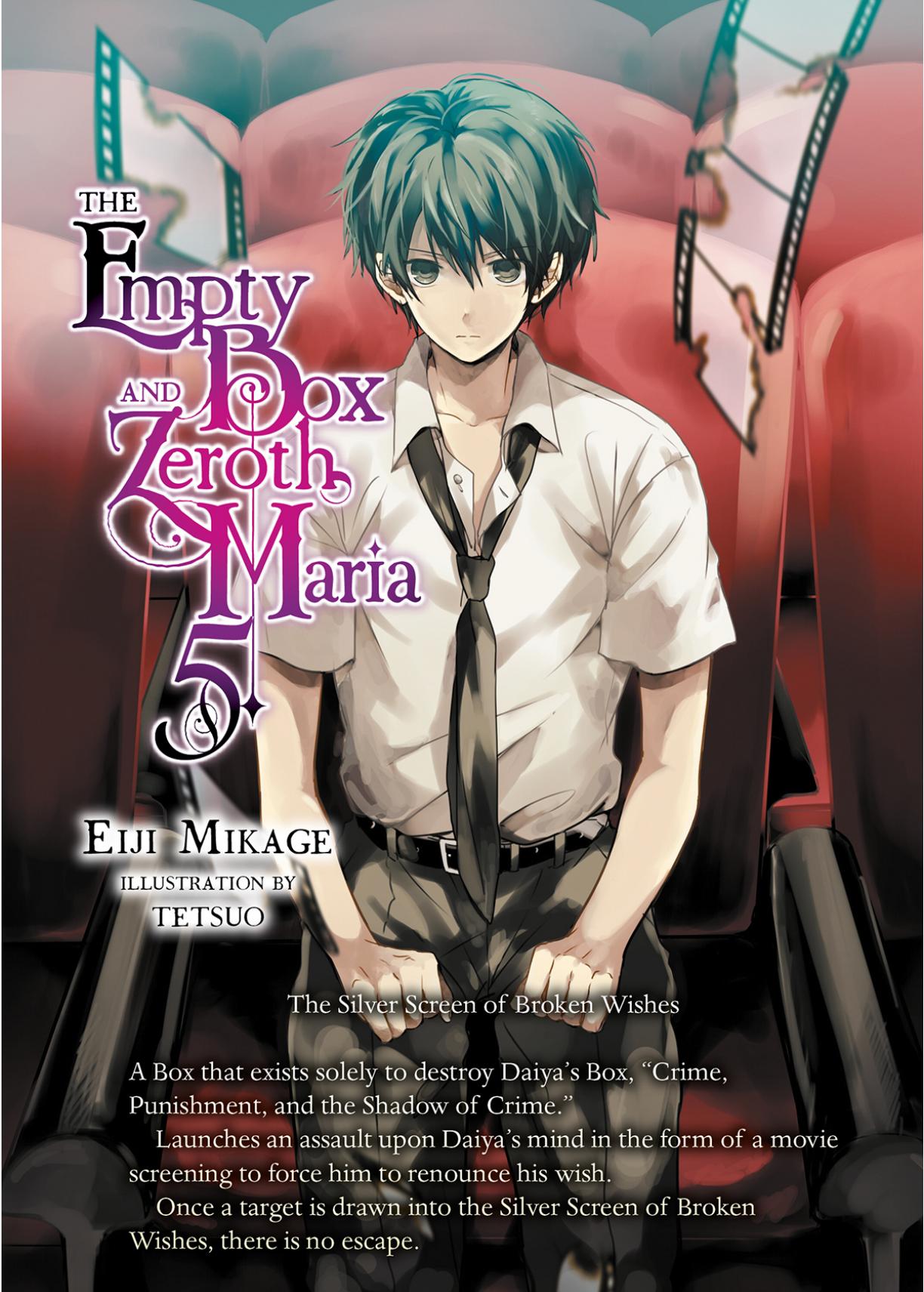


THE
Empty
Box
AND
Zeroth
Maria
5

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



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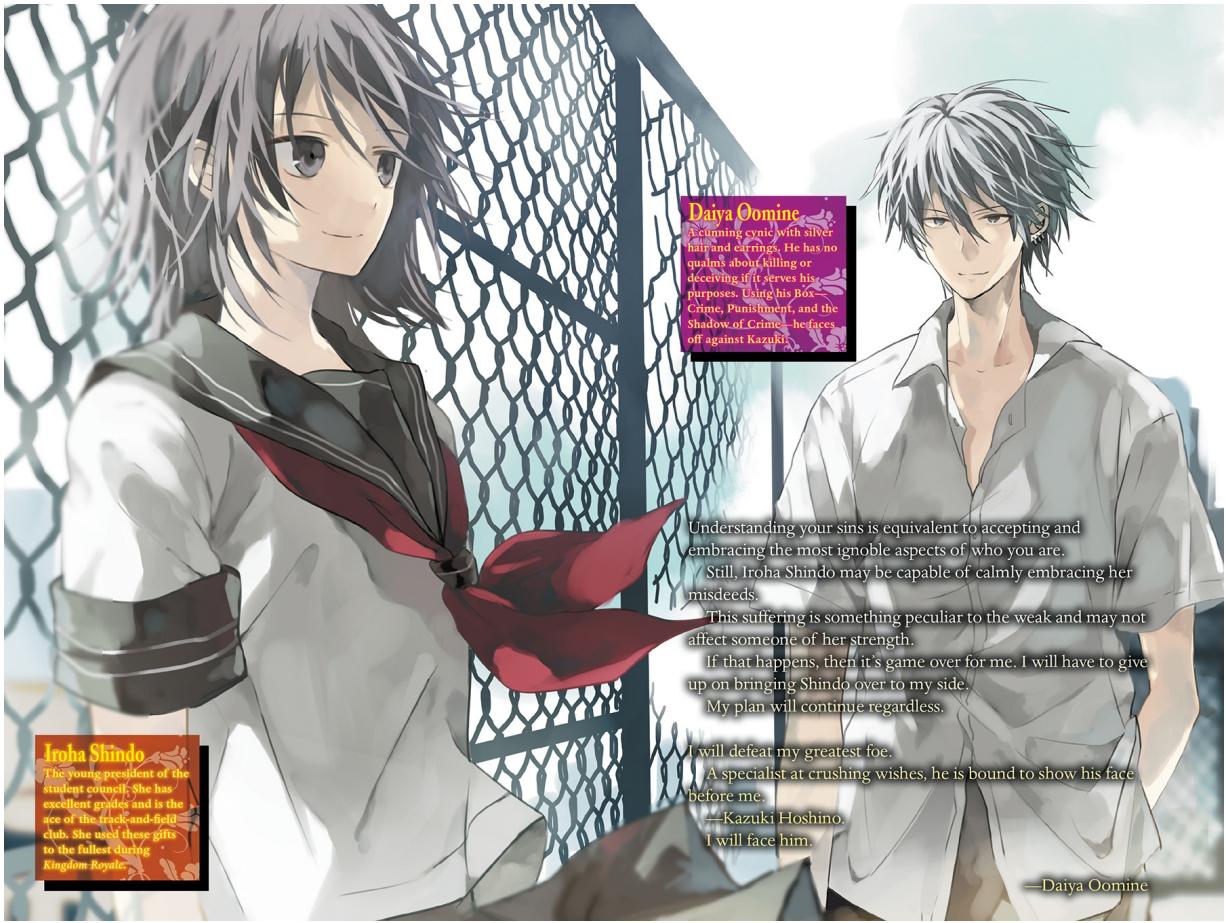
The Silver Screen of Broken Wishes

A Box that exists solely to destroy Daiya's Box, "Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime."

Launches an assault upon Daiya's mind in the form of a movie screening to force him to renounce his wish.

Once a target is drawn into the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, there is no escape.





Iroha Shindo

The young president of the student council. She has excellent grades and is the ace of the track-and-field club. She used these gifts to the fullest during *Kingdom Royal*.

Daiya Oomine

A cynical cynic with silver hair and earings. He has no qualms about killing or deceiving if it serves his purposes. Using his *Not-Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime*—he faces off against Kazuki.

Understanding your sins is equivalent to accepting and embracing the most ignoble aspects of who you are.

Still, Iroha Shindo may be capable of calmly embracing her misdeeds.

This suffering is something peculiar to the weak and may not affect someone of her strength.

If that happens, then it's game over for me. I will have to give up on bringing Shindo over to my side.

My plan will continue regardless.

I will defeat my greatest foe.

A specialist at crushing wishes, he is bound to show his face before me.

—Kazuki Hoshino.

I will face him.

—Daiya Oomine



Maria Otonashi

A beautiful and heroic young woman on the hunt for O, the grantor of Boxes. Though she is gifted in the martial arts and possesses a keen mind, her excessively noble nature has led her to forbid herself from harming others. Kazuki desires to protect her above all else.

—I won't allow it. No matter what.
I have to stop Daiya.

And that's why—

—I don't care if that means getting a Box and using it.
A clash between two Boxes is inevitable.

My wish is to meet Daiya's Box and his wish head-on and
destroy them.

I don't know what he wished for. I have no doubt it's
nonnegotiable for him.

But no matter what it is—

—I've made up my mind.
I will confront Daiya.

—Kazuki Hoshino

Daiya, with the power
of his Box, just might
destroy the world.
On top of that, he seems
intent on dragging
Maria into this mess.

Kazuki Hoshino

An extremely ordinary young
man with a decidedly unusual
obsession with maintaining a
normal life. He has become a
favorite object of study for O.
To put a stop to Daiya's
Crime, Punishment, and the
Shadow of Crime, he launches
a counterattack with the Silver
Screen of Broken Wishes.





Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime

Activates when the target steps on the shadow of its wielder, Daiya.

It forces the target to recall the “awareness of sin” in the depths of their heart and places them under Daiya’s Rule so that he can control them as he pleases.

Designed by Toru Suzuki





EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



New York

Copyright

The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria, Vol. 5
Eiji Mikage

Translation by Luke Baker
Cover art by Tetsuo

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UTSURO NO HAKO TO ZERO NO MARIA Vol. 5

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First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
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First Yen On Edition: February 2019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mikage, Eiji author. | 415, illustrator. | Tetsuo (Illustrator),
illustrator. | Baker, Luke, translator.

Title: The empty box and zeroth Maria / Eiji Mikage ; illustration by 415,
Tetsuo ; translation by Luke Baker.

Other titles: Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria. English

Description: New York, NY : Yen On, 2017— | v. 1 illustration by 415 —
vols. 2–7 illustration by Tetsuo.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017027929 | ISBN 9780316561105 (v. 1 : paperback) |
ISBN 9780316561112 (v. 2 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316561136 (v. 3 :
paperback) | ISBN 9780316561143 (v. 4 : paperback) | ISBN
9780316561174 (v. 5 : paperback)

Subjects: | CYAC: Science fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction /
General.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M553 Em 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017027929>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-56117-4 (paperback)
978-0-316-56127-3 (ebook)

E3-20190121-JV-NF-ORI

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Ordinarily, none of this would have anything to do with me. I'm too normal to grant wishes, not mine or anybody else's.

The only one who interests this paranormal entity before me now is Kazu. To him (or her, maybe), I'm nothing more than an acquaintance of his. The only reason I received this power is because he (or she) wanted to influence those around Kazu and satisfy his (or her) desire to toy with him.

The Box I've been given is like some hand-me-down, but still I cling to it like a beggar digging desperately through garbage in an effort to survive.

Even so, I'm dependent on it.

O directs an inviting smile toward me.

"O, I'm confused about something. I accept that Kazu is extraordinary. I can also understand your interest in observing him. But I fail to see why a being of your stature would go to such lengths to meddle with a single person."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's not natural for someone with so much power at their disposal to do such a thing. You're obsessed with Kazu. You haunt him without even hiding your desires. That alone is enough to drag you down to the realm of the mundane."

"And what of it? I'm not in this to be worshipped, so that doesn't bother me. Just appearing before you and having this conversation was bound to make me ordinary in your eyes, after all."

"What're you getting at?"

"If I wanted to remain an otherworldly enigma, then I would demonstrate my power without saying a word. Allowing others to understand my motives and goal is enough to make my presence something more familiar, you see. Each word I speak turns me commonplace," he (or she) explains before asking me a question in a

pleasant tone. “Might you prefer that I be otherworldly? Perhaps you feel as though the supernatural capabilities of your Box will vanish if the one who grants your wish loses some of their luster? If so, then I’m afraid to say I cannot be what you wish me to be.”

“Then what does that make you? If you’re not a god, then what are you?”

He (or she) tells me his (or her) true nature without any noticeable hesitation.

“I am the direction known as O.”

It’s a straightforward sentence, although I have no idea what it means.

“Direction? What’re you talking about?”

“I am merely a part of the whole that is myself. O is one facet of my vast identity.”

The idea that O is a separate part of some bigger entity still doesn’t help me make sense of things.

“...So to put it in terms of the human body, you’d be like a hand or a foot?”

“Not quite. Ah yes...let’s use the example of water within a large pool. All the water in the pool is ‘me.’ Then scoop out some of that water with a cup. The water in that cup is the me that is O. The name O is the cup for maintaining what constitutes me. That is the direction called O.”

“...What do you mean by describing yourself as a ‘direction’?”

“My greater self lacks any sort of will whatsoever. Well, it does have a will, but it’s best to assume it doesn’t, as far as you all are concerned. So intrinsically, ‘I’ have no vector. However, when I received the name O, I also received meaning. Once I did, my ‘direction’ came about as a matter of course.”

“You’re saying there’s a reason why this ‘direction’ is fixated on Kazu?”

“Exactly. You are indeed quite quick on the uptake.”

It goes without saying that the remark was more contemptuous than complimentary.

That’s why O continues by saying, “It’s what keeps you from being able to use your Box fully.”

I bite down on my lip. I’m aware of this, but it stings to be told yet

again.

“You cannot understand the Box as it is. You impose your own interpretation on it, distorting it and replacing it with something you are capable of comprehending. The Box as you envision it is something else entirely. Ah yes, it seems you believe I don’t find you to be of interest, but you believe incorrectly. You are the exact opposite of Kazuki; as he possesses the disposition to use a Box, you lack it entirely. That position is quite intriguing, in a sense,” O says with a bewitching smile. “I’m quite certain you will be the first to apprehend my true nature.”

Enough already!

If this being keeps dropping hints, I may be able to identify what they really are.

It’s true that O can change shapes as they please. I can’t tell if they are male or female, either. I have no way of knowing their original form or anything else.

But I have a certain talent for seeing the truth of things. I have an intellect, not that it does anyone any good.

If O becomes transparent to me, I will no longer be able to believe in the extraordinary powers of the Boxes. As long as O’s nature remains a mystery to me, I can consider the Boxes to be special.

This is why I will not try to warp O with my own interpretation of them.

I will venerate O and worship them.

And by continuing to avert my eyes from reality, I will enable my wish to be granted.



◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine 09/06 SUN 12:05 PM ◆◆◆

"I was really surprised... Yes. Yes. I had heard about the dog-people before, of course. But, well, in my mind, they were just something you saw on TV. I never imagined one would show up among people I knew."

The LCD TV screen shows a woman with her face blurred out. She's middle-aged, apparently a housewife, and the note of irritation in her mechanically altered voice isn't quite concealed.

"Tell us about Mr. —." The name is bleeped out.

"Hmm... I guess he was normal? Quiet, though. Even when I said hi to him, he would just mumble back. I wasn't sure if he was replying or not."

"Did you notice anything different about him?"

"...Recently, or maybe not so recently, his parents disappeared. Ever since then...I guess he became a...a what do you call it, a shut-in? That's how it seemed to me. A job? ...Who knows? I have to wonder what he did for work."

"And what about his parents? You said they disappeared?"

"Yes... Oh, no, it could be that his parents just moved to a different piece of property. It's only a rumor that they vanished. I'm not really sure. Anyway, Mr. — didn't really interact with anyone in the neighborhood, you know."

"I see... Are you aware of the common thread among those who become dog-people?"

The middle-aged woman is obviously having trouble replying. *"...Yes. They're criminals, right? And their crimes were particularly heinous."*

"The criminal record of Mr. — has yet to be revealed, however..."

"All I know is that I saw him start howling and drop onto all fours. I'm sorry, but I don't know anything—"

The camera cuts to show the host and commentators in the studio; the

woman must not have known any other useful information.

Everyone looks so serious, but they also seem unsure what the appropriate reaction even is to this somewhat ridiculous phenomenon. It's a strange, altogether inexplicable anomaly; their comments are all painfully forced and do nothing to address the real topic at hand.

I sit back down on the bed with a sneer.

As I intended, the talk shows have been discussing the “dog-people” for several days now.

That's what they're calling the phenomenon—average folk suddenly lose the ability to speak one day and begin walking on all fours. Of course the talk shows jumped on such a sensational story.

Still, it's unlikely the cause will ever come to light, no matter how big of a topic it becomes. At present, all sorts of doctors, academics, and other learned minds are investigating the dog-people. No matter what angle they approach it from, though, not one of them is ever going to know that it is the work of a Box.

So, in the end, these figures are just going to disappoint their audience with some sensible, worthless conclusion that it's “acting” or “a belief that they are a dog” or “a mental illness,” even though those could never be the case. No, the spiritualist quack they brought on the show primarily for laughs had a much more satisfying theory for the audience: *“This is a trial brought upon us by the gods! It is a reminder to any humans arrogant enough to believe they are special—that they are just another animal.”*

I snigger.

No way in hell.

For starters, if you're gonna talk about arrogance, it's way more prideful to think the gods would so conveniently test us. After all, we don't care about how cheeky a caterpillar gets, right?

That's why the only one who could come up with something as ridiculous as dog-people is a fellow human.

I look toward the television, and the host is insincerely expressing his “heartfelt wish” for the victim's full recovery. And with that, today's feature on the dog-people comes to an end.

You “wish for his recovery,” do you? Well, you won’t for much longer.

The reason being that Katsuya Tamura, or our “Mr. —,” with his squeaky-clean criminal record as of now, is a murderer who killed his parents. It

won't be so easy to say your well-wishing once the truth comes to light.

And this crime known only to Katsuya Tamura and me will become known to the world.

As for why, the public mind can't ignore the fact that all the dog-people discovered before now have been found to be violent criminals. It follows, then, that the police can't disregard public opinion, either. They'll probably come up with some grounds for an investigation, then find the remains of Katsuya Tamura's parents in the garden of his home.

And so Katsuya Tamura will be thrown into prison, where he should have been to begin with. Well...now that he's basically a dog, his mental state may make sending him to prison a bit more difficult, but that's not a problem. Punishing the criminals who have escaped judgment isn't what I'm after.

If the case of Katsuya Tamura goes as I intend...

I have no more pieces to put in place. The truth is, the ability I received from my Box can make others into dog-people whether they're guilty of a crime or not, but I have deliberately used my ability to look into those with criminal records and do it to them alone.

My goal is to plant an idea—that the dog-people must be lawbreakers—in the minds of the general public.

Those dumb dogs crawling on all fours are criminals.

If this assumption spreads among the populace, then simply being a dog-person will be enough to link someone to a history of violent crime.

And now the result.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a sight more wretched than these human canines. No capacity for thought, naked and barking and crawling around awkwardly—it's enough to fill anyone with revulsion. You can't treat them like people, either, so they're not going to inspire any natural sympathy. Especially when everyone knows they're a criminal deserving your hatred.

They'll all come to fear such a state.

Commit a crime, and you could be next. But what exactly causes the phenomenon will never be fully understood. The only answer for avoiding the humiliation will be a life of integrity, free of misdeeds.

And crime will fall.

The total number of these dog-people is too low, of course. I have to make criminals believe it could happen to them easily, so I'll create many more. I'll cause a mass outbreak.

When I do, no one will be able to avert their eyes.

I look back at the TV.

The topic has changed, and another image fills the screen. It looks like a video recorded by some regular person on their mobile phone. The footage is rough and blurry in places, and I can hear the surprised exclamations of whoever filmed it.

Several dozen adults have formed a crowd, bowing their heads to the ground on a main thoroughfare in the Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku.

It's impossible to tell at first glance what group these people prostrating themselves belong to. Yakuza, drag queens, salarymen, high school girls—there doesn't seem to be a common element among them.

This motley group is bowing toward a figure at the center. And weeping.

The camera zooms in on the person at the middle of it all.

A young man with silver hair and earrings in both his ears, gazing coldly down at the people kneeling toward him.

I don't need to say that the young man is me, Daiya Oomine.

“...Hmph.”

All according to plan. Every cell phone comes with a camera these days; I knew if I created a show like that on a major street, someone was bound to record it.

The TV coverage was another factor I had taken into account.

The TV personalities back in the studio are frowning at the video and throwing out totally wrong ideas. “*Is this some sort of new religious cult?*” they ask.

Naturally, that's not at all the truth.

The dog-people and the ones bowing to me both came about due to my abilities.

No one in the studio has connected the two as of yet. Of course, someone will eventually try to link such concurrent, unexplained anomalies. People on the Internet are already suggesting the two have something in common—cheap guesses, but not incorrect.

This footage is a bit of foreshadowing.

When the dog-people become even more unavoidable for society, I will make them understand the significance of the person in the center of this video.

And that is when my plans will truly begin.

I exit the business hotel and walk the streets of Shinjuku.

It's a crowded Sunday afternoon. The sheer number of people is unbearable. It makes me dizzy.

I already know most people are sinful to some degree. More people than I can imagine have corruption hidden inside them like sludge under their skin. I have the power of my Box to thank for that knowledge.

Now that I know, I can't see this throng as anything more than so many wriggling sacks of slime.

...But, well, I guess I've gotten used to that by now.

Though the calendar says it's already September, the temperature during the day still feels like summer, with practically no signs of dropping. A look down at my watch indicates it's two o'clock in the afternoon.

The sun has begun to sink, which means my shadow is stretching.

People passing by step on it, one after the other.

And that—*is what activates my Box.*

Each time a foot lands on my shadow, I see crime after crime after crime.

“.....”

In the beginning, it was more than I could bear. I couldn't even stay upright. You can get used to anything, though. That inability to process the revolting sensation is a thing of the past. I've long rid myself of such weakness.

Now, this is just another task.

“Urgh!”

This one is more foul than usual, and I let out a gasp of agony.

What the hell is this? It's utterly vile, like someone threw up in a blender and added shit, used vegetable oil, and tiny cicadas and poured the results down my throat.

What scum would be carrying such a sin?

Pressing my temples, I turn my eyes toward the one who stepped on my shadow to see just how despicable this person must look.

“.....”

Now, this is a surprise.

It's a girl in middle school with a black bob haircut, the very definition of

“plain.” There are no classes today, but she’s wearing her navy-blue sailor uniform all the same. From her appearance, you’d find her so innocent, it would be hard to even imagine her in the chaos of the city streets, much less as an evildoer.

The middle school girl suddenly lets out a whimper and directs a dubious gaze toward me and my scowl. ...*Ugh. As if you don't know who's at fault here.*

Our eyes meet, but that’s all, before she tries to continue on her way.

“Don’t try to get revenge. You have my sympathy, but this is your own doing.”

She was starting to leave, but now she stops in her tracks and turns around. The blank look on her face probably isn’t so much due to surprise as it is to incomprehension.

“I’m sure you feel like you’re punishing him, but the guys paying money for your body aren’t the same as the bastard who gave you HIV. They aren’t even in the same category. Their crimes aren’t as grave as the one you’re about to commit, either. Though I doubt you’d accept that.”

Her eyes betray a hint of bewilderment, but her face remains expressionless. She may not be that adept at expressing her feelings.

“What I’m saying is, stop selling yourself to infect others.”

Her face still blank, the girl opens her mouth. “...Please don’t say ridiculous things like that in public.”

She finally speaks. Her voice is thin and so faint that I have to strain to catch what she says. Guess she’s not the lively type.

“Relax. See, no one’s paying any attention to our conversation. If you worry about each and every person passing you by in the city, your nerves will be shot. They don’t care if a wanted person is wandering around.”

Well, they might if you start acting like a dog, though.

“How do you know about me...?”

“I don’t. All I did was catch a whiff of the rotten things you’ve done.”

The face of this somewhat lifeless girl scrunches up. I suppose she’s trying to scowl, but I think she really is just bad at showing her feelings. All she does is narrow her eyes a bit.

She turns her back on me and begins to run. It must’ve finally dawned on her to make a break for it.

“You can’t escape. You’re already mine.”

I shut my eyes.

I close off my vision, and *I close off myself*.

Now that the girl has stepped on my shadow, I've taken in her crimes. I grope around in the depths of my mind, searching for her sins.

—*Shnk*.

My insides tingle with pain.

I seek out her thoughts, fighting down the discomfort. The vast collection of murky, hateful intent within me is like a mass of filth, down to the way it makes me want to plug my nose even when it has no smell. Think of what you might find in the cauldron of an evil witch in a fairy tale, boiling and bubbling with lizards and poisonous herbs.

The pain in my gut is most likely an illusion, just the scream of my mind. The pain is an expression of its abhorrence at making contact with something so foul. I feel like I've been infected with horsehair worms.

As I choke down my disgust, I at last come across this girl's thoughts among the rest I have taken. They appear similar to shadows.

They are all crimes committed by another.

I reach down into the hideous cauldron within me—and *take hold of a shadow*.

“Ungh, ah...!”

Almost a hundred meters away, the middle schooler fleeing from me doubles over.

Got her.

I open my eyes.

Pressing hard against my chest to calm the tingling inside me, I slowly approach the girl.

“Ah...aaaaAAAAAh...”

The middle schooler gasps in distress, tears flowing from her eyes.

Unsurprisingly, she is beginning to catch some looks from those around her, yet not one of them offers to lend her a hand. They all either ignore her or give her a wide berth as they watch in confusion.

“What you're feeling is just the misery of looking directly at your crimes. Do you understand?”

The speechless girl only weeps.

“Don't worry. I don't intend to make you into a dog-person. The ones I see as dogs, as no better than animals, are the lowest of the low who've shut

off their minds, fled from their crimes, and forgotten how to feel guilty. That doesn't apply to you. Your suffering proves it. You're just in a desperate, self-destructive spiral, which means you still have room to grow. Still, it seems you need to be watched. So—”

I take the shadow of the girl's crimes in my hand and pop it into my own mouth.

“—*your own crimes shall take charge of you.*”

An intense bitterness spreads throughout my mouth.

And control of the girl is mine.

“Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime” is the name of the Box I've obtained.

In simple terms, it's able to control others by playing upon the feelings of guilt that haunt them.

There are some conditions, though. Conditions I imposed myself. In order to control a person, I must stare at their crimes head-on, essentially viewing the most despicable parts of them. For example, this middle school girl here has launched into a reckless, self-destructive campaign after being infected with HIV while working as a prostitute. Now, she's sold her body numerous times specifically to infect the men who come to her for these paid liaisons. Even though this is hurting herself more than anyone else, even though her awareness of her misdeeds is crushing her, she cannot bring herself to stop. Her sins have taken on a will of their own and run amok, attacking her and others.

I accept those sins.

I accept the malicious aggression that accompanies them, too.

Her sins will attack me as well, of course.

But this is the only method that lets me control my targets.

A Box can grant any wish.

But no person can make a wish without at least a few wrinkles. A Box takes these distorted wishes and makes them come true, flaws and all.

It's no different for me. My realistic sensibilities get in the way, and I find that I can't believe completely in the power of the Boxes. A certain part of me refuses to let go of the idea that it's impossible to grant any wish.

If you use your Box without being a little clever about it, then your wish will be left twisted and unrealized.

Fortunately for me, I understood this. That's why I didn't use my Box immediately after receiving it from O and decided first to learn how I could put a Box to best use.

Before long, opportunity came calling within Koudai Kamiuchi's "Game of Indolence." That's where I was able to find my answers.

The trick is to not use the Box to grant my wish directly. The trick is to ask the Box for the *means* to make my wish into reality.

Let's say I wanted to destroy the world. If I made a direct wish to the Box to destroy the world, I wouldn't be able to manipulate it correctly. The wish is just plain vague, and I would also harbor doubts over whether such a thing was possible. So I create a buffer and ask for a switch that sets off nuclear bombs. That's more than enough power to destroy the world, not to mention tangible and easy to imagine.

It's an outrageous wish all on its own, to be sure. You still have to believe that Boxes have the capacity to do such things. But I've witnessed the awesome power of Boxes firsthand. It's already feasible to me that I could receive a weapon found in the world today.

With this technique, even a realist such as myself can use a Box properly.

My true wish is to drive all the fools who lack imagination from the world. I didn't ask the Box for that directly, but rather, I asked for a weapon that is up to the task.

"Control over others" is the power I chose.

I can probably thank my core personality for the fact that it was granted. Someone else might not be able to believe that taking control of others was possible, so it wouldn't have come true for them. I, on the other hand, know I can control others to a certain extent with my words and deeds. It's a bit of an assumption on my part, but, well, an assumption is good enough, as long as I can believe it. That's how my wish came true without being warped. What's more, I've made my wish even stronger by burdening myself with strict limitations. Going to such lengths was what granted me this power.

Unfortunately, the power itself is a bit lacking when it comes to achieving my ultimate purpose. Such a roundabout approach is limited when it comes to achieving my goal. I'm a little irritated with my own nature as a realist, which is what forced me to choose this method.

But I also think it's as it should be.
After all, nothing feels strange about this ability.
That must mean it's a perfect match for me, right?

The girl is still crouching with tears streaming from her eyes.
“Can you stop this senseless revenge?” I ask her.

Though her whimpering *ah, aaaah* isn't a proper reply, she manages a nod.

I believe her beyond a shadow of a doubt. This girl is going to give up her stupid vendetta. As it stands, I don't have any need to maintain total control over her.

Now that my business with the girl is done, I begin to move away, only to find that a pair of men, maybe college students, are blocking my path.

“...Hey, what'd you do to her?”

The man's tone is calm, but they seem upset. They aren't going to let me get away with what they saw as injustice. They probably think I was harassing the girl.

“I didn't do anything. Did I?” I ask, turning to look at her.

The girl hastily scrubs her tears away and stands upright. “No.”

She raises her head.

At that one simple action, the two men flinch.

What's the matter?

I immediately understand once I see the girl's face, though.

I'm not surprised they reacted as they did. One look at such an expression would knock me for a loop, too.

The girl's smile is unnatural, as if the corners of her mouth are being forcefully pulled back with bits of kite string. Her eyes gleam dully.

This again, huh...?

“This person is a god.”

Oh, give me a break.

All I did was stoke this girl's feelings of guilt. I didn't take direct control of her body or anything. I just drew out her guilt and forced her to look at it, which I'm guessing allowed her to put her heart in order. You could say she happened to get some counseling that proved immediately effective. For her, this was salvation itself.

I suppose I would seem like a god, getting results instantaneously with my mysterious powers. This does happen sometimes, in rare cases.

This was more than they bargained for, I guess; the two anxious-looking men shift away from us after the girl makes her proclamation.

I look at the girl with equal apprehension. She's squinting at me and panting heavily, as if she truly is beholding the divine.

What is it with this god stuff? Cut it out. Seriously, just stop. It freaks me out. It feels like fingers pushing into the back of my throat. I'm not a god at all. I don't want to be anything like one.

But...

“—You’re right. I am.”

...I have to allow her to call me that.

I’m still weak. I haven’t entirely rid myself of the boy I was before I pierced my ears, the boy who believed the world was kind. That’s why shouldering the crimes of others brings me pain.

Is suffering just part of being human?

If so, then I can’t afford to be human. I must forsake my human heart. If even strangling Koudai Kamiuchi to death wasn’t enough to free myself from this frailty, then I need to kill someone else. No matter what it takes, I have to purge the weakest parts of my being.

I will transcend myself.

If I must be a god to achieve my purpose, then a god I shall become.

“.....”

I look at the girl worshipping me.

I had thought there was no need to control her completely...but now I see there’s no reason *not* to control her, either. What sort of god am I if I’m not prepared to rob her of her dignity and utterly humiliate her?

I’ll make a ruin of her life.

It was pretty much over to begin with anyway. And so—

“I want you to offer me everything.”

—I touch her shadow of a crime within my own chest and begin to take control of her.

“...Ah.”

A carnal sigh escapes her, and she pushes herself against me. She gazes up at me with moist eyes, imploring me to take command.

“Be grateful. I’ll find a role even for a depraved girl like you. I’ve got an

idea. For starters, you can get down and lick my shoes.”

“Oh, wow, thank you so much! Thank you!!”

Without a shred of resistance, she sticks out her tongue and slides it across the bottom of my boot.

“I’m so happy. I’m truly, truly blessed that you would allow someone like me to touch something you wear, even if just with my tongue!”

As all the bystanders watch with curiosity and contempt, I think:

This is ridiculous. Making her do this brings me no pleasure, only shame. I’m getting nauseated. All the same, I have to make everyone submit to me like this.

I must discard all my emotions, even the most trivial.

“—Urgh.”

But my chest still hurts.

I touch my earrings.

I now have six piercings total. I just had this desire to put holes in my body.

“__”

For some reason, Kokone Kirino’s face appears in my mind.

I must rid myself of my feelings for her, but still, I remember.

The girl in my mind’s eye isn’t the shallow, disingenuous girl who wears contacts, changes her hairstyle frequently, and spends over an hour doing her makeup in the morning.

The Kokone Kirino I remember will forever be the timid girl always following along behind me and worrying about how others felt. The bespectacled girl whose diffident eyes were only for me.

I drive the image of Kiri’s face from my mind.

Yeah, I get it. My attachment to Kiri will prove to be the greatest obstacle in the path to my goal.

I lower my gaze to the girl still licking my boots.

I will change the world.

I will transform it.

“...That’s right.”

In order to make this possible, *I will need to do away with Kokone Kirino.*

And I will have to defeat my ultimate foe.

“I’m going to meet the zeroth Maria.”

My once foolish and carefree foe found his resolve and changed during the killing game.

He’s a specialist at crushing wishes, so he’s bound to show up. Unlike before, he isn’t going to get caught in this Box. He’ll dive into it headfirst. Then he will destroy my wish.

—Kazuki Hoshino.

Our battle will begin.

◇◇◇ Kazuki Hoshino 09/06 SUN 2:05 PM ◇◇◇

Kokone hadn’t changed, even without Daiya there.

It didn’t matter if she had predicted his disappearance; this was weird. That’s why I came to a conclusion:

Kokone’s cheery personality was just a front.

And not only recently, but the entire time I’d known her.

To be completely honest, earlier I had noticed something forced about Kokone’s current cheery disposition. I also felt Kokone was doing her best to keep up with Haruaki and Daiya.

Another thing I picked up on was that Daiya was not especially pleased about this.

But I didn’t think it was anything worth troubling myself over.

After all, everybody’s a little fake to some extent. Mogi told me that, before her accident, she had to force herself to maintain her social relationships. What’s more, Kokone really pushes herself to be the person she wants to be. That’s not a bad thing at all.

Or so I thought.

That was definitely a mistake on my part.

If it weren’t, none of this would have happened.

“That’s why I’m telling you it was wrong, Kazu! I don’t know if she got her hopes up because you were too nice or not, but you know what kind of

state Kasumi is in!"

We were in the classroom after school ended when the trouble started.

"You knew full well why she wanted to come back to school! Kasumi was working her ass off with her rehabilitation; do you have any idea how horrible it was for her dealing with you?!"

Kokone was on my case about the way I left for Maria's apartment the other day and ignored Mogi's attempts to stop me.

"If you think it's no big deal simply because she doesn't *seem* depressed after her accident, you don't know a damn thing! No one could just shrug off what she's been through. She's just putting on a brave face so we don't worry about her!"

It was July, with summer break right around the corner. Though it was already past five PM, the sun was still coming in strong through the windows, and the classroom was bright. I'm sure it was probably hot because of the season, but I don't really remember.

Kokone was doing her best to fight down her tears. It was probably inappropriate for me to feel this way while I was getting chewed out, but Kokone's distress on her friend's behalf just made me more fond of her.

That said, I couldn't agree with her.

I got what she was saying. I understood all too well. I wanted to do right by Mogi, too. Obviously.

But I'd already chosen Maria.

And that was why I told her about my choice straight out.

"Kokone, Maria's...the one."

She could tell I meant it, and it startled her a little. But that didn't keep her from arguing back.

"B-but that was still no reason for you to choose that moment to do what you did! You should've waited until she was a little better, at least! You're decent enough to do that, aren't you?!"

I fell silent, but not because she had convinced me. I simply knew that anything else I said would only upset her more.

Basically, no matter what Kokone said to me—even if she decided she hated my guts and never talked to me again—my decision wouldn't change. I'd never want to lose a friend so important to me, but that still doesn't make anything different.

I knew what Kokone wanted to say. But when would “the right moment” have been? Did it even exist? Was it once Mogi was able to attend school regularly? Should I have told her I chose Maria right when her earnest wish was finally granted? Would “the right moment” to reject her have been after she had overcome the pain of rehabilitation so she could be back at school with me?

Of course not.

Mogi would have suffered no matter when it happened.

“Say something, Kazu! Please—just don’t hurt Kasumi any more!”

It’s not like I wanted to hurt her.

I wanted to shout it at her, to say I was the one in pain, but I knew I didn’t have the right.

I pulled out my phone. “What’re you looking at?!” Kokone snapped, but I ignored her and opened the image I was after.

In it was a picture of Mogi in her pajamas making the peace sign.

I really loved that picture. The sight of her smile, positive and hopeful as a sunflower, always lifted my spirits.

When I looked at that picture, it reminded me that once upon a time, in another world, I had loved Mogi. If someone smiled at me like this, and even felt affection for me, falling for them would be a matter of course. I know that very well about myself. It’s a picture I treasure, a picture I hold dear.

And that’s why I deleted it.

I mean, I had already chosen someone else.

After that, I simply looked at Kokone without saying anything. She didn’t speak, either. Maybe she couldn’t, not when my eyes were so serious.

With only the two of us in it, the classroom fell completely silent.

Yes, completely.

That’s probably why. The two girls must’ve thought there wasn’t anyone in this quiet classroom.

And they were able to gossip freely in the hallway as they stopped back by the classroom after club was finished for the day.

“Ugh, Kokone is really getting out of hand.”

I doubt they even suspected the person they were talking about was in that very classroom.

“She’s trying too hard to show off how cute she is. Yesterday she was going on about her glasses; it was so annoying. Like anyone cares what your face looks like. If you don’t wanna have an actual conversation, go talk to a mirror.”

“I know, right? She’s so obnoxious, and she talks only about herself. And for all her bragging about how pretty she is, she honestly isn’t. Like, compared with Maria, it’s no contest. They’re not even in the same league.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re horrible, Yuu!”

I knew the two voices in this gleeful conversation. They were girls from our class, Kokone’s friends. They often ate lunch with her.

“I mean, it’s true. All Kokone has going for her is the work she puts into her makeup, don’t you think? She’s too desperate to get guys.”

“Hmm. It does seem to work, though. Hmm, maybe guys can’t see that stuff for what it is.”

“All you have to do to get a boy is just be a tiny bit attractive and act all friendly with him. It’s probably easier for them to make a move when you’re not that great of a catch to begin with.”

“Kokone’s really got that part figured out, huh?”

“Does she really think she’s popular? The only reason we hang out with her is because the boys come flocking when she’s around.”

“She does have her uses.”

“It just stresses me out. And besides, now that our prince of sarcasm is gone, there’s not much reason to keep her around.”

“Oh yeah, Oomine always was a favorite of yours, Mii.”

“He’s rough around the edges, but deep down, he’s really nice. He’s not your average bad boy. I mean, he just oozes class! At least *I* get you, Daiya, my love.”

“You’re creeping me out here, Mii. Come on, you just wanna believe that because he’s hot, don’t you?”

“Could be. Like, nobody gives a crap about ugly guys.”

“Do you think Oomine’s going out with Kokone?”

“Hmm, seems more like they had something in the past, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah, could be. Like, maybe she reeled him in, but then he got away once he figured out what she’s like?”

I could hardly stand to hear any more of their cruel comments. I wanted to

plug my ears, but I couldn't do that. After all, I was with the one who would be suffering far worse.

The voices drew closer. In a few moments, the two of them would come face-to-face with Kokone. Unsure of what to do, I looked at my friend.

I was sure I would find her white-faced and frozen. Probably in tears... *What should I do? Should we hide and wait for the two of them to leave? Then maybe we could go to McDonald's or somewhere, and I could listen to her and try to cheer her up.*

As it turned out, though, she wasn't going to need any cheering.

Kokane was not pale, as I had predicted.

Kokane—*had a joyous grin on her face.*

“.....Huh?”

I didn't understand at the time. I had no idea how she could react like that under those circumstances.

Yeah, but I think I get it now. I saw what happened next, so I can guess why she seemed so happy.

I'm sure the emotion Kokone was feeling right then was—

“Heh-heh...”

—a sense of superiority.

The two girls reached the classroom and opened the door. They noticed Kokone inside straightaway, and they went so stiff, it was almost comical.

“K-Kokane. Didn't know you were here.”

Kokane's expression was soft and gentle. “Yeah. I was here the whole time.”

The two of them were unsure how to react to such a mild response.

“Uh...Kokane...?”

“So that's what you really think of me? I'm sorry. I can be a bit clueless, so I didn't notice. I'll be careful from now on.”

“U-um, Kokone?”

“I get it. Sometimes it's easy to go overboard when you're gossiping about how much you don't like someone. You just get caught up in the moment. It's not how you really feel. Yeah, I understand.”

It was a strangely open-minded response in light of the awful things they had been saying behind her back. The girls' faces relaxed slightly, suggesting they had been put at ease, although the doubt wasn't totally gone.

“Th-that's right.”

“We just got carried away.”

Their excuses still didn’t change Kokone’s gentle expression.

“But you know, I don’t feel great after overhearing you. You get what I’m saying, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

“So I was thinking, maybe I could say just a few things back to you, and we could call it even? What do you say? We can all go back to being friends with a clean slate.”

“S-sure. Say whatever you want,” one of them agreed.

So Kokone offered her response. She looked them in the eye and spoke slowly and clearly so they wouldn’t miss a single word.

“Go to hell, you ugly creeps.”

The two girls stared in wide-eyed shock, unable to process what she’d just said.

“You’re hideous. You’re not even average. I have my uses? Try saying that once you’ve used a guy who might actually give you a chance, you malformed freaks. You’re too ugly to get a boyfriend even if you are riding my coattails.”

As Kokone’s insults finally began to sink in, one of the girls’ faces flushed red with anger, while the other’s went white with fear.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, what a joke. I mean, if you’re making jealous comments, you must recognize I’m better than you, right? Does it really hurt that much to be inferior? Geez, you two, pull it together. I don’t really care if I’m better, but I’ll tell you this: The most you’re good for is showing how much prettier I am by comparison. Worthless *and* hideous.”

Kokone smiled coyly. The intense gleam in her eyes was almost a glare.

“Okay, now let’s let bygones be bygones.”

Naturally, Kokone did not talk to either of those two ever again after that.

I think back over the incident as I watch a video on my older sister Roo’s laptop of a group prostrating themselves at Shinjuku Station. Someone uploaded it on YouTube.

I understand now.

Kokone is kind enough to cry on Mogi’s behalf, so how could she say such vicious things to those two?

I had thought Kokone was forcing her way ahead along the path to the person she wanted to be. But that's never been the case. I'm positive Kokone has no choice but to portray herself as she is now. It's her only option, no matter how much stress it puts on her.

If she doesn't force herself, Kokone cannot remain Kokone.

And I'm sure those two girls touched a part of her they shouldn't have.

That's why she lost it.

I have yet to figure out what could have sent Kokone on such a rant, but I'm fairly certain Daiya would know.

"Oh, I saw that video, too. It's crazy. That kid has a lot of charisma for his age."

I turn around to find the other owner of this room peering at the screen of the computer. Her comment is way off, though.

"...That's...my Umaibo, isn't it?" I ask.

Roo is opening the package of my *tonkatsu* sauce-flavored snack.

"And isn't that computer mine?"

"Yeah. But that's not the same," I say.

She grudgingly pulls out her wallet and presses a ten-yen coin into my hand.

...That's not the point here, but... Ah, whatever.

Roo nibbles away as she wonders, almost to herself, "You think someone like that could change the world?"

I look back at the computer screen.

Yeah... That may be what he intends.

With the power of his Box, Daiya could be attempting to destroy it.

If he's using a Box, I know Maria will get tangled up in all this.

And that means she'll be lured out of our daily life, and Aya Otonashi will take over.

"...No—"

—I can't let that happen. No matter what.

Within the Game of Indolence, I came to understand that my foe is Aya Otonashi, the one trying to overcome and kill the original Maria Otonashi. I have to bring Maria to a world far away from the Boxes or O.

I have to stop Daiya.

But how?

I'm not an owner. Given the nature of Daiya's Box, I don't even have any means of fighting back.

How am I supposed to protect Maria like this?

“__”

There is an answer, an exceedingly simple one.

I want to avoid this method more than anything; it'll betray all that I once was. Argh, but it's too late for that, isn't it? I already made up my mind to get my hands dirty when I gave up on Koudai Kamiuchi.

That's why...

...there's no reason for me not to get a Box and use it.

What's about to happen is a clash between two Boxes.

My wish to destroy Daiya's Box and his wish will confront each other head-on.

I don't know the nature of his wish. I have no doubt that whatever it is is nonnegotiable for him.

But no matter what it is—

“I don't like it.”

Any wish that has to rely upon those stupid Boxes is bullshit. I don't care how important it is to Daiya; it's bullshit. I'll smash it into a paste and then wipe out every last trace of it.

Even if I have to kill Daiya Oomine himself.

“...I've been thinking—you kinda scare me lately, Kazu. You kinda have the look of a killer in your eyes, you know?” she mutters.

I ignore her and shut down the computer.

I've made up my mind.

I will confront Daiya.



Breaking of Close Ties, SCENE 1

1. EXT. HOTEL – NIGHT

The exterior of a relatively large business hotel. It's night, yet there is still a bit of light left.

2. HOTEL ROOM

The hotel looks clean with sparse furniture. The room is on the large side. Having been left there by second-year middle school student Koudai Kamiuchi, Miyuki Karino is terrified, face pale as she is surrounded by several men of clearly low standards. There is a double bed behind the men.

MIYUKI

K-Kou!

Koudai Kamiuchi ignores the voice calling out to him and closes the door. Miyuki sees this and tries to escape, but one of the men plants himself in front of the exit. Miyuki searches for somewhere to run to, then quickly darts into the bathroom. The bathroom just so happens to have a lock. Putting the latch in place, Miyuki sits down against the door, her breathing ragged. The silhouettes of the men can be seen through the semitransparent door.

MEN

Come on out, Miyuki!
We won't treat you bad. It'll feel good.
We paid a lot of money for this.

At the sound of the men hitting the door, Miyuki wraps her arms

around herself, her lips trembling. She hurriedly tries to open her school bag (but struggles to do so). Getting the zipper undone, she pulls out a mobile phone with many charms and decorations attached to it. She begins to enter text with shaky fingers.

3. SCREEN OF A MOBILE PHONE

Help me! At this rate a bunch of weird men are going to... Miyuki's hands stop as she enters the message, her face white. The screen has halted on *Come save me*.

4. FLASHBACK—RINO'S HOME

An elementary school-aged Daiya Oomine pats little Miyuki's head. It seems to tickle her. Next to them, an elementary school-aged Kokone Kirino hovers over Daiya with an uneasy look on her face.

5. BATHROOM

Miyuki continues entering text, nearly in tears. The phone screen displays “Come save me, Dai!” She presses the SEND button. The screen says “Your message has been received.”

◆◆◆ **Daiya Oomine 09/09 SUN 6:10 PM ◆◆◆**

If someone were to make my life into a movie, there probably wouldn't be a need for a new script at this point. The tale of my struggles to transcend humanity from here on out might be unique, but it won't be popular. O and the Boxes and all that are just too ridiculous.

Yeah, the stories of my past romances would still probably make for a film that would attract a way larger audience. Ah, but it'd probably be a no-go unless we tacked on a false epilogue suggesting a happy ending. Let's say I'm actually afflicted with an incurable disease and die. Then for the ending, how about Kiri moves on from my death and grows as a person? It would've been a huge hit in a different era.

Unfortunately, though, I'm actually alive, real life carries on even after the tragedy ends, and now we've passed the point of no return.

The tale of Daiya Oomine is already over.

It's time to finish filming, because no more is needed.

I need to bring an end to all that's left of Daiya Oomine's humanity.

That's why I've come back to school.

"Oh, come on, Kazu. If you're awestruck by my beauty, you should just come out and admit it."

"I think you'd better speak up soon, Hossni. Tell her she's got it all wrong. Say, 'That's not it. I couldn't help but stare because I was wondering why this giant fruit fly was here.'"

Kiri and Haruaki are going back and forth like this before school in the classroom.

Sitting in my chair, I figure I might as well join in the conversation.

"Y'know, I used to talk about wanting to kill someone without really appreciating what it meant, but watching you, Kiri, I finally understand the concept. I think I can use it properly from here on out. I should be grateful."

"Huh? Oh, do you mean toward yourself, now that you've seen how brightly I shine and you can't stand how dull you are? It's inevitable!"

This is a sham of a conversation, all about just trying to keep up appearances. No different from reading the music to cover a popular song on guitar.

It's all so hollow. Worse than hollow—it's pathetic.

I was missing for an extended time. Not only that, I got ahold of a Box. I've changed. Some of the people here have probably seen that video of people bowing in Shinjuku and noticed I was at the center of it. After returning out of the blue at the end of summer vacation, I shouldn't be able to slide smoothly back into the normal routine after only one day. No way.

The easygoing atmosphere Kiri tried to create is no more. Some of the girls in class are avoiding her, which proves it.

The normal flow was likely already shattered, whether I came back or not. When Maria Otonashi showed up, when Kazuki Hoshino was affected by Box after Box, normality started to crack. Kazu could probably maintain the

mood here if he worked to sustain it, but the Kazu who overcame the Game of Indolence would never do something so ineffectual.

This transient routine will end.

And I'll apply the finishing blow myself.

I spent all day yesterday placing several dozen students at our school under my rule. School will be the starting point for my plans.

If a world under the influence of a Box is "abnormal," then I'll slather everything in that abnormality.

I pull out my phone and send an e-mail to the address of a certain murderer, one of the students who are now my Subjects.

It's Daiya Oomine.

I need to talk to you, so come to the roof during lunch. I'll leave it unlocked.

"It's been a while, Oomine. Hmm? No, that isn't right. I guess this is the first time we've spoken in the technical sense."

The student council president, Iroha Shindo, shows up to my summons as requested on the roof during lunchtime.

"If you're going to confess your love for me, I wish you'd picked a slightly nicer place to do it. It's way too freaking hot up here."

I thought the events of the Game of Indolence might still be affecting her, but...this girl has guts. Even when a fellow participant in a killing game calls her aside, she's completely casual. That's Iroha Shindo for you.

And that's why it's worth it to have her come meet me.

"You remember killing me, huh?"

Shindo's eyes go wide for the briefest moment at my unflinching remark. But she quickly brushes it off with a forced smile. "Well, you're alive now, aren't you?"

"It seems you do. Murderer."

Shindo pouts her lips and scratches her head at my words. She seems composed, but I know she isn't. This is her putting on a calm facade.

"Now then, I'm going to fill in the gaps in your memory. As sharp as you are, I'm sure you've surmised that those events weren't a dream or fantasy. But your recollection is probably still vague in places. Do you know the culprit responsible for the situation?"

Shindo appears to hesitate for a second, then answers, "...That bastard Kamiuchi."

"That's right. If you know that, then naturally, you must have wondered something. How was Koudai Kamiuchi able to pull such a thing off?"

After a moment's thought, I tell her.

"It's because he had a Box."

Shindo waits for my next words. I don't say anything further, though. I'm sure I've said enough.

When I don't continue, Shindo scratches her head, perplexed.

"Uh...don't you think you're cutting your explanation a bit short there?"

"I'm think it's enough for you to get the gist."

"You overestimate me. I'm not too good at guessing... A Box, huh? From the way you phrased it, I'd say it's like the tool that forced us into that killing game? Or maybe I should think of it as a tool that has the power to make things happen, including the game."

I was right about Shindo; that explanation alone was enough for her to figure that out.

And she even takes it one step further:

"You wouldn't happen to be implying you have that Box, would you?"

I thought you said you weren't good at guessing. "That's right. I have a Box now, though it doesn't really do killing games. You could probably figure that out, since I went to the trouble of calling you here and telling you, right?"

"It's not so much that I know, but, well, something has changed about you. I figured something must have happened."

I've changed, have I? After becoming an owner and doing the things I have, I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

"So what *are* these Boxes anyway?"

"They can grant any wish."

"Any wish? That's crazy. But I'm sure it doesn't work out that way most of the time. There has to be some sort of curse, right? Like those ones in our national RPGs that make it so you can't take off your equipment. Um, I should warn you that I'm a commonsense type of person. I'm not going to buy into all this talk of Boxes just like that. But I'm willing to grant that they exist for the sake of keeping the conversation rolling."

Shindo continues, still astride her high horse.

“So, what did you wish for? Romantic fulfillment? Oh, that’s so cute of you.”

“To transform the world.”

She goes quiet for a moment. “...Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

Shindo responds with a blank look on her face, as if at a loss as to how she should be reacting.

“Oh boy... Fine. I’ll take you at your word. So what you’re saying is that you’re going to use that power to put yourself at the top so you can change the world. But I don’t think you’re capable of it, much less the right sort of person for it, you know?”

She doesn’t mince words.

But her evaluation is fair. She knows me only up until the Game of Indolence.

All my NPC did in the Game of Indolence was reject everyone else. He didn’t burden himself with others. If you wanted someone suitable to take a stand at the top, it would probably have to be someone like Shindo, who feels obligated to protect others.

If you put the two of us as we were back then side by side and asked which was more qualified to be a leader, anyone would choose her.

And so I must surpass Iroha Shindo.

That’s why I called her here.

Here, on the roof, where the sun is shining so brilliantly—*where she will make a nice, dark shadow.*

“I’ll explain how I’m trying to change the world.”

Shindo sighs without enthusiasm. “I’m not all that interested, though. I don’t mind hearing you out, but it’s hot. Can we maybe do this in the cafeteria?”

“That won’t work.”

“I see. Then I’m leaving. You tracked down my e-mail address, so shoot me a message there. Subject: ‘My plan to transform the world.’ You watch too much anime, Oomine. If a message with that title showed up in my in-box, I wouldn’t even open it, much less reply.”

And with that, Shindo turns her back on me. I quickly step around in front of her.

“Come on. I get that you don’t want to let me go, charming as I am, but

girls aren't gonna like you if you can't read the situation. If I were Yuri, I would go crying to some dude from the Self-Defense Forces and tell him about the creepy guy who won't leave me alone so he would come beat you up."

Shindo steps to the side of me where I'm blocking the way and slips by.

But it doesn't matter that she's trying to force her way past me. I've already completed my mission.

Shindo has already stepped on my shadow.

And thus—

—the crime of murder enters me.

“.....”

It's another intense one...

The shock of it is almost enough to drive me to my knees.

That middle schooler from before also created a powerful sense of revulsion, but this sin has a bite to it like a sharp blade. It's a stimulant. Her sin is like swallowing a bunch of nails; if I'm not careful, it won't think twice about shredding me from the inside out.

All the same, I bring it into me.

“Shindo.”

I address her back as she makes to get away without even turning around.

“Drown in the depth of your own misdeeds.”

I pluck out the shadow of those crimes I have processed within me, and—

“—!!”

—I swallow them.

“Ungh... Ah... Ah!”

Shindo shouts just before she puts her hand on the door of the roof. A pained look, as if someone had squeezed her naked heart, appears on her face, and she sinks to the ground, sweating profusely. Shindo's feeling the same cutting pain as I am now.

Suffer. It's yours to begin with.

I look down at the crouching girl. She is glaring up at me.

“What did you...do?!”

“You seemed all calm and collected, but it would appear that it still

bothers you. You're just good at hiding it, huh?"

"I asked you what you did!"

"I merely helped you remember your crimes."

"...What?"

"Looks like I've got no choice. Let me explain about my Box. It's called Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, and it allows me to rule over people and control them as I please. When I have swallowed someone's shadow of a crime, they'll remember the event that gives them the greatest sense of wrongdoing. To be precise, they recall how they felt when it happened. In your case, it was your murders in the Game of Indolence."

"...Th-this feeling...is from back then...? No—no wonder it felt familiar," she says, her eyes filling with tears.

"You are under my Rule. I can make you do whatever I want now."

Shindo stands up, pressing her chest with her hands, openly hostile.

"So now that you're convinced your 'Rule' means you've beaten me, you think you're better than me or something?"

"And what would be the point of that?"

Shindo furrows her brow.

"...Then—then what's this about?"

"Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime takes the form of a shadow, which serves as its vehicle for exercising its power. This shadow has been stained a purer shade of black than anything else by layer upon layer of sins. This is my Box. However, it isn't just mine alone. *It's shared by everyone whose sins I have embraced.*"

"...And...?"

"That means you, too, can use Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime."

Shindo's eyes go as round as circles.

"Wait. If so, then are you saying that's why you asked me to come meet you?"

She really is quick on the uptake. Shindo cuts ahead to the next step in my explanation and lays it out for me.

"You're saying you want me to work with you?"

I lift the corners of my mouth in an audacious grin. The answer is yes.

I want to increase my chances of winning the battle with Kazuki and his team, so I need Iroha Shindo and her unshakable strength of will.

“That said, if you don’t agree with my plan, then you probably aren’t going to cooperate. Which is why I’m going to fill you in on what it is I hope to do.”

“...Fine, whatever, I get it! Just do something about this pain!”

“I can’t. That’s something that was in you from the get-go. All I did was stir it up and call it out. Take care of it yourself. If you don’t, I’ll judge you as unworthy of receiving any power and simply use you as a pawn under my control.”

“You visual-*kei* wannabe piece of...! Damn, fine, fine, I understand! Don’t take me lightly, got it? Once I pinpoint where the feeling is coming from, I can control it. Just wait a bit until I calm down. I need only words to take your plan apart!” Shindo spits. She inhales deeply and blows it out slowly a few times, like she’s doing a breathing exercise. As she does, her face returns to normal.

“Okay, go ahead.”

Once she’s completely recovered, Shindo urges me to continue. I have to hand it to her—she really did get herself together right away, just as she claimed.

“Here’s your answers. What I’m trying to do is strengthen everyone’s sense of individual ethics by creating a heavenly presence watching them.”

“Okay... Yeah, I don’t really get it, but continue.”

“For example, some people think of a Jizo as just a stone statue, but they’re still resistant to the idea of breaking one. Even atheists have a compulsive sensitivity toward the Shinto and Buddhist deities that gives them a fear of punishment.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I’m the same way.”

“Be it because of *kami* or gods or society, people find it hard to do wrong if there’s someone watching over them. I’m going to provide that sense with Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime.”

“How?”

“Have you heard about the dog-people?”

“Of course... Oh, so that was you, huh? But why be so roundabout when you have a Box that’s supposed to be able to do anything? You could just wish for everyone to have better ethics from the get-go.”

“I’m a realist, so this is the most I can do.”

“Hmph, poor you. You know, if you share this power to control someone

with other people, someone's gonna abuse it.”

“I’m sure they will, but it’s not a big problem.”

“You sure of that?”

“I won’t make a Ruler of just anybody. My Box’s power of control can’t be exercised without the permission of someone who is already a Ruler. At present, the only Ruler is me. I haven’t even told anyone before this that Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime is shared. You’re the first.”

“Oh, I’m *so* honored,” Shindo replies mockingly, then continues, “But if I become a Ruler, that means I can make other Rulers, too, right? Wouldn’t you lose track of things if the number of people with the ability grew exponentially?”

“Rulers won’t grant this power willy-nilly. I’m sure you’ll realize this if you actually obtain the power.”

“I will, huh? ...Well, even if I do, I still don’t think it will keep people from misusing it, you know?”

“Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime connects us to others through guilt. If someone is conscious of abusing the power, it will lead to guilt. That guilt will then be conveyed to others with the ability. Especially for Rulers.”

“Hmm. So it’s like being observed, eh?”

Shindo purses her lips again. Now that I think about it, I suppose that’s a habit of hers.

“Anyway, I get what you’re saying. Still, why did you want the Box to do all that? It seems to me you’d be happier if you were more honest about your desires.”

“.....”

I didn’t want to talk about this if possible, but if I don’t, she most likely won’t cooperate.

Touching my earrings, I open my mouth to speak.

“I hate people who lack imagination.”

“That goes for me, too. Pretty much all smart people, I think.”

“Up until a certain point in time, I thought ruining the lives of others was clearly the work of someone evil. I thought bad people destroyed good people. But I was wrong. The ones who ruin lives and rob others of their happiness are idiots with no imagination. They aren’t evil—they’re fools. Scum incapable of considering how much their own selfish actions harm

other people.

“Take a serial shoplifter. The damage caused by their thefts could cause a business to go under. That might put the employees of said shop on the street. Without income, the households of these employees might fall apart. If a shoplifter continues to steal, with malicious intent, in the full knowledge of these possibilities, then they are a villain. I’m pretty sure the majority of them aren’t, though. They may have some vague notion that shoplifting is wrong, but they’re stealing to satisfy some desire without thinking about the significance of their actions. And they completely destroy lives without even realizing that’s what they’re doing.”

“Oomine...”

Shindo’s face has grown uncharacteristically solemn.

“Someone like that took away *your* happiness, didn’t they?”

I have no intention of answering that question.

“However, if Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime is in operation, people will be keenly aware of their misdeeds,” I continue. “That’s why I’m drawing attention to the dog-people. If each of us begins to consider what constitutes a crime, we will have a heightened sense of ethics. We’ll think about what our actions mean from an objective viewpoint. We won’t do wrong for ambiguous reasons anymore. This will result in fewer tragedies.”

“You think it’ll be that easy?”

“I’ve already thrown the dice. I have no choice but to follow through,” I reply.

Shindo peers intently at me, as if trying to size me up.

“Hey... If that really is your...” She stops there. “...No, never mind. Um, I think you’ve put a lot of thought into Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, and that what you’re doing is interesting. But as I said before, I don’t feel you’re up to this.”

“Then how about evaluating me?”

“Huh?”

“I’m going to give you the power of a Ruler now. In order to Control the Subjects, you must bear the full weight of their crimes. Including your classmates... Okay, I’ll give you the sins of ten people.”

“You mean you’re going to give me the ability to control those ten? But how would that allow me to judge you?”

“You’ll understand if you try.”

“...Hmph. Are you sure? I still haven’t agreed to go along with you, so I may not cooperate even when you give me the power, you know?”

“I’m fine with that, if you don’t feel I’m worth your cooperation once you’ve finished your evaluation. But if you do accept me, then I need you to work with me whether you like it or not.”

Shindo nods with an irritating smile, like she’s humoring a selfish child.

“Okay, fine. I’m prepared for that. If I find you worthy, then I’m with you.”

“Don’t forget those words.”

“Hey, I don’t mean *with* you, like a boyfriend and girlfriend. It might be surprising coming from a girl like me, but I’ve got someone I kinda like.”

I find myself laughing at Shindo’s ability to crack jokes at a time like this.

She’s so confident, even though this is another Box like the one that made her into a murderer.

Shindo is most likely certain she won’t find me worthy. She probably thinks she couldn’t possibly lose to my Box.

“...Hmph.”

Don’t get a big head, Shindo.

I’ll make you regret your conceit in accepting my proposal. I’ll win and show just which of us is better. I’ll place you under my control and make you lick my boots.

A thin smile appears on my face, and I close my eyes.

At the same time, I close myself.

I sink into my own depths, searching through the mass of thoughts.

The shadows of others’ crimes thrash about, threatening to rend me limb from limb. Becoming a Ruler means taming these monsters.

Shindo, do you think you’re up to it?

“Shindo.”

“What?”

“Don’t lose your trust in people.”

I then grab ahold of Shindo’s head, and with my pointer and middle fingers, I poke the shadow of a crime into her mouth.

Swallowing a crime is the same as imbibing the foulest part of that

person.

The first time I took in the sins of someone else, I wondered if it was going to turn my blood green and putrid. If that tainted blood was going to course through my veins to my entire body and rot my cells. I had a waking vision that I was melting like a zombie. My nails smelled like piss and shit, and I started wondering if I was going to attract flies. That's how much I suffered.

However, it's possible Iroha Shindo could have no trouble whatsoever swallowing this sin.

This suffering is unique to the weak. It might be nothing to someone strong like her.

If so, then I lose. I'll have to give up on joining forces with Shindo.

My plan would still most likely go on as before, but the defeat would have a lingering effect. The failure to acquire a strategic resource like Shindo would be painful, but even more so would be the knowledge that I am unsuitable as a Ruler.

That's why—

“Ugh, ah,aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

—her deafening scream fills me with relief.

“Ah, uh, aaaah! N-no! Stop, what is this? Don't do this to me! It's gross, so gross it hurts hurts hurts hurts ugh I can't stand it I hate it die die what the hell?! They don't deserve to live!”

Actually, the despair is greater than the disgust.

“But! But! ...They're people. Just a normal...person...”

The ones harboring such hatefulness are simply those around us. Not criminals, not villains or anything else—just regular folk you wouldn't be surprised to find smiling beside you.

People commit crimes simply by living.

Most become used to them without even knowing they're doing it. They pardon themselves according to their selfish values. Their actions may elicit this disgust from someone else, but the filth itself is so familiar that they accept it without a second thought. In short, people are always easy on themselves.

Humans are so ugly.

That's why they ruin others simply by living.

Looking askance at Shindo in her despair, I whisper, “Nine more to go.”

I grab her head again and start to put another shadow in her throat. But Shindo, her face bright red, clutches my hair.

“Don’t be stupid. What... What’re you doing to me?”

“Do you want me to stop?”

Shindo glares at me, tears falling from her eyes.

“Of course I do! Nine? There’s no way I could handle even one more of those!”

“But I’ve got 967.”

Her eyes go round at the sudden revelation of the number.

“I said that I already bear the sins of 967 people.”

Shindo is at a loss for words.

“Y—” She coughs as the word begins to leave her mouth, but her hostility does not abate when she continues, “You’ve got 967 of these in you?”

Shindo laughs and shakes her head.

“Ah-ha, no way! Your mind could never take it! There’s no way you could do that unless you were prepared for it to destroy you!”

“That’s true. You’re right about that.”

“Huh?”

“I know it’s going to destroy me. I could very well go insane, bite off my own tongue while I’m thrashing around, and bleed to death. *I’m doing this while fully prepared for that.*”

I’m sure my end won’t be pleasant. No one will celebrate me or pay me honors; I will be mocked, others will be too ashamed to look at one in such an abject state, the stench will make them plug their noses, and someone will eventually kick my body into a canal or something. That’s all there is to it.

But I knew all that going into this.

Even if it comes to that, I will rid us all of these fools.

Shindo’s grip on my hair weakens.

“I don’t mind dying as long as I’m able to set the stage a bit. My supporters will take up the baton from there. That’s why I share my rule with them—to ensure that Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime will live on. As long as I don’t relinquish my Box, its system will continue. If this system can run smoothly without me one day, then I’m okay with dying at any time.”

“What’re you saying...?”

“So how about it?”

I say it as if spitting out the words.
“Am I up to it? Have I won you over?”
Shindo gives me a serious look, then releases my hair.
She then forcefully wipes away her tears with her arm, takes a few more deep breaths, and calms her emotions.
That sharp light is back in her eyes, and the corners of her mouth twitch upward.
“...I’ll take the remaining nine. I promised, after all.”
“You’re fine with that?”
“Of course I’m not. But my word is my bond, and I don’t think there’s anything I can’t do.”
At those words, she flashes a bold smile.
“You have my respect, Daiya Oomine. I’ll stick with you until you come crashing down.”

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine 09/11 FRI 4:13 PM ◆◆◆

Now, then.
This is an unforeseen development, but let’s put together what we know.
Let’s check the current situation.

I’m being held in a movie theater.

It’s a red theater, so clean that even the air seems especially clearer—which also makes the place feel cold and oppressive.

That’s where I am.

“.....”

I think back on how this came to pass.

I had begun working with Shindo to take over the school.

She had asked whether that was really necessary. True, there is no strategic advantage to putting the school under our control and using it as a base. However, it is absolutely necessary psychologically. I still have yet to rid myself of my weakness, so I need this to be my ritual to renounce and

break with normal life.

I will defeat Otonashi, who can likely sense Boxes; defeat Kazuki Hoshino, the one who stands in opposition to Boxes; and bid farewell to Kokone Kirino, the symbol of my own normal life. I need a ritual to do this. I've even decided on the order for it. The 999th person will be Maria Otonashi, the 1,000th will be Kazuki Hoshino, and the 1,001st person will be Kokone Kirino.

Once that's finished, I plan to mass-produce dog-people.

Then, I will be able to transform the world with my Box.

Our takeover of the school had gone without a hitch so far. Things were proceeding smoothly, but that was also why something seemed off.

Otonashi and Kazu knew I'm an owner, so it was strange that they hadn't taken action yet. I wouldn't have been surprised to find them blocking my way the moment I returned to school, and really, that should have been their natural reaction.

But neither one did anything of the sort.

I saw them both at school, but all they did was watch me from afar. Kazu ignored me. Otonashi seemed to have her eye on me, but she didn't actually do anything. It's possible Kazu told her not to.

He didn't finally intervene until I made Yuri Yanagi my 998th Subject.

"Took you long enough."

We were in the library after school.

I had just subjugated Yuri Yanagi in broad daylight without any concern for the eyes of others. Shindo had the library on lockdown, and at that point, all the students there were Subjects, too, so we had no reason to worry.

Kazu gave Yanagi a look of sympathy as she suffered under her sin of murder thanks to Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, and then he fixed me with a glare.

He had been hiding in the library. I didn't expect to find him alone, but I guess it made sense when I thought about it.

Kazu wasn't relying on Otonashi anymore. What's more, he didn't intend to allow her to interact with or come under the effect of any Boxes. I don't know how he was able to deceive her, but that's why she hadn't been able to act.

“Daiya.” Kazu called my name and smiled. “I’m assuming you’ve prepared yourself?”

I couldn’t hide my surprise at seeing his smile.

After all, the bewitching expression was just like O’s.

As I fell into thought, wondering about the significance of this, he quickly came up alongside me.

Kazuki Hoshino whispered, in the honeyed, gentle voice of one trying to sweet-talk a girl:

“It’s time for you to break.”

It must have happened the moment I heard those words. I was in the theater, with no way of knowing how I got there.

It was a strange phenomenon. I caught on to it right away. I was inside a Box.

But whose?

“...It can’t be.”

Speaking from the circumstances, it would be simple to infer who. I should already have considered such a possibility, too.

But I just couldn’t accept it all that easily.

After all, he despised Boxes with everything he had. You could see it most clearly in how he harbored such hatred for O, who was nothing short of fascinating for the rest of us.

Still, would he really go so far as to obtain a Box for the sole purpose of opposing me?

“No...”

That’s not right, is it?

He didn’t do it to oppose me.

He did it to protect Maria Otonashi—by crushing my Box.

That’s why Kazuki Hoshino used one himself.

And thus, he banished me into this movie theater.

The theater is one of those cinema complexes with multiple screens. I’m sure the reason it resembles the one in the shopping mall nearby is because Kazuki is the owner.

I search for an exit, although I know it’s most likely no use. Doesn’t seem

like there are any. The stainless red carpeted corridor stretches on in a continual curve. I imagine if I looked at the plans, the passage would make a perfect circle. There are entrances to theaters spaced at equal intervals, four in total. All their interiors are identical in every way, from the space to the size of the screens and the number of seats.

And they're all devoid of people.

I reach a conclusion.

I'm trapped inside this movie theater Box.

Having processed the situation, I think things over again.

What exactly is this Box? What's going to happen next?

I glance at the video billboard in front of me. The name and showtime for each film is written on the screen.

Theater 1 *Breaking of Close Ties* (4:30 PM – 6:00 PM)

Theater 2 *A 60.5-Foot Gulf* (6:30 PM – 8:00 PM)

Theater 3 *Repeat, Reset, Reset* (8:30 PM – 10:00 PM)

Theater 4 *15 Years Old and Earrings* (10:30 PM – 12:00 AM)

Each film lasts for an hour and a half. There are thirty-minute intermissions between them. Another movie starts precisely two hours after the previous one began. The end of the last film will coincide exactly with the end of today, September 11.

Should I take this to mean I'm supposed to watch them all?

I check my watch. 4:24 PM. I pull out my phone to check the time there (no reception, as it turns out, so I can't communicate with the outside world), and it's the same. The video billboard also shows the same thing. Still, this is the inside of a Box. There's no guarantee time works the same here as in the outside world.

Regardless, there's no denying that the first movie, *Breaking of Close Ties*, will start according to the time displayed here.

“.....”

What should I do?

It's highly probable that watching the movies will cause everything to

proceed as Kazu intends.

But if I don't watch them, I still won't know what he's after. If I can't pin down a counterstrategy because I don't know what to do, I could be playing into his hands even more.

Should I watch them and get a grasp of the situation? Or should I ignore them and resist this Box?

In the end, though, it turns out all that thinking was for nothing.

I'm sitting in front of a screen.

I've teleported yet again. I sigh at the cheesy paranormal cliché.

I immediately look around me. I'm not tied down. If I decide I don't need to watch the upcoming movie, then I can get up from my seat.

However, I don't feel like doing that at all.

This lethargy has nothing to do with my will. It's probably— No, it's undeniably the power of the Box.

I start by trying to resist whatever force is keeping me in this chair. Guess I'm not completely immobile. I can stand up. But that alone makes me extremely *fatigued*, as if I'm in the throes of a high fever. I can't keep it up for long. My willpower won't last.

As exhaustion weighs me down, I look around me.

.....

What's going on here?

There are people.

And not just one or two. I don't know where they came from, but there are about as many people sitting in the chairs as you would expect in a theater on a weekday night.

Haruaki's here, too.

And Koudai Kamiuchi, who's supposed to be dead.

Not all of them have connections to me, though. Some of the faces I recognize, though I can't put a name to them, *and some are completely unfamiliar*.

Why is Kamiuchi here? Why did he choose these people? If he wanted to collect people I know, then why have people who are barely connected to me?

The entire audience is expressionless, almost like they're wearing masks of their own faces. It's possible they aren't physically here. Like props or something. I'm taken aback at the weirdness for a moment, but it's a bit heavy-handed. If anything, the excessive presentation is a reassuring reminder that this is the work of a Box.

I continue my observations, trying to discover the relationship among these dolls.

And then, I find it.

"What the hell is that?" I yelp.

There's something in the seat on the right edge of the very last row... No, maybe that isn't the right way to put it. It isn't that something is there, but more that it's the only place something isn't.

In that seat is a human-shaped *pitch-black hole*.

The darkness is absolute.

It's not a shadow, but a void.

If I had to call it anything—I'd call it an "abyss."

I frown instinctively at the strangeness of it, lose my stamina to stave off the fatigue, and plop back down.

".....!!"

It's then that I finally notice her and wonder how I could have been so out of it.

She's sitting right next to me.

"...Rino."

Miyuki Karino.

The ex-girlfriend of the one I killed, Koudai Kamiuchi.

My friend since childhood, one year younger than me, who lived in the neighborhood.

An old friend I will never speak to again.

"____Urgh..."

Like the other props populating the theater, Rino is blank-faced and unresponsive. She's the only one I can't explain away as a prop, though. Just having her sitting next to me reminds me of who I once was.

I hear a buzzer announcing the beginning of the movie as I futilely try to process my emotions.

Almost on conditioned reflex, I turn my eyes to the screen.

It's a fairly unremarkable hotel.

The instant I see the building, I immediately know what happened there; I wonder if it's because the one involved is next to me.

A group of sleazy-looking men are closing in on a middle school-aged Rino. Her face white, she dashes into the bathroom, pulls out her mobile phone, and enters a text with trembling fingers.

She sends it to me.

The scene cuts to a boy with black hair, his notebooks spread on a desk at his home.

It's me, back in middle school.

My phone tells me I got a message, and I pick up my phone and open it. The text Rino just sent me is displayed.

Yeah, I remember what happened back then.

At first, I was bewildered and couldn't quite believe the message on the screen. Rino had always been fond of pranks, and as innocent as I was at that time, I couldn't imagine anyone I knew being involved in a crime like that. I believed I lived far removed from that world. Those murders on TV were mere stories from some far-off land that would never leave the screen.

"This has to be a joke. If this is all true, then..."

The me on the screen mutters as he calls Rino.

"Hello, Rino?"

"D-Dai, h-help..."

A man's voice can be heard behind Rino's tense plea.

"Hey! Who're you on the phone with?!"

Crash! Glass shatters. Rino screams.

The phone call is cut off.

At last, I finally understand the situation Rino was facing. The reality sinks in that my thoughtless call had put Rino in even greater danger. Fighting desperately to control my panic, the me on the screen dials 110 immediately.

I can hardly stand to watch any of it, and that's when I finally look at the "Miyuki Karino" sitting next to me.

Needless to say, her face is blank.

But even that appears like some wordless plea to me.

At last, it dawns on me—the common thread linking all the people here in

this theater.

They're all cast members. Haruaki and Kamiuchi both appear in the film. Yeah—if I look closely, I can see the men who assaulted Rino are here, too.

And the leads are Rino and myself.

Rino next to me is dressed in a school uniform I've never seen before. It's probably the standard outfit of the high school she attends.

...Oh, so she actually made it to high school, huh?

When I became a high schooler and began living on my own, I cut off all the people I knew from middle school, aside from Haruaki and Kiri. I haven't had any contact with Rino, of course, or even my own parents. That's why I had no idea Rino had been able to continue her education even after that incident.

As I realize this, my gaze moves away from Rino.

The theater is filled entirely with things I don't want to look at.

But this Box won't permit me to look away. Its power is working to prevent that very thing.

So my gaze naturally returns to the screen, even though it's the last thing I want to see.

Rino is thrashing around in tears on a bed.

Each scene makes me want to cry out in anguish.

This isn't a movie. It's simply the past.

My past, from Rino's perspective.

She was abandoned at that hotel, it was too late when Haruaki and I went to save her, and everything started to fall apart after that—and all of it is just something that really happened.

This is—

Oh—

It's a screening of my sins.

The moment I realize this, guilt sweeps over me.
My Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime threatens to escape my control.

“Ugh!”

*I see. So this is your strategy, eh, Kazu?
You want to make me self-destruct.*

If you toss me into a theater playing my past and put me face-to-face with my own crimes, then I'll collapse under the weight. From the outset, Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime was all I could handle. There's no need to take any risks when you're destroying someone who's already unstable to begin with. All he needed to do from the get-go was slip near me on the tightrope and give me a little shove on the back.

The many shadows of crime within me are raging. They constantly long for me to break. They're salivating in anticipation as they wait for me to tumble into the abyss. If their meal falls down to them, they want to gobble me up, down to my very bones, and swallow me.

Damn, what the hell? It's my ability! They're all a bunch of stupid pets who can't figure out which one of us is the owner.

I can see Rino in my periphery as I press down on my temples in pain.

Rino, who should have no expression on her face, is staring at me, unblinking.

Quietly...

...wordlessly...

...she watches me.

“...What?” I ask, though I know I won't get a response.

“.....”

Rino silently stares, unblinking.

I understand. This is a prop for the Box's show.

Even so, the words leave my mouth before I can stop them. I can't keep them in.

“You wanna tell me you hate me or something?”

“.....”

Rino silently stares, unblinking.

“Yeah, of course you do. But you wanna know how I really feel? I think I shouldn't have gone to help you at all back then. I shouldn't have been nice to you. I think you should've just killed yourself in shock when those disgusting

men raped you.”

“.....”

Rino silently stares, unblinking.

“That’s right. Why the hell are you still alive? How dare you keep on living! Was that not enough to teach you that someone like you should be ashamed to be alive?”

“.....”
.....
.....
.....”

Rino—

No, everyone in the theater silently stares, unblinking.

Reproachfully.

“*You need to stop...*”

None of them started talking—not Rino or anyone else.

It’s merely a line spoken by the person on the screen.

“*Stop justifying your own actions by thinking other people deserve to be hurt.*”

Middle school-era Rino is saying this to me, back when I still had black hair.

The scene cuts to Rino coloring over a photograph with a red pen.

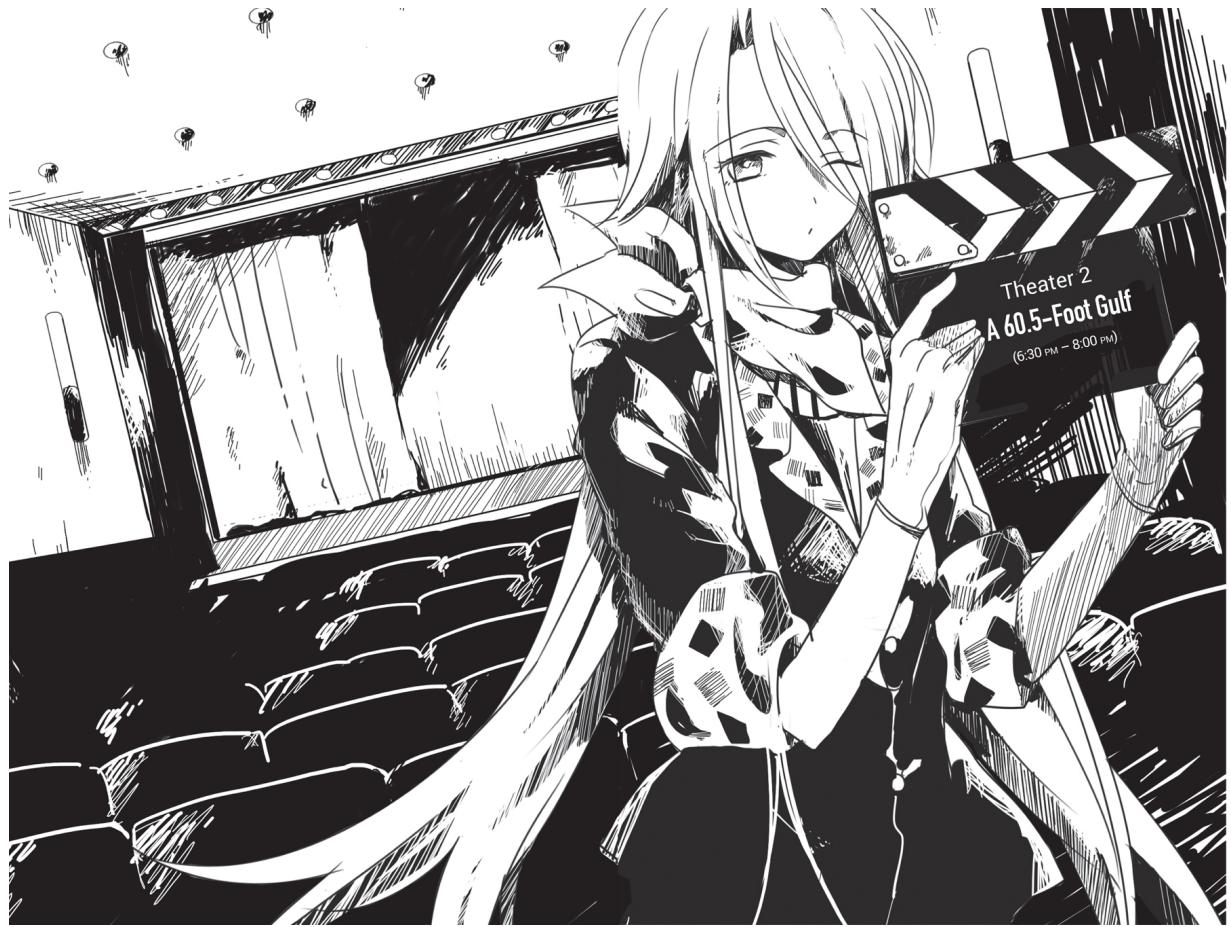
“*Die, die, die, Kokone Kirino!*”

The Kokone Kirino in the photo is covered in red, almost like blood, once Rino is through with her.

“__”

I nearly whimper, but I just barely manage to stop myself.

But the abyss in the seat has suddenly drawn the slightest bit closer to me.



A 60.5-Foot Gulf, SCENE 2

1. BASEBALL FIELD (NOON)

A game is on. It's the final of a regional tournament. Bottom of the ninth inning, two outs, players on first and third, with a count of two balls and one strike. The score is two to three. A middle school-aged Haruaki Usui is on the mound. Wiping his sweat away with an arm, he peers at the catcher's sign.

HARUAKI (VO)

He's the best.

He confirms the sign with a nod.

HARUAKI (VO)

The senior coaches aren't happy about it, but he's the reason I can ignore them and stay in this middle school baseball team even though we use softballs.

Set position.

HARUAKI (VO)

I've seen plenty of seniors who people expected would go pro in the future. Some of them, I was sure they'd make it. But I never felt threatened by any of them. Far as I could tell, none of them were better than him.

He lets out a big breath.

HARUAKI (VO)

Every play he makes is a thing of beauty. Just watching blows me away. Makes me wonder if I've even got the stuff to be a player.

He lifts his leg.

HARUAKI (VO)

I'm enough of an athlete that any elite baseball club would ask me to come on board. Any kid who plays baseball dreams of standing on the mound at Koshien, but for me, it's becoming more than just a fantasy. It's a challenge I have to complete. It's safe to say even the pros are in sight now. [He winds up his arm.] Still—ever since I first started playing baseball in elementary school, I've just been imitating him.

He throws a hard fastball. The batter whiffs. Seeing the ball enter the catcher's mitt, Haruaki lets out a yell and flexes.

HARUAKI (VO)

That's why I don't think I stand a chance against him.

The catcher takes off his mask. Holding it in his hand, Daiya breaks into a smile. He then runs up to the mound and practically leaps to embrace Haruaki. The rest of their teammates gather round, forming a ring of celebration.

HARUAKI

Hey, get off me, Daiya! I don't want any hugs from dudes! Plus, you're all sweaty and smelly.

Still, Haruaki is grinning.

DAIYA

Not any worse than you, so don't worry. You stink, too.

Daiya is smiling as well.

HARUAKI

Wh-what?! Somebody get me some deodorant! The manager's gonna hate me! I was gonna seduce her when I gave her the winning ball and made up some story about how I got that winning strikeout for her!

DAIYA

Ha-ha, our team doesn't have any girl managers.

The players assemble in a line on the ground.

HARUAKI (VO)

There was a scout I knew, and I once secretly had him take a look at Daiya in action. [Everyone bows.] I wanted to play together with him in high school, too.

The players begin to run toward their fans sitting in the stands.

HARUAKI (VO)

The scout wasn't impressed. He thought Daiya was good for a middle schooler, but because he hadn't put in the effort to perfect his skills, any dramatic improvement would be difficult, and that meant he might not be able to become a regular on the team. Getting a scholarship would be a long shot at best. That was the scout's evaluation. It's true that Daiya's physical abilities are mediocre. I can sprint faster, my grip is better, and my back is stronger. All the same, I believed that Daiya had enough ability to slightly compensate for at least that much.

The players bow to the stands.

HARUAKI (VO)

That scout's observations may or may not be correct. But I came to understand, from an objective viewpoint, that he's not considered anything special as a baseball player. Yeah... Maybe I knew it all along, too. Maybe it wasn't the way he played that blew me away. Maybe I left Daiya in the dust long ago when it comes to talent and actual skill for baseball. That doesn't change my personal ranking, though. I'll never upset him, even if I become an ace in the major leagues.

Kokone is in the stands. She is slightly teary in happiness. And those eyes are only for Daiya. Daiya turns a weak but gentle smile on Kokone.

HARUAKI (VO)

Daiya will always be the star.

Haruaki grins as he watches the two of them gaze into each other's eyes.

HARUAKI (VO)

So I gave up on my first love.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine 09/11 FRI 6:00 PM ◆◆◆

"The screening of Breaking of Close Ties has ended."

The movie ends without any credits, and the instant it does, I'm in front of the video billboard. It's my old friend teleportation.

A chuckle escapes me in the empty entrance.

“I’ll crush you.”

I get it.

It’s as mean-spirited as it sounds.

Kazu’s attack is like a finger jamming straight into the wounds of my past—working around, widening the gash, worsening the memory to completely drown out my wish with pain.

That bastard sure knows how to be cruel.

“__”

That’s right. Why am I letting myself be at his mercy? This is a deliberate attack from Kazu.

I mean, is the information in this film even correct?

The events that happened are definitely the way I remember them. However, they were presented from Rino’s perspective, so there are also parts I don’t know.

It’s entirely possible those portions are fabricated. I don’t know if the movie’s depiction of what went on in Rino’s heart is the truth or not. No one but she would know.

“It would seem you’ve been dealt quite a blow.”

I look up in surprise at the voice.

“...Who are you?”

There is a girl with long hair whom I’ve never seen before. Her prim uniform is reminiscent of a lady working the reception desk of a department store, and she has a scarf around her neck. From her face, I would guess she’s around the same age as me.

“My name is [A], and I am the concierge of this theater.”

However, she exudes a bewitching aura that makes me think she’s not a member of my generation. I wouldn’t quite call it “class”; that word is too positive. No, her aristocratic air is more the irritating kind. Someone with that kind of detached dignity could probably kill someone with a placid smile on her face, believing her victim isn’t of the same species.

She’s also frightfully beautiful, a cut above even Maria Otonashi, who’s intimidating to just about everyone.

“...[A], you said? That’s a silly name. Who are you? Why is someone

here when there isn't supposed to be anyone?"

"To explain it in a manner easy for you to comprehend, I am a pseudopersonality that accompanies this Box, the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes. I am not a person who exists in reality."

So in short, she's like what Noitan was for in the Game of Indolence.

Between Noitan and her, is there some rule that says these hosts have to be unpleasant?

"A pseudopersonality, eh? If so, does that mean you're going to be nice and tell me about this Box?"

"Yes."

"Let me ask you straight out. What kind of Box is this?"

"It is meant to crush your Box. The films on our program, *Breaking of Close Ties*, *A 60.5-Foot Gulf*, *Repeat*, *Reset*, *Reset*, and *15 Years Old and Earrings*, have all been prepared to make you abandon your wish."

Though this is what I expected to hear for the most part, the truth is that the upfront declaration wears on me. It's never pleasant to hear about your own demise in such unambiguous terms.

"As clever as you are, sir, I expect you harbor doubts as to the credibility of the events depicted in *Breaking of Close Ties*. On this point, I shall answer that they are not."

"What?"

Why would she explain that to me? Even if it is true, the revelation lessens my mental burden dramatically. That goes against the purpose of this Box.

"You appear uncertain, but please put yourself at ease. This fact in no way implies you should relax your attention. *Breaking of Close Ties* was made from the memories of Miyuki Karino. I simply spoke as I did because memories are on occasion distorted, which makes them imprecise."

I see. The faithful replication of Rino's memories in the movies means she unmistakably despises me at this point in time. Damn. I would laugh, if it were the slightest bit funny.

"...Just to make sure I'm working from the right premise—are *you* telling the truth?"

"I have been created in such a way that I can speak nothing but the truth."

"What proof do you have of that?"

"It is a difficult question to prove. All I can do is ask that you believe me.

I do apologize.”

...I guess that makes sense. How foolish of me.

But despite her courteous words and apologies, I don’t sense that [A] is being in any way humble toward me. In fact, her gracious manner makes it seem like she’s mocking me. Why would Kazu choose such a loathsome woman as a guide? Is this his type? Now that I think of it, she is kind of like Otonashi... Either way, I’m sure that’s not the case.

...*Hmm, oh. That’s got to be it.*

“...I’ve noticed something. Do you mind?”

“What is it?”

“*You’re O, aren’t you?*”

The woman who calls herself [A] does not respond.

“The mascot of the Game of Indolence, Noitan, was an expression of Kamiuchi’s twisted nature. However, Kazu is the way he is. I can’t imagine him expressing such an off-putting personality, so why do you exist? There are two possibilities. One is that this isn’t Kazuki Hoshino’s Box. The other is that you found your way in here,” I explain.

[A]’s demeanor completely transforms. The smile on her face becomes one I know very well.

“I should have expected as much from you.”

There’s no mistaking it.

This is O.

“I had thought I might play the guide for a tad bit longer. I never expected you would see through my ruse so quickly.”

“...Why would you do this?”

“This Box is quite the formidable foe for you. I started to worry you might be undone in a one-sided struggle, so I took this form in order to gift you with some information.”

“Is it a problem for you if I lose? You’re on Kazu’s side, right?”

“I don’t have a problem with you losing, but I do have a problem with you losing *so easily*. Have you forgotten that I seek to observe Kazuki? Now that I’ve learned of him, I want as many opportunities to observe him as I can get. An easy victory for him doesn’t suit my purposes. That is the gist of it.”

“But if you aren’t careful in aiding me, I might end up winning.”

“If that is how things turn out, then so be it. I hope to avoid that, though.”

It would appear they’re being honest with me. Come to think of it, back in

the Game of Indolence, O did say: “*Kazuki has no faith in my whims.*” If O really doesn’t care if I win, then Kazu was right.

That said, it doesn’t change the fact that O is more on Kazu’s side than mine. O can afford to say such things only because they don’t believe I will triumph.

“If fun is what you want, then how about giving me some more valuable intel? All you’ve given me so far is that if I don’t escape from here by the time all the movies end—by the end of today, basically—then I lose.”

“That’s true. But I’ve changed my mind about giving you any further information, since you were capable of discerning my true nature so quickly.”

Man, they’re really overestimating me.

Still, that remark is a hint in and of itself. It’s like they’re saying the info I have so far is all I need to shatter the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes.

“Now then, as you have deduced who I really am, I suppose I shall take my leave for the time being.”

“Be my guest; not like I can say no... Oh yeah. One thing I want to ask before you go. Who is this awful woman you’re pretending to be? Is she in one of the upcoming movies?”

“No, she’s unrelated to you. She most likely won’t be appearing in the movies, either. But there is a reason I chose this form, of course.” O’s reply is completely unhelpful, and they immediately turn their back to me and begin walking away.

Their footsteps fade, and I’m alone.

I look at my watch. The time is 6:15 PM. Fifteen minutes left until the start of *A 60.5-Foot Gulf*, the next movie on the docket. I have five hours, forty-five minutes remaining overall.

Even now that O is here, my situation hasn’t changed. Kazu has me hog-tied and is continuing to give me a one-sided beating. I have a weapon called Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime in hand, but as I’m trapped in this place, I have no way of striking back at Kazu.

...No, wait. Can I really not hit him back?

I look at my own shadow.

Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime definitely exists.

You can use a Box inside a Box. That was proved before when Maria Otonashi remained an owner inside another Box. I’m still an owner, and I’m

still a Ruler.

But who am I supposed to use it on? There's no one here for me to use Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime on.

“...*There's no one here?*”

Then where are they?

Obviously.

In the outside world, there are 998 Subjects who can act on my behalf.

“__”

Now, let's think.

What can I do to defeat Kazuki Hoshino?

If I can destroy this Box, I can get out of here. The simplest method would be to Control a Subject and have them murder Kazu.

But that wouldn't be a victory. I do think I need to win, but I shouldn't kill him. If I want to heighten humanity's sense of personal morality, then murder—especially using someone else to do it—is absolutely off-limits. Willingness to do such a thing is another issue entirely.

It's possible my mind would be finished the moment I murdered Kazu. The damage would be great enough for those 998 shadows of crime to consume me and shatter my psyche. If I reach a point where Kazu's Box will inevitably crush mine, then I must consider killing him in desperation. But that should be only as a last resort.

So I need to find a means of convincing Kazu to do away with his Box on his own.

I have to find a way to jab at his weakness the same way he's prodding at my past.

Kazu's weak point is—

“...Yeah.”

It comes to mind immediately.

“*Maria Otonashi, huh?*”



The Silver Screen of Broken Wishes is not going to grant me a moment's peace to brainstorm, and I'm trapped in another theater.

The next film, *A 60.5-Foot Gulf*, will be my torture.

Well, I do feel a little better this time, though. After all, I have a fellow audience member. It'll be less depressing than watching by myself.

“Hey, isn’t that right, Yuri Yanagi?”

Yuri Yanagi, sitting behind me and to the right, doesn’t have the wherewithal to answer my sudden rhetorical question. She’s frantically taking in her surroundings, her face white.

I check again to make sure I succeeded in summoning her here. Just as Maria Otonashi did with the Rejecting Classroom, it really is possible for owners to enter Boxes and interfere with them. Of course, they can’t escape, so it’s a one-way deal.

“Um? Uh? Am I in a movie theater? When did I move from the entrance?! Wh-why am I in a chair all of a sudden?!”

I’m totally used to it, but this is Yanagi’s first time teleporting. As expected, she’s surprised.

But it’s too much trouble to explain.

“So I’m the only one whose past is being shown, even with another person here. Does that mean this Box exists just to crush me?”

Something about this seems off in my mind, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Y-you’re ignoring me...? ...Ah! What’s with these people here?! It’s like they’ve had their souls sucked out! I’m scared!”

I’m trying to think here, and she just won’t shut up.

“Quiet down, slut.”

“S-slut? What’s wrong with you? That was completely uncalled-for! I’ll have you know I’m the good-girl type!”

“If you can make jokes, you must not be too upset.”

“...Huh? Uh, that wasn’t...a joke... O-oh? Maybe that’s all in my head...? I don’t cut my hair short, and I haven’t bleached it or anything... But none of that matters! Please explain! The one sitting next to you is, um, Kazuki’s friend, right?”

“...Yeah.”

At my side is the empty husk of Haruaki Usui. It would seem he’s the next lead.

“I don’t feel like explaining, but I will say one thing. Under no circumstances will you tell me what you think of this movie.”

Yanagi seems confused. Naturally, I don’t tell her anything else.

I called her into the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes as one of my

Subjects.

This allowed me to confirm several things. First, I can use Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime in here without problem, and anyone sharing my Box can enter, even if they aren't a normal owner. Also, time in here is synced with the outside world.

However, my primary objective in inviting Yanagi here wasn't to check those things.

"Yanagi, what were Kazu and Otonashi doing?"

It's to get a grasp on their situation.

Those who share Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime can't communicate their thoughts freely. At most, they can share faint sensations. Though I can use my Box, I can't issue accurate commands if I have no idea what's going on outside.

That's why I sent this order to my Subjects: "*Find out what Kazu and Otonashi are going to do.*"

Thanks to this lack of telepathy, I need to hear the findings from someone.

Yanagi is here as that messenger.

"...Do I have to tell you?"

"It seems you still don't grasp your role here."

I use Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime to incite Yanagi's sense of guilt.

"Uh, ungh! Nnngh! ...Nh—"

I had intended to just give her open wounds a little nudge, but Yanagi lets out a cry of distress and begs me to stop with her eyes.

Yanagi's crime is the same as Shindo's: murders in the Game of Indolence. She even killed Kazu with her plotting; there's no way she can escape the guilt of such a grave transgression so easily. That's why she suffers so greatly.

"K-Kazuki doesn't want Otonashi to get caught up in this. He's doing everything in secret from her, it looks like."

"So I was right... Still, why is Otonashi being so cooperative? She's the last one I'd expect to keep her mouth shut and listen to Kazu when there's a Box right there in front of her."

"I...wouldn't know..."

"A worthless slut like you is good at manipulating people, right? How would you keep Otonashi out of action, if it were you? Just for reference."

“H-hey, you’re being really mean to me, don’t you think?! ...F-fine. Well, I don’t think I would have much chance of persuading Otonashi once I came out and told her the truth. So I guess I wouldn’t have any choice but to lie. Like, I might say I have a good plan and then suggest launching it sometime after today.”

“Do you think she would believe such an obvious lie?”

“Otonashi trusts Kazuki, so I’m sure she’d believe anything he said, no matter how suspicious it sounds.”

“...I see.”

Yeah, coming from Kazu, Otonashi would probably swallow the most pathetic lies. Meaning it would be unexpectedly easy for Kazu to pull the wool over her eyes.

“Nicely done, Yanagi. I guess I have no choice but to admit that my capacity for deceit can’t hold a candle to yours.”

“...Um, that isn’t praise, is it? You’re insulting me, aren’t you?”

“Obviously.”

“...You really come to life when you’re mean to me. Perhaps you’re actually quite fond of me?”

“What? Don’t get full of yourself, slut. You look like one of those little *teru teru bozu* dolls.”

“I-I’m a *teru teru bozu*...? I’ve never heard that one before... I don’t know quite how to respond...”

Yanagi’s bangs are usually straight, hence the comparison to the simple little dolls children make when they want good weather. She parts her bangs down the middle and asks, “E-even now?” Of course, I ignore her.

“I learned something thanks to you, though.”

“Huh? Is there some hint on my forehead?”

“Oh yeah. It says, ‘Go to hell.’”

“Geez... You’re so mean...”

“First of all, I’m now convinced that Kazu has used the trusting relationship he’s built with Otonashi.”

The bond of trust between Maria Otonashi and Kazuki Hoshino is already false, and Kazu has been hiding the fact.

What’s more, he’s even used that trusting connection to his own ends.

“I figured out a way to summon Otonashi here.”

My mouth softens into a smile as the breakthrough comes into focus.

“All I have to do is tell her the truth.”

I just need to confront her with the fact that their goals have already diverged.

If I inform Otonashi of Kazu’s betrayal, the two of them are finished.

Kazu will lose his purpose, and the victory will be mine.

An image appears on the screen.

It’s Haruaki back in middle school, wearing a familiar uniform.

◇◇◇ Kazuki Hoshino 09/11 FRI 5:48 PM ◇◇◇

I smell peppermint. To me, it’s synonymous with being in Maria’s apartment.

I lift my head from the bed to check the time. The screening of the first movie, *Breaking of Close Ties*, should already be coming to an end.

I hold a conclusive advantage. Daiya is imprisoned within the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, and it’s designed so that when all the movies are finished, Daiya will relinquish his Box. All I need to do is wait for time to pass.

That’s no reason to get sloppy, though. This is Daiya, after all.

Daiya can use his Box within the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, and I’ve learned his Box controls other people. With that ability, Daiya could manipulate someone into launching an attack on us.

“Kazuki, help me carry the food,” Maria says.

I make sure I’m wearing the right expression. I can’t allow her to realize I’m acting in secret. That’s why I can’t slip up and let the tension show.

I deliberately try to relax my face.

“Okay, I got it.”

I stand up and head to the kitchen. Maria smirks at me.

“Why do you look like such an idiot?”

“...Huh?”

“Now that Oomine has returned as an owner, even you must know the danger we’re in? Yet, here you are acting like a fool.”

“Sorry.”

I relax. Maria thinks I’m the same as ever.

The dishes are plain, and on them are hamburg steaks Maria and I made together. Maria never had much interest in cooking, but even she’s become quite the accomplished chef these days. She doesn’t exactly look at home in an apron, but the thought doesn’t feel strange anymore.

“Kazuki.” Maria calls my name as I hold a plate in each hand. “There’s a leftover cherry tomato from the garnish.”

A mischievous grin appears on her face. Maria holds it out at me. My hands are still full.

“U-uh...?”

“Eat it. Don’t put the plates down.”

Don’t put them down...? Still holding the dishes, I lean forward and eat the cherry tomato between her fingers like a baby bird pecking at its food.

Her fingers themselves go into my mouth, too.

All she does is smile smugly, though.

She pulls off the stem and slides her fingers free.

“You’re an idiot,” she says as I chew away.

“...That’s pretty harsh, when you’re the one who made me do it.”

“You’re an idiot because you just did what I wanted without saying no,” she retorts, still smiling, then turns away from me and back to her work.

I return to the other room and set the hamburg steaks on the table.

“.....”

Believe me, I know what’s going on.

I’ve created this happy setup by deceiving Maria. I’m taking advantage of her total faith in me to go behind her back. I’m betraying her.

But I had no other choice.

I want to be with Maria forever.

That’s not her wish, though... No, that’s not it. She believes she isn’t allowed to wish for such a thing.

Maria calls herself a Box and wants to grant the wishes of others, and she prioritizes other people above herself. No, “prioritizes” is too weak a word for it. She seeks to make others happy by sacrificing herself, to the point she doesn’t seem to care about herself at all. She follows strict rules for herself and becomes “Aya Otonashi,” who exists solely to grant wishes, in an attempt to erase “Maria Otonashi.”

I cannot let that happen.

That's why I will kill the "Aya Otonashi" within Maria.

But it's too early to allow her to find out about my plan. If she did, I'm sure she would leave me. I have to keep her in the dark until an opportunity arises.

Still...

...will that time ever come? How long do I have to keep lying?

"Kazuki."

My body goes rigid. Her call was timed so perfectly, it feels like a rebuke for my deceit.

"The rice is ready, so take the bowls in there."

"O-okay."

"...? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no... Nothing."

I don't think I'm particularly good at hiding things. I can't hide the changes within me forever. The day it comes to an end is almost here.

"Then hurry up and come get the rice bowls."

"Okay, I'll be right—"

My phone buzzes. I pick it up right away.

"....."

It's a text from Haruaki.

Yuri Yanagi is up to something.

It's a straightforward message, no emoji or anything. I'm sure he must have typed it in a hurry.

Yuri. One of the people under Daiya's control—one of his pawns—has taken action.

"S-sorry, Maria! Something came up."

"...? What're you saying? Is it so urgent you can't even eat?"

"Sorry!"

Without waiting for her approval, I rush out the front door. I hear her calling for me to stop, but of course, I can't. I quickly jump into the elevator and shut the door so she can't follow me.

This'll make her suspicious, probably. She may even piece together that my unexpected errand is Box related.

But I told her that tomorrow would be the day we take down Daiya.

And Maria believed me.

“.....”

Holding my chest as it aches with guilt, I start a call to Haruaki.



I'm heading toward Haruaki.

As I run through the night, I suddenly recall a conversation I had with him in the park.

“I used to like Kiri.”

Haruaki told me that the day after Daiya returned to school.

Immediately before, I had been telling him about Boxes. I had made up my mind to fight Daiya, and I'd decided that to that end, I needed to reveal everything to Haruaki. Night was falling, right after the children playing there had gone home. As he listened, Haruaki jumped on a swing that had been squeaking mournfully after being abandoned.

“__”

Even after I finished explaining, Haruaki didn't say anything for a while, simply swinging in silence. For some time, the swing's lament was the only sound.

He was going so hard, I wondered if he was going to do a full 360. As I watched, I was sad that I had no other option but to bring Haruaki into this. But I had reached this conclusion after serious deliberation, so I had no regrets. Or so I was telling myself.

That's when it happened.

“I used to like Kiri.” Out of the blue, with no context whatsoever, Haruaki answered me with an admission that he once had feelings for Kokone.

“Huh...?” I was surprised.

But as soon as he said it, I understood. It made sense.

Haruaki had rejected all those baseball endorsements from powerful schools trying to court him, and he'd come to ours, which had no prospects of reaching Koshien, the biggest national tournament for high schoolers in Japan. He was good enough to reach the pros, and yet he had sacrificed his future. I knew that. Maria had learned as much back in the repeating world,

and she had shared it with me.

I had always wondered why.

But there it was.

Haruaki had chosen the same high school as Daiya and Kokone, even if it meant giving up on his dreams and future. I have no idea if it was because he wanted closure for his romantic feelings, or if he was thinking of something else, but he hadn't had a choice.

The swing had come to a halt. Haruaki climbed up on top of it and kept going. "But you know what? I don't feel that way at all toward the new Kiri. I dunno, it's just that before, she was so vulnerable and fragile. Like she'd really be a mess without someone there to keep her safe. I wanted to protect her."

He pushed the swing lightly again. It gave a shrill *screee-screech*.

"I was so full of myself. A superficial sense of resolve isn't enough to let you take care of someone else."

His tone was light.

However, things like that are hard to say. They don't come out unless you've been taught by experience.

"Do you really not feel anything for Kokone anymore?"

"Nope. That's why I'm fine with the idea of you and her going out. You're a good match."

I didn't know if that was how he actually felt or not.

All I knew was that Haruaki gave thought only to certain girls. While Haruaki had never said as much, the truth was that he was the ace of our baseball team, which meant he was popular with girls, particularly from other schools. More than a few had professed their feelings for him, and he had actually gone out with several of them. But all those relationships had been short-lived, and nobody was confessing to him anymore as far as I knew.

All I could do was guess at what his feelings were when he dated them, what led to those breakups, and why girls stopped pursuing him.

But the reasons are most certainly connected to Kokone and Daiya.

"What about Daiya?"

"Huh?"

"You don't think it would be good if Daiya went out with her?"

Haruaki didn't answer right away. He stopped pushing the swing and

waited for it to slow down. Before it stopped completely, he dropped down with a “Hup!” and then told me plainly, “I don’t.”

“Why? Of all people, those two—”

“Daiya can conjure up the deeper resolve that I couldn’t.”

What’s wrong with that?

As if he could read my thoughts, Haruaki smiled wanly and said, “That’s why they won’t be happy.”

I didn’t understand what he was getting at immediately.

“It’s not love. It’s not a proper relationship.”

I knew nothing of how the three of them had lived before, so I couldn’t feel the full weight of what he was saying.

I did know someone who resembled Daiya, though. Someone who would sacrifice their own happiness for that of others.

So I intuitively understood that the relationship between them was a mistake, that it was over.

“Let me ask you this, then. Why did you give up on Kokone? If you don’t think Daiya is good for her, then why do you need to hold back?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m not holding back at all. I thought I told you; there’s no need for me to protect her anymore. I’ve already had a change of heart.”

“...Kokone got strong enough that she doesn’t need someone to keep her safe?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Huh?”

“She’s as weak as ever. People don’t change that easily. But there’s no need to protect her anymore. I mean—”

As Haruaki spoke, the look on his face was one I had never seen before.

The emotion there was something different from anger or hate or pity. Haruaki was wearing a smile.

“—Kiri is already broken.”

I would later come to comprehend the emotion in Haruaki’s smile.

It was the smile of one who had given up.



The place where I'm planning to meet Haruaki is that same park where we had our talk. It's about a two or three minute run from the apartment complex where Maria lives. Unlike the last time, the sun has already completely set.

Haruaki and Yuri are sitting on a bench bathed in the light of the streetlamps.

“Kazuki...”

Yuri looks up at me with teary eyes. I feel some pity for her, but those tears don't hold any special emotions for me. After all, up until just recently, I'd had more than enough of her disingenuous tears. I'm quite familiar with what she's done to her tear ducts.

Yuri is sitting quietly on the bench. She isn't being restrained in any way. According to what I heard on the phone from Haruaki, she had complied with his orders simply by speaking to her.

“Haruaki, I just wanna make sure—what was Yuri doing again?”

“Like I said on the phone, she was loitering around near Maria's apartment building. She didn't seem to be particularly crazy or confused. She even explained what's going on. Daiya gave her an order and told her to look into what you and Maria are doing.”

“Okay.”

This much I expected. If Daiya were to attempt something from within that movie theater, I figured that all he could do would be to use the people under his control to learn more about the two of us.

All the same—

“Yuri, are you okay telling us about your orders from Daiya?”

I mean, doing that is disadvantageous for him.

“Yes, it's fine. This is just a maybe, but I don't think this Box has that level of power over me.”

My chest aches at the word “Box” coming from Yuri's mouth. Even though she had forgotten about the Boxes themselves, Yuri did remember the existence of these things that had brought her suffering. Even though she would begin to beat herself up again if she remembered in detail.

But right now, I've got too much to worry about to sympathize with her. Anyway, let's get her talking.

“Yuri, can you explain things in a bit more detail?”

“Yes... Oh, but there’s one thing you need to be careful of. I can’t keep anything hidden from Oomine. If he gives me the Order to talk, then I have no choice but to tell him anything he wants. So please choose the topic carefully.”

“Got it. I understand.”

Still, I have to wonder if it’s okay for her to say that much. So Daiya might have used his Box on her, but she isn’t necessarily his ally.

“Yuri, Daiya controlled you to make you dig up intel on me and Maria, right?”

“That’s correct. *We* received a Command to investigate what you did to Oomine, and what you plan on doing next. We were also told that anyone with information was supposed to come into the Box where Oomine is.”

“Daiya is saying to come into the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes?”

Does that mean anything Yuri learns isn’t automatically conveyed to Daiya?

“What are these Commands like for you? As far as I can see, your mind seems to be in pretty good shape. It’s not like being brainwashed, is it?”

“You’re right. It’s completely different from brainwashing. Still, I don’t think I can disobey.”

“How compelling are the Commands? What happens if you don’t heed one?”

“...Let’s see. I don’t know exactly what happens if a Command is ignored. There may not even be a penalty. But either way, *it cannot be broken.*”

“It’s absolutely impossible for you to resist the orders?”

“Yes. And I’m sure that applies not just to me, but to all the other Subjects, too. It feels like...my spirit has been taken hostage. Disobeying a Command is like throwing your life away, in a sense.”

“So that’s how it is... So why didn’t you resist when Haruaki stopped you? Wouldn’t that be disobeying? How were you able to do that?”

Yuri lowers her gaze uncomfortably at my question.

“If Haruaki weren’t your friend, I might have tried to fight back or run away.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Command is to investigate the two of you. So if I get caught by your

friend and wait for you, it still counts as following orders since you might show up.”

Does that mean Yuri is trying to say...?

“The Command is still in effect?”

By interacting with me directly, she’s creating a situation where she can gain intel.

Yuri gives a small, apologetic nod.

“But please believe me. I think you already see this, but Oomine hasn’t robbed us of our minds. All he can do is give orders we absolutely have to obey. I’m still me.” Yuri takes me by the hand and looks me in the eyes as she says, “I’m still on your side.”

I can feel the warmth of Yuri’s hands.

My face flushes warm.

...Okay. I can’t tell if she’s trying to sway my heart deliberately or not, but that just shows this is indeed the same old Yuri.

“There’s something that’s been bugging me.”

Haruaki finally breaks his silence and asks Yuri something.

“You aren’t the only one trying to find something out about Hossyi, are you? Does he have others under his control working on it, too?”

Yuri has been saying “we” for a bit now.

Sending Yuri alone to gather information would make for unreliable results. If he can, I’m positive Daiya would send out the same Command to multiple people.

Yuri squeezes my hand tightly at Haruaki’s question, then answers.

“No, I’m not. I think he passed along the Command to all the Subjects.”

“All...of them?”

“Yes, all of them.”

What does that mean? I’m pretty sure we have quite a few Subjects among the students at our school alone.

Are all of them shadowing us...?

“...How many Subjects are there?”

“.....Nearly a thousand.”

“A thou—!”

I stop short without thinking.

I imagine it—the sight of one thousand people in this park, surrounding me, pressing in, jeering at me to spit it out, to confess.

I think back on the video I saw on YouTube of a group of people in the streets bowing their heads to the ground and sobbing, like they were swearing allegiance to Daiya.

There were probably only ten or so people at most, but that still made enough of an impact to warrant coverage on TV. It was enough to make Roo ask aloud when she saw the video if someone like him could change the world. Others likely had the same reaction, too.

Still, it's conceivable that all Daiya did was make a Command to the tune of "Bow down before me and weep."

That was all it took for him to get that much influence.

And Daiya can do that same thing to one thousand people.

I saw something similar about group psychology once on television. If a group of people started looking up at the sky, though there was nothing in it, how many would it take before total strangers started looking up, too?

The answer was three. If three people look up at the sky, a fourth will think there is something there and look up as well. Then if someone else sees the original three plus the one, the fifth, too, will be caught up in the effect and turn their eyes to the sky. Eventually, a whole bunch of people will be looking at a perfectly ordinary sky.

Because of three people.

So what about a thousand?

For example, one thousand people could all rush into the same restaurant and create a surge in its popularity. They could also bully them online if they found a blog that offended them. No...even those conjectures are on the mild side. You wouldn't need even a whole thousand to pull those things off.

The power of a thousand is beyond anything I can conjure up in my head.

What's worse, it's not like the number of people he can Control maxes out at a thousand. Daiya can make it even bigger.

Yeah, I see it now. The strength of this Box.

It's no exaggeration.

Daiya's Box has a power great enough to change the world.

And now—

—he's using that power for the sole purpose of taking me down.

I can't keep the tips of my fingers from trembling.

"...Hey, Yuri, how detailed were these latest Commands? From what you're telling us, Daiya didn't give instructions about each and every aspect of how you fulfill it, right?" I ask, fighting down my anxiety.

"That's right. He didn't give us a lot of details, so each one of us is carrying out the Commands according to our own methods and judgment. But we can't do anything that would go against our own morals. We obey by doing what we believe we're capable of and using the means we think is the best. I don't know which apartment Otonashi lives in, but I do know she lives in that building, at least. That's how I was able to get close like this," Yuri explains.

"...Um..." I think on what she said. "So you're saying that even if you did know the location of Maria's apartment, you couldn't smash the window and break in because you think it's wrong?"

"Exactly."

If so, does that mean people are actually limited in terms of what they can do under Commands?

I relax a bit—or start to, but then I shake my head. No. I can't relax. Yuri being Yuri, *she* might not be able to, but others might not have any problem with it.

...There are people who smash windows and invade homes even without Commands, after all... Like Maria, like Maria, like Maria.

"I understand why you were hanging out in this park. Remind me again—you said you were able to make it here because you know the location of the building, right? Which would imply that other people who don't know won't be showing up here?"

"Correct. Others won't be arriving."

"...Subjects can't share information among one another?"

"No... There is a feeling like we're *connected* somewhere deep within our consciousness...but our thoughts are not linked. So I can't share the fact that I know the location of Otonashi's apartment building."

"But come on," Haruaki interjects, frowning. He had been silent for some time. "Even without special abilities, you can still use your phone, can't you?"

Yuri's eyes widen. "Th—that's exactly right. Why didn't I notice that? ... Oh, what should I do...? I can...do that, too..."

Her voice begins to tremble, and the color leaves her face.

“Now that I know, I have no choice but to do it.”

She pulls out her mobile phone.

“Huh?”

What is Yuri doing? She can't be trying to make contact...? She just said she was on our side.

Despite that, she really is here pulling out her phone. Her eyes are wide, and her lips are quivering.

She's trying to trick me.

She isn't so kind as to pause for me in my confusion. Yuri types out a text, gets ready to send it, and then—Haruaki restrains her with her arms behind her back in a full nelson.

“Ungh...!”

The phone falls from Yuri's hands.

“Damn! Sorry, Hossyi! My bad!”

“...U-um?”

“Don't you get it, Hossyi? Yuri told us about Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, even though it doesn't help Daiyan. She can probably also oppose him a little. She's trying to help us. But *she can't stop herself from completing the Command to the best of her ability*. Isn't that right?”

Gazing at me with tearful eyes, Yuri gives a small nod.

“He's right. Oh... Wh-what should I do...?”

“You're not strong enough to fight me, so I could always keep you pinned, you know?”

“N-no, even if you can stop me, it's probably no good. You see, the idea of keeping in touch with the others just never occurred to me, so I'm sure someone else will think of it. If one of them can pinpoint Otonashi's whereabouts, they'll definitely contact others. After that, it's simply a matter of time. The information will spread and spread...!”

“Ugh, I get it. That makes sense... Hossyi. One of the Subjects might already have Maria's address as we speak. Don't you think you oughta hightail it outta here?”

“B-but.....”

This is Maria we're talking about. If we do that, she'll figure out I'm fighting with Daiya over a Box. This, too, is something I need to avoid at all costs.

Could we even get away, though?

I mean, a full thousand people are on the hunt for us.

A thought pops into my head, and I check the Internet for my name.

The results of the real-time search make my face go pale.

RT: [Please Share] Kazuki Hoshino and Maria Otonashi, second-year and first-year students at XX High School, respectively, have gone missing. At six PM, Kazuki's older sister discovered a letter that appeared to be Kazuki's suicide note and went looking for the two, but she has yet to find them. Please contact her immediately if you find these two students. Kazuki Hoshino's address is—

“Wha—?”

What the hell is this?

They've even put my address up online. When I check the page of the original poster, I see no tweets before this one. They obviously made this account to write this. And that tweet isn't the only one; they even have pictures of me and Maria, as well as Maria's motorcycle on there.

Considering Maria's appearance is also hard to ignore, the tweet has already spread quite a lot in a short time. Some people doubt its credibility, but they don't matter. A search for missing persons warrants spreading the word, regardless of whether the intent behind it is benevolent or malicious.

At this point, it's reasonable to assume Subjects have seen this tweet.

I reflexively raise my head and survey the area.

There's a female office worker strolling along while staring at her phone, a middle-aged man walking his dog, and a middle school student with a hat on sitting astride his bicycle.

And as my gaze passes over the middle schooler, our eyes meet.

...He might be one of the ones looking for me. He could have seen that tweet. He could be one of the Subjects. It's not crazy to think this kid could call those other thousand people to come and trap us.

As the thoughts run through my mind, I lock up, unable to move.

Fortunately, the kid looks away from me, not appearing particularly suspicious.

“—Ugh.”

I can't believe I'm afraid of a normal middle schooler looking at me...

...All the same, I can't write off my reaction as an overactive sense of

self-consciousness. There are indeed plenty of Subjects nearby. Plus, they're average people, indistinguishable from anyone else. They're not in uniforms like policemen.

Just being outside like this is exposing myself to danger.

“...Hey, Yuri.”

I suppress my fear to ask a question.

“You said this ability can't violate your morals, right? So let's say Maria and I were to hole up in her apartment—would you not be able to force your way in?”

“I wouldn't. But there may be some unethical people among the Subjects... No, there definitely are, unfortunately. And at least as far as I know, some of them are like fanatical believers in Oomine. I don't think they feel guilty at all about following his Commands. So I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't mind breaking into the apartment...”

So does that also guarantee that people might see this tweet, show up at my house uninvited, and put my family in danger?

“You and Otonashi...may even be tortured...!”

She's about to cry, but still she thrashes and struggles against Haruaki's arms. So she can send her message.

I'm sure she truly doesn't want to relay the information. But by all appearances, she can't stop herself. Maybe it's that *she doesn't feel any guilt about the act of using the phone itself*, setting aside what comes after. If not, then Yuri would never have been able to investigate us to begin with.

That is the compulsion of the Commands.

“...How can I...?”

A crowd of a thousand is after us. Each one of them is exercising their wits to catch us and learn what they can.

It's just a matter of time. There's no way in hell we'll be able to hold out until the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes runs its course.

...Yeah, and that's not even the worst of it. The stage where this mass of people is sniffing around for information on us is the easy part.

My point is that if Daiya never gets any intel on us, he's not going to continue with the same Command. He's fighting against the clock. Once it gets down to the wire, he's not going to have time to waste on the slow and steady methods. This Command is, at most, Daiya's opening attack. An initial wait-and-see, just a means to an end.

“Hey, Yuri.”

Without any developments, Daiya is sure to pursue an even more certain means of escaping the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes.

In other words—

“If he gave a Command to kill me, what would you do?”

—he would consider murdering the owner.

That would be an unmistakably immoral act. An act that would be impossible, as I understand it from how the situation has been explained to me.

Nevertheless...

“I would kill you,” Yuri replies matter-of-factly.

“...Why would you be able to do that?”

Even as the question leaves my mouth, I think I understand the answer.

“No matter what it is, the actual Commands must be carried out no matter what. Our individual morals don’t matter. The current Command is ‘Find information on Kazuki and Otonashi,’ for example. We have to obey it, but coming up with the means to do so is up to our own discretion. For me, breaking and entering is a criminal act, so I won’t do it. But if, say, the Command itself was ‘Get into Otonashi’s apartment,’ then I would have no choice. Ethics wouldn’t come into play there.”

Making Commands that are more specific displays the true power of Daiya’s ability to Control. The only reason the current Command is vague is because he is uncertain of the situation.

I’m sure Daiya’s desire to avoid murder is all that’s keeping him from just doing it at the moment. Once he’s backed into a corner, he may very well resort to such a method.

If it comes to that, then I will have all those people after my life.

At this rate, I have no choice but to do something.

As for the play I should make—

“.....Yuri.”

Her arms still restrained, Yuri lifts her head and looks at me.

“I’m going to fill you in on everything that’s going on with us right now.”

“Huh?” Haruaki says. “Hosshi, you sure about that? The Subjects who figure something out go back to Daiya, right? You know he’s gonna really go on the offensive if he starts learning stuff!”

“But this is my only option... That, and I’m fairly certain Daiya can make

a decent guess as to what's going on with me and Maria anyway. So I'd prefer to feed him just enough to let him think he has what he needs to break out."

That will keep the option of murdering the owner off the table.

"I have one other reason, too. I want to send Yuri to the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes."

"Huh?" Still in Haruaki's arms, Yuri stares in shock.

"I could be wrong, but you hate Daiya, don't you?"

Yuri's eyes remain wide for a moment...but then she seems to get what I'm driving at. Her mouth turns upward slightly. "Yes, I do."

Perhaps because she knows she is going to get information, Yuri stops struggling. She continues to speak with an expression akin to joy.

"Oomine killed me in that murder game, and it's because of him you had to see me in such a terrible state. I'll never forgive him for that. If I happen to find any of his emotional scars, I'll rub rock salt into the wound. I'll make it so painful for him that he passes out and then kills himself."

...Uh, you know...I'm not asking you to take it that far. You scare me, Yuri... You freaked out Haruaki so much he accidentally let go.

"...A-anyway, you're with me, right?"

"Yes."

Her skittish nature aside, Yuri is quite tricky and shrewd. She also can have nerves of steel when push comes to shove.

Essentially, she'll be a Trojan horse.

If I can get her near Daiya, she will slow him down for me.

Thus, I explain to Yuri about how I'm deceiving Maria now.

I tell her that in order to enter the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, she needs to head to the mall. She replies she already had a sense of that after Daiya used Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime. When she explains in more detail, it becomes apparent that Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime doesn't belong to just Daiya; Yuri can also be described as an owner.

After learning this, something occurs to me.

For some reason, I think, *This is kind of like Maria's Box.*

How, exactly? If you asked, I'd find it hard to answer. If I had to put it

into words, I guess maybe the best answer would be that they have a similar feel.

Though born of powerful emotions, they are cold and somewhat brittle, and they don't seem to have a point. They're Boxes with no discernable meaning to me.

Perhaps because I had the notion, I think something.

*Oh, what if—the one who truly understands Maria isn't me anymore?
What if it's Daiya Oomine?*

I shake my head.

What the hell are you thinking all of a sudden?

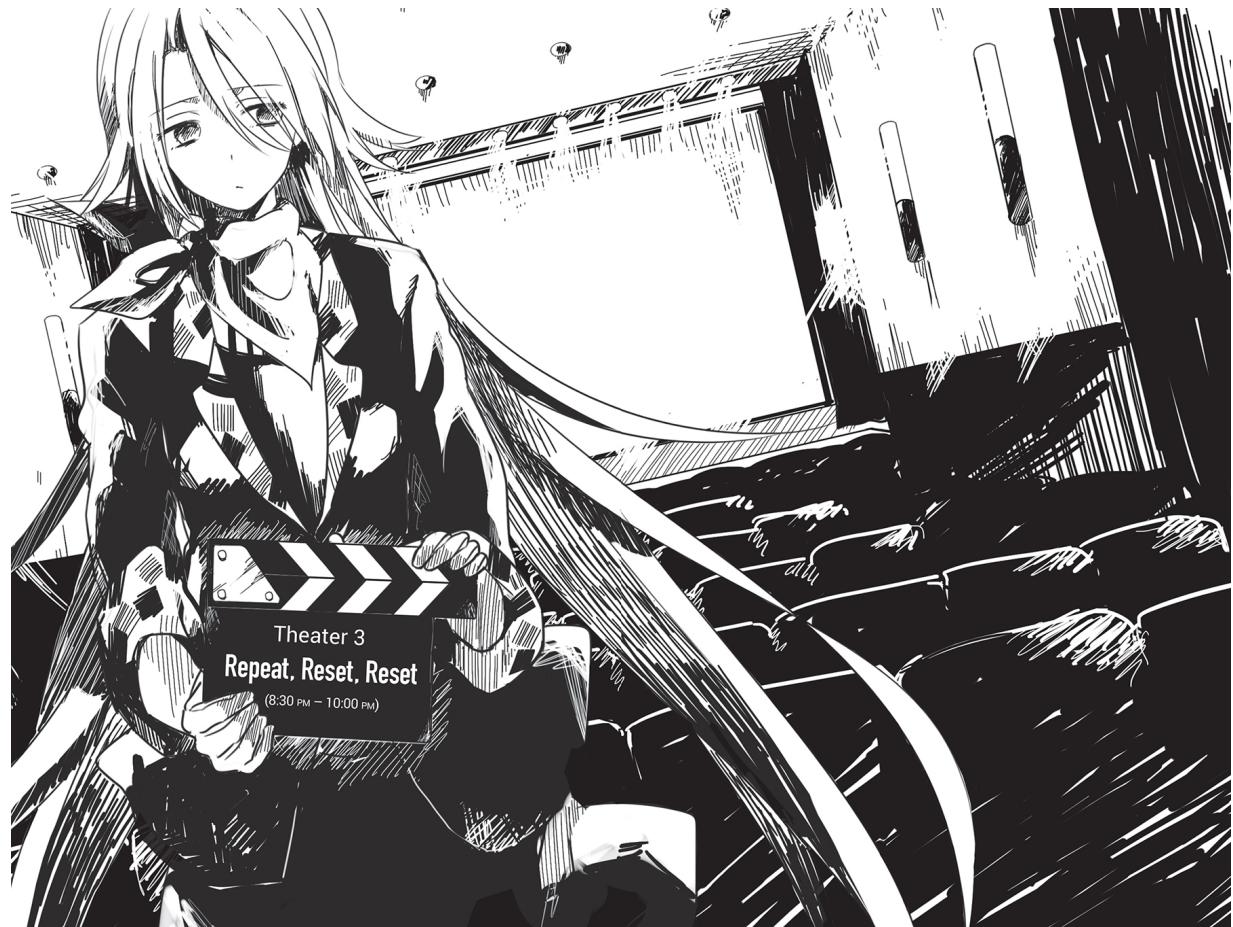
I should be contemplating Daiya's next move instead.

"Hey, Hosshi," Haruaki says. "*Daiyan will go after Kiri.*"

Yeah, that's it. I agree.

That's why the one I need to protect now—

—is not Maria, but Kokone.



Repeat, Reset, Reset, SCENE 3

1. CLASSROOM

It's a high school classroom, belonging to first-year Class 6. It's the 1,533rd cycle of the Rejecting Classroom. School has ended. The sky outside the window is as cloudy as it's been all 1,533 times. Maria Otonashi is sitting on the teacher's podium as she speaks with Daiya. Having inferred that Maria is no ordinary transfer student, Daiya is on guard.

DAIYA

...Don't look at me. It bothers me. It feels like you can see everything about me.

MARIA

You aren't entirely wrong. I have investigated my classmates to find the owner of the Rejecting Classroom, so I have information a transfer student shouldn't know on her first day.

The corners of Daiya's mouth lift upward, and he adopts a mocking attitude.

DAIYA

What a bunch of nonsense. Fine, I'll bite. What have you found?

MARIA

I know what's on Kokone Kirino's back.

Daiya's face stiffens visibly.

DAIYA

...How do you know about what's on Kiri's back? That's the one thing she would never show to anyone. Even I've never seen it before... Don't tell me you're one of the people who hurt her?

MARIA

That's the twenty-second time.

DAIYA

What is?

MARIA

That's the twenty-second time you asked me that question when I referred to Kokone Kirino's back.

Daiya scowls. Of course, he doesn't remember saying that. Only Maria, with her ability to retain her memories from the repetitions in the Rejecting Classroom, experienced them. Maria abruptly reflects on all the time she has spent in solitude, then lets out a weary sigh.

MARIA

I'll explain how I got my hands on such information. I already——..... [Time passes.]

Maria tells Daiya she has lived this same March 2 over and over, 1,533 times. He listens in silence for a time without interjection.

DAIYA

I get it. You mentioned Kiri's back to persuade me that all this BS is the truth. But that alone isn't enough to eliminate the possibility that you just hired a private eye or

something to look into Kiri.

MARIA

Well then, how about I mention something known only to you and another person?

DAIYA

...What?

MARIA

One of your childhood friends, Miyuki Karino, told you she had feelings for you, and you rejected her.

Daiya's eyes widen, but he promptly hides his bewilderment.

DAIYA

That's definitely something only Rino and I would know. I haven't told a soul about it, and I know she wouldn't, either. However you got that knowledge, it can't have been good.

MARIA

True. I most likely would have never known if I hadn't heard it from you.

DAIYA

I wouldn't tell you that. It doesn't matter if this Rejecting Classroom of yours is for real. I'd never tell that story to another person.

MARIA

I'm sure you wouldn't under normal circumstances. You told me how Kirino suffered as a result, and you did say you had never intended to tell anyone about that incident.

Daiya would rather leave the subject untouched, and he fixes Maria with a stern glare. Though the intense gaze shakes her internally, Maria does not let it show on her face. She mastered the art of suppressing her emotions back when the number of times she had experienced March 2 was still in the triple digits.

MARIA

However, there was a reason for you to speak of it.

DAIYA

No way. I myself guarantee there could be no reason great enough.

Maria recoils slightly at Daiya's rebuttal, then pulls herself together and continues.

MARIA

You deliberately told me the part of your past you most wanted to keep hidden because you decided to cooperate with me. This was on the 1,532nd March second.

DAIYA

Are you an idiot? To cooperate with you? If you're going to lie, at least come up with something good.

MARIA

A Box can grant any possible wish.

DAIYA

...So what?

MARIA

Something in your eyes changed once I told you of Boxes, and you eventually came around to the idea that they are

real. Surely you must understand, since this is you we're talking about here? You have a wish you want granted more than anything else.

DAIYA

.....[His brow furrows.]

MARIA

It would appear that rings a bell. You do want a Box. And that's why you made a request to me. You work with me, and in return, I'll teach you how to get ahold of a Box.

DAIYA

...[He thinks deeply.] ...I'm not the trusting type, so I won't buy your talk of 'Boxes' and 'Rejecting Classrooms' so easily. I told you that story about Rino—one you would never find out about under normal means—as a way to convince myself. So that I could convince the me in another world—the me in this loop—that your story about Boxes is true.

MARIA

That's about the size of it.

DAIYA

...Damn... I hate to admit it, but a trick that favors practicality over emotion sounds a lot like an idea I would have.

Relaxing inside, Maria drops down off the podium. Though she had sat up there to project an air of intimidation, it felt uncomfortable to her. She was raised well and never could do away with her feeling that it was bad manners.

DAIYA

I know my intentions, but how about yours? What's in it for you, telling me all this?

MARIA

It allows me to make you my partner.

DAIYA

Is that really necessary?

MARIA

It's because I'm in a deadlock. I need a change of perspective.

DAIYA

So you need a partner—but why me?

MARIA

Surely it can't be so hard to figure out. You're the smartest person in class; that's all. In any case, your intelligence alone gave me cause to suspect you as the owner immediately, without any other proof. You do seem completely oblivious to the idea of being an owner, though, which has removed you as a suspect for now.

DAIYA

I'm smart, huh? Well, that may be true, but it's still a poor reason for why it has to be me. You could probably use my inability to keep my memories and have other partners aside from me. You're a partner whore.

MARIA

Relax. I can't say anything about the future, but you're my first partner. This is the first time I've felt like doing this. It's possible the reason I feel this way is—

Maria hesitates for a moment, then continues.

MARIA

—you and I have something in common.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine 09/11 FRI 8:01 PM ◆◆◆

Now I'm sure. *My target is Maria Otonashi.*

If Kazu thinks I'm still fixated on Kiri—that I'm going after Kokone Kirino and not Maria Otonashi—then defeating him will be easy.

Although that's no excuse to rest on my laurels.

“—Urgh!”

I groan in the entrance.

Now that I've seen *A 60.5-Foot Gulf*, the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes is undeniably hurting me.

...I had no idea.

I had no idea Haruaki was so clearly in love with Kiri. I had thought he'd sacrificed himself and come to the same school as us because he couldn't turn a blind eye to what had happened to her. It didn't even cross my mind that romantic inclinations were involved.

Yes, it's true. I made a mess of not only Kiri's destiny, but Haruaki's, too. I've trapped so many people while I lived on carefree.

“.....Stop.”

Stop thinking this way!

If I start blaming myself, the shadows of crime in my care will attack me again. They're constantly plotting to reverse our master/servant relationship. If I give them an opening, they're going to take it.

“Ngh!”

A furious wave of nausea assaults me... I have to power through this. I feel like if I give in to the urge to vomit, my soul will come out with everything else.

I have to choke it down.

I have to choke it all down.

"It's cruel," Yanagi says, rubbing my back while I suffer. "None of that would have happened if you had only let Usui have Kirino."

".....Huh?"

"I often come to your class to meet Kazuki, and Kirino and Usui are both very cheerful people. Except they really aren't. They're both forcing themselves to act that way for your sake. They can't survive as they really are, so they have no choice but to pretend to be happy."

Yanagi displays a gentle smile as she says this while stroking my back.

"They're both doing it for you."

I can read between the lines.

They both ended up that way because of you.

She's right. She's right, she's right, she's right... She's right.

It feels awful, like bugs crawling inside my skull, and my vision flickers. I can't let her stand there and smile. I don't care if she hit the nail on the head; I can't let her get away with it.

The moment I think that—

—my hands are around her neck.

“_____ Aaaaaaaaaah!”

I can't tell what I'm screaming.

My arms, my throat, my body are all beyond my control, as if I'm possessed. I'm acting on autopilot. But I understand. The thing possessing me—is me. The one taking over is myself.

"Agh, ah!"

Hearing the voice that escapes, and seeing Yanagi's face turning blue, I finally remember how to take back control.

I release her neck in a panic.

Yanagi collapses, coughing.

"Urk, kh—"

I stare at my hands.

No way... How did I end up like this? I'm not okay anymore if I can strangle a girl without hesitation. If I had come to my senses even a moment later, there would have been no coming back.

Then I understand.

I was this close.

I was a hair's breadth away from making a mistake.

I touch the earrings in my left ear.

Goddammit, this isn't gonna help, so stop thinking this way. There's no turning back for me. I don't have time to lose my head over distractions.

That's why I have to get back to normal. I have to be logical.

“Yanagi.” I say her name, my voice careful and calm.

She glares at me with teary eyes.

“You thought I didn’t know?”

“..... Cough! Cough, cough! ...Know...what?”

“That you’re helping Kazu, and that’s why you said what you did just now to make me suffer.”

I get the sense that, for just a moment, Yanagi’s complexion changes.

“...? What’re you talking about? I don’t understand.”

However, she quickly goes blank, acting bewildered and clueless.

It’s intriguing enough to override my anger. This girl really is cunning. If I hadn’t learned her true nature in that killing game, she would’ve had me utterly fooled.

“You came here because Kazu told you to slow me down, right?”

“.....”

A barely discernable silence indicates she’s trying to read the situation.

“I don’t know what you mean. I had no choice but to come here because of your Command. Where exactly would I find the freedom to fit into Kazuki’s plans?”

Hmph. Yeah, might as well tell her.

“I’ve been operating under the assumption you would come here all along.”

Naturally, that surprises her.

“Wh-why? Someone else would have an overwhelmingly higher chance of getting information on Kazuki and Otonashi! There are nearly a thousand of them, you know!”

“It’s about Kazu. He had you under observation after you became a Subject, right? Once he knew you were up to something, he heard from you what my Command was. What would he do once he learns he can’t stop my Commands?

"It's easy to imagine. He'd give me information intentionally to keep my Commands from turning violent. He'd also get the idea that he could send in someone allied with him to deal a blow to me. You're perfect for the part. You're crafty *and* easy to manipulate, since you love yourself more than anything." I give a derisive snort of laughter, then ask, "So, am I on the mark?"

Yanagi can't answer.

"Well, whether you want to answer or not, I can get my answer if I Command you to say it. But there's no need. Your behavior tells me more eloquently than anything else."

"Ngh..."

"He's unique and capable, I'll give him that. But when it comes to strategy, he has no chance in hell against me. Ultimately, I have him in the palm of my hand."

Sending in Yanagi as a spy was Kazu's defense, as well as his offense.

He's missing something, though. Using others has its risks. As the one with Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, I know this better than anyone.

That's why I can keep my footing.

"Yanagi, you have feelings for Kazu, right?"

"...Wh-what does that matter?"

"If you could, you'd make him have eyes for you, right?"

"Well...I mean..."

Yanagi doesn't seem to catch on to why I'm saying these things.

"I have a plan that could make him do just that."

"....."

It would appear that's enough for our sly Yanagi to deduce what I'm getting at.

"Otonashi and Kazu's bond is steadfast. It'd take something unusual to break their connection, and that won't change while you're here acting as Kazu predicted. You yourself must be the most aware of this, right?"

"...What do you want to say?" Yanagi asks this, though I'd bet she already knows.

That's why I don't mince words.

"Betray him."

Her expression doesn't change.

“My strategy all along has been to sever their bond. That’s how I’m trying to keep Kazu from reaching his goal. You and I share the same interests.”

Yanagi is quiet for a moment, but then she scowls angrily at me.

“What are you talking about? Our ‘interests’ have nothing to do with it. Do you think anyone would ally with you after you killed them in that murder game and then choked them just now? Do you believe after all that I would betray the one I love to help you?”

“...Do you think Kazu wanted to be in this situation?”

“Don’t avoid the question. I know changing the topic and bringing the conversation into your territory is one of your favorite tricks.”

“You don’t, do you? He doesn’t enjoy compromising his principles, obtaining a Box, and having O haunt his every move, right?”

“Please listen when someone’s talking to you.”

“Whose fault is it? Who has he become like this for?”

“.....I said—”

“Maria Otonashi.”

Hearing that name, Yanagi unwillingly swallows her retort.

After she reacts, I continue.

“He’s fighting me like this because of Otonashi. He got a Box to oppose me because he’s obsessed with her. I should let you know I never really cared about what would become of Kazu. I have no intention of killing him, and no reason to want to defeat him, either. If anything, him finding happiness is an ideal scenario to me. Don’t you agree? It’s not like I hate him.”

“.....”

“If Otonashi were out of the picture, he wouldn’t have any cause to fight against me. He also wouldn’t have to deal with Boxes anymore. That’s right —his current actions won’t lead him to happiness. The success or failure of his strategies against me have no bearing on his ultimate happiness. So, what can we do to make the circumstances desirable for him?”

I tell her, emphatically:

“Otonashi needs to get away from Kazu. If that happens, he will be able to lead his own life.”

“.....”

“Then Kazu can find peace of mind.”

“...But that’s not what he wants.”

Yanagi has taken the bait my questions provided.

I'm internally ecstatic, but naturally, I make sure that doesn't show.

"There's no way to guarantee that what Kazu wants is what's good for him. Otonashi doesn't want him to do this, either, right? But he's taking those actions because he thinks it's all for her sake... Yeah, I see now. When you think about it, you're aiding and abetting his efforts for Otonashi's sake."

I choose to put things that way once I understand that Yanagi doesn't care for Otonashi.

"What course of action do you think would be preferable for Kazu?"

"That's..."

"I'll say it once more. Our interests are aligned... Well, I know you hate me, so I won't go so far as to say you should collaborate with me. Regardless of what you do, I'm staying my course, though. Kazu isn't going to accomplish his goal. And to that end—"

I brush the piercings in my right ear, then tell her.

"—I will make it impossible for the two of them to make amends."

"...N-ngh."

By all rights, Yanagi would never want to take my side; I can see uncertainty in her eyes.

She'll probably never emotionally permit herself to cooperate with me. The same goes for violating Kazu's wishes. Still, if forsaking those feelings will bring Kazu happiness, she will think that's the best thing to do.

".....Is that...true?"

"Is what true?"

"That you have no intention of harming Kazuki?"

Which is why she asks this question. It's like she's grasping for a reason to cooperate with me. Like she's asking for that one last push.

"I suppose I can say...I won't harm him. But, well, separating him from Otonashi will undoubtedly be painful for him."

"I... I see."

Deep down, she must be more inclined to betray Kazu now.

It looks like Yanagi is going to swallow her feelings and follow my lead. She believes that's best for Kazu, so she's going to put herself through the pain of double-crossing him.

It's a beautiful love indeed.

Well.

Except for the fact that all of what I said to her is a lie.

First off, I did predict she would come here. Everything after that is false.

I hadn't particularly hypothesized that she would show up. It was when she actually arrived that I hit upon the idea that Kazu had sent her.

When I contemplated why she had come, I couldn't help but sense something intentional about it. Out of all 998 Subjects, Yanagi was the one to appear; it was just too convenient.

Once that occurred to me, the idea that this was Kazu's design naturally popped into my head. It wasn't an especially amazing work of deduction.

Anyway, it would be fair to call my lies just a bunch of bluffs. Saying them aloud, though, prevents Yanagi from making any rash moves, and it makes her consider which side holds more advantages for her.

The claim that Kazu wouldn't oppose me if only Otonashi were gone is also a lie.

Kazu being who he is, he's against the very notion of Boxes. My being an owner pits him against me. He's that type of person.

Another lie is that separating Kazu from Otonashi will make him happy.

I do believe Otonashi is a cancer for him. That's not something I made up. But it's not possible to cut out something that has so deeply infected a body. Those two forged an unbreakable link thanks to what amounts to a lifetime together. Rooting out something that has so profoundly pervaded him is as impossible as removing terminal cancer. Attempting to do so would result in some major obstacles. My understanding of this also happens to be the very reason why I gave up on getting him with Kiri.

Let's say Otonashi parted ways with Kazu. Even then, he'd never get her out of his head. If it goes poorly, Kazu may even become more hung up on her than he is now.

Their bond is, in a certain sense, a curse. There's no release from a connection of that magnitude.

It's for this reason that I don't have anything remotely resembling a plan for shifting Kazu's attentions to Yanagi.

Every last bit of that is a lie.

All she has to gain by collaborating with me is Kazu's hate.

Still, it won't be so easy to see the truth—or falsehood—of my words.

People have a tendency to believe information that is beneficial to them. Yanagi is very much this sort of person. I'm positive she'll want to place as much faith as she possibly can in any information that suggests she could

become his lover and make Kazu happy to boot.

And so she'll make her choice.

"What should I do?"

Yuri Yanagi will choose to betray him.

"What can I possibly do?"

Her expression is the epitome of humiliation.

Yuri Yanagi is going to kill who she is, endure the pain, and ensnare Kazuki Hoshino, for the sake of one she despises.

All the while unaware that her actions will ruin him.

Ha-ha-ha, tough break. You were duped so easily. I'll give you some candy or something once this is all over.

Hiding my joy, I tell her, "Otonashi will come here at some point. When that happens, all you need to do is string her along in whatever way is best for you. Use your usual web of lies and theatrics. I'll provide backup."

"...How are you going to call Otonashi here?"

"She'll probably send Otonashi our way before too long."

"She?"

I say her name—the sole person capable of exercising the same power as me.

"Iroha Shindo."

◇◇◇ Kazuki Hoshino 09/11 FRI 8:26 PM ◇◇◇

"You know, I'm embarrassed to say this—it really makes me sound like some textbook villain—but I'll do it to keep things easy to understand. Uh, we have Maria Otonashi, and if you want her back, you'll do what we say."

That's what Iroha said to me on the telephone.

".....Why?" I whisper without thinking as I obediently head to the elevated tracks alone.

Why would Iroha stoop to kidnapping...? The possibility that it was just a lie also entered my mind, naturally. That's why I called Maria first thing.

But Maria didn't answer her phone.

Yeah, I know. That doesn't tell me whether she really has been abducted. Maybe she simply didn't notice the call.

But as long as I can't get ahold of her, I have no choice but to go to the elevated tracks on my own as Iroha asks, trap or no trap.

Why? ...That goes without saying. Not going to save Maria is not an option for me.

I'm sure Iroha said what she did because she knows that about me.

".....Ugh!"

This really sucks.

I knew Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime had turned Iroha into a Subject. I just couldn't imagine her following Daiya's orders, given who she is.

And how is Iroha capable of kidnapping Maria?

I mean, Yuri told me she can't contradict her sense of ethics unless the Command is specific.

But since Daiya doesn't have a thorough grasp of the situation, I can't see why he would make such a detailed command as "Kidnap Maria, then threaten Kazu and summon him to the elevated tracks." And even if he did, using someone as strong-willed and intelligent as Iroha for the job seems like an especially bad choice. In this case, it would be more advantageous to go with one of his fanatics, who would carry out the Command without harboring any doubts, like a machine. Iroha might find some flaw in the Command and work against Daiya's will.

So I have to assume that *abducting Maria was Iroha's own decision.*

Running, I roll up my sleeve and check my watch. 8:27 PM. Shortly before the third movie, *Repeat, Reset, Reset*, begins. Three hours and thirty-three minutes left until the end of September 11.

I thought today would be over quickly, but it feels interminably long.



I arrive at the place I was told.

It's a tunnel beneath elevated tracks running alongside an embankment, away from the center of town. The spray-painted graffiti is a clear message

that this is a hangout for delinquents. The light of the streets doesn't reach this far. That's why the feeble glow of the lamp Iroha apparently brought illuminates only the right half of her face.

I step toward her through the long grass. It's dark, so I can't see them, but I can sense multiple people nearby. I'm sure they're not going out of their way to hide. The priority is less on concealing themselves and more on frightening me by letting me know I'm not alone.

Iroha is sitting next to some graffiti sprayed on the wall.

"Ruff, ruff! Rrrr...!"

Atop a naked man on all fours.

"Okay, okay, I hear ya, boy. Kazuki's here."

The chubby man she is sitting on *is barking like a dog.*

"...Ungh."

I'm overwhelmed with utter loathing. The man's slovenly, flabby body pisses me off, too.

I don't want to look at him, but I don't even want to avert my eyes. I can't stand the idea that I should have to look away because of this man. *You're the one who should get out of my sight. Don't think you can be a part of my world, you eyesore!*

Then I notice something and calm down.

"This is that phenomenon..."

That's right. I already know what this is. I had no idea it could be so disgusting until I actually saw it, but I learned what they were called on TV.

"A dog-person," I whisper.

Then it all comes together.

"So the dog-people are Daiya's handiwork, too..."

"Yep. Oh, but I made this one, not Oomine."

"What do you mean? ...How are you able to do that?"

"Ah, guess I'd better start my explanation there, huh? You see, Kazu, I wield the same powers as him."

"Huh? But how is that even—?"

...Wait, now that I think about it, Yuri said Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime is shared. Does that mean those other than Daiya can use its abilities if they put their minds to it?

So other people can also...?

"As it happens, I'm the only other person at present who can do the same

things as him, so relax.”

She beats me to the punch and explains, which puts me at ease a little.

...But I shouldn't relax—not under these circumstances. I need to make sure Maria is unharmed.

I survey the area, trying to avoid looking at the naked man.

“Where's Maria...?”

“She's not here,” Iroha replies curtly.

“And did you really kidnap...?”

“I did. Thanks to the previous Command, I got some info on her, so I worked out the general location of her apartment building.”

“What are you going to do with her? What is it you want from me?”

Iroha gives me a long look, but she doesn't answer when she gets up from the dog-person.

She kicks him in the head.

“Yipe! Yipe!” the naked dog-man cries in a weak falsetto, then looks up at Iroha with moist eyes.

The spectacle is so gross that it makes me wince.

...No, wait. I almost forgot because of my disgust, but that's not the correct reaction here.

“Wh-what're you doing?! He's a human! He's just been Commanded to become a dog!”

“Human? No, I don't think so. As you can see, he's much less than human. I mean, he's so gross, right?”

“He is, but...only because you made him that way!”

“Oh really? This guy is a rapist who goes after little girls.”

“Huh?”

What did she just say?

“He's a horrible, dangerous criminal. He was the worst kind of person long before he became a dog. This power is for controlling others, but part of it lets me peek at their crimes, too. So I can also root out scumbags like him.”

“...You went to the trouble of tracking down a criminal?”

“I thought I'd try my hand at making a dog-person, so I searched for someone with particularly loathsome crimes, who'd deserve it. That's when I found him. It didn't have to be him in particular. But he was a good choice. It allowed me to prevent him from victimizing anyone else. He's done it so many times, you see, assaulting little girls. Rehabilitation isn't an option.”

“...That’s... Is that true?”

“Yep. He’s a degenerate. The only thing that gets him off is putting his pathetic penis into the vaginas of crying, screaming little girls.”

Iroha kicks him in the head again.

The dog-person lets out a pitiful cry.

I watch this in silence.

“See, you aren’t saying it.”

“Huh?”

“You aren’t telling me not to kick him anymore.”

Iroha orders the still-whimpering dog-person to sit. He sticks out his rear end like he wants to show me his anus, then plops it down to sit on all fours.

“You’ve accepted that he’s subhuman.”

“Y-you’re wro—”

“No, I’m not.”

Iroha looks down at the dog-person, spits on him, then leans back against the wall of the tunnel with an expressionless face.

“You’re thinking it, aren’t you? You’re upset this son of a bitch is still alive, so you hope that maybe he’ll die.”

“I’m not!”

“Could you still say that if you saw the girl he abused who can’t leave the house anymore and has perfected the art of cutting? Or her parents, who ended up getting divorced because she went crazy? Can you live with not telling this scum to die when he’s solely responsible for ruining so many lives?”

“...I—I can.”

I do want him to pay for his crimes, and I do think he’s unworthy of forgiveness, but I can’t say it’s right for him to die... Or that’s how it’s supposed to be. I’m uncertain because he’s just too revolting as a dog. That has to be it.

“Hmm? Well, I was able to say the same until not so long ago. But surprisingly enough, that might be the minority opinion. Humans have a real thing for poetic justice, you see. You can tell that by watching any Hollywood movie. It feels good when the villain who opposed the hero gets defeated. That’s why people get emotional and demand the death penalty for those who commit unforgivable crimes in reality, too. It’s normal to want this trash to die when you see it.”

“I don’t...think that’s true.”

“It is. I understand where you’re coming from, though. I used to believe that was wrong for a long time, too. I thought anyone who found it easy to say ‘Execute ’em, kill ’em, they’re not worthy of living’ just lacked imagination. Even if someone commits a crime, that’s just one side of them; they’re a person with a good and decent side, too. If I had normal interactions with them, then no way would I want to press the execution button. Like, it’s so easy for you to say criminals should die, but can you say that after taking a good look at yourself? Are you really so squeaky clean and innocent? You go and drive drunk like it’s nothing; have you never considered the possibility that you might kill someone in a traffic accident? Does that mean you think you should die, too, when it happens? That’s what I thought—before I gained this power.”

A thin smile appears on Iroha’s face.

“.....And now?”

“Yeah. Now I think criminal scum should die.”

There is no trace of hesitation in her words.

“It’s true that people who have no qualms about saying criminals should die are lacking in discretion. But once you understand criminals well enough, you start to agree with those people. I’ve killed you and others; I know I’m being blind to my own faults, but I can still say it. I learned that when I obtained this power. Guys like him are fundamentally different from humans with common sense like us. There really are worthless people out there who are so beyond sympathy that it makes me sick. They have zero empathy, low IQs, and a complete inability hold a conversation; you’d be surprised. Those who commit these crimes are all like that. They’re simply incompatible with society at large. Take this guy for example. Guess what he said when I asked him if he felt bad for the girls he raped? *‘I just couldn’t help myself.’ ‘It was just their bad luck to happen to catch my eye around that time.’ ‘I think what I’m doing is bad, but it’s not like I can do anything about it, right?’* Do you see? Can’t you tell how offensive this is? These guys don’t have an ounce of remorse. They don’t comprehend the suffering of their victims. No self-awareness of what they’ve done. Not even a hint of doubt about prioritizing their own desires. I understood. They’re the dregs of humanity by their very nature. That’s their fate.”

The dog-person barks. “Arf, arf.”

“That’s why I made him look the part.”

Her mouth twitching, Iroha glares at the dog-person now lying on his back. Even though it’s her own handiwork, she can’t abide the grotesque image and openly displays her anger.

“You can’t stand the existence of something like this, right?” Iroha says, then claps her hands together with a *pop* for some reason.

That’s when it happens.

“““Yaaah!“““

A great roar.

“Wha—?”

What is this?

I find out right away when I look around me.

People with brown paper bags over their heads are shuffling this way. I’m sure they’re the ones I sensed when I arrived here. And now I understand. These are Iroha’s Subjects.

It’s dark, and I can’t quite see, but they’re concealing only their faces with bags; they’re all dressed differently. One is in a uniform from our school, another is in a dress, and as far as I can tell, their ages and genders are diverse, too.

The people gather and begin to circle around us.

It’s bizarre. The sight of a nonuniform group acting in perfect sync is extremely bizarre.

What’s about to begin? What should I do?

I can’t make my next move because I can’t tell what Iroha is trying to do at all. All I can do is stand here.

Iroha ignores me and raises her voice.

“Let’s all administer his punishment together.”

“Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!”
“Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!”
“Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!” “Punishment!”

The sudden shouts are overwhelming.

Nearly twenty men and women are calling out, their fists in the air.

...Wh-what the hell is this?

These people are just under Iroha's Command. But as I watch, I can't get that idea into my head, though I know it to be true, and I find it difficult to suppress the panic in my mind. It's the same feeling I had when I saw the video of Daiya making those people bow to him. If around twenty people all perform the same odd behavior, emotional confusion is a natural reaction.

The paper-hooded mob lifts up the dog-person as the chant continues. They pin his arms behind his back, immobilizing him, then turn him toward Iroha like an offering.

And Iroha—is holding a knife she must have gotten from somewhere.

“I-Iroha, what are you—?”

Iroha doesn't look my way, though.

“Okay, this is a Command. Stop being a dog, rapist.”

As the words leave Iroha's mouth, the demeanor of the dog-person changes. His expression quickly turns into human terror. It seems he still remembers his time as a dog, as he's simply frightened and not surprised by the situation.

“A-ahhh! Please stop! I—I know I was wrong! I won't attack girls anymore!”

“What? It's too late for that, you know? Don't you see you can't take back what's already been done? Can you put their hymens back? Oh, I know. Go ahead and cut your own dick off with this knife.”

“Th—that's—”

“Then how are you going to express your regret?”

“I—I promise! I won't go after girls anymore!”

“Ha! How long are you going to keep up with that nonsense?! That part goes without saying, obviously. Do you understand that it isn't a show of remorse? It's like going to a diner and saying you won't skip out on your bills anymore. You see? Ya get it, champ? Declaring you won't dine and dash is apologizing? Are you screwing with us here? If you truly think you hurt someone, then offer an idea about how to ease her pain a little, you dirtbag.”

“E-ease her pain? What do I need to do?”

“Think with compassion for how they feel. If you put yourself in their position, you'll come up with something on your own, right? Like paying one hundred million in damages or something.”

“O-one hundred million? Th-there's no way I can do that. I'm

unemployed, and—”

That excuse does it.

Iroha plows her fist into the tip of the man’s nose without any emotion on her face. One, two, three times, she hits him without the slightest change in her expression.

Yeah. There is no forgiveness for this man anymore, no matter what he says.

“Ah, agh, agh! Agh!”

His nose is bleeding profusely.

The paper-bag mob silently hold the man’s body still. Not one of them tends to him. Iroha keeps on speaking as if nothing has happened at all.

“You don’t have any remorse for your actions at all; you’re just begging for your life out of fear. I can see it in your eyes; you’ll keep doing it. That’s why this is the end for you.”

Iroha claps her hands again.

“This is a Command. Each of you, answer me with the penalty for this man that makes you most comfortable.”

The paper-hooded mob responds.

“Death.”

“Death.”

“Death.”

“Death.” “The ugly dog should die.” “Die, criminal.” “He should die a more brutal death than anyone.” “Die with your malformed dick.” “You should die because you reek.” “Die. You smell like a stray mutt.” “You have the brains of an insect. Die.” “Die, you pedo.” “Die, pervert.” “Your life isn’t worth anything, so die.” “Hurry up and die.” “Die now.”

“Die.”

“Die.”

“Die.”

The paper-bag mob is saying this because they’ve been Commanded to, of course.

But from the tone of their voices, it’s evident this is how they truly feel.

Twenty people are wishing for this man’s death from the bottom of their hearts.

“Whew...” Iroha heaves a deliberate sigh, then says, “It’s unanimous—they want you dead.”

Iroha brings the knife closer.

“Stop! Stop! Stop! I mean, it’s not like I’ve done anything to you all! It has nothing to do with you! What right do you have to—aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Iroha rips out some of the man’s hair, her face a blank mask. I can hear it tearing; it sounds painful.

One of the people in the paper bags mutters “Die,” with a clap as if to cheer her on. Someone else follows suit and claps. “Die.” It spreads into a chorus. Applause wishing for his death.

“Die” *clap*. “Die” *clap*. “Die” *clap*. “Die” *clap*. “Die” *clap*. “Die die die!” *clap clap clap clap cla-cla-clap clap*.

The “die” chant is almost enjoyable.

As I watch, I can’t help but think:

Yeah, they’re right. This guy does need to die.

“Ahhh! Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!” No longer able to protest in words, the man shakes in terror and wets himself.

“Squeal louder, pig. Regret you ever lived, pig. Suffer, pig.”

Iroha thrusts the tip of the knife at him, right next to his eyeballs.

“That will be our catharsis.”

The action portends something that cannot be taken back, and I finally regain my composure.

“Iroha, sto—”

I try to step in, but I’m restrained by three men in paper hoods. One of their arms blocks my vision. I can’t see anything.

“Don’t do it! Iroha!”

If you do, there’s no coming back for you. You will become a prisoner of the Box, and your normal life will never return.

But—

“Command. When the knife touches you, go back to being a dog.”

“Ugh, yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiipe!!”

—I can’t stop her.

The man’s scream is now just the cry of a dog, resonating through the tunnel.

The group in paper bags releases me and moves away. I can see again.

Before me is a naked man covered in vibrant red. Though I understand the horrible nature of what has occurred—yes, there is undeniably a part of my

heart that thinks, *Good riddance*. The cries of the man are truly unbearable, and even the touch of the sound itself on my eardrums is incredibly unpleasant. Seeing that naked, chubby body convulse so pathetically sparks an irresistible joy within me.

I'm not like these dog-people. I'm not this disgusting. I'm not a fool. They're dogs by nature; that's why they ended up this way.

It's relief. It's a sense of superiority.

But I know. I know full well.

This is how Daiya, their creator, wants me to think.

It would be dangerous if these were my default feelings toward dog-people. I wouldn't be able to treat them as humans; I'd merely view them with contempt and think them deserving of punishment. *Of course they should die*, I'd think. If that sense percolated through the world, the entire planet would be at the mercy of the Box. Normal life would be gone.

I cannot allow that to happen.

That's why I step toward the man, to resist and help him while he's still moving.

"Stay right there!" Iroha stops me. "I won't let you help him. Make another move, and I can't make any guarantees about Maria Otonashi's life."

"Wha—?!"

Is she using Maria's life as a bargaining chip here?!

"Wh-why? Why do you want to kill someone so badly? Is it that important?!"

"True, there isn't much value in killing him as an individual."

"Then why?!"

"This is what we're going to do from here on out. This is the kind of world we're going to build."

So.

That's what it's been all along. This is the outline of what Daiya and Iroha long for. What I've just witnessed here—fanning the desire for their deaths, and then following through with murder—it's what Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime is going to bring about, in miniature.

"That said, I can't let you stop it in front of everyone. If you can, that means you'll continue to interfere. And you'll become an obstacle. I get it, see? I know you can become a surprisingly major hindrance. That's why I can't look the other way if you resist."

Still silent, the mob in paper bags encircles us, keeping watch.

In the center of the circle, Iroha's footsteps click toward me, bearing down on me.

"Oh yeah. I suppose I need to speak about the topic at hand, too. I have to tell you my demands for returning Otonashi."

Iroha's face is illuminated by the glow of the lantern as she approaches.

She reaches out and puts her hand on my chin, tilting my face upward.

"Give up your will to resist us, right here and now."

Her face is dyed red in the light.

The red tint spreads throughout her cheeks, like it might if she was crying.

Her pupils, large in the darkness, hold me fast.

"To prove it, I want you to suck your thumb and watch that trash over there breathe his last. Like a preschooler bawling because his mama wouldn't buy him some candy."

After saying this, she lets my chin go. She wipes away the red liquid on her lips with her arm, but all it does is smear and spread the color.

Yeah... That's when I understand.

Iroha is never coming back.

She's never coming back to normality, a world free of Boxes. Her piercing, raptor-like gaze suggests the presence of some bladed instrument lurking within her. Her expression is tainted by madness.

Iroha is not on this side anymore. It's not crazy to think she would actually do something to Maria if I were to try to save this naked man. She's that far gone.

What is she going to do with me? In this state, she has no reason to just let me go. If she's with Daiya now, she may use the Subjects around here to restrain me and force me to give up the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes.

I won't let her do that.

How can I fight back when Maria is a hostage, though?

No answer presents itself. Of course it's not that easy. That's why I stay still, able only to wait and see what my opponent is going to do.

I'm sure she understands I'm racking my brain. With a calmness that seems almost deliberate, Iroha pulls out her phone. Before she dials anything,

she says, “Here’s the thing about giving Commands—there’s no need to go to the trouble of using words. That was just a little performance for you.”

Upon saying this, Iroha makes a call. I can hear a male voice coming from the speaker, but not well enough to understand what he’s saying.

Iroha speaks to the man on the other end.

“Yeah, rape Maria Otonashi.”

“Wha—?!” I shout without thinking.

What? What is Iroha saying?

Iroha appears to have expected this. “I told you, didn’t I?” she says. “Prove you aren’t going to oppose us. Just watching this subhuman dog-person die isn’t good enough. That’s why I’m doing this. If you don’t resist, even when I take away something that matters to you, I’ll be satisfied.”

“I won’t.....”

My voice rises in anger.

“I won’t let you! No way in hell!”

“You won’t let me? Fine, fine. Then I’ll just drive you to the brink. Steal your will to fight us and render you powerless. That’s why I’m giving the order to rape Maria Otonashi.”

“Iroha, do you even understand what you’re saying? You say that man over there deserves to die, but don’t you see you’re doing the same thing as him?”

“I’m not. I’m not doing this to satisfy some urge. I have a solid objective. No matter how just the war, there is no way to end it without killing enemy soldiers. It’s impossible to prevent normal civilians from dying in the process. In extreme circumstances, some soldiers will even go straight to committing atrocities. Overall, though, justice is justice. What’s right is right, even if there are some trivial drawbacks.”

“Don’t be stupid! This is *not* right! It’s not trivial at all! This makes no damn sense!”

“Oh, it makes sense all right,” Iroha says with a look of disgust.

It’s no use... I’m never going to get through to her with this debate. One look at the clouds of insanity in her eyes is enough to tell me that.

All the same, I have to do something to prevent any violence toward Maria.

Basically, I should be good if I can convince Iroha that I’m completely broken.

...If I'm right about that, then I do have some ideas.

"If you just want to break my will to fight, there's no need to go to extremes."

"Oh?"

Iroha signals for me to keep going with a questioning look.

It's a dangerous gambit. I may actually lose the strength to oppose Iroha and Daiya. Still, it should be enough to put a halt to the horrible act they're about to commit.

I voice my proposal.

"You should make me into a Subject."

Yes. If they do, Maria's involvement won't matter one bit. There's no proof more certain that I wouldn't act against them.

But Iroha's response is not what I expect.

"Nope, already tried that."

"...Huh?"

"Why do you think I have this lantern? To create shadows, natura... But, oh, you never knew how Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime works? Guess you wouldn't understand, then. You see, this Box activates when people step on your shadow. So I actually already tried it. Has anything changed about you? Nothing has, right?"

"...This means you can't make me into a Subject?"

"I guess I can't say it for certain? But I couldn't do it earlier."

"Why...?"

"Because you're an owner. The Boxes react to one another. It's like how Oomine was able to act freely even in the Game of Indolence. The moment I got here, I stepped on your shadow in order to make you into a Subject, but I couldn't control you. The same goes for Otonashi."

"You tried to make Maria into a Subject?"

"Yeah, well. That would make things easier."

Her tone is unapologetic.

"Owners can't be made into Subjects..."

"Yeah... Well, not exactly. According to Otonashi, we can if the owner's will to reject the control vanishes. Care to give it another go?"

With that, Iroha places her foot forward, as naturally as walking—
and steps on my shadow.

She carries herself so normally that you'd never guess she was trying to

use a Box.

She's so casual about it that her foot is on my shadow before the idea to avoid it enters my head. Despite what Iroha said, that's no guarantee I won't become a Subject this time. Maybe it was only an accident that the first time didn't work. That's why she's able to step on my shadow, even though I shouldn't let it happen so easily.

“.....”

No matter how much I wait, though, I don't feel anything.

“... You can make anyone aside from an owner into a Subject?”

“That's right. If there's someone it won't work on, I'd like to see them.”

I don't feel a thing. Even though her foot is on my shadow, it's nothing to me.

“If there is an exception, they'd be the first.”

Iroha is lying.

No... maybe that's not the correct way to put it. She's not lying, but she is mistaken.

After all, she's saying she can subjugate anyone if they aren't an owner. That's exactly where she's wrong.

The reason being that I am not an owner.

I, Kazuki Hoshino, am not the owner of the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes.

“See? That's why I can't accept your proposal that we let Otonashi go by making you into a Subject.”

“So...”

“Yeah. I go back to Plan A. Breaking you mentally.”

Now that we've reached this point, nothing I say will stop Iroha. That's painfully apparent.

Then I notice it.

The knife, wet with blood, is lying at my feet.

I look at Iroha.

Iroha is a wonderful person, I know. Though she can be a bit oblivious to

the feelings of others, her thoughtfulness toward them outweighs that. She knows she's a strong person, so she helps other people while putting herself second. What she's doing now is just that taken to an extreme. If I took the time to spell it all out to her, I'm sure she would realize her mistake.

I don't have that time, though.

I won't have enough time to choose Maria and save Iroha, too. I know that.

So—

So—

“.....”

I may have reached a conclusion, but still. I'm going to give it one last try.

“...You're wrong.”

“Huh,” Iroha responds half-heartedly. She's cleaning out her ear, all but saying I'm not worth listening to.

“Daiya and you, you're wrong.”

“Fine, I'll hear you out. Wrong about what?”

“About trying to fix the world by killing people. That's where you're wrong.”

“Just letting you know now, if you're gonna appeal to basic common sense, I'm not gonna listen, okay? There's no denying it's better to kill one murderer before he kills a hundred. Putting that murderer's head on a pike to warn others of the penalty will strike fear into the fools and prevent any new crimes, and that's a good thing, right? It's just that we didn't have a good means of doing so until now. All right, go ahead and enlighten me. How is this somehow wrong?”

“.....I definitely won't condemn weeding out idiots who do nothing but cause trouble. I think some people really are worthless. I don't want to believe so, but I know for a fact they exist.”

“Right? Your mind is just so ensnared in traditional wisdom, you're having trouble accepting it. You're repulsed by the scene you just saw, and that simply gave you this vague notion it wasn't right.”

“No. It's just...why do you get to choose?”

“.....Choose what?”

After everything I've said, you still don't see?

A surge of violent frustration wells up within me.

I glare at Iroha and her stupidity, and I clarify. “Choose who is fit to die.”

I can tell my sentiments reached her by the way she swallows.

“You and Daiya are imperfect. You’re not gods or anything like them. By what standard do you choose who deserves death? Are your choices absolutely infallible?”

“Th—that—”

“It’s not possible. You take someone’s life because of an unreliable choice.”

“...I can’t declare with perfect conviction that we’ll be one hundred percent correct. But the laws today are no different, right? You can’t say every death sentence in the court system was the right call... Plus, I don’t think we’ll make mistakes so readily. At the very least, anyone can tell that this child rapist is better off dead.”

“Are you sure? It’s true he hurt others, but he just might have an even greater capacity to save people, too. By your logic, he wouldn’t be fit to die anymore.”

“What? He’s a dog; that’s impossible for him!”

“Maybe. But do you truly know that?”

“...I do. I can tell in an instant how stupid this dog is. He doesn’t have anything close to an ability to help that would outweigh what he’s done.”

“And that right there is pride. You’ve tricked yourself into believing you can do anything now that you have Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, even though you’re nothing special at all. All you did was get ahold of a Box, but you’re giddy with how omnipotent you feel. You’re so sure you can make the right calls. You want me to tell you what society calls such a state?”

I tell her.

“They call it getting carried away.”

“.....”

“It’s easy to see where this is going. First, the criminals you select to be culled will be the kind anyone would recognize. But that’s just the beginning. Your hubris will carry you too far. Eventually, you’ll start singling out people in the gray zone. It’ll get worse and worse until, in the end, you’re making dog-people out of anyone you don’t like. You’ll start weeding out anyone who’s inconvenient for you, regardless of whether they’re good or evil. Oh, but maybe it’s already too late? I mean, you’re already trying to stamp out Maria and me, since we’re in the way.”

My anger mounts as I explain.

Why don't people as intelligent as Iroha and Daiya understand? Can't they envision that outcome?

"What you're doing isn't punishment or cleanup or anything else. It's murder. All you and Daiya have done is let the Box convince you you're all-powerful. You've just let it corrupt you and drive you to commit crimes yourselves. History is full of massacres, and you're just trying to create another one. It's not a revolution or anything like one; it's an all-too-common error. There's no justice in this."

I begin to walk toward Iroha, who is silent.

"That's why I'll stop you."

I haven't forgotten that I'll be coming up alongside the knife, too.

"....."

It appears my speech has shaken Iroha a bit.

What I have said is absolutely correct. Even Iroha has to see it.

However, to me, she says, "...What's with your face?"

"...My face?"

"Yeah. Everything you've said was meant to back me into a corner. You're arguing in an attempt to win me over." She looks utterly disgusted as she spits, "Why do you have such a gentle smile?"

When she points this out, I instinctively touch my face.

"People don't make that smile normally. And a regular person could never say what you did just now."

"...I didn't say anything crazy."

"No, you didn't. But a regular, subjective person wouldn't be able to say all that in this situation. *A person panicking because their loved one was taken hostage wouldn't be so factual.*"

"You're saying I'd be more emotional if this was genuine?"

"That's not what feels so wrong. It's on a different level than just 'getting emotional.' This is something impossible. Or that shouldn't be..."

Iroha's expression contains not just anxiety, but fear.

"You—"

And with that expression, she asks:

"Where is what makes you human?"

I have no clue what the question means.

However, I remember Daiya making a remark along those lines in the past. He told me I was “in suspension” or something. Perhaps what Iroha is saying has a similar meaning.

Yeah...something about me is not normal. I’ve been denying it, but I think it’s about time I faced the facts.

I can’t really describe it, and if I tried to put it into words, it probably wouldn’t make any sense, but if I had to express how it feels to me in my own words, it would be this:

There's not enough of myself in me.

“...Enough about you. It doesn’t matter. At any rate, I’m not going to stop.”

“So you didn’t see my point?”

“What you’re saying might be correct, in a certain light. Oomine and I, we have a conceited side that tends to put others below us. We aren’t perfect, so we can also make mistakes. But calling it quits is another story. We can’t give up just because of that. We can’t let ourselves give in to reality, accept the bad, and let ourselves be beaten up over and over without putting up a fight. I won’t accept that. Thanks for the candid advice. I’ll improve. I’ll be careful about choosing who deserves to die when I kill them.”

“‘Improving’ won’t enable you to make accurate judgments.”

“I still don’t think that makes this method wrong.”

And then Iroha says, eyes clouded with madness:

“That’s why I won’t stop. I won’t change my actions toward Otonashi.”

Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I give a small, involuntary sigh.

“What’s with that sigh? Does that mean you’ve thrown in the towel? Maybe your spirit has been broken.”

“Yeah, I’ve given up.”

I’ve given up—

—on doing this without bloodshed.

Now, I can’t let her grasp my intentions. If I don’t finish it in an instant, the Subjects around us will grab me. I have to stab her with no hesitation. I have to do it so that she doesn’t sense my intent to kill her.

I'll kill her.

I'll pierce Iroha's heart as effortlessly as humming a tune, and I'll grant her a fast death.

"...People who deserve to die, huh?"

Iroha claims they exist.

But when it comes down to it, that isn't something for fellow humans like us to decide. Even I think it about certain people. And that is wrong of me. It has to be.

Because if it's not wrong, then even what I'm about to do would be forgiven, and it doesn't have to be. I wouldn't forgive such an act myself.

I'm merely making the same erroneous choice as Iroha and Daiya.

If I were to describe people worthy of death to me—

—I would say everyone who harms Maria deserves to die.

That's why I drive the knife toward Iroha's heart.

I don't make a single extraneous movement.

After I'm sure Iroha is looking away, I swiftly scoop up the knife, leap to my feet, and stab. The knife's blade vanishes into Iroha's heart.

I don't wish for her death in my mind.

There isn't a shred of malice within me. I simply did what needs to be done. That's all.

Oh, what if this is it?

Maybe this part of me is what other people see as abnormal?

If so, then Maria's the one person who must not see it. Yes, if she ever witnessed this part of me, we—

"What... What are you doing, Kazuki?"

My heart jumps.

"A-ahhh...!"

Why? Why is she here?

The way she calls me "Kazuki." The pronunciation. The sound of my name.

And the voice I love—

“.....Why...are you doing such a thing, Kazuki?”

One of the women with a paper bag over her head approaches me.

“Uh, ahhh...!”

...Ahhh, why didn't I notice? I should've recognized her even if I couldn't see her face, so why didn't I? Simple. It's dark here, and plus, I wasn't exactly at leisure to look over each and every person. How could I not have been suspicious about why I was called to this place in the dark?

Why didn't I pick up on the number one thing Iroha was hiding?

A girl with slender legs removes the paper bag.

“Maria.”

And there she is: Maria.

It's undeniably Maria.

“Kazuki...” Maria calls my name, voice trembling.

“Maria...why are you here...?” I mutter without thinking, although I do have a glimmer of understanding.

“Because I ordered her to come,” Iroha answers, right in front of me.

Even though I'm still pressing the knife into her.

...Yeah, of course I noticed. I noticed the moment I stabbed her that I felt nothing when the knife supposedly entered her body.

I pull out the knife that should have pierced Iroha's heart. I push its point into the palm of my hand. I don't feel it stab me. The blade has gone into the hilt rather than through the palm of my hand.

This knife—no, this toy meant for pranks—is not going to kill anyone.

“Shall I give you an external opinion on your behavior?” Iroha sneers at me in my amazement. “They call it getting carried away.”

She plucks the toy knife from my completely limp hand.

“Command. Dog, give me some happy barks.”

The naked man, who should've been unconscious with pain, nimbly gets up. He runs around us on his hands and feet. He barks “Arf, arf” energetically, paying no mind to the fact that he's covered in red.

“I told you—I don't really need to give Commands verbally.”

Iroha stabs the knife into the dog-person as it runs around. It can't possibly hurt, but he cries out “Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiipe” and collapses in pain again.

“While you weren't looking, we covered him in blood. Then I gave him an order to yelp and act like he was in pain if he was stabbed. That's all it

took to make you buy it hook, line, and sinker.”

Oh, right. The paper-bag mob blocked my vision, so I didn’t actually see the moment Iroha stabbed the man. All I experienced were the cries of the dog-person and the sight of him covered in red and in pain. It’s this darkness. There are plenty of places where they could have sneaked in the blood, and they could even get away with not using the real thing.

“...Why would you do all this...?”

“Because I was Commanded to, by Oomine. He just gave me one order. ‘Show Kazuki Hoshino’s betrayal to Maria Otonashi.’”

Iroha shifts her gaze to Maria, then presses on.

“It was unexpectedly difficult. After all, Otonashi has implicit faith in you. She wasn’t going to see a betrayal for what it was if I was half-assed about it.”

Maria bites her lip as she hears this said of her.

“Bringing her here was easy. All I needed to do was use the same method I did to get you to come. In short, I threatened her using you. I just have to say something like *If you don’t do as I ask, or if you try anything funny, I’ll use my Subjects to kill Kazuki*, and then Otonashi would have no choice but to play along, no matter how fake it sounded. If I order her to wear a paper bag and tell her to keep quiet and listen to our conversation, she’s obviously going to obey. That’s how I was able to show her.”

Iroha jabs the toy knife in and out of her chest as she explains.

“I showed her how you would kill me.”

All of it—

—everything she said and did was so that Maria would see me commit a murder. Leaving the knife in a spot where I could grab it, working me up by talking about raping Maria, faking a murder in front of me so I would get the idea.....

And then, just as Iroha planned, I stabbed her with the toy knife.

Iroha snaps her fingers. In response to the sound, the paper-bag mob all begin to head home casually, without any real sense of order. Like they had just finished their errand.

“Shindo told me she wanted me to watch you kill her,” Maria says. She had been refusing to meet my eyes. “I didn’t believe it. Even when I heard Oomine had already used his Box and set his plan into motion, even when I knew it was true, I couldn’t believe that you would kill someone. That you

would solve a problem with murder. That's not even an option. The moment you do it, you fall to the basest level, and all your convictions lose meaning. You knew I think that way. You knew I would never work with a person who would stoop to that. And yet..."

Unsure what to say next, she shakes her head.

"...No, enough about you and me. I still don't understand. Murder should have been impossible for you. Though just an attempt, the fact that you did try to kill someone will be a continuous source of guilt for you. Bearing such a great sin will keep you from your normal life, and the change in you will also transform that normal life itself. Oh, and it's not just the internal aspects; the law can also snatch away your normal life just like that if you commit a crime like murder. That's why you—the one who values normality above all else—would never choose that option."

She clenches her fists.

"There's no way you could kill someone... No way! You would never do something like that!"

Maria turns her eyes to me imploringly.

"...Yes, I know! You can't! It's impossible! Which means you're under their control. Maybe you took those steps under the manipulation of Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime. It has to be! It has to be, Kazuki!"

Maria grabs my shoulders and shakes me.

"I want you to deny it," she begs with her entire being. She saw my violent act with her own two eyes, but she still screams that she wants me to deny it. She's likely aware that if I did, it would be a lie, yet she still says those things. It's like she's throwing a tantrum.

I never thought Maria could get like this. I never thought it...

But I'll make use of these emotions.

I'll keep deceiving her.

"You're right."

I'm the worst. My own words make me ill.

If she recognizes what I am, though, she will leave me, never to return.

Thus, even if it's a clumsy lie worthy of a kindergartener, even if it's the lowest, most immoral falsehood, I have to say it.

"I knew it," Maria whispers. "I knew it was true."

Relief appears on her face.

Maria believed my obvious lie. I fooled her.

Yeah... I can tell. Maria doesn't want to be apart from me, either. She still wants to trust me. Our bond won't be broken so readily.

So I need to keep honing my lies.

"Maria, you see—"

"Heh-heh, I'm so relieved. Now—"

Maria's expression speaks to the solace at the depths of her soul, and she says:

"Now, I don't need to trust anyone."

".....Huh?"

Her expression—

—doesn't match—

—her words.

"I had a faint— No, I had already figured it out. I knew it—" She had said that earlier. "I knew it—you betrayed me."

"Ah..."

My arms hang limply at my sides.

I fearfully turn my face to Maria.

"I can tell, you know. It may be gone now, but I used to have that trick for reading your mind just from your facial muscles, remember? I spent a lifetime with you, remember? I can still see when you aren't being truthful with me, at least. But I rationalized and tricked myself into believing I didn't know for certain. I kept putting off the issue until I could find decisive evidence. Well, now I've found it. That laughable trickery of yours has informed me beyond any shadow of a doubt that you have changed."

I had thought until this very moment that our connection would not meet its end in so simple a manner.

...I'm so stupid.

I didn't need to deceive her, but I did for so long. I've been misleading her ever since the Game of Indolence came to an end. I was constantly destroying a firm bond that could not be severed so easily.

In the end, that bond collapsed under the effects of all my betrayals.

"Yes... I'm relieved. I had realized I couldn't keep going like this. It was painful, blaming myself for all my excuses. I am a Box. I'm not allowed to

possess a human heart. I shouldn't spend long periods of time with someone and grow attached to them. Despite this, I couldn't make the decision to part ways with you on my own. I couldn't leave you, and I searched for good reasons for us to stay together, like the possibility of encountering O. I was even afraid. I thought that, at this rate, I might even lose my purpose and vanish altogether."

That's what I wanted.

But...

"But...you betrayed me and showed me the error of my ways. You helped me realize my weakness. You helped me make up my mind."

Each and every word pierces my heart.

Maria was the one I never wanted to hurt. She was the one I wanted to protect more than anyone else.

And yet, I hurt her over and over, until I broke her.

"...Maria, listen to me. I did it for you."

Even now, I still can't let her go.

But...

"Don't call me that." Maria turns her back on me.

"Huh?"

"Don't call me Maria."

She won't even allow me that.

"I discarded that name a long time ago. I used it on a whim, and it stuck around only because you didn't forget and kept using it. But we're through now, so it's unnecessary. My time as 'Maria' is over."

Then, Maria turns back, locks her eyes on me—

—and says:

"I am the Box Aya Otonashi."

That moment, a certain scene arises unbidden in my mind, and I have a flashback.

It's a scene with faded colors—stagnant, muddled, and warped.

The classroom of repetitions.

A sepia-toned Maria stands atop the podium. She introduces herself. Her expression is unfocused. There's so many versions, tens of thousands of

them, and I can't tell which is real. "*I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you.*" "*I'm Aya Otonashi... Nice to meet you.*" "*I'm Aya Otonashi.*" "*I'm Aya Otonashi.*" She says it over and over atop the platform, in loop after loop. The closer she gets to the end, the more emotion drains from her face. Maria used that seemingly infinite amount of time to create another personality. She rejected everyone else to become the perfect Box.

That girl.

Her expression.

".....Ahhh....."

After all this time, I can finally see it. I never noticed before, since we were always together.

Somewhere along the way, Maria began expressing herself almost like a normal person. She had begun to be sad, angry, and happy like anyone else.

I didn't notice. I might have been able to find some other way of doing things if I had, but I didn't.

But now, those commonplace emotions are lost to Maria again.

"...No." The word slips out of my mouth. "I'll keep calling you Maria."

"..."

Maria doesn't respond to me and extends her hand toward Iroha. Quickly apprehending her intent, Iroha hands over the toy knife.

"Kazuki, you are different now. You changed once and for all the moment you stabbed Shindo in the chest with this toy. You are no longer my partner. Your presence will only corrupt me. Thus—"

For some reason, Maria presses the toy knife into my hand.

"—*you are now my enemy.*"

I don't know why, but something prompts Maria to embrace me with a kind smile on her face.

"...Maria?"

Could it be that she doesn't want to leave me after all? There's no chance of that, but I'm still thinking such naive thoughts this late in the game.

That turns out to be a mistake, though.

I mean, I can see how the knife in my hand is stabbing Maria's chest.

"Oh..."

The knife is a toy, of course. I haven't actually wounded Maria. All the same, it only *happened* to be a toy this time.

"That's what I mean," Maria whispers in a small voice. "If I get close to you, you'll stab me."

Her voice is so very, very gentle that the truth is crystal clear.

She is exactly right.

This is exactly what I'm trying to do. Unable to understand each other, we will come into conflict, and this will be the end result.

I will pierce Maria through the heart.

"Kazuki."

Her body is as frail and delicate as ever.

With the knife in my hand still plunged into her, Maria says, "Thank you for everything."

This thin wisp of a girl, a year younger than me, will continue the struggle alone. She will fight on, though she has been so stabbed and betrayed. She will stay in the battle for the sake of all those complete strangers.

I can see the outcome.

It's defeat.

In the not so distant future... No, in the very near future, Maria's endurance will run out. She'll maintain her edge, paring down her soul with a file, wearing herself away until, before long, there is nothing left.

I can see this in her future, yet I cannot stop her.

Maria moves away from me, and she is finally free from the knife.

Taking it from my hand, she returns it to Iroha, who has been watching us disinterestedly.

Dismissing me, Maria turns away and begins to walk off.

"Kazuki," she says quietly. "I couldn't eat all the hamburg steak by myself."

Stupid as I am, I fail to notice right away—

That was her good-bye.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine 09/11 FRI 8:57 PM ◆◆◆

“You and I have something in common,” says the Maria Otonashi on the screen.

A question slips from my mouth. “What is this?”

After yet another teleport, I am being shown the third movie alongside Yanagi. She’s sitting behind me to the right, and beside me is a shell of Maria Otonashi. That means she is the lead in *Repeat, Reset, Reset*, the film for this round.

This seems suspect to me, though. Why would it be Otonashi? I can’t recall anything significant between us. We didn’t have a close relationship like I did with Rino or Haruaki. If we’re screening my transgressions here, does that imply I did something to her without knowing it? This is meant to bring me pain; Otonashi isn’t really in a position to do that, is she?

Or so I thought.

However, my expectations are betrayed.

What’s appearing on the screen now are things I could never have foreseen.

These are interactions between Otonashi and me in the Rejecting Classroom that I have no recollection of. The two of us are putting our heads together on how to get out of it.

“I...worked with Otonashi...? Before Kazu?”

It’s an odd thing to see. What’s more, my expression toward Otonashi isn’t hostile, or even the one I have to make normally.

It’s almost affectionate.

“What’s with that meek look on my face?”

...Wait, maybe it isn’t so hard to understand.

I glance at Otonashi’s face on the screen.

She’s already formed her aloof aura. You might think she couldn’t help but appear that way to the rest of us because she’d been retaining her memories of that world, but that’s not it.

The others may not be able to tell the difference, but I can see it.

I can see that Otonashi is straining to create herself.

Once I saw through that back then, the me from that time felt an affinity for how she was suppressing herself for the sake of some goal, just like I was.

“Help me.”

Maybe that's why, on the 1,536th March 2, I said something so ridiculous.

...Geez, past Daiya. I don't know when you're from, but get it together. What kind of torture is this, just showing me embarrassing stuff? Has the design of the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes been altered so it puts the screws to me by humiliating me instead?

Why do I have memories of the previous time to begin with? I briefly wonder, but the answer comes soon enough. I don't. Unlike Kazu, I can't. But in much the same way my NPC was able to discern the goals of the actual me, if I heard what had happened previously in the Rejecting Classroom from Otonashi, I could gain a very accurate grasp of the previous cycles of the world.

In that sense, I might have qualified as a partner, if only barely.

“I don't know what to do. What can I do for Kiri? Nothing. If I touch her, she goes pale. If I hug her, the memories of the past emerge, and she begins to cry. All I do is bring her suffering, no matter what I try. But she's hopeless without me. She can't do anything on her own. If I abandon her, I know she'll commit a grave mistake. I'm wrong if I get too close and if I get too far. Hey, what should I do?”

What the hell am I blabbing to Otonashi about...? As if she could help, even if I did tell her. She's as powerless as I am.

But the me from the past continues.

“I think maybe you can find it for me.”

The Daiya in the screen speaks fervently.

“A solution for what to do about Kiri, amid all these repetitions.”

There is no such thing!

If my warnings now could reach the me back then, I would shout until my voice was gone. The Daiya on the screen is sounding that stupid. He's shockingly soft.

However, Otonashi's response to that is incredibly irresponsible, too. I know the answer. The problem between Kiri and me has yet to be resolved as of the present, which means she never found a solution.

And yet, she says this.

“Sure. I'll see what I can turn up.”

But in the following scene—the 1,539th March 2, three transfers later—Otonashi has this to say.

“I’ve discovered a way of resolving things.”

What the hell is she talking about? There isn’t such a thing... There was never meant to be.

“At the very least, I know the best course of action for you in regards to Kirino.”

“The best course of action... What would that be?”

Embarrassingly, the boy on the screen isn’t even hiding his excitement.

Dumb as I was, I probably hoped for something. I must have believed in the possibility that this method, one that I myself hadn’t found, existed.

Otonashi speaks to my past self.

“Don’t concern yourself with her anymore.”

It goes without saying that I was disappointed by her words. In fact, I was angry.

“Don’t be stupid. Who’s going to save her, then? Or do you mean to say she’s already recovered?”

“...No, Kirino’s wounds run deep. They’ll likely never heal.”

“Then why would you suggest I should leave her?!”

“Because no one can save her.”

“What did you say?”

“That is how deeply she’s been hurt. An arm doesn’t grow back once it’s been lost, right? You can’t get rid of those deep scars.”

“As if you know anything. Did you give up on everything because you wasted your time dragging your ass? If an arm is gone, you can at least attach a prosthetic one with surgery.”

“Maybe someone out there can do that. It may not be the same as before, but that would be a form of salvation. But, Oomine, that is more than you can do.”

“Why?! Who else besides me could?!”

“You know the answer to that.” Otonashi looks uncomfortable as she says, *“Oomine, you’re keeping Kirino’s wounds from healing.”*

The boy on screen goes quiet.

“Your presence makes Kirino want to go back to who she once was. Even if it would save her, she wouldn’t accept a prosthetic, because that’s not being whole again. Just being near you is enough to stop Kirino from

moving forward.”

Yeah, I know that. Even stupid as I was back then, I thought the same in my heart of hearts.

“I know you understand. But... No, I guess I should say that it’s why you’re searching for a way to help Kirino. It is also true that distancing yourself from her won’t necessarily solve everything. Losing you, her greatest supporter, will likely present her with a new set of problems. But I’ve realized that this is still the optimal solution. In the end, all you can do for Kirino is leave her.”

“If I go away, she’ll suffer and mess up and probably even get hurt again. She may not be capable of extracting herself from that chain of negativity. You’re suggesting I just ditch her anyway?”

“Yes.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“Not at all. While your departure may not necessarily cause her harm, your presence absolutely does. That’s not all. If you don’t remove yourself, Kirino is not the only one who will suffer. If you don’t go, your own wounds will become more fatal than hers.”

“I don’t care about me!”

“Well, you should!”

I’m more than a little surprised by this display of emotion from the normally apathetic Otonashi.

“Are you—trying to become me?”

It’s a plaint of grief.

Only now, I understand what it means, too.

I am truly walking the path to ruin here. I’m sure the same goes for Otonashi. It makes sense, now that I think about it. There’s nothing aside from self-sacrifice in her actions so far. She lives for something other than herself.

She believes she’s the only one who needs to do it.

But there’s no reason the word of some mysterious girl who just transferred to our school today would convince me of that. Even if we did team up on previous cycles of March 2, the memories of our time together don’t exist.

Unlike Kazuki, it doesn’t seem real to me.

“If you aren’t going to lend me a hand, then I won’t cooperate anymore.”

“...Oomine.”

On the other hand, Maria has already interacted with me as a person for 1,539 days. Given her personality, spending that long together would lead her to grow attached to me.

That's why she's going to want to help me.

“If you truly want to heal Kirino’s wounds, there is only one option. I will do it. I will see it through to the end, for your sake as well.”

That's why she says what comes next.

“I will perfect my Box.”

But I can't accept that option, either, and we go our separate ways.

Even after such a definitive farewell, though, our partnership doesn't dissolve there.

It's like nothing at all, because Otonashi hides our parting on the 1,539th March 2. I don't need to say that it essentially makes it seem like there never even was a good-bye. However, while that may be true for me, Otonashi isn't quite shrewd enough to pretend she isn't holding something in. The incident lingers, even if I don't have any memory of it.

We no longer have a trusting relationship in the truest sense.

That brings us to March 2 number 1,542.

To our surprise, we finally hit upon Mogi.

But in the end, that's as much as we can manage. There would be no further progress. The Rejecting Classroom is formed around the core of Mogi's wish to “reach March 3 with no regrets,” and to enable this, part of the system causes the owner to be forgotten, even if they are identified. When the upcoming 1,543rd time arrives, I, and Otonashi, too, will naturally forget that Mogi is the culprit.

We're able to pinpoint Mogi several times after that. Unfortunately, we're never once able to get beyond that. Even if we do track her down, Otonashi is unable to do anything violent, so she can't defeat the Box. What's more, as I have no real sense of the loops, nothing's driving me to do whatever it takes to escape from the Box. Though extreme measures may be the only means open to us, we never attempt to resolve the situation by harming Mogi.

We're at an impasse. Honestly, the only one who has a chance of overcoming Mogi's Box is Kazu.

That's why our relationship comes to an end.

"This is good-bye."

On the 1,635th March 2, after more than one hundred cycles as partners, Otonashi finally abandons me.

She gives the farewell in the classroom during the break after first period, and I scowl at the sudden and perplexing event.

Kazu is next to me.

"Daiya, do you know Otonashi?"

"No, not at all."

I'm frowning, but not because such a longtime partner is suddenly telling me good-bye. Unless she tells me about the Rejecting Classroom, to me, Otonashi is just a stranger who transferred to my school today. Her farewell means less than nothing.

She looks unexpectedly hurt by my reaction. I'm sure she's experienced the bewilderment of others plenty of times amid the cycles of this world, but she can't keep it from getting to her.

...Why?

I don't understand, but I put together a theory. Otonashi was immensely alone in this world, and then she met someone she could share the cycles with. For her, that moment would amount to her first release from solitude within the Rejecting Classroom.

But then she goes back to being alone again.

Alone forever, in a world that may very well last for all eternity.

If so...then of course. Otonashi is lonely.

It means she was still wet behind the ears on the 1,635th transfer.

She carries on, without explaining to me about the Box.

"You're just going to forget what I say to you once the 1,635th time ends anyway, so telling you this may be worth nothing as a countermeasure. So what I'm about to tell you is just for my own sake. But I'm going to do it anyway."

Ignoring the deepening frown on my face, Maria says her piece.

"Don't use a Box."

I have no memory of this warning now.

"You will attempt to have the Box grant a wish that is too big. You will chase ideals that are beyond your control. Just as I have."

What does telling me these things mean to her?

Needless to say, the warning is worthless. I would forget all about it, as she predicted, and end up using a Box. She was talking only to herself.

Oh, that's it.

She really is talking only to herself. Just speaking of her own fate. Distracting herself by venting vulnerabilities she can't share with anyone into a world destined to vanish.

That's how weak Otonashi is at this point in time.

*"I know what results from asking a Box for such a wish. The outcome is
—"*

And that's why she tells me what amounts to her own ultimate end.

"—ruin."

This is a bitter admission, one that should reach my heart.

Inside the theater, I mutter, "...What? What the hell are you saying?"

But hearing this confession doesn't suddenly bring my memories with Otonashi flooding back so that I can treat her kindly, or any other similar development.

There are no miracles.

We cannot make them happen.

The boy on the screen laughs coldly, put off by the crazy talk of a girl he's just met. In the end, I ignore Otonashi and leave, taking Kazu with me.

Only Otonashi is left behind.

She stands where she is, while our other classmates whisper about what that could have been about just now.

Grinding her teeth, clenching her fists, Otonashi keeps talking to the empty air.

"But then what will I do if you learn of the Boxes anyway and obtain one? I won't feel inspired to steal it from you. I may not stand against you, like I would against other owners."

She won't stand against me?

What is she saying? There's no way—

"—"

No, wait. It's true. As of the present, Otonashi hasn't lifted a finger toward me since I returned to school with Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime.

Hey, what if...?

A certain possibility pops into my head.

Before, I thought the reason Otonashi hadn't tried anything yet was because Kazu really had her fooled. Or maybe because she was onto him but purposely going along with his instructions. Either way, I figured Kazu was at the root of her inactivity.

If I'm to believe her, though, what if she was unsure of what to do about not just Kazu, but my Box as well?

"We will be partners again— No, we won't. I won't work with you. I don't want to interfere with your affairs, either. I guess we'll both just be moving in the same direction. We were never meant to be partners. Our original relationship—"

What she says next doesn't carry any especially negative connotations, but Otonashi's expression is taut with distaste.

"—was as kindred spirits."

Yeah, I can see why Otonashi would make that face.

After all, this means I will fall into ruin, just like she has.

".....I feel sorry for Kazuki."

A voice pulls my attention back from the movie to reality.

Its owner, Yuri Yanagi, was speaking quietly as she watched the film. What's more, her brow is furrowed in disgust.

She feels sorry for Kazu? What's up with that reaction? It's like she caught Otonashi in the act of cheating or something.

...It's not like I don't know where she's coming from, I guess. Otonashi wasn't unfaithful or anything like that, but Yanagi probably felt there was something sacred in Otonashi and Kazu's relationship. That's why my cooperation with her in the Rejecting Classroom, and even my influence on her, seems like going behind Kazu's back.

In my case, too, I considered the Rejecting Classroom to be only the source of the bond between Otonashi and Kazu. I didn't think it held any other significance.

The reality is different. It's obvious when I think about it. Kazu isn't the only person Otonashi spent the equivalent of a lifetime with. Yeah, he was the only one to hold on to his memories and stay at her side, but she did end up in long-term contact with all our former classmates in Year 1, Class 6.

I, of course, was one of them. Without my memories, I couldn't call her

“Maria,” since she always introduced herself as “Aya Otonashi,” and I could never fully join her as a partner. But she stuck with me for a long time anyway, no matter how many times I forgot her.

Otonashi and I had our own story within that repeating world.

I reflect on what she said and mutter, “Ruin, huh?”

As a consummate realist, I already knew without her pointing it out to me. Using a Box will destroy me.

In knowing my own abilities, I’m simultaneously aware of my own limitations. I understand that no matter how I struggle, how carefully I scheme, my strength will eventually run out.

My understanding of those limitations, in turn, places limits on my Box.

And that makes me unable to use it to the fullest.

Damn... I knew that, so why am I already past the point of no return? I’m dragging so many people down with me, forcing them to play along with my ideals, and wrecking their lives? And worst of all, I’m even committing murder. Just throwing in the towel won’t be nearly enough at this point.

Why did I use a Box?

When did I get like this?

—Do you have a wish?

Oh, right. I was past hope the second I encountered O and learned of Boxes.

Once I learned about them, there was never any other option but to use one. I knew my wish would never be granted for all eternity, but I had no other choice. I had exhausted every option and failed to realize this wish; if a Box would grant me even the slightest possibility, I would reach for it. I would pay any price to make it happen.

The coercion was real. The compulsion was real. And the downfall was set in stone.

If O was aware of all those things before they gave me a Box—I decide to put a lid on those thoughts.

...That’s enough. That’s enough. That’s enough about all of that.

The movie is still going, and I decide to give it my attention.

“Oomine. If you fail—if you end up unable to make it back—I will help

you. That's why I exist. If you are beyond all help...," Otonashi says within the now empty classroom on the screen, "*...I will use the Misbegotten Happiness on you.*"

"I acted as if none of this had happened."

The voice is the same one from the movie—except it's not in stereo, and it comes from somewhere other than the speakers.

"After all, for you, it basically didn't. It's a story that doesn't mean anything even if I hold it close to my heart. That's why I decided it never happened. My relationship with you isn't the only instance of this. I decided lots of other incidents also never took place."

A shadow appears on the screen. A person is standing in the way of the projector.

Blocking the view, as if to suggest that neither the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes nor the story of the movie matters.

"__"

My breath catches in my throat when I see that silhouette, and I hate to say it, but I'm powerless to do anything else. She looks no different from usual, and I'm so used to seeing her, but I'm still blown away.

Is it really possible to react so strongly to the mere appearance of one person? ...Well, yes, since that's what I'm doing. I forget how to breathe for a time. My eyes open wide, and for some reason, the corners of my mouth lift upward in a silly grin. My heart beats a wild rhythm, heavy sweat beads up on me, and my fingertips tremble.

Just her presence makes me feel faint. The air is beyond tense—more like sharp and pointed like a bladed weapon. That's the level of pressure I feel just coming face-to-face with her.

When I see her, I don't know why, but a name leaves my mouth, as if a hand reached into my throat and yanked the words out.

"Aya Otonashi."

I whisper, and I understand.

Yes, that's it. That's the right name.

"It never happened, huh? Why didn't I ever think of that?" "Aya Otonashi"

muses. “Why did I never think to erase my history with Kazuki?”

She went by “Maria” until now due to the constraints placed on her by the one who couldn’t forget that name.

But Kazuki Hoshino has been cut away.

Kazuki Hoshino is now her enemy.

The name Aya Otonashi is appropriate, now that she’s released from the spell of the name Maria. It wouldn’t be right to call her Maria anymore.

She’s broken the unbreakable bond for her purpose, and she is no longer human. She lost that humanity the moment she proved she could do it. As one striving for the same things, I know that better than anyone.

This perfect, sculpted beauty is monstrous. This girl, who has completely killed off her past self, is my ideal personified. A being that exists to accomplish a single purpose.

It’s clear to me just beholding her now, and I let out a sigh.

There is no longer any trace of the zeroth Maria.

It would be impossible even for Kazu to bring back “Maria Otonashi.” If he can’t stop me, he can’t stop “Aya Otonashi.”

And I understand.

A glimmer of an idea occurs to me, seeing this girl whose humanity is long gone. Though the thought is proof that I cannot use a Box to the fullest, it still flashes into my mind.

That is to say—

—the true nature of O.

◇◇◇ Kazuki Hoshino 09/11 FRI 9:44 PM ◇◇◇

“Looks like you lost to Oomine again, Kazuki.”

In my stupor, I could hear nothing until her words finally reach my ears.

Looking around me, I find Iroha gazing up at me. She’s sitting with her chin in her hands. Aside from her, the tunnel is empty.

A glance at my watch tells me I’ve been standing here stunned for nearly

thirty minutes. The third movie, *Repeat, Reset, Reset*, is almost over, too. Iroha apparently stayed with me for the almost half an hour I was gone.

“Whew.”

Her sigh sounds like a mother who has been waiting patiently on a child throwing a tantrum. And that’s how Iroha talks to me, too. “Okay, now hurry up and hand over the Silver Screen of Broken Wishes and become my Subject. I’ll put you out of your misery.”

I’m still in a daze; my head’s not working right. In my wavering vision, the graffiti on the walls of the tunnel seem to be works of art holding some profound meaning. It’s hard to swallow my saliva. It somehow annoys me that my nostrils are in the center of my face. I’m oddly embarrassed to find dirt under my nails.

It doesn’t matter.

The Silver Screen of Broken Wishes, Subjects, whatever—none of that matters.

Maria.

I hurt Maria.

I couldn’t stop her.

She will never go back to being Maria Otonashi. She’s become Aya Otonashi.

Will it be possible to turn the tides and bring Maria back?

I try to imagine it, and I reach an answer.

No, it’s not.

It’s impossible.

Which means I don’t have a purpose anymore.

“...Hey, Iroha.”

I’m not sure why, but even though my mind is empty, I want to ask about something that’s been bothering me.

“What?”

“You set this up to let Maria know I betrayed her, right?”

Why am I asking? Sure, it interests me, but I don’t have the mental capacity for this.

“That’s what I told you, didn’t I?”

“But still,” I ask, as if I know the answer will provide some breakthrough, “you weren’t lying when you said you’ll choose who deserves to die, right?”

Iroha’s eyes go wide. Then she twists her lips and says, “Of course not.” Her eyes are tinged with madness.

“I will do what I have to do to make the trash die out.”

Though my head is muddled, I think, ... *Yeah, I was right.*

My intuition that Iroha could never come back to normality wasn’t mistaken.

Iroha was being genuine when she was going on about her goal with the dog-person as an example. There’s no need for me to take back my claim that their methods are wrong, either.

Daiya and Iroha will keep on making mistakes. Even if they come to realize the error of their ways, they’ll be too far gone to make it back. Then they’ll keep running, straining under the pressure, and eventually break. Just like Maria.

Someone has to stop them.

But that’s beyond me at this point. I don’t have any purpose, and I don’t feel like doing anything anymore.

I give up.

“.....”

I give up?

On what? On Maria? I’m giving up on Maria?

Yeah. That’s how it is. There is no path to success, so that’s my only choice.

But when I think of what that entails, specifically, my body feels as if it’s going to melt from heat, like my sense of pain has malfunctioned. I can almost feel the joints throughout my body dislocating and my limbs being torn off. Those thoughts are absolutely taboo. It’s an option I must not select.

Still—

“Don’t make me laugh.”

—what is this emotion boiling up inside me?

Am I angry? At Iroha?

It would make sense. Iroha tricked me. She laid a trap for me, showed Maria how I’ve changed, and drove us apart. And not only that, she won’t let go of her flawed reasoning, and she’s trying to drag other people down with her.

But that's not what it is.

This emotion is not directed at Iroha.

For one, I know she's not a bad person. I'm opposed only to this "eliminate the fools" idea. Plus, I get the sense it isn't her fault she's come to believe it.

She's certainly sincere about it, but it doesn't sit right with me. Did Iroha really always have the desire to do something like this, I wonder? Did she harbor such ambitions before coming into possession of Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime?

...Before she received that power from Daiya?

"I want to ask you something."

"What?"

I look at Iroha once more. There's nothing normal about the streaks of blood on her face. Her once captivating eyes that glimmered with strength are now murky and dark.

This isn't the face of a sane person. Some part of Iroha has broken.

When did that happen?

"Was it too painful for you?"

"Huh?"

"When you received Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, is what I mean."

Yes, that has to be it. That's when Iroha came apart.

My theory is that something had to happen to her before she could gain those abilities. No, maybe it was more than a one-time thing. Given how Daiya has changed, ongoing suffering might be a requirement of wielding these powers.

"...Why are you asking that?" The question amounts to a yes in my mind.

I understand.

What prompted Iroha to take action in such a manner?

The answer—she was simply writhing in agony.

When she accepted Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime, she was already weakened by the Game of Indolence and gave way completely.

Unable to endure the negative emotions surging within her, Iroha subconsciously sought an avenue to help her purge them. She wouldn't be able to hold her mind together unless she did so.

As it turned out, there was a convenient outlet right there.

Namely, Daiya's idea of eliminating the fools. Having lost her faith in humanity, Iroha flung herself at this argument and latched on to it. Leaning on the principle of correcting the world as a crutch, she averted her gaze from her own broken nature by rejecting anyone she judged as unworthy filth.

Daiya made her do this.

Daiya sacrificed Iroha to fulfill his own wish.

So is the violent passion darkening my vision directed toward Daiya?

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

Daiya is the same as Iroha, after all. He has something inside him that he can't endure, and he resorted to a Box so he could lay it to rest. I can't help but think he is also a victim, in a way.

Don't get me wrong—I'm also angry at him for his schemes, driving Maria and me apart and doing this to Iroha. But in the end, that's not the same as whatever irrepressible emotion has come upon me.

...Is it even anger at all?

No. It's similar, but this feeling isn't anger. It's nothing that simple.

This almost intolerable storm inside me—is *hatred*.

Toward whom?

Oh.

If it's hatred I'm feeling, then everything that comes to mind points to one target.

There's only a single individual who can evoke this kind of feeling.

“—O.”

“You rang?”

I'm not even surprised.

I could sense this coming. I had a hunch they would appear.

I look at them.

“What's with that form?”

The new arrival is a woman so lovely that all she has to do is stand there, and you're convinced she's looking down on the world from above. She's so utterly graceful that she doesn't feel real—an unpleasantly false-seeming woman.

So why does the thought enter my head in spite of that? Their features

aren't *that* alike, so why can't I shake the idea?

The long-haired woman...resembles Maria Otonashi.

"...And just who are you?" Iroha asks.

"Ah, I suppose you and I have yet to meet each other. I had thought you would be able to infer my identity, but if you haven't, then I shall tell you my name. I am O."

"O? You're O?" As soon as she asks, Iroha seems to remember something. Her eyes widen, and she braces herself.

"Don't tell me—you're here to take Kazuki's side...?"

"Heh-heh." O does not confirm or deny it.

"I heard about you from Oomine. He said you have Kazuki's back. Have you come to help him since he's in trouble?"

"While I have never actually aided him even once, it is true I am partial to Kazuki."

"You're going to keep my wish from happening!" Iroha shouts.

O looks away from her without a word in response. "There's something I'm not certain about, though," they say to me, ignoring her agitation.

"...H-hey!"

"I took interest in you because I noticed something in you that was unlike other humans."

"...Hmph." Recognizing that she's being ignored, Iroha goes quiet. She's probably decided that nothing she says would have any effect.

"But you see, my understanding of what makes you alone so special, of what you are to me, was unclear. However, when I witnessed you stabbing this girl just a moment ago, I at last became certain, or nearly so. And thus, I wish to confirm it."

My brow crinkles, and I give O a sharp look.

"To that end, yes...I shall reveal a portion of my true nature."

"...What are you—? Are you implying that something will change if I know? It won't. It can't."

"I wonder, when all is said and done. Perhaps you will end up feeling a bit more familiar with me?"

"Familiar? Can you at least put some thought into your jokes?"

"A being that grants wishes would never be so commonplace or tangible as this. It wouldn't even be something so clearly recognizable, not in this manner. The colossal true form of 'me' is sheer power alone, lacking a will.

If so, why am I able to manifest here before you with a will as O, as I have? The reason is that someone brought O into existence, using a wish.”

“Someone...?”

What is O getting at? That they were created as a paranormal phenomenon by someone else?

“Let’s imagine a wish capable of doing so. Ah, how about this? A wish to the tune of ‘I want to make everyone’s wishes come true.’”

“—!!”

No way...

The one they’re talking about can’t be...?

I try to consider what type of entity O is again. They are the distributor of the Boxes, the one that has driven several people around me insane with their sweet temptations. A being that grants false wishes.

So—

“I’m positive it’s exactly as you think. That ‘someone’ has no awareness of it, either. They don’t know that their Box works in this manner. They don’t understand how they are able to grant the wishes of others. Still, this is the truth.”

O says exactly what I am thinking.

“*Maria Otonashi’s Misbegotten Happiness is the Box that birthed me, O.*”

The answer is the one I predicted, but hearing it still comes as a shock.

However, I quickly shake my head.

“That’s crazy. There’s no way Maria could do that.”

“Please don’t misunderstand; the actual entity that makes the wishes come true existed before she ever used her Box. If not, she never would have been able to obtain it in the first place. All she really did was give me form as O and establish me in her vicinity. Do you believe *that* is possible?”

“That’s—”

Possible, I believe. I’ve already seen greater wonders than that.

“Still, Maria said she has used the Misbegotten Happiness to take those people into her...”

“Have you actually seen her do so?”

“Huh?”

“All you did was take her at her word, correct? She told you about the memory loss, where the user and those associated with them lose all memory of it each time her Box takes effect.”

“...But...”

I felt it myself. I felt the bottomless sadness of the Misbegotten Happiness when I touched Maria’s chest. I saw the people she had absorbed into it.

“It appears you don’t agree. Tell me, have you ever felt a Box used by another owner? Didn’t you feel something similar then?”

“Huh...?”

That’s right. I did come into direct contact with Mogi’s Rejecting Classroom once.

“Since you have, I’m sure you’ll understand, but what you felt was something like a mindscape representing the owner’s feelings toward their Box.”

If that’s what they’re telling me, then that ocean floor I saw when I touched Maria’s chest...

“What you perceived when you touched her was nothing more than your mind’s eye. The idea that users are drawn in and trapped within the Box is true in her world. Boxes are capable of twisting reality in such ways, after all. But that is not the truth. The salvation she grants her users is flawed, despite how much thought she gives them, how deeply she empathizes. That imagery is merely the torment of her guilt. Yes—”

O’s beautiful face is unmarred by any ugly expressions as they tell me:

“Yes—it is, quite simply, an expression of her despair.”

I recall what I saw back then.

The floor of a coldly shimmering ocean. A scripted theater of bliss. The faint sound of someone sobbing drowned out by ceaseless laughter. A lonely battlefield, filled only with defeat and no reward.

That is Maria’s despair.

...Maria.

I really do want to save her.

“...So it’s as I thought,” O says quietly, glancing at my face.

“What is as you thought?”

O doesn’t answer the question, though. All they do is look at me. Unable to suppress my irritation, I ask about something that’s been nagging at me for

a while now.

“...O, everything you’re saying is about Maria. Weren’t you going to talk about me?”

“Would you mind not rushing so? I was merely starting at the beginning. We’re about to get to the point, so put your mind at ease... Now then, think over it again. Someone has a wish to grant everyone’s wishes. This is why I exist as O. However, a Box is a consummate mechanism for drawing out wishes, which is why it even includes the user’s resignation to their situation, the belief that the wish cannot come true. That being the case, in what form would such beliefs take for this someone?”

“...This isn’t about me at all.”

“Yes it is.”

“Huh?”

“You remember Nana Yanagi, your first love.”

The sudden mention of her name knocks me for a loop.

“...Wh-why mention her now?”

“Because that someone used their Box on her.”

“__!!”

“Oh yes, that makes sense. You didn’t know, so you would be surprised. However, you said you wanted to cut to the chase, correct? So I regret to say I cannot allow you a moment to recover.”

Everything about this jerk pisses me off.

“Well then, I’m not sure where your heart is on the matter, but to Nana Yanagi, you were a savior. You saved her more than anyone, even her boyfriend, Toji Kijima. The girl who absorbed Nana Yanagi naturally became aware of this fact. It made a powerful impression on her. You were a savior, after all. Not many are so highly esteemed by another. That’s why she unconsciously imposed a condition within herself. A condition that *Kazuki Hoshino is someone capable of becoming a savior.*”

“...None of that makes any sense.”

“Does it not? Well, I’ll keep going anyway... Now that she is aware of the existence of a savior, there are conflicting sentiments within her. Part of her heart desires to grant wishes above all else, and another longs for someone to stop this side of her.”

I know about this, too. Back in the Game of Indolence, I learned what she really felt.

“The notion that she can’t truly grant wishes is beneficial for the side of her heart that wants to be stopped. That’s why the two sides work hand in hand. Boxes grant all desires as they are. In short, *the Box simultaneously fulfilled the desire that conflicts with her wish, namely for a savior who will shatter it.*”

What are they doing?

They want me to think of myself as a savior?

A savior with the power to break the wishes made with Boxes?

“You never thought it was strange? Why you could retain your memory within the Rejecting Classroom, even though you were not an owner? How you were unaffected when Iroha Shindo over there stepped on your shadow? Perhaps it’s more natural to think of it this way—you have been under the influence of the Misbegotten Happiness since the very beginning. You have been provided with the capacity to resist Boxes.”

The Misbegotten Happiness produced two powers.

One is the power that created O.

And the other is the power that created the “savior.”

“A Box has burdened you with the duty of being a savior... Wait, maybe putting it this way will help convince you.”

“Kazuki Hoshino is a knight meant to stop Maria Otonashi.”

A knight.

I am Maria’s knight.

I received this power from none other than the Box of Maria herself?

“__”

I instinctively look at the palm of my hand. I close my hand, open it. Close it, open it. Rock. Paper.

Yep...there’s nothing remarkable about it. It’s weak, and smaller than most of my classmates’. I don’t feel anything special. Yet...what is it? Something is off, different from before... No, that’s the wrong way to describe it.

It’s the opposite.

The constant sense I had that something was wrong is gone.

“So. How about giving it a test? See whether you really have obtained a

power from the Misbegotten Happiness.”

“A test...? How?” I ask.

O shifts their gaze over to Iroha, as if they finally remembered she was there.

“Break her Box by force.”

“Wha—?!?” Iroha yelps, glaring my way.

Even if she weren’t acting so hostile, I would have no desire to follow along with the plans of someone I despise as much as O. If their suggestion is even possible, I still wouldn’t do it.

And yet...

“.....
.....
.....

Hee...hee-hee.”

A giggle I cannot contain escapes from my lips.

“Kazuki...?”

Iroha stiffens. I just can’t keep myself from laughing, though.

“Hee-hee..... Eh-heh-heh-heh...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“...What? What’s so funny?”

Yeah, what *is* this feeling bubbling up within me?

What is this irresistible emotion?

I want to try it.

I want to test my power.

I want to crush that Box you guard so close in your chest.

Yes, this is what I’ve been feeling.

There’s not enough of myself in me.

It always felt wrong—*Why am I like this? Where did this sensation come from?* It always felt like some immense power was yanking me along, guiding me. Like my will had been absorbed into some stupendously colossal force. Even just a moment ago, I felt it. Even after losing all hope that I could save Maria, I ignored that emotion and asked Iroha a question so I could create a way forward. Like I was on autopilot.

Now I finally understand the cause.

Everything was Maria's doing.

It's Maria's fault. Maria threw my life into chaos. Maria's Box is the source of it all. My attempt at stabbing and killing Iroha, my willingness to destroy Mogi's Box when I knew it could kill her—every last bit of it happened because of Maria.

I have been under her control.

That—

—makes me unbelievably happy.

After all, this means I am undeniably hers. I had always wanted to be, so of course I'm pleased.

I felt guilty for how I attempted to do away with Aya Otonashi against Maria's will. I was always unsure whether it was the right thing to do, and bringing any further sadness to Maria pained me.

But I've been forgiven.

I have learned the justness of erasing Aya Otonashi.

I'm allowed to keep trying to satisfy this dark desire.

Oh, Maria.

My beloved Maria.

No matter how much you hate me, how much you scream and cry, I will annihilate your Box. I will tear it to shreds. I will tear it up like a painting you poured your heart and soul into, right before your eyes. I will break it down and down and down until not a trace of it remains.

Ah, my heart is dancing in my chest. The high is overwhelming me, and my breathing grows rough.

Superiority. Subjugation. Omnipotence.

“...Are you okay, Kazuki?” Iroha calls my name as I hunch over and hold my chest, gasping raggedly.

Yes, that's right. Before I kill Aya Otonashi, I need to test this power to find out if it's the real deal. If it actually works.

“H-hey... Why are you glaring at me like that?”

And I'll test it on this girl at the mercy of her stupid Box.

Still, how do I go about destroying a Box?

I consider a way to do so...or try to, but I can't imagine that I'm going to be able to destroy a Box by thinking. Intuition tells me I would be better off

conjuring a specific image for the power.

So I imagine.

I imagine myself as a knight. Before me is a blood-soaked wasteland. An army of soldiers clad in armor with various weapons in hand blocks my way, filling almost my entire field of vision. I pierce them through the heart with my longsword, building a mountain of corpses. Though I make enemies of everyone, earning their hatred, I never stop slaughtering the foes who would stand in my way.

All so I can be with Maria.

To free Maria from her prison high in the castle, I pile up the dead until they reach her. I clamber onto them, feeling the flesh squish and give way underfoot as I climb the makeshift ladder to look upon the form of the captive Maria.

Then I deliver her to freedom.

Yes.

“Yes.”

I understand.

“I understand.”

It’s not like a divine revelation; I’m not overwhelmed with shock. I’ve just made sense of things I already knew. It’s like fiddling around with a ring puzzle until it suddenly comes apart: I get it, without a feel for why.

I understand the Boxes.

I know how to use them.

The thing about Boxes is that the moment you think about how to use one, you lose the ability to employ its full potential. You end up overly conscious of simply having a Box, without trying to put your desires into it. All you need to understand is that a power capable of granting wishes exists. All we can do is have faith in ourselves and push ahead toward our objectives.

It’s fine if a Box is empty. No, it *must* be empty.

Yeah, that’s what I understand.

It’s enough. That is all I need to know. That’s all the knight needs to seize the power to crush Boxes. With that alone, with this wish-granting tool—

—this empty Box will be mine.

“...Well, time to get to it.”

My right hand grips Iroha’s face over her eyes, and my left yanks her by the arm to throw her off balance and send her to the ground.

“Huh? Wha—?”

I lean over her. Iroha looks up at me with wild eyes. It’s all so sudden that I don’t think her mind can keep up with what’s happening.

It’s too late, fatally so. She’s beyond help. Doomed to defeat.

Just like that, I shove my hand into Iroha’s chest. Just like I would drive in a sword.

“Huh? Ah! Ow, ngh! ...Nngh!!”

Then I pull out the downgraded version of Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime that she had in her chest.

That was such an easy victory.

Who knew removing a Box could be so simple?

I look at the Box. It’s black, hard, and round like a cannonball—probably a different shape from Daiya’s. It fits neatly in my hand. The pain of the owner seeps into me from it, but I don’t intend to pay it much thought.

“...Huh?” Seeing what I’m holding, Iroha at last realizes what just happened to her. “Ah...! Aaah!”

She may as well be reacting to someone ripping out her heart. Clutching her chest, she looks up at me with white-faced shock.

“What... What have you done?”

There’s no need to respond when she already knows the answer.

I remain silent, but Iroha keeps talking. “H-how are you able to remove Boxes?!?”

...How? In what manner should I reply to that?

The real answer is that I’m the knight, but I’m pretty sure the meaning would be lost on Iroha.

So what should I tell her?

After some thought, what comes to mind are the words Daiya once used to describe me.

Man, Daiya really is clever. His analyses are always on the money. I denied it at the time, but it turns out he was right.

I close my eyes briefly and declare:

“I exist to stamp out wishes.”

In a sense, I’m announcing to Iroha that I am her enemy.

Her eyes widen, and she gazes up at me. She searches my expression, then shifts her eyes to the Box in my hand.

After she looks back and forth several times, my intent dawns on her, and the color drains from her face.

“St... Stop! If you destroy it, I’ll—!”

“Nothing good comes of relying on Boxes.”

“I don’t have any choice! I mean, now I know. There’s a power that can perform miracles. I don’t think...I can live without one anymore. I won’t survive a life without a Box! Give it back!”

I see. Once you know you can cheat, it becomes impossible to even consider not doing it. I feel like O once said something similar to me. The knowledge that Boxes exist has an enormous effect on people.

It’s unavoidable. In which case, I guess I just have to teach her a lesson.

“Can I get a please?”

“Huh?”

“Beg and say ‘Please, please don’t crush the Box.’ Bow your head to the ground.”

“...What’s gotten into you, Kazuki? What’s the point?”

“You aren’t desperate enough to prostrate yourself? Then your wish wasn’t worth all that much. You were sacrificing others when you weren’t even prepared to suffer yourself.”

“That’s not what I’m asking!”

“No questions, either. Now, hop to it. Beg.”

Perhaps finally convinced I’m serious, Iroha bites her lip. “...You can’t fool me. I have no proof you won’t crush the Box even if I do bow.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s obvious. But if you don’t bow, you can bet I will destroy it. Beggars can’t be choosers, right?”

Iroha doesn’t reply and instead glances at O.

“Nope. O won’t help you.”

“.....!”

“I know. There’s nothing to be gained if you grovel to me. The best plan for you would be to find an opening and take back your Box. That’s why you

checked out O—because if they were to enter the equation, it might make me drop my guard. It won’t work, though. O was the one who urged me to try out my power, so there’s no reason for them to intervene. Not to mention I already know you’re on the lookout for an opportunity, so no way in hell am I going to give you one.”

“Ugh...”

“If you don’t want the Box to get smashed, your only option at this point is to move my heart. So humbling yourself isn’t altogether meaningless, understand? I believe doing away with this Box is the right thing to do, but I won’t if you can convince me I’m wrong.”

This is not a lie.

While I don’t think she will change my mind, if she did, then I obviously wouldn’t destroy the Box.

“.....”

Iroha stays silent. For a while, she doesn’t even move.

Until finally—

“Wah, waaaaaaah...”

—she starts to cry.

Fat teardrops fall from her eyes as she lies prone. She screws up her face like a pleading child, sobbing pitifully.

Then, as I told her to, she bows and touches her head to the ground.

Even I am surprised.

Iroha of all people is doing this? Iroha the powerhouse, who cut off her own finger to accomplish her goal in the Game of Indolence...?

“Please. I beg you, please, don’t crush it. Please give it back.”

Tears stream down her face as she pleads.

She isn’t just meekly obeying my order because I told her to. Begging is the only course of action available to her, so she had no choice but to bow down. Like a powerless child whose only defense against the abuse of an adult is their tears.

That’s how far I’ve backed her into the corner.

I can’t say the sight doesn’t cause an ache in my chest.

“...I have to have it. I have to have it, or...I can’t go on...”

Iroha sincerely wants this Box.

She’s earnestly telling me it’s her only salvation. She believes she can’t go on living without it, and the fact of the matter is, she may be right,

unfortunately, now that she knows they exist.

That's how Boxes are.

As I'm seeing here, they ruin people, never letting them go back to what they once were.

“...I get the picture. To you, the Box and yourself are inseparable. Losing it will scar you.”

“...Yes. So I beg you. I'll do anything. Just please give it back...”

My heart aching for Iroha as she sobs, I hold out the Box in front of her face.

She probably didn't think I would honestly return it to her. Stunned, she looks up at me. She takes in my smile and the Box before her, and her face softens in relief.

"Th-thank you..." Iroha reaches toward the Box in a way that is almost imploring.

“Thank you?” I tilt my head. “But all I’m saying is that you’re going to get hurt.”

“Huh?”

"C'mon, there's no way I'd give it back," I tell her.

I smash the Box in front of her eyes.

It's like I squished a huge bug in my hands; a black slime sprays from between my fingers onto my hand and Iroha's face.

Splat. As the remains of the Box squirt across her, her expression goes rigid, as if time has stopped for her.

She touches her own face over and over, trying to see if it really just happened. Though it's very clear what has occurred, she confirms with trembling hands again and again that the Box is no more, as if she's pleading in disbelief for it not to be true.

“Ngh, ah—”

And then, she finally accepts the reality.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I'm unsure whether the Box's demise had some physical impact on her, or whether it was just pure shock, but Iroha passes out.

“Phew.”

Her eyes are rolled back into her head. I look at her unconscious form and

sigh.

*Crying, begging?
Are you kidding me?*

I saw it coming. Iroha begged, and though I hated to see her do it, I had anticipated pretty much all of it. That's why, if anything could have swayed me to keep the Box intact, it wouldn't have been groveling and appealing to my compassion.

What could have changed my mind was Iroha persisting with her own arguments, even pushed to the brink with despair. Her one chance would have been overwhelming me with a display of strength.

After all, if she were still in her right mind, she most likely would have done so. That would have also presented me with an opportunity to reevaluate my perception of Boxes, for the first time.

But Iroha couldn't do it. She isn't meant to be someone who grovels and passes out. People lose sight of themselves, sure, but this is ridiculous. It's stupid.

That's all the evidence you need to see that the Box made a fool of her and sent her down the wrong path.

I showed her the destruction of the Box so that I could drive the point home. I taught her that she can never get her Box back again.

I have no idea if Iroha will recover from what I have done. To be honest, it's going to be difficult. That said, it's far preferable to getting a Box and making more mistakes. It's leagues better than doing ongoing harm to others under some insane value system. Iroha will have to face a life without a Box in the days to come.

If she can't, then I hope she'll quit being a nuisance and drop dead already.

"That clarifies things," O says as I look at the prone Iroha. "You have undoubtedly been influenced by the Misbegotten Happiness. You possess power as a knight."

"Seems that way," I reply, turning to face O.

O's lovely face isn't wearing the usual calm and composed expression. It's not expressing anything at all, like a doll's. Exquisitely crafted dolls feel more eerie than beautiful, and in the same way, O's blank-faced and perfect appearance is nothing short of creepy.

Yeah—this right here.

Ever since I discerned their true nature, I have always felt that they...no, *she* was unsettling.

That's right. It comes back to me hard and fast. I could remember the sight only in dreams, but the face I saw then is the one I'm looking at right now.

This is the original form of O.

And in her original form, she is letting me see this expression.

It has to mean she's decided to face me, now that she deems me worthy.

"Kazuki. I once said you and I shared the same goal. However, while that statement was correct in one light, it would appear it was incorrect in another. We both exist and work for the sake of Maria Otonashi. That hasn't changed. But I am the entity who grants her wishes, and you are the one who crushes them. Though we both act on her behalf, our purposes are diametrically opposed. Even now, I possess an affinity for you as one like myself, so this is indeed troublesome. I must keep my emotions in check. The reason being..."

"Yeah..."

We are enemies.

Neither of us put it in words.

We know it so well that there's no need to say it out loud.

I will defeat O.

That will enable me to recover the zeroth Maria. The two goals are now linked.

"Sadly, however, I fear you will not be the victor. Erasing me is not difficult. All you need to do is smash the Misbegotten Happiness as you did just now. But while that may be the condition for defeating me, it does not guarantee victory for you. Simply destroying the Box"—O eyes the fallen Iroha—"could quite possibly demolish her personality, just like this girl here. Iroha Shindo may recover, but I doubt that will happen for Maria Otonashi. It takes everything she has to maintain her current self. It's such a delicate equilibrium that if her objective falls apart, everything else will break in succession. I'm sure you understand this, too. Crushing her Box in such a violent manner will unquestionably shatter her mind, leaving no hope of restoration."

It hurts, but I think O is right about that.

I can't save Maria just by putting an end to the Misbegotten Happiness. If I do, Maria's strength will give out while she is still absorbed within her

creation, Aya Otonashi, and she'll never return.

There's no point unless Maria herself wants to renounce her Box.

I can't complete what I've set out to do if Maria doesn't offer up her Box of her own volition.

But—

"It's impossible," O says, as if reading my mind. "Your betrayal made Maria Otonashi's resolve complete. Surely you understand? That alone will prevent her from ever voluntarily giving up her Box now. Her will is so strong that not even placing her own life on the scales will move her. You have witnessed this more than a few times before now, so I think you know what I mean."

Yes, I have witnessed it.

This Maria won't exercise violence against others, even when failing to do so will lead to her death. This Maria is incapable of sacrificing others, because she works to make them happy.

I will destroy the Boxes for Maria.

She won't go along with it, I'm sure. There is no reason she'll work toward her own happiness, I know, and that's why I believed I was all out of moves and gave up, falling into despair.

But...

"I can do it."

...I've learned that I am a savior.

That I am a knight.

"Maria will hand over her Box to me, voluntarily."

I'm not sure what I need to do to make this happen. But I have faith in my own power now.

This power was born from the wishes of Maria herself. It's ridiculous to think it can't do anything in spite of this.

I can bring about a miracle that flips this all around.

"I already have the empty Box I need."

That's why I can do it.

Yeah... First, I'll take Maria back from Daiya. Then I'll face Maria herself and make her give me the Box.

“I see. Then I shall destroy the empty Box.”

With that, O is unmistakably my enemy.

...Oh. It took me a while, but I've realized her true identity. In recognizing her as a foe, I finally realize.

Why did I never catch something so simple before? I should have known who she was before now. At the very least, I should have inferred it as soon as I saw this form.

After all, I thought they were similar from the moment I met them, right?

O.

It's just an initial. If this entity was born of Maria, she could easily have unconsciously called it O—a letter that was in her mind at all times. If true, then I have to think of the name this way:

Maria wanted to be someone who grants the wishes of others. And in a certain sense, O is a being that has accomplished this desire—Maria's ideal, in a certain sense.

Then there is the name of the one Maria is trying to become, at the cost of herself.

That's right—they both share the same roots. This is why I consider both of them to be my enemy.

I call out O's true name with enmity.

“Aya Otonashi.”

I'm not sure of her origins. There may be a person she is modeled after. Given the name Otonashi, it could be a blood relation.

What I do know is that Maria wants both O and me to exist.

We are incompatible, though. We are polar opposites through and through, so only one of us can survive. But I have absolutely no intention of losing.

This is why I declare once again:

“Aya Otonashi, I will kill you.”

AFTERWORD

Hello, long time no see. Eiji Mikage here.

I am finally able to deliver the fifth volume of *The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria*. Though I did have other projects and another series, a two-year gap is... Well. I apologize. To any readers saying, "You forgot the plot because of the gap," I wrote this while taking that into account to a certain extent, so please feel at ease when giving it a read.

Which is what I feel like I say every time... I like writing novels a little bit too much, so I suspect I'll figure out how to write them quickly before too long. That's just my prediction, though.

Um...to be honest, when I finished Volume 4, I was aware that writing the next one was going to be tough. It wasn't that Volume 5's content would have been difficult for me so much as that I felt I was lacking the energy needed to write this series. Some will probably think, *What the hell kind of reason is that?* and I will agree with them. But now that I'm fully recharged, this time around, there is way more of *that* than usual. I went at it with a vengeance, ready to take on all comers.

Now, regarding the plot, this volume adopts a format with two lead characters.

The fact is, during the initial stages of narrowing down my vision for the series, I had this itch to make a volume where Daiya was more prominent than the main character. That is most likely because I had originally wanted a character like Daiya to *be* the protagonist. That would have made things easier for me.

But when I considered the concept of the series, along with other things, I

reached the conclusion that it was best to pass on that idea. It was unavoidable.

However, in secret (even from my editor), I planted various seeds during the first book so that eventually Daiya would take the stage and overshadow Kazuki. It's probably because Daiya is the one with the childhood friends and so on, not Kazuki. In fact, it's more like Kazuki is inserted in Daiya and the others' community.

What that means is that I completed my initial plan with this volume. The story is entering the final stage, and it's nice to be able to realize not just the stuff with Daiya, but all those other things I set out to do during the conception phase.

Now for the acknowledgments.

To my editor, Miki, thank you very much once again. Let's continue to have fun working on projects together.

To my illustrator, Tetsuo, I'm sure there must have been difficulties because of the gap, but thank you for the wonderful artwork. I find it very inspiring that you enjoy this story.

And to all you readers. Having many comments from those wanting to read the continuation gave me motivation to gird my loins and put this story out again. I truly thank you. I'm still green as far as authors go, so please bear with me.

Well, see you again soon!

Eiji Mikage

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