time his bright blue eyes gazed directly at hers, like two crystal-like pools of truth. His voice had the warm timber she could never quite get the full extent of over the phone. "Your heart knows what I wouldn't let your eyes see. Ran, it is time I told you the truth. All of it..."

Her heart skipped a beat.

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It wasn't, Shiho decided, much of a plan. It was, however, the best that she and the professor could have come up with in so short a time. Knowing Gin, knowing what little she could decipher of the situation, time was something Kudo didn't have much of.

Leaning nonchalantly against the wall of an out building, the young woman kept her hood down low, pretending it was just against the drizzle that had started to fall from the sky. She was keeping her ears wide open. This was the small part of the hospital where staff and nurses would hang out for their cigarette break and to complain about various patients. Just around the corner from the bins she was hiding behind, a couple of interns were battling it out against the elements to enjoy their daily intake of nicotine. It was a long shot, Shiho knew, but maybe, just maybe...

"Fancy that Kudo guy making the news..."

"I know," said another voice, amongst various grumbles and the clicking of a damp lighter.

"Already got a message from my girl asking me to get her his autograph. Fan girls, honestly..."

A chuckle followed by a crack and a small smell of sulphur. "Here, try this," after a muttered thanks, the woman's voice continued. "Why's he such a big deal anyway? I passed by his room just now. He's just a boy."

"Ah..." The man replied a short cough interrupting him. "That'll be because you only transferred here this summer. He's a crime solver, one of the best. Keeps showing up when the fuzz are at a loss and making it seem like child's play. He'd regularly make the headlines this time last year."

"Is he really that good?" The doubt in the female intern's voice made Shiho smile. It reminded her of her own reservations when she had first met the young detective.

"They say he's the best sleuth the nation's got. I'd easy wager that half our prisons are filled with murderers he's caught." A silence some mutterings that the hidden listener couldn't quite make out, followed by a question. "So... Hum... Which room's he in, this wonder-boy? Only it's my girl's birthday coming up soon, and she did ask..."

"Room 1145 I think, the one at the end of the corridor in the trauma ward, first floor. Use the lift nearest the A&E in the main building; it'll take you right there."

"Cheers!" A scraping as a cigarette is stubbed against the wall. "Come on, we'd better get back indoors. This drizzle's giving me goose bumps."

Holding her breath, the young woman wearing the body warmer and hood waits until both of the hospital's staff members are back indoors. Then and only then does she allow herself a smile.

"Found him!" She whispers. She sighs in relief as she leans back against the wall, drinking in a last moment of peace before she dives into a potential rescue mission. It could be suicide. She doesn't care.

Tapping her shoes against the wall to get the damp out, she allows herself a moment to enjoy the

sensation of having ones on that fit. Of the three times prior that she had returned to her body, Shiho had been barefoot for two and had only found a pair of loafers that were too big the other. She didn't miss the friction on her toes and ankle, the bite of cold, or the sharp pain of fire and wood on her soles.

As her hand swipes away a lock of hair from her cheek, her fingertips feel the raised edge of an old scar. It's only been several months, but it feels like a life-time since that first post-betrayal encounter with Gin. The scrape along her cheekbone has healed well. She has no doubt that by the time the night is done fresh cuts might come and join it. She is not afraid. Not yet.

Warily, she looks up to the surveillance camera under which she had found her hiding spot. Unlike that time where she and Conan had unwittingly returned to their true forms together, she wasn't going to let herself get caught on tape. She hadn't thought Gin or Vodka would've caught the live showing of the Miss Japanesque ceremony, but she did think that the security footage of one of Tokyo's busiest hospitals would be under a lot of scrutiny. If she wanted her plan to succeed, the last thing she wanted was for the Hospital's security to march her into Gin's grasp. Kudo's hospitalisation was a big enough risk already.

A glint in her eye as she pulls a phone from her pocket, the young woman checks the time: Twenty to nine at night already. If she wants to use the guise of a visitor, she had better get in quick. With a short beep, the mobile device is turned off. Glancing around, she waits till the camera is pointing away from the staff smoking area before sneaking in.

This time, Shiho won't be the one waiting.

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*To be continued...*



A quick look at his wristwatch and Kogoro gives a sigh. To say that a fortnight ago he would have been home starting on a six-pack of beer at this time. Ran would be out collecting some ingredients for dinner and the brat, Conan, would have been playing with his friends. As it is he's still neck deep in paperwork and files, his fellow sufferer Takagi has abandoned him following a message from his girlfriend. He can hear him talking in hushed tones with inspector Megure. Obviously his missus isn't happy. Kogoro can't care less. The sooner they get through this mountain of evidence, the sooner their lives will resume with normalcy.

Then his phone rings. Checking the display, he notices that it's the Suzuki kid. Why on earth would she call him at five thirty in the afternoon? Isn't she with Ran, indulging in some post-school window shopping exercise? Could it be...?

"Hello?" he answers gruffly, trying not to let his sudden worry takeover.

"Hey, old man, have you heard from Ran at all?" The young girl sounds puzzled and a bit shaken. "I can't find her and she's not answering her phone..."

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## **Chapter 18: \*Gin\*.**

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Nine o'clock chimes quietly through the corridors as the speaker system springs to life. Announcing the end of visitor hours, the voice through the intercom sounds weary, as though certain that nobody is listening. Why should they bother? Only a few visitors remain that haven't left already, and the nurses in charge of checking the wards will soon send them out the door. The crackle of the message being cut short followed by a quiet jingle leave silence to reign once more. A shadow flits through the corridors, the tell-tale blue of a patient's gown floating from their shoulders. Soft sandals stride passed closed doors, the

muffled sound of coughing and machinery beeping punctuating every step. There is a clear purpose in the person's gait, a certain resentment built up within their masculine shoulders. Choppy short hair sways sharply as the clack of a door shutting puts the man on alert. Someone is coming.

Hiding quickly in the doorway of a darkened room, the shadowy figure breathes a small sigh of relief at seeing that the figure is not their nemesis. A girly figure and a sweet smile on her face, the young high-school student does a little twirl out of room 1145. She pauses momentarily, as though containing her joy. The man in hiding feels his heart sink. Such happiness must mean...

No matter, this doesn't change things. Pocketing the scissors he'd taken as an improvised weapon, he takes a deep breath. This is it. This is why he's here. He counts to twenty before following the girl down the corridor, eyes alert to every shadow, ears cocked for every sound.

As Eisuke Hondou begins shadowing Ran Mouri's footsteps, he only just misses the arrival of another intruder in the hospital's trauma ward.

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Well, Shinichi thought, I never dreamt that that would go down so well.

As he sinks back into his pillow, the mask on his face forcing deliciously pure if antiseptic air into his lungs, Shinichi Kudo plays back the last few minutes in his mind. His head had felt a bit dizzy during the retelling, and there had been a few moments where he had hesitated and considered leaving details out... But he had done it. He had told Ran the truth of what had happened all those months ago in Tropical Land. He had explained the real reasons why, as an Osakan teenager had once pointed out, he had never really felt the urge to ask her how she was, to find out what he'd been missing out on... He even told her how he had gone about tricking her all those times he'd shattered her most justified suspicions: like that time during the play, that phone call in London, and more importantly that one time with his

mother.

"That didn't work, by the way..." Ran had said simply, with a blush and a smile. "I just figured..."

"That I had my reasons." He had sighed. "I know..."

Shinichi grins at the memory of the exchange. It was nice for his doubts too to be put to rest. He had expected many punches more, in all honesty. Instead he got to see Ran's face turn purple for a moment, as she inevitably thought back to all the moments she had shared with a not-so-innocent little boy. Once the colour left her cheeks, however, he was privileged with the gift of the most beautiful smile he had ever seen on her face. One that he felt could champion all his ambitions as a detective, a smile of vindication and pure pleasure in enjoying the simple rightness of truth.

Speaking of truth...

Now that his feelings and guilt towards Ran have been untangled, he is still left with a knot in his gut. As Ran, upon noticing his obvious fatigue, had given him a gentle hug and bid him farewell, his mind had already started drifting to the other puzzle plaguing his mind.

A tea-coloured blur comes across his vision as he feels his body protest once more. Too many emotions, he has let himself down by allowing his health to reach such a low, but still he feels the need to push. A thought occurs to Shinichi as his sight and consciousness begin to fade, no, a word: Silver...

He must have passed out. One second his sight had gone black, and the next she is standing there, before him, a silhouette backlit in blue. Her shape is that of an adult. He must be dreaming...

"Miyano..." He whispers. To his own ears his voice sounds small and surprised.

"Humph... No more given names, huh?" Though her timbre of voice is mellower and more feminine than when he last heard it, it is definitely her. The young man would recognise that sarcastic bite anywhere. She continues on as she comes to lean upon his bed's side. "Not that I ever told you my true first name. Look at the state of you Kudo... I'm glad you can recognise me at all."

A tingling sensation of warmth floats across his cheek. She is pulling away a strand of hair. She is close. She is dizzying. She is real.

"Shiho." He blurts out, just as he realises that this is no dream. She is truly there. He barely restrains a swearword as he lets slip one of the rare scraps of information about her that she didn't know he had found out. This is embarrassing. "I... How..?"

Eyes wide, Shiho Miyano takes a moment to digest the sound of her true name escaping from his lips.

"When did you...? No it doesn't matter..."

He watches as she delicately folds her arms across her chest. The pose looks slightly more awkward than he is used to. He congratulates himself on not allowing the distinctive curves of her figure colour his face.

Damn that woman for catching him in a moment of weakness. The surgical operation that he must have undergone has badly affected his defences with regards to the depth of intrigue and wonder that his comrade stirs in him. He focuses on her soft green irises in an effort to regain focus. He wants answers.

The eyes in question crinkle as she smirks. Yes, she will elaborate for his benefit. The question must be written all over his features.

"How I got my body back? With the antidote of course..."

"But we... The professor and I, we looked everywhere for it." He whispers, putting into words the reason for his confusion.

"I thought you might have done. Had I not hidden it, we might not have had to live out the charade that this past week has been." She looks away a moment, her eyes suddenly looking very sad. "Sorry. I'm afraid your promise that you would end the organisation that day didn't stop me from taking some precautions in my paranoia. I hid the spare antidote pill in the very same gun that sent you here."

A vague recollection of a small red and white speck appearing as the rose gun fired gives Shinichi some succour. Of all the places, that would have been the very last he would have thought to check. Trust Haibara.

No. Not Haibara anymore. Shiho.

"I can call you Shiho then?" The young man asks drowsily. He can hear the voices of children playing in his head, memories of a little girl asking for permission from her friend to use her first name. It feels as though a lifetime has passed, and yet...

A very familiar sigh, followed by an expression he has never seen before on her face.

"If you must."

It takes him a moment to decipher the emotion on her face. His instincts kicking back into gear, he manages to shove away the mental cotton numbing his senses and thoughts as he frowns and focuses. Pushing himself up on his elbow, pulling the oxygen mask away from his face, he leans towards her the better to see.

Eyes turned away from him, Shiho Miyano, the woman he once knew only as Ai Haibara, has a determination in her jaw that echoes that of her given name. Something in her has changed. He would never have expected her to allow him to use her given name, even if it were an alias. The look about her, the way she's watching the door to the room...

Shinichi remembers now what it was he tried to recall when he passed out. Gin is on his way. That would be the only reason for Shiho to be

here. That must be why...

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The sleeve of her blazer slides deftly away from her wrist, as Ran Mouri goes to check the time. It is nine o'clock, on the dot. As though to reinforce this information, and echo the announcement she heard as she left Shinichi's room, a nurse spots her walking down the corridor and hails.

"Visiting time is over! Please make your way to the exit, miss."

Bowing her head to express understanding, the dark haired maiden then quickens her steps towards the stairs and starts making her way down. She had no idea that she had been there that long. Over three hours have been and gone in a flash. No wonder, really, with the emotional rollercoaster that the evening has put her through... It is the first time since arriving at the hospital that she even has the time to think that maybe she ought to call her father. Good heavens, she should phone Sonoko too! After abandoning her so abruptly in the shopping mall, what was her best friend to think? Spying the downpour out the window that, by the sound of its great sheets of rain has now started in earnest, Ran curses her lack of umbrella. She has but a thin jacket to brave the elements, and there is no way she would be heard if she were to make a call in that, let alone manage to keep her mobile dry.

With a sigh, she fishes out the telecommunications device from her satchel, ready to turn back on, as she spies an area reserved for urgent phone calls at the foot of the stairs. She is going to impose on the hospital staff a moment longer. She'll try to keep the calls short.

After what seems to be an age, she manages to get through to her father... The phone seems to struggle to find a connection, as though the other end is already mid-call. Her father couldn't still be working at this hour, could he? But no, as the great sleeping detective Kogoro Mouri answers, she soon finds out the cause.

"Ran! At long last! I've been worried sick, phoning all the hospitals in

the area looking for you... Of all the..." His fatherly diatribe goes on a while longer, stressing his fret and worry, reminding her of her duties as his daughter. She can understand his concern, but phoning all the hospitals just because she didn't turn up on time to make dinner and has her phone switched off? Really, dad, especially when he hasn't been coming back from work all week till half eight in the evening? Kogoro takes the petulant retort in his stride. "While we're on the subject, Sonoko's still here, I..."

The sound of a handset being neatly snatched from one hand by another is followed by the thin voice of her friend and classmate. "Hey Ran... Sorry, I called your dad. I came by your flat after you disappeared on me only to find the place near empty."

"Empty?" Worry flutters in Ran's breast as she recalls the young amnesic girl she had left under Eisuke's protection. Had he? "What about Ai? ...and Ei- I mean Hondou?"

"Huh, Hondou was here?" The surprise coming through the tinny speaker sounds genuine. Sonoko really has no idea that Eisuke should've been there. Did the silver-haired man her friend mentioned...?! "So that's what you meant when you said not to worry about him anymore, that he'd been found? Huh. Maybe he's the one who called little Ai's family then..."

"What?" Ran still recalls the conversation about Ai's family quite vividly. Shinichi and the professor had both agreed that she had no one left... Who then was this family that Sonoko mentioned? "T-Tell me, Sonoko... When you said near empty, did you...?"

"I came across one of Ai's relatives as she was picking up the last of the little girl's things. The door to the flat was wide open Ran. Everywhere was dark. I thought you were being burgled!" Sonoko's reply does little to reassure the young woman's fears.

"What did they look like? I..." She dreads to ask the question, but now that she knows the truth behind Shinichi's disappearance, she can't help but have her own theories about the young auburn haired child's

demeanour. It only makes her worry further. "Was it a tall man with cold eyes or...?"

"What?" A laugh followed by a chirpier tone. The words that come next do wonders for Ran's heart. "No, not at all: it's quite the opposite in fact. It was a young woman. Do you remember Miss Hairi, from the Miss Japanesque contest? It was her, the woman that came there with Kudo."

Ran Mouri freezes to the spot. Relief sweeps through her like a wave as the dark and twisted scenario she imagined is irrevocably dismissed. Miss Hairi had been Shinichi's protégée during that case. She recalls, with added fondness now that her feelings towards Shinichi have been straightened out, how determined he had been to protect that woman. The way that her childhood friend had looked at Miss Hairi... Even if he still doesn't realise it, Ran is glad. Besides, she has her own suspicions as to how Miss Hairi came to be in the flat.

"Ran?" The Suzuki daughter's voice sounds worried at her friend's silence. "Ran, are you okay?"

"Ah... No. Yes..." While shaking her head, the Mouri girl smiles into the phone. "I'm fine. Sorry. I was just thinking of Shinichi."

"Ah, yes..." Sonoko, sounding quite relieved, enquires after him. "Miss Hairi told me he'd taken ill. How is your hubby? Can you also ask him why his friend felt the need to scream in an empty building?"

Rolling her eyes at Sonoko's flippant tone and chosen nickname for the teenage sleuth, Ran twirls around while cradling her elbow. She has been looking out the window as the lights throughout the hospital darken, leaving her to gaze at the dreary black night outside. Not wanting to think of the horrendous weather she is going to suffer to get home, she instead thinks of how the scream Sonoko mentions fits in perfectly with her personal theory. It does not however explain where Eisuke vanished to... Thinking of whom, Ran can't help but feel a heavy weight in her stomach.



"I... Shinichi's fine..." It's not even worth fighting the hubby nickname till they have time for a proper girly chat. Ran is tired. She can see someone who looks like a doctor coming towards her, probably to lead her out. "It was a bit touch and go for a while, but he's recovering better than anticipated. Tell me..."

She needs to ask the question quickly. The doctor's reaching for the handle to the glassed off area.

"Was there really no sign...?"

She momentarily bites her lip in worry as the door opens and she finishes her question. Shyness causes her to look away. Forgetting herself, she uses the missing boy's given name.

"...of Eisuke?"

The answer is turned into garbled noise as suddenly she makes eye contact with the stranger before her. Frosty blue eyes, the colour of a deadly glacier, send her phone tumbling to the tiled ground. Recognition hits her as a wave of nausea makes her head spin. This is the man from that rollercoaster ride. He is the one after Shinichi, after Eisuke!

"Sorry to startle you, Miss," there is no sense of regret in the man's deep voice. In fact she can even detect a hint of sadistic mirth. The joyous tone in his voice doesn't last long however, the following words out of his mouth sending an alarming chill down her spine. "You are going to take me to Shinichi Kudo's room."

There is no questioning him. Beneath his slapdash disguise she can see a blood-stained suit. The feverish gleam to his face equals that of the gun he has just shoved under her chin. He remains alert, watching her every move.

The man known as Gin, Ran feels, has little patience for karate.

"Damn it!"

The little transmitter sparks to life, static fluctuating along with the fear in the young man's voice.

"What is it, Hondou?" Jodie Starling, her hair flattened by the water falling from the heavens, manages to keep her sharp retort low. Huddled against the wall of one of the homes near the hospital, she is keeping a keen eye on one of its many exits.

"He's got her... Gin's in the hospital. He's caught Ran!" Hondou's reply chills Jodie to the bone. Her parka is of little use against the assault of anything other than mild weather. Hand on her pistol, the American woman counts to three in a vain effort to control her emotions. Shuu was right. She isn't cut out for this sort of thing. She can't just sit back and wait while friends and allies face the enemy. Curse James Black for stopping them from rushing into the hospital en masse.

But they can't afford to start a gun fight in a place with so many civilians. They can't run the risk of Gin spotting them and getting away. They have to wait till the very last minute...

James is right. They shouldn't even have Hondou an untrained, unaffiliated young man put himself in such a risky situation... Yet they sorely need the eyes inside, as the brave teenager has just demonstrated.

"What's he doing? Is... Is she alright?" If anything happened to that angelic child... Biting her lip, Jodie forces her past months as English teacher away from her thoughts. She needs to focus.

"Yes, for now... I'm following them. I think he's forcing her to lead him to Kudo."

Crumbs, that means he probably considers her disposable. Eyes scanning the surrounding area once more, sharply looking through the sheets of rain to the darkened streets and muddy grass, the FBI agent wonders the

obvious question.

"How did he get in? Do you know?"

"The crook's in disguise..." A hushed whisper, quick intake of breath and momentary radio silence is followed by a sigh. "It's a poor disguise as well: a simple lab coat, badge and black wig. He's posing as a doctor, and none of the staff seem to question him..."

"... It figures..." Remembering the time they were guarding Kir, a black organisation member who'd been in a coma, Jodie knows that hospital staff are often rushed off their feet, sleep deprived and focussed on little else but the task at hand. The staff never questioned the FBI's presence, even outwith visiting hours provided they showed an authorisation. She also remembers something else, a comment Shuu made once... What was it already, something about Gin having an aura that forbade all enquiries?

"Keep an eye on him, but stay safe. We'll do what we can to protect young Miss Mouri." Before the young man can answer, she switches the channel on her encrypted and water-proofed walkie-talkie. "James?"

Her mentor and superior doesn't need asking twice, his centre of operations allowing him access to Hondou's transmissions as well.

"Akai's in position. Camel's making his way to the nearest route out. I'm having everyone on standby ready to rush in on my signal." His voice more gentle, he adds for Jodie's personal reassurance. "Don't worry, Jodie. We won't let what happened to Kir repeat itself. Make your way to the trauma ward's fire exit. James out."

The foreign woman stays a moment looking gloomily at her handset. That's right. Kir, as the announcer Rena Mizunashi had been known to the black organisation, had died despite the FBI's best efforts. A mole for the CIA, Hidemi Hondou had been Eisuke Hondou's older sister. Uncovering Shuu's whereabouts after his feigned death, which Jodie still has issues dealing with, led to Kir's undoing. Gin had made a point of executing

the young woman in front of her FBI allies. Jodie will never forgive him.

She has a feeling that young Hondou, despite being unclear about the details, won't either.

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"Shiho! Enough with that scary face!"

A rasp, a cough: Shinichi's throat protests at the loud volume of his request. The woman before him takes a moment to change. Her eyes, wide and intense, were staring at the room's door with antagonism that he can't ever recall seeing. Her expression, even as she turns to face him, is cold and marble-like. Her hands, pale and blue against her burgundy sleeves, hold her arms in an iron grip: the only clue as to the turmoil in her soul. Her gaze softens as she looks into his eyes, but not before he gets a glimpse of the woman she was before, of Sherry.

"Don't fret too much..." She says gently, her tone that of his loyal companion. The tenderness he can feel in her words is at odds with her stance, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why. Smirking at an object on his bedside table, she goes on. "Time isn't something we have an indefinite supply of. It's best not to worsen your health with unnecessary worry."

He glimpses something metallic hiding under her body warmer. He recognises the tension in her shoulders from a bus heist months prior. This girl, she...

"Tell me... Shiho..." His breaths are shallow, but Shinichi is only worried about one thing.

Despite the pitter-patter of rain and the odd howl of wind beating against the window of the room, the sound of feet stomping down the corridor can be heard. Something tells them that those are not the steps of a mere orderly. Shinichi doesn't have much time.

"Shiho, what do you intend to do, now that you're back in your own body? Where will you go?"

A pause, a look on her face as though only just now considering the question: Shiho gives him a small resigned smile. His heart sinks.

"You asked me, back at Mouri's flat, what it was that caused my amnesia..." Gently, she steps away from him, her hands lightly stroking the sheet as she turns her back to him. It is so typical of her to ignore his question in favour of raising new ones. "I'll tell you now, mister detective..."

As she takes another few steps away from his bed, the back of her head hiding her emotions, Shinichi can feel his heart sink. The small voice of his fears, hidden for years in the back of his mind, pipes up: Is this her final farewell? No. It can't be... He won't allow it.

"Shiho..." He groans. If only he didn't feel so weak, so battered...

"When the explosion happened... After Gin shot at you and I..." She begins quietly, her voice as soft as a bird's. The now dimmed lightning of the room fuels her hair with gold and fire as it sways to reveal her face, the corner of an eye, the noble profile of her nose... A fleeting flash of regret and she turns away once more.

"I want to keep secrets no more." Her hand glides down her back, pulling the metallic object from her belt. "I don't want any regrets. I'm no longer going to hide."

With her gun in her hand and her head twisted one more time, Shiho Miyano gives him the saddest smile he has ever seen on her face. She stands in the doorway, like a maiden from an old English painting: soft, vulnerable, unreachable...

"I love you. The mere thought of losing you is more than I could ever bear."

Three words: that is all it takes. The great detective, Shinichi Kudo,

sits in his sickbed, unable to utter a sound or move as his brain goes into overdrive. His heart feels warm and large in his chest. He is confused, but acutely aware of the young woman before him as she pushes open the door. She slips out of view, just, only for a word to reach his ears and turn his blood cold.

It isn't a word spoken with love. It is one of pure hate.

"Sherry."

Gin had found them.

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To be continued...

*The rain is a nuisance. It makes it hard to see, distorts what little light comes through the windows of the darkened hospital rooms. The man stares long and hard through his magnifying eye-piece, hands gripped loosely around his rifle. The room in particular that he is observing only has one occupant now, the second bed available left vacant. The trauma ward is going through a blissfully empty spell, but he doubts it will be for long. As the wind howls passed his waterlogged locks and hat, he can just about make out the sound of ambulance sirens. Cars will swerve and tires will skid in such stormy weather. Whatever staff the hospital has available will probably all be in the accident and emergency centre right now. A small blessing, considering the fish he is angling for in the hospital wing before him.*

*Wait. Wait a minute...*

*There's someone else in the room.*

*Who is it? A girl? Did the sleeping detective's daughter return?*

*He grits his teeth.*

*No. She has auburn hair. She has the distinctive silhouette of one he had sworn to protect.*

*Impossible...*

*Akai Shuichi is not a fool though. As he sees the young woman return to the door to his room, his decision is quickly made. It is time to find a better spot.*

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## **Chapter 19: Jin and Sherry.**

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"Sherry."

The young teenage child looks up at him. Her auburn locks gleam with fire as the light of the shooting range catches them. Turquoise eyes look him up and down. He sees her shiver. Gin is both mildly disappointed and thoroughly impressed.

"She-rry..."

He stands there now, in the hospital, a hostage standing between him and the now eighteen year old traitor. He longs to turn his gun to her, to put an end to her unforgiving gaze. But he must wait. He has but one question for her...

"Gin."

He still remembers how terrifyingly young her voice had seemed back then. He was only twenty-five, and he had been the youngest member to become the organisation's best shot, ever. Seeing a fellow codenamed member who'd only barely reached puberty, let alone finished, was like an ice-cold shower. His ego was undeniably deflated. The boss had probably intended that when he had asked Gin to train this new codenamed recruit fresh from America. The older woman, probably a guardian but more the red herring as he thought of her now, left them to train.

"Gin."

Her inflection never changes. Disinterested, deliberately dismissive, it flatters him though. She hasn't betrayed the organisation, the family, to the point where she can insult him by using his birth name. But she isn't so good at hiding her emotions any more: he can see her hand shaking as she lifts up the gun in her hand. There is clear concern in her eyes for the unfortunate girl he has taken hostage, the friend of the detective whose room they stand before.

His eyes glaze over a moment as he sees her hands wrapped around the handgun's hilt. Here she is, an adult, holding her weapon in the exact same way he'd taught her. Unwavering, the steadiness in

her arms is backed up by the resolve in her eyes, just as it had been back then, in that dusty shooting range. Gin fights a moment the tears threatening to swell in his eyes. His fever must be returning. The girl before him is no longer the child he taught in the range, despite the nature of the guise she has been hiding under. She is no longer the one he'd treated like a protégée in the big family that is, no was the organisation. A family that comes before blood relatives and thanks to her, it is no more.

"Tell me..." He tastes blood on his lip. He has never been this angry. He thought to have a nice, drawn-out and calm revenge. It turns out the boss's death affects him more than he could have guessed. His teeth grind out the next few words. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your true guise?"

She stands there, mute as a statue, the shadows of raindrops peppering her glum, unmoving face. Gin is certain that she feels no remorse for leading the organisation to its demise. He's ready to bet that she thinks Shinichi Kudo's astounding beheading of the organisation was the "good" thing to do.

There's no such thing as good and evil. He's certain to have told her that many a time. The only thing that dictates right and wrong is loyalty... Gin, most loyal of all the boss's crows is determined to teach her that for good.

"Let her go."

The sound of her voice takes him by surprise. He momentarily lowers his Beretta. His hostage, too astonished to speak, slackens her grip against the choking hold of his arm. He can feel the black haired girl shiver. Gin smirks. He laughs.

"Make me."

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The corridor that had only fifteen minutes prior been peaceful and mundane now has a rather nightmarish appearance. Ran is no longer alone, rejoicing in the sweet truce of truth in a well lit environment. The windows that had previously been content to reflect the soft yellow tones of the walls rather than show the weather are now bleak and black curtains of hammering rain. She no longer feels the soft residual warmth of the hug she had given Shinichi while leaving. Instead she is treated to the cold uncaring touch of metal as her captor rams his gun back against her throat, hissing menacingly as he faces the other girl before them.

Hairi... No, Haibara... In the momentary respite the murderer's surprise gives her, she takes a deep gulp of air and widens her stance. Now that she knows the truth of Shinichi's case, of Conan's true identity, it doesn't take her long to put two and two together with regards to the young woman holding a gun pointed at Gin. Though she still doesn't fully understand why the criminal called the other woman Sherry, it seems immediately obvious now that the possibility is no longer being discounted: Hairi-san as she was called during the Miss Japanesque investigation is indeed Haibara. The two look identical, and Ran easily recognises the clothes that she is wearing from her own wardrobe. It doesn't stop her from reeling in shock at seeing the same girl handling a gun with deadly looking precision, when only a few days ago she had been crying into her shirt after having a nightmare.

"Ah... Ai..." She whispers before catching her lip. Ran mustn't attract the fake doctor's attention, not if she wants to be able to escape the situation at the first opportune moment. Though the eerie ambience that now reigns is off-putting, she pushes her fears aside and calls back to mind her karate training.

She knows this is no tournament. It is a matter of life or death. It is reason more to focus. The moment her opponent's gun moves away far enough...

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Naoto Matsumura, a thirty something intern at the Beika Central Hospital is nervously twirling a piece of card in his hands. With the accustomed slowness that causes him normally to use stairs



rather than take the lift, the numbers on the elevator's display change from nought to one. As he awaits the ping and opening of the doors, he glances at the improvised recipient for what he hopes his girlfriend will consider the gift of a life time. A hastily cut out photo of a high-school student bent over a body; the newsprint is sloppily pasted to a piece of white board he salvaged from the shop's bins. It looks crap. He sighs.

The things he does for love... Naoto only hopes that his girl, Saika, is a big enough fan of the kid to let slide his slapdash effort. Well, at least it gets him away from A&E for a short while... Drunken students and careless drivers are already starting to trickle in, and it won't be long before clumsy kids and unfortunate elderly find themselves surrounded by the chaos that is his daily routine. It is good to take a short break before the worse of it arrives. Scratching what little stubble is left of his shaved head of hair, he steps out and starts to navigate his way around the stairwell to the corridor he is after. Sign posts guide his steps, and it is not long before he is pacing down the forty strong succession of rooms.

Room 1145, isn't it? Naoto starts reading the signs on the doors: room 1140, Mrs Nakano... Room 1141 the following label reads; Mr Nishida, Miss Matsumoto and Mr Hasegawa. He can hear the soft bleeping and wheezing coming from the occupants. The next few rooms, 1142 through to 1144, are empty, having either been occupied by lucky folk who were recently released back to their homes or... Naoto tries to ignore the shudder down his spine, pushes the thought away. Not everyone who goes to hospital makes it out alive. It's a fact, best not to dwell on it.

He pauses, just at the junction that would take him to room 1145 onwards or to the ramp down to the next ward. He's an idiot. Naoto never even considered that the teenager might be in no fit state to sign something for his fan-girl of a girl friend. He hangs a moment, leaning against the wall, pondering whether to go on or not. It doesn't take long. He can already picture Saika's face in his mind, querying why he didn't even check... He will have to if he wants to face her in the morning with his head held high.

Naoto Matsumura strides around the corner. He expects an empty wing, idly lit by streetlight outside and the small glow of emergency lights. He doesn't expect there to still be visitors. He doesn't expect to see a doctor at all, let alone one holding a young girl hostage; not while another girl is pointing at the doctor with what looks suspiciously like a... Like a gun...

"Eeh!?" A startled whimper escapes his lips. The card slips from his sweaty fingers. The doctor swerves around as he does. Naoto's shoes slip on the linoleum floor as he fights to keep his balance. He doesn't see the cruel smirk on the doctor's face. He can't see the gun now trailed at him. The nurse doesn't even notice the cleaning trolley, let alone the silhouette of a stranger leaping out from within its curtained shelving.

In that split second, all that Naoto Matsumura sees is darkness. Pain ripples through him. A deafening whistle robs him of all sounds. The intern falls, his legs suddenly turning to jelly. The only other sensation, as he begins to lose consciousness, is a familiar yet unpleasant feeling of warm liquid covering his hands...

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Hearing Gin's voice is enough to rob Shinichi of all self control. The breathing mask is ripped away without a second thought. His stomach protests painfully as he forces weakened legs to the floor. He grabs onto the trolley holding up his drip as he struggles to stand. It will have to come with him. Dizziness takes over a moment. The trolley alone cannot carry his weight. His good hand lands heavily on the bedside cabinet. The touch of cold metal helps him focus. Time, he's running out of time. Grabbing the watch, he straightens up. Breathing deeply, he starts to make for the door when he hears the gunshot: The first gunshot. His blood turns to ice.

"No..." He whispers hoarsely. "No!"

The room swims as he shuffles towards the door. Shinichi cannot think beyond it. Pest his ill health,

Shiho! He must save Shiho!

A shout reaches his ears, a voice he recognises but cannot place. The yell that follows on the other hand...

"Ran? Ran!?" What is she still doing here? No... It can't be. Shinichi shouts out as fever takes over his brow with sweat. "Ran, get away!"

A second shot goes off, the sound of it piercing his heart with despair. The door handle, a mere foot from his hand, slams down. The young detective readies his watch, his only weapon. If he is to go down tonight, he will go down a man.

The door swings open. Instead of the menacing killer he'd anticipated, two young adults roll in. His eye, however, is caught by a sight beyond them.

His auburn haired partner, Shiho, is standing in the corridor, blood covering her knee. It is not her injury, however, which worries him the most.

The shadows of the corridor and the rain have sapped all warmth from her appearance. Empty handed, she slouches slightly to compensate for her injury. Her gaze is fixed upon her enemy, out of Shinichi's field of vision. Her eyes, cold as ice, display but one emotion. This isn't Shiho, the detective thinks to himself, but Sherry. It is too much. He cannot bear to see her in this way, to see her reaching down for the gun at her feet, bloodlust in her eyes.

"Shiho! No!"

He wants to run out there and stop her. But he can't. Two pairs of arms grab him from behind. A foot other than his own pushes the door closed. Two anxious faces come into sight as they hush his cry. Hondou and Ran are holding him back. The fear in his childhood friend's eyes reminds him of who he is.

"Shinichi..." The woman whispers by his ear. "Think."

Deep breaths, he can do it. Sherlock Holmes would never lose his calm like this. Shinichi's gaze hardens as his posture straightens. He must act fast.

Another, third shot reaches their ears, along with the sound of broken glass. Shrugging off his companions, Shinichi steps gently towards the door.

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It is all happening too quickly. One minute she is there, bluffing Gin with a toy gun in the hopes that he will release Ran, the next...

She sucks in a breath through clenched teeth. Her leg, Gin got her leg. She presses her hand firmly on the wound. The young woman once known as Sherry counts her blessings: An inch lower and he would have taken out her kneecap; had the young Hondou interfered but a second later, she would have been dead. With wary eyes she glances back towards Gin and the unfortunate soul behind him. Had it not been for that intern... She chooses not to think about what could have been. Instead the auburn haired traitor, as Gin is all too keen to label her, feels something inside her boiling. A new sentiment is rising to smother out the fear, the resignation. The fake doctor before her has lost his wig. Her old mentor stands before her, ragged and desperate. The ice-cold hatred in his eyes matches that in her heart.

In the split second where Hondou Eisuke stabbed her enemy in the arm, the same second in which Mouri Ran delivered an impressive kick to his chin, Shiho flung her weapon at Gin's in an attempt to parry the shot that she saw coming as the nurse careened onto the floor. She only deflected the shot, but along with Mouri and Hondou's efforts, the tables turn in their favour. This is no longer a desperate standoff. Both guns now lay on the floor between them. The Beretta that slides closer to her feet as the two other teenagers flee the corridor is not her own.

This is her chance to end it, once and for all.

"Shiho! No!"

Her hand touches the hilt of the weapon. Her true name rings in her ears. Her limbs, guided by the memories of a training session years ago, put the sights of her weapon in line with Gin's eyes. Her thoughts, taken aback by the sound of Kudo's voice, drift to memories of a time not so long ago... A sentence said with a tone full of reproach.

How could I understand someone who kills people?

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A menacing shadow looms, unnoticed, on the rooftop facing the corridor turn of the trauma ward. The man no longer seems to notice the rain as he flicks his sodden k-way the better to kneel. He points a long thin instrument forward, his eye glued to a piece of it near his shoulder. Patiently, he watches the scene unfold before him. The FBI was too slow to stop that nurse from reaching the ward, but it does not matter. He will live. Shuichi Akai is there to make sure of that. As he sees the sister of the one he once loved draw her gun once more at the killer, intent clear in her every move, Shuichi smiles.

"Sorry, Sweetheart..." The hardness in his tone belies any endearment. "If you think I'd let you run from your crimes in death, Gin, you're wrong."

A twitch of a finger, a spray of damp and heat as the rifle recoils against his shoulder, and the bullet is propelled forward. It travels through the storm, carves its way through the glass of the window pane as it shatters from its momentum and finds its target. Gin, the cunning swine, doesn't even bother reaching for the pistol at his feet. As his hand reaches in his coat for another firearm, he barely has time to register the shot coming from outside. He collapses as the sniper takes out his knee.

His eye continues to watch the scene through the spyglass. Shuichi fishes in his pocket for his walkie-talkie. It is time to call an end to the hunt.

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Pain, weakness, the dizzying sensation of the world collapsing around him, Gin is falling. Sherry, despite her own wound, is staring him down, his gun still unused in her hands, armed and aiming at him. He can read hesitation and doubt in her features.

"Sherry!"

Silly girl, always thinking things over too much: Shoot me now, he thinks. Prove to me that you're still a part of the family. Show me that I, the silver tiger of the black organisation, managed to train you to the same standard. The FBI and your friends have given you my head on a silver platter. You cannot deny your past, your blood. Spread your wings, black bird, and let fly...

Or don't. It's your loss.

As he pulls out the small back-up handgun, he can see Sherry bracing, but still no shot is fired. As he points the barrel at her, he barely acknowledges the shadow looming into his vision as he focuses on her green-blue eyes. Just one more time, please, he wants to see fear, the terror he instils in someone's gaze as he delivers the deadly blow. The girl's eyes have always hypnotized him so. Let them exchange parting shots with one another.

But his arm fails. The gun falls, unused from his hand, as a sharp stinging sensation makes itself felt between his eyes. He feels numb, sensation fleeing his body as some unknown poison begins to cloud his mind. He sees the girl lower her weapon. He hears her whisper, her words echoing in his ears as his head sways. Someone else is there, a young man.

"It's over, Jin."

Jin. He's certain that she called him Jin, a name stripped of all the deference due to a high ranking member of the organisation. He cannot hear her dismissive tone. All he can sense is pity. His pride, his identity shatters. It is more galling to be called Jin than it is to be put to sleep by the same detective brat who brought down his organisation, the boss, the man who he thought of as the father of them all.

As his consciousness fades into darkness, he realises fully the truth of his situation. It is not long before he dreams, and his thoughts are echoed there by the child form of Shiho Miyano, once known as Sherry.

"It's over."

"Yes," he replies in his dream, ruffling the child's hair as he surrenders his soul. "It is."

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"What do you think you're doing?" A heavy sigh, Shiho disarms the gun and puts it on the floor before turning to face the teenage detective. She fights to get control of her emotions, part relief that it is now over, to have survived, part worry for the young man standing next to her. "Kudo, you idiot. You could have gotten killed!"

"And so could you!" Swaying a little on his feet, the dark-haired man gives her his best glare. He had seemed so calm and collected, stepping out of his room to activate his watch's dart gun. Now she can see the sweat on his face, beading on his arms. The drip holder groans as he leans heavily against it. "If you think I was going to leave you alone to face him, of all people, you are wrong."

The fire escape behind them bursts open as Agent Jodie arrives. A few other agents arrive from the junction of corridors, along with a confused looking cleaning lady who faints at the sight of the carnage. One of the American representatives sets about performing first aid on the unfortunate intern who begins to stir as Jodie darts forward to snap a pair of cuffs on Gin's prone form. From outside the sound of a police siren and ambulances can be heard even more clearly now for the hole in the window. The spatter of rain makes it hard to concentrate. A flash of lightning startles them.

Shiho watches with renewed fright Shinichi tumble towards her as he loses his balance. The roll of thunder helps her release some frustration as she catches him in her arms, the trolley he'd been leaning on clattering to the floor beside them. Painfully she slides down to the floor with him, putting aside the pain in her injured leg.

"Why do you do it?" She whispers, brushing his fringe from his eyes. She's fighting the tears in her own. "You're in no state to even stand... So why keep trying to come to my rescue, against all odds?"

A wheeze escapes his lungs. A cheeky grin is plastered on his face as he looks up to her from her lap, before melting away into a smile of contentment. "You're the idiot." He chuckles, colour returning to his cheeks. "It's obvious, really."

"What is?" Common irritation at his smugness, the warm glow of admiration and a tender familiarity she never wants to lose, Shiho is overcome with emotion. Just when she thinks she's got her detective all figured out...

"I love you too, Shiho."

"..."

"Ouch! What was that... for...?"

Smiling down at the teenage detective, the auburn haired woman barely notices the lights turn on. The ward soon fills with the sound of police officers approaching the scene, along with one vocal individual shouting a young woman's name. Mouri and Hondou assist Shiho in bringing a dizzy and exhausted Shinichi back to his bed. A quick medical examination reassures them that he hasn't done any serious damage. Another doctor assists Shiho in bandaging her leg.

The detective falls to sleep as Shiho holds his hand, staying by his side as she awaits the police summons for a testimony.

This is it. She no longer has to run, no longer needs to hide. Sherry is no more. Ai Haibara is gone. All that is left is Shiho, and a new life to begin.

She leans over to kiss him on the forehead as an officer beckons her over.

"Thank you, Shinichi Kudo."

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*To be concluded...*

*A paper lies discarded on the sofa, the headline boasting about the record high temperatures Tokyo has been experiencing this summer. A couple of waistcoats lay discarded, signs of the Professor's recent attempt at making himself presentable during her absence. He seems to have succeeded. She finds the house empty, his car is gone. Wiping away a drop of sweat from her brow, the young woman casts off her blouse as she heads for the shower. The Teitan High tie follows shortly, only for her to pause as she lets it drop. The table it flutters down to is strewn with a handful of unopened mail. As per usual, the professor has collected the daily delivery, only to put it aside for later. It catches her attention not because one of the envelopes has her name on it, rarity enough, but because she recognizes the hand writing. Stark bold strokes marking out her name in strong black ink, the address underneath written out in the sloppy ballpoint of some intermediary, she knows instantly who sent this.*

*"Jin..."*

*How long has it been since that fateful stormy night? The final showdown between her and the harbinger of her past; that had been the night where she had put all her masks aside, put her true feelings bare before Kudo... Before Shinichi...*

*"... Nine months..."*

*Nine months in which Jin Kurosawa had been arrested, tried, jailed.*

*Nine months of peace... A blissful time in which Shiho Miyano and Shinichi Kudo, no longer hiding as children in a world where black crows hovered, could get acquainted, live and discover love.*

*All of this while a killer dies alone.*

*-o-*

## **Chapter 20: No longer...**

*-xx-*

"No longer than twenty minutes..." Mutter, mutter, the young man's voice goes on petulantly between two laden breaths. "Curses... I've had enough time to do twice as many laps as I..."

"As you...?"

Stunned by the female voice coming from behind him, the eighteen year old turns around abruptly, only to lose his footing and fall backwards onto the ground. Landing heavily on his rump, he lets out a startled yelp before grinning up at the woman who has just surprised him. The bright sun behind her blinds him from seeing anything but her silhouette, yet he still recognises her clear as day.

"Shiho!"

As her name escapes his lips, she adjusts her position the better to peer down at him. Sweaty and flushed, Shinichi Kudo the great high-school detective looks exhausted, but happy. The fruit of his physical efforts have plastered down his unruly locks, creating dramatic emphasis of his facial features. A similar effect has affected his white sports top.

For all his cheer in greeting her, Shiho Miyano thanks him with duffel bag to his nose.

"Quit complaining and go shower, you idiot detective." She retorts with a grin.

She watches with her arms crossed as her shorts wearing companion struggles back up to his feet. An unruly smirk graces his face as he lets out some unheard quip before fleeing to the changing rooms. Men...

But she smiles. Slowly but purposefully she strides along the football pitch on which he had been training. Her summer dress flutters gently in the breeze, the shawl on her bare shoulders merely a

precaution against the colder wind to come in the evening. The high-school grounds are deserted. The rest of the football club had gone home a good half hour earlier. Shinichi stayed behind to work on his endurance some more. Shiho would have liked to stay and watch, peacefully sat on one of the benches nearby, waiting for him to tire or tell her to go home. She enjoyed the slightly self-conscious blush he got when she had done so before. It was amazing to see how much of a difference the sport made.

Casting her eyes towards the small building the sports groups used as their changing and shower rooms, the young woman felt her mind turn back the weeks, remembering the days following her return to her true body. Shinichi Kudo, the great teenage detective, had been barely able to stand, let alone walk. It had taken them weeks to reach the point where he could walk the distance from his house to the professor's unaided. The suggestion Doctor Herschel had made, that he ought to join some physical activity club, had seemed ludicrous at the time but...

Oh, that is quick. There he is out of the showers and dressed already. He strides confidently out of the cabins.

Yes, Shiho thinks, gazing approvingly at the young man in crisp trousers, a smartly ironed shirt and much improved hair, the gambit has paid off; even if he still needs a cane for the odd time when his balance goes awry or he tires.

"What took you so long then?" He asks as he lifts up his duffel bag and cane. The smart lump of wood and metal is reminiscent of his idol's more classical incarnations. "I gave you my uniform to drop off at my house while you picked up my change of clothes and got changed yourself, but..."

"Don't trouble yourself!" She replies, waving away his concerned and curious look. Though it was amusing to see him torn between worry and the thirst for some mysterious anecdote that might lead to a case, the young scientist isn't in a mood to play games. "I just lost track of the time..."

Dubious eyebrow, unimpressed pout and slouch of the shoulders are all that Shinichi needs to convey his disbelief. After spending a moment or two longer than she would like of putting up with his discreet glare, Shiho shrugs. Goading him on with her purse, she moves on ahead of him.

"Come on, or we'll be late for the party." With a sigh, she hears him chuckle. Shaking her head, she smiles in turn. Tonight's party is one that she is looking forward to.

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It doesn't take long for the pair to reach the train station. Flashing student cards at automated barriers to get access to the line for their destination, they easily shuffle through the crowds, unnoticed, unhindered by fear or worry. Oh, there is the odd schoolgirl chuckling at spotting a famous face, and a few wistful young looks from young men as the two pass by but... Shinichi Kudo smiles; it's been over nine months; nine months since he got his body back. The nine odd months of being Conan now seem like nine weeks next to the fullness his life has taken on since.

He's back to solving cases all over the place now. His face gets to regularly make the papers once more, even if every now and then he gives Kogoro Mouri's reputation a lift by the intermediary of getting Ran to deliver helpful hints... It wouldn't do to leave the old man entirely on his own after all he'd done to help him, unwittingly or not. It doesn't hurt that the sleeping detective's time assisting with the follow-up investigation into the black organisation seems to have lit a fire in his soul. Even Ran is impressed with how shrewd and professional her father has suddenly become. When asked about his newly found rigour, the old man just mutters something about protection. Shinichi is grateful for this. He would hate Conan's departure to signal the return of the pathetically unprofessional sleuth Kogoro Mouri had once been.

The young man smiles warmly as he sits in the carriage. The man sitting across from them is reading a paper featuring his former "mentor" on the cover, having solved a case flawlessly without any assistance. Shinichi remembers checking afterwards and being suitably impressed. He leans back with a content sigh, letting the pain in his legs and gut from his workout seep out as he sits. It

feels amazing to be so active and fit once more. It's just a shame that he has to keep it up if he wants to keep being able to walk straight. He plays a bit with his cane, barely used so far today, before glancing wistfully at his travelling companion.

Shiho... The name hasn't lost any of its magic; nor does the person it is attached to lose any of their mystery. In fact, the woman once known to him only as Haibara gains more fascinating appeal by the day. He's already found himself wondering at the glorious sheen of her hair. He's made a list of the seven, no, make that eight facial expressions she puts on that makes him wish he could actually read minds. Every time they squabble or wind each other up he feels delighted to have such like-minded company to keep him on his toes. Today however, it is hard for him not to remember how their relationship has changed.

Stuck in the body of a small boy, he could only really appreciate female company on an intellectual level... No head rush, no intoxicating shivers down his back from their mere presence... But now... He soaks in the glorious warmth of her arm against his. He enjoys the heady perfume of her scent... A smidgeon of actual perfume helps confirm what he already knows: Shiho Miyano is certainly dressed up for the occasion. He's already drunk in the sight of her flawless elegance. The young man feels warmth and happiness spread across his cheeks as he revels in the lack of guilt he feels in admiring the beautiful woman at his side. They are boyfriend and girlfriend now. As he's been growing accustomed to appreciating her outer beauty, he's also been learning to read her soul.

A glance at her melancholy eyes as they stare off in the distance is all he needs. He remembers her evasive answer at the school grounds to his legitimate query. Something is bothering her. He can't be truly content tonight without knowing what. He can't be relaxed until he has brought a smile back into her gaze.

"I'm fortunate..." He begins gently, pretending to be resting and speaking of nothing. "I have a most wonderful girlfriend who never turns up late to anything, and more often than not helps ensure that I'm on time for any commitments I may have, so long as she is aware."

Shinichi doesn't even need to open his eyes to picture her suspicious squint. If he doesn't say anything else soon, she's bound to jab him in the ribs before sulking for no obvious reason. Leaning forwards he faces her earnestly.

"Seriously, what's bothering you?"

She turns away, eyes wary of the crowd around them. She doesn't want to talk about it, not here. He understands enough, but hopes she will at least give him a hint. He sees her draw breath and she lowers her gaze. She is.

"You got the news, didn't you, last night?" Barely a whisper, fatigue showing in the slouch of her shoulders: there's something old in her voice, something he hasn't heard since...

"Gin?" He answers calmly. "Yes, I did. I even went and checked. He passed away in the prison's hospital ward. His injuries from the night of the explosion never healed right. Illness took its toll. I..." He pauses, curious as to the relevance of this news. "What about it?"

A shake of the head, slightly perplexed glance and a sigh, she replies. "I guess I... Needed more time to digest that information than I thought? I don't know... It just felt strange thinking about it when I got home."

Of course, it makes sense. Gin had been the last enduring element of her old life. Shinichi isn't that troubled by his death: illness happens. He knew how close he himself had been to that endless sleep from his own very similar injuries. He is just relieved that the assassin lived long enough for the investigation and trials regarding the Black Organisation not to be hindered by his passing. It hadn't occurred to him till just now that Shiho might feel very differently about it.

As he did once before, long ago, Shinichi wonders about the relationship between Gin and Sherry...

"Anyway," Shiho goes on, straightening her dress and regaining some of her more usual composure,



"what about you? You ready for this party?"

"Huh?" Distracted from his train of thought, it takes the detective a moment to recall the reason for their train journey. "The Engagement party? Of course I'm ready! Why wouldn't I be?"

He's slightly shamed at how defensive he sounds: his reply is too quick, his voice just a touch too shrill. He stares intently at his cane, his finger searching for the trigger mechanism the professor had inserted for him. He doesn't want to see the all-too-knowing smirk on her face.

"Come on, Shinichi..." There's a seductive trill in the way she pronounces his name that only adds to the knot forming in his stomach. "I'm not blind. You've clearly been avoiding the topic all day. You haven't even wondered about who else will be there!"

"The parents, friends from Sonoko Suzuki to Natsue Hatamoto, if they can make it, cousins and other relatives, partners and various work colleagues of the main parties involved... Of course I know who'll be there." His arms are flailing around. Angrily he shoves them in his pockets to try and preserve some appearance of calmness, his cane leaning lamely against his thigh. Her barely restrained laugh isn't helping, no matter how sweet the sound. "I'm a detective, remember?"

"I was thinking more about how likely Hattori is to steal you away for a full summary of your evil fighting exploits that he's been dying to hear every time he phones, or how likely Sera is to do the same..."

"You're more worried about her obvious infatuation with me..." He quips, half jokingly.

"Oh? I hadn't thought you had noticed." Shiho gives him a superior smirk. "You never noticed my feelings for you..."

"I wonder why..." Shinichi Kudo says soberly, his fringe nearly hiding the glance he gives her.

Curious, the auburn haired woman stops poking fun at him. She gazes expectantly at him, her expression more akin to that of an innocent child than any of Ai Haibara's had ever been. Defeated, he shrugs.

"I guess I just never thought we could work that way... So I never looked for it. I'm such a fool."

"Yes..." She whispers, a warm smile gracing him with some solace. "But you're my fool now."

Ruffling his hair as the train pulls to a stop, the woman that fills his heart with warmth and joy slips another word into his ear.

"Honestly, if you're ever needing out of Ran and Eisuke's engagement do, let me know: I'll find a way..."

He loses count of the number of blessings she has bestowed upon him as he steps out of the carriage with her in tow.

-xx-

The evening was every little bit as surreal as he had anticipated, with a few added surprises. It was only to be expected, really... Before being shrunk, Shinichi had often daydreamt of asking Ran for her hand. As Conan he sometimes spent all night fantasizing about the engagement and wedding that would follow. Of course he had thought of all who would be invited to such a party by Ran and himself.

The fact that he wasn't the groom to be hadn't changed the party's guest list all that much. Eisuke Hondou was an orphan. He had no parents to attend. His sister, Hidemi Hondou, had died under the name Rena Mizunashi. He did have a couple of friends from Osaka able to attend, shy folk who mainly kept to themselves. The more notable guests from his side were his guardian, the man who Ethan Hondou had trusted with providing for his son after his unfortunate demise, and, more astonishingly, Shuichi Akai. Though the FBI agent was a close associate of Jodie Starling and the older brother of Masumi Sera, both of which Ran had invited, Shinichi knew for a fact that Ran did

not know the man.

Eisuke took a moment away from his now fiancée to have a quiet word with the older man, a clear indicator of who had wanted him there. This intrigued Shinichi to no end: he didn't know when the two had been in contact long enough to bond, let alone for Hondou to put aside Akai's clear involvement in Kir's unfortunate demise. Then again, Hondou didn't seem to be the sort to put the blame for a crime on anyone but the killer. Seeing the amicable atmosphere and trusting smiles between the two put his mind at ease and allowed Shinichi to let the mystery be. This was Ran and Eisuke's party. Shinichi was going to be extra good and avoid any dramatics. He had even solved a case in the station on the way there, reassuring himself and Shiho that the likelihood of a murder interrupting the festivities would be extremely low.

"You know what..." He even caught himself thinking. "This is the best time to say thank you."

And thank you he said. The stern faced man who had helped Shinichi so much through the latter stages of his investigations into the black organisation had even seemed pleasantly surprised. The young saviour of the Japanese police felt a breath of fresh air flow through his lungs as he expressed his gratitude and respect. Akai's curt nod and smirk bolstered his confidence and pride further. Yes, Shinichi had in Shuichi Akai and ally for life, and he was glad.

"I'll go see if I can find Hattori," Shinichi smiled at Shiho, as he broke away from Akai's company. He could tell that the FBI agent and his former girlfriend's sister were dying to catch a word in private. It wasn't hard to guess why. They both shared the same melancholic gaze as they watched a beaming Ran flit from guest to guest, congratulations flying in from all sides.

Even though he'd barely known the woman called Akemi Miyano, Shinichi knew it was her that they were both thinking of.

It didn't take him long to find Hattori. The tanned Osakan teen was as far as he could be from Kazuha and her girly enthusiasm for all things frilly and white, while still being within close enough range to barge in if any other man dared to flirt with his special girl. Holed up in a dark corner at a table, he was busy conversing with a person that looked a lot like a boy... for a girl. Looks like Shiho's predication was right. Contrite faces as fancy glasses of fizzy juice were swung around; the two were clearly talking about the big case they'd missed out on.

"I couldn't believe Kudo would keep me out like that," the young man was saying, his accent and dialect sounding more pronounced than usual. "We're best buddies! The least he could have done was to message me about events..."

"And I can't believe my brother even knew to sideline me like that! If big brother Shu' hadn't asked me to check out that phony case back in the states, I could have..." Sera's words too seemed to have a raw quality to them.

Shinichi hadn't expected either of them to be quite so wound up about it all still. Embarrassed, heat flushing through his cheeks, and a frown of his own on his face, he stepped up to them.

"Sorry for having had other things on my mind at the time guys. Had I known it meant so much to you two..."

"Ah don't worry about it Kudo!" The two teenagers reply in chorus, beaming smiles on their faces all of a sudden. Shinichi couldn't help but feel somewhat tricked. Sera continued on with a smug grin. "You know that that case of yours is the talk of this whole party? Without your epic showdown with those bad guys, Ran and Eisuke would never have gotten together."

"Yeah, it goes without saying!" Heiji pulled a clean glass from a box under the table before pouring a dark liquid into it. "I was a hell of a surprised when the invite to Ran's engagement do didn't have your name on it. What happened? All I managed to glean these past few months was that you and Ran broke it off without any hurt feelings and suddenly the wee big sis' is your girl."

"Did you seriously just call Miyano the wee big sis'?" The tomboy's expression was a study in

childlike disgust. Heiji was now pouring a fizzy transparent concoction from an unlabeled bottle. His companion reached for the smaller container he had put to the side. "Mind if I get a refill?"

As Heiji finished pouring the drink before tending to Sera's glass Shinichi pulled up a chair to sit next to the pair. The short haired woman took a hearty gulp from her freshly poured beverage as Heiji passed the third glass over to the Tokyoite detective.

"Ah, cheers." Shinichi said. He'd correctly surmised that the drink had been poured for him. He took a polite sip before pulling a face. "What is this?"

"A party drink!" The detective of the west replies smugly, holding his own drink to his nose. "Drink up, and tell us all."

"Yeah, we want to hear everything!"

With a sigh, Shinichi rubs at his forehead while savouring the strangely sweet and heady flavours of the beverage. He had a niggling suspicion about the nature of it, something that he ought to look at twice but... A party full of swing going on around them, the laughter of young and old alike cradling them from the dance floor, he had little inclination to fight the mood. Another mouthful of ruby coloured liquid and he begins the tale, trying to keep references to what neither of the two were particularly privy to at a minimum. It felt good actually, to put all the strangeness of those two key weeks into words. Revisiting those moments, picking up the clues with his tale more than he ever had at the time, it spread a warm glow through his heart. Yes, this was how it was meant to be. Yes, it was where he wanted them all to be: happy, safe and content, the rest of their lives before them.

By the time Shiho comes to find them, he is busy demonstrating the new ability the professor has given his cane. Heiji wastes no time in pouring Kudo's girlfriend a similar drink as Sera busies herself in wondering how useful the cane would actually be in solving everyday cases. The auburn haired scientist accepts the glass gratefully, a warm smile on her face as she sits herself down. It's only as she says the name of the drink aloud in surprise that Shinichi realizes what it is they are drinking.

"Kir?" She doesn't look put off, but there is definitely a sense of surprise as the young woman looks Heiji up and down.

The faint fluttering memory of guilt and pain troubles Shinichi at the name, before the more pressing concerns of his law-abiding self surface.

"Wait a second Heiji, we haven't been drinking alcohol have we?" Though his eighteenth birthday is well passed, Shinichi is very aware that none of them are anywhere near the legal drinking age of twenty-one.

Masumi Sera chuckles heartily as Heiji Hattori nods gravely. Slightly contrite, he nods in the direction of the bar. Most of the adults of sufficient age are rosy-cheeked and laughing loudly.

"It's an engagement party, everyone's drinking. I don't think Mouri senior will let the night end without finding out how his son-in-law to be handles a beer. What an idea to get engaged before being of legal drinking age anyway..."

"Why Kir?" Shiho's voice is soft and melancholy, the confusion in her brow obvious. "It's not the most obvious of drinks to smuggle into a party..."

It is true, now that Shinichi contemplates his drink close enough. He recognises the slightly tart taste of alcohol in it. The vial of crème de cassis on the table, the bottle of fizzy wine and fancy glasses kept beneath, it is a lot to carry and hide at once. A pack of beers would be a much easier choice.

"We thought Hondou would appreciate it..." Suddenly more sober in her demeanour, Sera contemplates her own glass wistfully. "If we are to toast his engagement to Ran, we might as well do it in style..."

"And remember the fallen who couldn't make it this far." Heiji looks Shinichi in the eye, something hard and mighty in his soul echoing with the feelings rising in Shinichi's chest.

"To the fallen..." He rises his glass, leading an impromptu toast. The detective can't help but wish that Hidemi Hondou could have been there with them.

"To the fallen..." The other three echo. They finish the toast together, unprompted.

"And to the happy couple!"

As the intoxicating beverage hits the back of his throat, Shinichi catches Shiho's gaze. Eisuke's absent sister is not the only soul being remembered tonight...

-xx-

The park nearby is dark and private in the early hours of the morning. Twigs snap underfoot. Night birds hoot and twitter between them and the now invisible fence. The trees blot out what little there is to see of the city, the only indication that neon lights are around being the lack of visible starlight above. The two don't mind though, as they trundle across empty paths and over well shorn lawns. They exchange the odd chuckle and quip, pausing every now and then to lose themselves in a kiss or twirl. The full moon above gives them thankfully enough light to avoid losing sight of one another.

He trips and falls, she helps him up. He trips and falls again. She laughs. His cane is waved about, useless in its own purpose.

"You're drunk."

"No, you are!"

Finally, after much to and froing, they settle a while against the trunk of a big oak tree, enlaced in each other's arms. Perched atop a small hillock, they can observe the skyline of the park's trees all around. At peace and smiling, Shiho Miyano and Shinichi Kudo share a contented sigh.

"Good night." The young scientist whispers. Her hand is warm and soft against his forearm.

"Yes, yes it was." The detective replies, tightening his hold on her a little with delight. "I'm glad."

"You are?"

"Of course..." He smiles at the wide eyed gaze she gives him. Why wouldn't he be glad? Silly. He's come to terms with the fact the he and Ran are just friends. She's the one he loves. After all these months she still seems surprised when it is obvious he's not pining after another woman. "How about you?"

"Huh..." A moment's hesitation, then she smirks. "Yes, I'm glad too."

After a moment's silence in which she pats away a wandering hand, the young auburn haired woman wraps her shawl tighter around herself and prods him in the ribs.

"So... You got any plans for after high-school? Not long till it's over now. I have to tell you, I've no intention of going through university again."

"I'm still surprised you actually joined Teitan high!" Rubbing his arms in an effort to ignore the slight chill of the night, the teenage boy gazes ponderously out into the dark above. "I... I'm not sure yet, to tell the truth. I've spent so much time thinking of getting my old life back, be it from getting shrunk or my injury... I haven't really thought ahead much further than that."

"Will you go to police academy?" Slight anxiousness in the tone of her question, she looks vulnerable as the breeze catches at the draping around her shoulders.

"No." His reply is straight forward. Not only because he knows without even asking, Shiho would find it awkward. Shinichi, despite being quite keen to work alongside police detectives and inspectors, has no compulsion to join their ranks. He is all too aware of their limitations and the

restrictions placed upon them by their statute. He wants to be a finder of truths, not to right wrongs. He has to take a moment to think. "No, I don't think I will. I might go on to study law or forensics though. Yeah, forensics could be really handy."

"Whatever you put your mind to, I'm sure you'll pull it off." Her head sags gently against his shoulder, the late hours catching up to her. Entranced, he listens to the gentle in and out of her breaths. After a moment, she utters a sound. "Huh..."

"Hm?"

"So this is what tipsy feels like? Who knew..."

Shinichi chuckles. His memory of a certain bottle of Chinese wine makes him pull a face.

"Yeah, it's nothing like one imagines, eh? If I wake up with a headache tomorrow morning, that'll be the second hangover I'll be blaming on Hattori."

"Second, eh? You alcoholic, you..."

"Oh, hush. How did you know it was Kir then, eh?" Playfully he nuzzles at her nose. "I thought you knew nothing of alcohol?"

"Had some once, in..." A pause as she flits between drowsy thoughts. "England, yes, England I think."

"England, uh?" He scrunches his brow, trying to think of when she would have done such a thing. She stands up and stretches before replying.

"Yes. A research trip when I was working within the organisation. Alcohol's legal there if you're over eighteen." A knowing smile, she points ahead of them. "Come on, there's a bench over there."

The hint of gold in the sky urges Shinichi to follow her as he ponders her answer. He had known she had been travelling all over with the organisation researching immortality legends ever since the Dugong Arrow case. He hadn't known just how far afield she had gone, but he had also presumed that it had been...

"Were you... With Gin at the time?"

Memories of the letter from earlier on flash through Shiho's mind, shaky writing conveying the pain of a broken main, reaching out to his one and only remaining link from the life he no longer has. Should she tell him? Does it really matter?

A car toots its horn in the distance. The bench and the young woman cut a stark silhouette against a sky waking up in warm and bright hues. How lucky of them to find a spot with such a startling view of the rising sun. She stands still, her face taking in the distance, Shinichi's question evaporating from her consciousness as she turns and smiles.

"I love you, Shinichi."

He smiles as he steps up to sit at her side. Drinking in the beautiful sight he is sharing with her, he tries to contain his joy. It's over, definitely over. Not a shadow of grief or guilt had clouded her face. He can no longer detect the taut spring that such a mention used to pull in her. He can no longer smell the gunpowder in her retorts. There is nothing cold in the way she grabs his arm and kisses his cheek. A new life is beginning for the both of them, for one beautifully wonderful reason.

Shiho is no longer like a gun.

-xx-

**Fin.**