

僕はやっぱり
気づかないら



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I Really Don't Notice

vol.5

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「がごじまぜんばい、いわたし、
魔法が使えなくなっちゃいましたあ……」

僕は
やっぱ
気がない
ら





「兄妹ごっこはもうおしまいです。
これからは今まで通り、
そして今まで以上によろしくお願いします」

Prologue

Life is a long series of passing by.

The people one passes far outnumber the people one meets, or so a recondite English philosopher once— did not say. Those were words I just thought up on the spot. Thinking back on recent happenings, or rather the happenings of this past week, I got in the mood to put on airs and say something philosophical. A week of nothing but passing by, where never once did the gears lock into place.

You could say unmeshing gears were an everyday occurrence for me, but I get the feeling this time was especially striking. So unengaged you could call it remarkable, passing by to a miraculous extent.

I was trying my absolute best in my own way, and everyone around me was trying their best as well. When not a single soul had omitted a step in the process, even so, I got the impression we were going in circles the whole way. Like stepping on the accelerator of a car with a broken clutch, no matter how we floundered, the power wouldn't reach the engine. While I got the feeling that something came about, it ended as only a feeling.

As I thought, the world is always turning in places I don't see. Surely somewhere out there, a traumatic development I don't know of is unfolding.

But even if that was the case, my knowledge is restricted to what I know.

I can only speak of the world from my eyes, from my point of view.

That's why—even if somewhere I don't know, one of the players goes missing, it might end without me taking notice.

Chapter 1: Living Together x Card Games x Visiting a Grave

Time is a nimble beast, and by the time I noticed it, I had gone through more than half the summer vacation of my second year of high school.

Remedial lessons for skipping exams, the ComClub's training camp, and dropping by my old folk's place to pay a visit to my family grave, I was relatively busy, spending relatively fulfilled summer days up to the point I realized there were only two weeks of summer vacation to go.

While this and that happened on ComClub training camp, I'd call it a great success. The first and second days passed by without any particular problems; we managed to spend our time truly enjoyably.

"... Hmmm."

And at present, I was groaning to myself in my house's living room. As per usual, I was living alone in my two-story detached residence. When I returned to my old folks' place in the sticks for Obon, my dad and mom returned to Japan for the first time in a long while, but once it was time to go, they immediately made off overseas.

It did feel a tad lonely, but, well, I was already adjusted to living on my own.

"Still... it's that."

I muttered, looking at the mountainous heap of printouts and textbooks before me.

"Why must summer vacation have homework?"

I was quite likely speaking in proxy, the shared sentiment of students all over the nation. The vast amount of work on the table. As I was simply, plainly busy (admittedly an excuse), I had left it completely unattended. I did think that now was the time to do it, but the very fact I'd left it untouched so long contrarily prevented any outburst of motivation.

"I've still got two weeks, so you could say I'll be fine, but it's only two weeks, so you could just as well say I'm screwed if I don't start right about now..."

Now then.

Should I do it or not? That is the question.

..... “No, just do it!” I felt like I had been retorted by the world at large, so I reluctantly reached a hand towards the mountain of homework. Yet, just a step away, my hand wtopped.

“Urrgh...”

It’s been like this all morning.

Today’s the day I do it! I grew enthusiastic, listed all my work out, and thinking it would be terribly inefficient to go at it blindly, I first tried drafting up a perfect schedule, but along the way, I grew sluggish and frustrated, in which case, the next step was to clean my room; you can’t make progress in studies in a messy room, I thought as I cleaned, after which I spotted an issue of Corocoro from around two years ago ,and overcome with nostalgia, I gave it a readthrough, grew curious about the continuation, searched for the next volume, read that, and searched out the next one anew, repeating on and on until before I knew it, I had reached the latest issue of Corocoro released right before Obon—
And it was night.

The current time was around ten thirty.

“... My day ended with Corocoro.”

How depressing. It felt as if my already-non-existent motivation had been snatched away.

Dammit, curst you Corocoro Comics.

Why do you have to be so interesting?

... Yeah, it’s just, that. If I start at this hour, I’ll have to stop in the middle of something, which’ll only make it harder to pick up, so let’s give it a rest. They often say you should break out your new shoes in the morning. I can do my best tomorrow.

“... Didn’t I think that yesterday.....”

My thoughts have completely become that of a hopeless person. I see, so summer homework exists to prevent us from deteriorating like this.

“Very well! Let’s do this!”

I slapped both my cheeks, injecting myself with fighting spirit. Now I should

be up to the task. Holding a blazing resolve in my chest, I reached out for the homework—

Ding-dong.

— Or so I tried, but crumbled down the moment before.

“... Who could it be at this hour?”

Just when I had finally gotten motivated. At this point, is God telling me this homework should never be done? Feeling a light irritation, I headed for the entranceway and forcefully pulled open the door.

“..... M-mnnn.....”

I was greeted by a surprise.

“K-Kurisu-chan?”

A small-built physique, hair tied up on both sides. A white robe she inherited from her talented magician mother—was the setting she went by. A junior one year below me, Kurisu-chan.

She was an appealing young girl with wide, beautiful eyes, but at present, those eyes were overflowing with tears.

“W-what’s wrong? Dropping by so late? E-eh? Rather, why are you crying?”

“kagoshimasenpaaaai...”

She answered my confusion in a tear-muffled voice.

“I can’t uthe mmagic henymore...”

Kurisu-chan’s full name was Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

An earnest hard worker, and while she was a bit of a scatterbrain, a terribly cute little girl. I heard she was a mix between Japanese and some country out there, but I don’t know specifically where. Kurisu-chan was terrible at geography, and even she couldn’t really say what country half the blood flowing in her veins belonged to.

... Thinking about it carefully, I get the feeling she exhibited a level of idiocy that made me seriously worry for her future... but Kurisu-chan had a fatal flaw that made her devastatingly bad geographic skills seem inconsequential.

It went by the name of— eighth-grade syndrome.

Kurusu-chan was head over heels addicted to an already-out-of-print publication called Kuria's Grand Adventure, and she would wander around town cosplaying as one of its characters, at times blurting out incomprehensible terminology. Every time I spotted her eccentricities, I'd think whoah, that's harsh, I'm cringing. I did think to do something to treat her terminal disease, but I got the feeling this was behavior strictly restricted to puberty, so I decided to silently watch over her.

Someday, Kurisu-chan is sure to notice. Just how cringy she is.

And right now... Kurisu-chan said it.

She can't use magic anymore.

Which means—

“U-uu... Kagoshima... senpai. I'm sorry for dropping by so late...”

“Kurusu-chan!”

I closed in on her, firmly grasping her shoulders. I smiled with all my might.

“Congratulations!” I blessed her from the depths of my heart.

“... Hweh?”

“Congratulations, Kurisu-chan! You've become an adult! Congratulations! Congratulations!”

I repeated the word over and over again. I repeated it more than the last episode of Evangelion

Ah, to think the day would ever come.

The patient of a severe case of eighth-grade syndrome had finally graduated. What a wonderful day it is!

“U-umm, Kagoshima-senpai...?”

Kurusu-chan looked at me with a blank, perplexed expression. Her face was still wet with tears, but the source itself had been completely cut off.

“Splendid, that really is wonderful news! And now, Kurisu-chan, you've taken a step up on the stairway to adulthood!”

“Umm...”

“Time to celebrate. This calls for some red rice! Umm, what did you put in red rice again? Was it cayenne?”

“That’s no red rice I know of!”

“Ah, don’t tell me, you’re the type that uses Habanero? I knew you looked the part.”

“I’m not complaining about the spice level!”

Kurisu-chan threw in a forceful retort, after which she firmly shook her head.

“... Wrong, that’s not it, Kagoshima-senpai..... I, I really, really can’t use magic anymore...”

Her tears gushed up again. Her entire body quivered finely like a small animal. Hmm. Looks like it wasn’t an auspicious occasion.

That’s right. Now that I think about it, that’s strange.

Kurisu-chan usually never called herself a magician. More-so, she obstinately insisted that she was not a magician (I was well aware of that even if she didn’t insist it). But here she was, telling me she couldn’t use magic anymore.

Meaning that’s just how great her panic is at the moment.

Which means, this might be a far more severe situation than I was imagining.

“I can’t... enter my house, if I, can’t use magic... that’s why, that’s why, I have no way to go home, and I don’t know what to do... I was considering, sleeping, in the park but... urrrgh... it’s summer, so it’s full of bugs and scary...”

“.....”

“I can usually return... through any mirror just like that...”

She shifted her eyes. What she focused on was a mirror adorning the entranceway. It was a bit on the larger side, a full-body mirror for one to check up their appearance before they headed out.

Kurisu-chan reached her hand towards the mirror, gently stroking its surface as,

“—He who returns all manner of light, become my gate of safe passage—”

She chanted something spell-like.

“... Usually, that’s how I can get back... but now, after I chant, when I try sticking my head in...”

As she said that, Kurisu-chan faced our mirror.

And...

Clunk!

Chnk!

She thrust her head in.

She smacked it with her forehead. Headbutted it.

Kurusu-chan collided with such momentum as if she thought she would go through it. When she did such a thing, naturally, the mirror shattered. Countless fractures ran down it, as it scattered light in all directions like stained glass.

My mirror...!

“... Urgh. Why, why...”

While I was at a loss for words, Kurisu-chan kept mumbling in a voice mixed with sobs.

“I can always... do that and... go home...”

She turned to the shattered mirror again; just as before, she pulled back her head and readied herself.

Clunk!

Chnk!

The cracks in the mirror multiplied.

“... It's strange, this is strange.”

Clunk!

Chnk!

“..... Urgh.”

Clunk!

Chnk!

“.....”

Clunk!

Chnk!

“.....”

Clunk!

Chnk!
Clunk!
Chnk!
Clunk!
Chnk!

Kurusu-chan headbutted, and headbutted again.
Silently, at a set reason, she repeated the motion.
A majority of the mirror was now shattered, while a majority of the fragments had scattered around the entranceway, even so, that didn't stop her.
Her form was almost like a high-paced shishi-odoshi.

“... Ahem.”

Calm down. Be cool.

It's at times like these, that an objective viewpoint must take charge.

If I had to analyze this situation objectively...

A girl suddenly came late at night, “I can't use magic anymore,” she repeated some incomprehensible deposition before wholeheartedly thrusting her head at my mirror.

... Objectivity made it even worse.

This is bad. Just what is this girl doing...

Scaaaarry!

If I called the police, they'd arrest her for that one. It's an incident that would grace the front page of tomorrow's paper. On the evening news, “The darkness that plagues the hearts of our younger generation,” would have a special segment.

Well, of course, I'm not calling the cops. While I was taken aback by this outrageous scene, I managed to calm my heart.

That's right. As her senior, saving this girl is my duty!

“Stop it already, Kurisu-chan!”

As she continued conduct I could only imagine from a crazy person, I got her into a hold from behind. Still, she struggled within my grasp.

“Please let go of my, Kagoshima-senpai! I... I'm going to go home!”

“No you're not! That mirror isn't turning into a warp gate!”

“Yes it will! I’m a magician, so I know I can do it!”

“Well you’re not doing it!”

“That, it must be... my magic is... uwaaaaaaah.....”

Kurisu-chan began to weep.

Hey now. I’m the one who wants to cry here...

“For now, let’s calm down, Kurisu-chan! Deep breaths, deep breaths! We’ll do it together. In, in, out. In, in, out.”

“That’s the Lamaze technique!”

“Then let’s count prime numbers! Primes are lonely numbers, so they’ll fill us with courage! 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 11...”

“1 is not a prime number!”

Oh right.

Uwah, I accidentally played dumb. What a disgrace.

“Anyways, Kurisu-chan, humans can’t enter mirrors! There aren’t thirteen riders holding a battle royal in the mirror!”

“I am not trying to enter the mirror! I’m just trying to use transfer magic!”

“They’re the same!”

“They are not!”

Kurisu-chan seemed considerably panicked. I got the feeling she was indiscreetly speaking on some important details, but now wasn’t the time to lend an ear to her nonsense.

Kurisu-chan continued to squirm in my arms, but a young girl’s power was unable to brush off the restraints of a man.

Mh?

Wait a second.

Come to think of it, wasn’t Kurisu-chan supposed to be stronger than me? Last time we held an arm-wrestling contest with the ComClub members, I remember losing with an overwhelming difference. (By the way, I lost to all the girls. They all have way too much brute strength).

And yet, when she was strong to an unnatural extent, I was currently able to normally hold her down.

The power I felt from her was the strength of a normal high school girl... no, perhaps even lower. A normal, or feeble young girl’s power.

“Let go of meee!”

Paying no heed to my doubts, Kurisu-chan continued squirming her body. It was at that moment.

Thanks to her violent movements, her white robe fastened at the front snapped open, making it possible to peer inside. Of course, I was holding Kurisu-chan from behind, so I was unable to take in her form head-on. But at this very moment, we were standing in front of a mirror. The dazzling fragments of glass reflected back what I would see had I been standing in its place.

“” ””

With a jerk, Kurisu-chan and I froze on the spot.

A number of fragments had fallen on the floor, so it never did come to pass that I saw the entire contents of her robe. Despite that, the interior that did reflect from the mirror fragments that persistently remained... were largely covered by the color of skin. Or rather, completely skin. The missing mirror fragments showed black, but everything else was skin.

... No, let's stop using ambiguous expressions to escape from reality.

She was naked under the robe.

Stark naked, her socks and shoes the only thing she had on.

An appearance I personally saw as more erotic than pure nudity, nude with socks.

“... Kurisu... chan.”

My own face in the mirror had turned to an expression despairing for the world. As a healthy high school boy, perhaps I should be quivering in delight at this lucky pervert-esque situation of witnessing my junior in the nude; but that joy was overwritten by a far greater despair encroaching on my heart.

I had forgotten.

Kurisu-chan was... an exhibitionist...

Before summer vacation, when I took a bath with the dog Chris, Kurisu-chan charged naked into my bathroom with no forewarning, and it was then that I had to reach the conclusion. I had completely forgotten—no, that's not it. I had forced myself to forget. I didn't want to accept my junior's bad taste, or rather abnormal disposition that verged on felony.

I could no longer avert my eyes from the problem. I mean, she was seriously

naked under the robe...

For real. She really was a pervert...

No, I get that magical girls and nudity go hand in hand!

I get that they strip down in the transformation sequence!

“... Kyaah!”

Her head finally catching up to the situation, Kurisu-chan raised an adorable scream and hurriedly covered up her front. It was too late, in various ways.

“D-dd-did you seee?”

“... Yeah.” I gave a solemn nod. “Ah, but, umm, how should I put it, well... the mirror was perfectly chipped in all the important parts, so I didn’t see...”

“.....”

“... Hey, Kurisu-chan. Um... you know? I really don’t think you should keep up with that hobby of yours. Yeah, one wrong step, and it’ll be a crime.”

“You-y-you’re wrong! T-this is just a coincidence.”

Kurisu-chan firmly shook her head, giving an excuse in a voice stained with bitterness.

“The robe’s an artifact, but the clothing underneath it needs mana to maintain... so they disappeared the moment I couldn’t use magic... what’s more, the school uniform and, umm, u-underwear inside the storage gem... I can’t take them out without magic... that’s why, that’s why there really is nothing I can do...”

“... Kurisu-chan.”

I offered a level-headed response to her desperate defense.

“I’m sorry, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“U-uu.... Uwaaaaaaaaaahn!”

Right after, Kurisu-chan started wailing loudly.

On that occasion, she raised her head in emotion, the top of her short head colliding with my chin as I held her from behind.

“Gffh!”

Like a boxer who’d taken on a killer uppercut, I was down for the count. My brain swayed, in an instant, my consciousness was reaped away. Right before I

lost consciousness,

“I can’t do this anymooooooore!”

Only Kurisu-chan’s teary lament unpleasantly remained in my ears.

By the time I regained consciousness, the clock needles had rounded twelve, my scarce remnants of summer faction had grown fewer still. After letting it all out, Kurisu-chan seemed to have calmed down, this time giving a calm explanation of the situation she had been placed in.

It did seem she had failed in developing a new technique, and as a side effect, lost her ability to use magic. Her residence was located somewhere they couldn’t be accessed without the use of transfer magic, and to top it all off, her clothes and wallet were stored away in the gem she used for storage space, so she was at her wits end with no way to go on.

“No, you can drop that eighth-grade mental setting, just tell me what really happened.”

“... Fine.”

As she said that mixed in with a sigh, Kurisu-chan sitting on the sofa nodded with a terribly conflicted expression. By the way, at present, she wasn’t in her robe; she had changed into my middle school jersey I’d lent her. The size didn’t match, it was considerably baggy.

... She wasn’t wearing a bra or panties, but I’ll do my best to ignore that.

“Umm, that was all my mental delusion, and the truth is...”

Her field of vision loitering around as if she was thinking on the spot, she started explaining again.

When she was wandering around town in cosplay as per usual, she apparently lost both her wallet and house key. Her family just happened to be out on a trip, and because of that, she was lost with no way to go home.

“I see, you have it hard.”

“You have no idea...”

“... I hope you’ve learned your lesson from this. Let’s stop wandering around town in nothing but a robe, okay?”

When I spoke with a deep sorrow resting on my words, Kurisu-chan's face flushed bright red.

"Tt-that's..."

"You're still a high school student see. Don't you think you'd be better off getting a bit more experience before you dive into a specialized fetish like exhibitionism?"

"No matter how experienced you are, exhibitionism isn't... not that! T-that's not it... there's a very deep reason as to why I'm not wearing clothes..."

"A deep reason? You couldn't contain the exhibitionist impulses welling up from your depths?"

"Wrong! That's an extremely shallow reason, isn't it!?"

"Hey, I get how you feel. There are times I just feel like tearing off this shell I call self, and exposing all I am."

"Please don't sympathize! Wro-you're wrong... the reason I'm not wearing clothes doesn't have to do with e-e-exhibitionism or anything like that..."

"Oh? It doesn't?"

"....."

"Apart from exhibitionism, I can't think of any other explanation that would lead to a situation with you wearing a robe and nothing underneath."

"..... Yes. You're right. I am an... exhibitionist pervert..."

Kurisu-chan nodded with a face as if she had cast aside everything as a woman. As if she had run out of every tear she had to shed, her eyes became empty to the point I couldn't tell what they were looking at.

She seemed to be repenting from her heart. Good girl. Let us pray that this incident will cure Kurisu-chan of her exhibitionist tendencies. That being the case, I've managed to gain a general understanding of the situation.

"... I'm sorry, Kagoshima-senpai."

After exhaling a slight breath of resignation, this time she spoke in a minute voice.

"I barged in so late at night... you were the only person I thought I could rely on."

"Yeah. Don't worry about it."

It made me a little happy to hear I was the only one she could rely on, but sifting through her story, it could just as well be that she simply didn't have any other friends nearby.

At present, the ComClub members weren't in any state to be depended on. Kagurai-senpai and Kikyoin-san had returned home, and Orino-san didn't live in the area (rather, I have no idea where her house is).

"... I'm sorry I broke your mirror. I'll properly compensate you for it when I can."

Recalling her prior chaotic self, Kurisu-chan's expression blended with embarrassment and sincerity.

"You don't have to worry about that. It wasn't too expensive."

"But—"

"I heard it's a sentimental mirror mom bought with her first ever paycheck, but you don't have to worry about it."

"... I'm really sorry!"

Jumping down from the sofa, Kurisu-chan groveled on the floor. That was a splendid leap.

"Ah, I'm sorry. That was a joke, don't take it so seriously. We just bought it at the general store in front of the station, it didn't even cost five hundred yen."

"... P-please don't tease me like that... my hands are full as it is. They really, really are fully loaded..."

She said earnestly, making the expression of someone truly on the brink. It was painful to watch, so let's not tease her anymore.

"By the way, Kurisu-chan. Did you contact the police? About your wallet and key."

"No, it's not like I lost them, so..."

"Eh?"

"Ah! I-I'm fine. My phone was safe, so I put in a call on the way here!"

"I see... the wallet's one thing, but your house key's a heavy loss. Around when are your parents getting back?"

"Umm... p-probably, give them a week and... I'm sure in that time I'll be able to—no, I mean, I think my parents will be back."

A week, huh. It'll be harsh to spend that long without a house to return to. What's more, she's penniless, so she can't sleep at a hotel or manga café, or use any means of transportation.

"Kurusu-chan. Have you planned out your course of action?"

"... I haven't."

She sullenly hung her shoulders. Gazing over her unreliable form, I offered a single proposal.

"Then want to live here?"

Kurusu-chan raised her head in amazement.

"If it's just for a week, it won't be any trouble. See, I live alone so you don't have to worry about bothering anyone."

And considering her financial straits, I get the feeling that would be for the best. Rather, I didn't have it in me to drive her out into the desolation of night.

"But I couldn't possibly cause you so much trouble..."

"It's no trouble at all."

"But, but..."

"And wait, when you barged into my house at this hour, it's a bit late to talk about troubling me."

"....."

A little meanness and Kurisu-chan shamefully hung her head. A while of mulling later, she slowly raised it.

"... Then, you have my humblest apologies, but I'll take you up on that offer."

She reluctantly lowered her head.

"I-I-I may be inexperienced, but I I hope you'll put up with me."

With two weeks left, summer vacation had entered its final stages. And like that, Kurisu-chan and I had begun living together. Rather than a girl coming over to life, it kinda felt like I had gotten myself a little sister.

Night opens into the next morning.

The first thing I did was clean the house. To get the house prettied up to a level I wasn't embarrassed to show people, and to hide anything funny.

"Mn? This is..."

Once I gave the house a good onceover and returned to clean my room, I spotted something nostalgic in the back of my closet. Several hundred cards contained in a long-served candy tin. The cards of a trading card game I had desperately collected when I was young.

"... Wow, that takes me back."

The various thoughts born in my heart converted into a sigh and leaked from my mouth. The reminiscence of reuniting with an old friend you haven't seen in ten years, and... the embarrassment towards my youth summarized in the phrase, how much did all of these cost? I'm sure these are feelings any man who's played a card game will experience.

"Kagoshima-senpaaai. Breakfast is ready."

As I was gazing over each individual card, Kurisu-chan's voice came from the first floor.

When I descended the stairs and made for the living room, she was standing in the kitchen equipped with an apron. Under the apron, a bright-colored T-Shirt and shorts. My clothes from middle school. While they were men's clothing, she was pulling them off in a tomboyish fashion.

I was hit with déjà vu. When she stayed at my house a few months ago, she cooked for me just like this. The table was already lined with breakfast. Miso soup, white rice, broiled fish, salad. Not the slightest sign she had stayed her hand, cooking with some heart put into it.

"Thank you for the meal."

"Thank you for the meal."

When I reached the table, the two of us ate breakfast together.

"Yep. It's tasty."

"Y-you think so?"

"I do. But, I feel kinda bad. Having a guest cook breakfast and all."

"Oh no... it's fine. You're letting me stay, so please let me do this much."

Kurisu-chan said apologetically.

“Yeaaaah. I feel bad after all, leave today’s lunch to me.”

“No, I’ll make it.”

Kurisu-chan suddenly turned serious, making a clear declaration.

“While I’m here, I’ll make every meal. You don’t have to do anything.”

“.....”

I wonder why. From her words, I felt more coercion than gratitude. It looks like she was wary to never let me cook. Well I had no complaints if I got to eat Kurisu-chan’s delicious cooking, so the Kagoshima House kitchen would temporarily be left to her.

“In that case, could I leave groceries to you? The fridge is going to run empty soon. The menu’s up to you. Of course, I’ll be the one paying.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I get the feeling you’d be better at groceries than me.”

It was possible for the two of us to go together, but considering how we would be living together for the next week, I had my qualms about sticking together too much outside. Strange rumors in the neighborhood would be nothing but trouble, for both me and Kurisu-chan.

After Kurisu-chan heartily accepted my proposal, “... Umm,” she continued her words somewhat awkwardly.

“I know I’m making an unreasonable request, but... if possible, could I borrow some money outside of food as well?”

“Money?”

I asked back, to a powerless nod of, “... Yes.”

Ah, come to think of it, Kurisu-chan’s living here because she suddenly couldn’t return home. She’s surely lacking in various everyday necessities.

“I don’t mind lending whatsoever... but Kurisu-chan. If there’s anything you need, just tell me. We’ve got quite a few things around the house, so you might not even have to buy it.”

We’ve got some unused toothbrushes and bath towels; in regards to

shampoo and facewash, some of my mother's female products are around somewhere.

There, Kurisu-chan shamefully hung her head. Fidgetingly entwining her fingers, she spoke in a faint voice I could only narrowly pick up.

“... I-I want to buy some undergarments...”

“.....”

I had completely forgotten.

At present, Kurisu-chan wasn't wearing a bra or panties. She was wearing my middle school clothes commando.

““ ””

The air surrounding the morning dining table grew a bit dubious, we continued eating our breakfasts without exchanging another word.

After a late breakfast, Kurisu-chan immediately left for shopping. It did seem she wanted to put on some panties ASAP. While going out without panties would be a considerably high-risk action in a skirt, Kurisu-chan was wearing my trousers, so it would probably be fine. Additionally as a habitual exhibitionist, she would surely be accustomed to this sort of situation.

After I saw off an embarrassed, restless Kurisu-chan walking like a clear suspicious individual, I lounged around a while before leaving the house myself. My goal was the pawn off the large load of cards I'd found in my closet. If I wasn't going to be using them, I was better off selling them off. I had a number of rare cards, so they should amount to something.

I carried the tin of cards in hand as I walked down the residential block. The pawn shop wasn't too far away, so I'd probably be home before Kurisu-chan got back.

Even so, would Kurisu-chan be alright?

When I lent her money,

“Oh? Are you sure you're fine with that small amount? Umm... you're buying undergarments, right?”

“Yes... But it's just a temporary measure, and I don't intend to buy anything too expensive.”

“I won’t claim to be an expert, but don’t women’s undergarments go for quite a bit? You have to match size and such...?”

“Umm... there are some people who have trouble finding the right size, but I’m...”

“Ah, sorry. That was rude of me.”

“Aren’t you catching on too quickly!?”

“Sorry. I was lacking in tact.”

“Don’t look at me with those eyes of pity! Your tact just makes it harsher!”

We had such an exchange. It didn’t look like size would be a problem... Kurisu-chan looked like the sort whose size would be sold everywhere, but I was a bit worried if she could really buy undergarments with that paltry amount. Well, I heard they’re selling underwear at the hundred yen store these days, so she might be fine.

Whatever the case, my worry won’t amount to anything. She might have even made her purchase already.

“.....”

But I always find myself thinking it.

That girl really isn’t used to relying on people.

She was in an emergency situation where she couldn’t go home, so I’d like to lend her my power by all means, yet, Kurisu-chan refrained at every possible turn.

I got the feeling it was something different from humility.

I’d been thinking it for a while now, but it seems that girl doesn’t see relying on people as a favorable option. I think she has a terrible oversensitivity towards showing her weakness to others.

When she boasts such a frank personality, she always pulls back a step. Or so I thought various things as I walked, and just as I approached the intersection.

Someone suddenly appeared before my eyes.

They didn’t come from down the road. There was barely anyone out, so I’d be

able to tell if someone came walking from upfront. That person suddenly descended before me and landed without a sound.

They likely jumped down from one of the walls on the side. I mean, it's not like they could've used that transfer magic Kurisu-chan was talking about and emerged from the convex mirror attached to the telephone pole for safe turning.

Whatever their situation, only one thing was certain. When they appeared all of a sudden, they were impossible to avoid.

“Dwah!”

I grandly collided with that someone, the two of us collapsing to the floor. The candy tin in my hand in the floor, the lid popping open, the cards inside it grandly spilling into the air.

What's with this person?

A transfer student you suddenly bump into at the corner?

“Oww... um, are you alright?”

I quickly raised myself, raced over and reached out a hand.

There,

“A mere plebeian like you needn't touch me so easily.”

My hand was slapped away. I was dumbfounded.

The person soon stood and pat off the dirt on their clothing.

It was a small-build young boy. His age was around ten. Considerably shorter than me, either the same, or lower than Kurisu-chan.

When the summer sun still beat down harshly, he wore a sweltering black mantle. There were sinister ornaments stuck to his shoulders.

“Hmph. To let plebeian come in contact with me, what has become of me.”

The person... no, the kid scoffed and unveiled an arrogant line.

But his voice had yet to drop, making his utterances ridiculously high...!

A boy's soprano that put my heart at ease.

Alongside his childish face that showed off his youth at full throttle, it was kinda super cute.

“Oy, commoner.”

He said and looked up at me. While he seemed to be trying his best to make a scary face, he had a pretty baby face, so it wasn't scary in the slightest. Still, his tone the whole way had been especially self-aggrandizing. Granted he was probably at an age where he thought that sort of thing was cool. That mantle that made me want to retort, are you supposed to be some otherworldly noble or something, could be explained if I thought he was trying to show off at his age.

“Oy, are you listening?”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. Did you need something?”

“Are you one who lives in this world?”

“... Yeah?”

I tilted my head to the incomprehensible question. I wonder what he meant. Perhaps that was an extremely philosophical question? While I was troubled to respond, “Hmph. A foolish question. There's no way a whelp I can't feel the slightest magic from could be a resident of our world,” he reached a conclusion on his own, narrowed his eyes, and gazed at me as if to inspect my every move.

[IMAGE]

“Your age... the late teens, perhaps. The age one would attend hye school in this country. Oy, do you by chance attend the teaching institution Adatara hye school in this area?”

“Oh, yeah. I do. I'm a second year at Adatara High School.”

“I do believe a woman going by the name of Creastia Crimson Cridende Christopher Shuley should be attending, does that name ring any bells?”

“No ideas?”

I don't have any acquaintances with such crazy names. For a moment, Kurisu-chan crossed my mind, but surely their names were just somewhat similar.

“I see. I heard the ‘Flower our of Reach’—Allua's sole daughter was in these parts. But I don't feel the slightest trace of magic... is she away from this town...?”

“Are you looking for that girl?”

“No, Creastia is just a small aside. I wouldn’t come all the way out here for a single girl. My true objective lies elsewhere.”

“.....”

Yeaaah. For a while now, I haven’t quite been getting what he’s saying. I get the feeling he’s using similar terminology to Kurisu-chan, but considering his age, instead of eighth-grade syndrome, he’s probably just playing around. Which means, I shouldn’t read too deep into it, I should just tag along to a moderate extent.

“What’s your name?”

“I am called Griesther... no, there is no point in naming myself to a plebeian of your level.”

“Eh? Mn? Gri-what?”

“If you truly wish to refer to me, call me Griel. From my youth, a great many have called me so.”

He... Griel-kun said with a snort of his nose. This whole time, each and every one of his utterances seemed to make light of me, and that pompous attitude was even more evident in his pupils.

As if he usually stood in a position from which he could only look down on humans.

... No, but still, Griel, eh? I guess that’s his nickname in elementary school or something. Those grade-schoolers sometimes come out with outrageous nicknames, after all.

“So, Griel-kun. What’s this goal you were talking about?”

When I asked lightly, his young face curled into a menacing smile.

“I am searching for the sorcerer’s stone.”

“... Hmm. I see. You have it rough.”

I arbitrarily responded. A warmth spread across my chest. Come to think of it, I used to explore town searching for Tsuchinoko and

Chupacabra, once upon a time. I see, the sorcerer's stone, huh?

I wonder if he just read through FMA or HP.

"I'll ask without any expectations. Do you have any idea about the sorcerer's stone?"

"No, nothing comes to mind."

"I see. So be it... if my research is correct, the stone's main body, or something concerned with it in some shape or form should be in this area. It's faint, but I sense a mana very similar to the stone nearby..."

"Hmmm. I see. I highly doubt that, but do your best."

"Yes. The philosopher's stone definitely is an item of legend. It would surely be impossible for an ordinary magician to find it. But if you put my up to it, retrieving a pebble is of no consequence."

Once that strangely unmeshing conversation was over, Griel-kun took a step forward towards me.

"I've said too much. You'll be forgetting that conversation."

"Eh?"

"Fret not. I mean you no harm. I'm different from those petty ruffians you find on the street. I'll only be tampering with your memories a bit."

As he said that, he gently raised his right hand and touched it to my forehead. As if some unknown power dwelled in that hand, it was warm.

"... Mn?"

Right before I thought something might happen, his feet caught against something. The cards I had scattered a moment ago. He picked up the card at his feet, and a few more in the area. Fanning them out in his hand, he began gazing at them with intrigue.

"They depict monsters, warriors, and magicians. Different still from Tarot cards... oy, what are these?"

"They're Duel&Wizard Cards. You don't know them?"

"Never heard of it."

"Yeaah. I see, so kids these days don't know about them."

I gave a simple explanation of Duel&Wizard.

Around the time Yugioh and Duelmasters started gaining worldwide popularity,

some small manufacturer tried to follow blindly and came out with the card game.

It never became the topic of discussion anywhere in the nation, and before anyone noticed it, it had disappeared, maker and all, but as it had gained a dubious level of popularity in this region, I collected them with my friends. The rules themselves were pretty much Yugioh.

“Hm. Meaning they’re a tabletop game like trump.”

“Strictly speaking, yes.”

I began collecting the scattered cards. Once they were all in a pile, the moment before I accepted the portion Griel-kun had collected,

“How interesting.”

He said, sounding especially merry.

“I’ve changed my mind. You will play me in this Duel&Wizard.”

“Eh? But you don’t know the rules, do you?”

“I’ll learn them in five minutes.”

He sounded all-too stuck up, but it seemed he wanted me to teach him. After thinking a bit, “Yeah, sure,” I nodded. It’s not good to refuse a small child’s request, and it had been quite a long time, so I was right in the mood for a duel. If I started back after a game or two, I’d make it in time for Kurisu-chan’s return.

“Hmph. I’ll say it now, but don’t hold back thinking me an amateur. In this sort of tabletop entertainment, whether dealing with child or adult, never once have I faced defeat. May you paw at the earth with all your might.”

“.....”

The moment I heard that line I was convinced. Ah, I’m totally going to win this. It’s one of those things the world calls a premonition.

“Hello, Kurisu-chan?”

‘Yes?’

“Are you done shopping yet?”

‘I just finished up, and was thinking it was about time to return.’

“Aah, I see... um, look, I’m really sorry about this, but could you go kill time

somewhere? I'm currently out, and it doesn't look like I'll be home for a while."

'Did something happen?'

"No, nothing in particular. Just some minor business."

'Understood. Then I'll loiter around a bit longer.'

"Sorry, and thanks."

'Oh no. I had somewhere I wanted to go, so this came at the perfect time.'

After notifying Kurisu-chan by phone, I returned to Griel-kun.

The location was Asahi Park. A park with a wooden table set, and where I would often play card games with friends in elementary school.

"... Um, you know, Griel-kun."

Cleaning up the cards spread out across the table, I said with a sigh.

"Next time really is the last time, okay?"

"... Why?"

Ignoring my wish, Griel-kun groaned out in irritation.

"Why can't I defeat the likes of you.....!"

He covered his face with both hands, shaking in humiliation.

Since then, including the mock battle to explain the rules, we had dueled ten times.

The result was my complete victory.

I know I shouldn't say it, but Griel-kun was ridiculously weak. It was as if he lacked experience in the concept of trading card games themselves and was still failing to grasp the knack.

But I never thought he would be such a sore loser.

Each time he lost, "One more, one more," he'd say...

"Darnit. I'm building my deck again! Hand over the cards."

Griel-kun started constructing his deck once more. In regards to decks, first Griel-kun would make his, and I would form mine from the leftover cards. It was the least handicap I could give to a beginner.

As he held a staring contest with the cards, a serious look on his face, I offered him some advice out of the kindness of my heart.

"You can't just make a deck out of monsters with the highest offense. You

have to put in enough low-level monsters to sacrifice, or you won't be able to make any moves."

"I'm aware. But this sacrifice system is quite the cynical name. In the end, the weak may only contribute to battle as tribute to the strong. Hm. Like a model of the world."

"....."

I hear they call it release instead of sacrifice nowadays. But come to think of it, sacrifice is a casually terrible term.

"By the way, why does this Satan Summon monster card have the word summon in the name? Every time you summon it, you have to say I summon Satan Summon; is that not largely redundant?"

That's the eternal mystery. Griel-kun spent around ten minutes building a new neck. I used the leftovers to quickly throw together my own.

"I won't lost this time."
"Alright. Then rock paper scissors to determine turn order, let's go. Rock, paper, scissors."

I won. I chose second. I always was the type to strike second. We stationed our decks and drew five cards each. Our voices overlapped as we cried out.

""Duel!""

You can't miss that part!

"My turn! Draw!"

Griel-kun raised a heroic cry as he pulled a card with sharp movements. ... Because I hammered some half-truths into him, it seems like he believes all the overreactions from the manga are part of the official rules. I feel somewhat guilty.

"... Tsk. I put down two cards and end my turn."
"Huh? You're not laying any monsters? Empty handed?"
"Hmph. I wonder about that."

Despite his fearless smile, he had clicked his tongue a moment ago, so no doubt he was emptyhanded. I'm sure he filled his deck with high attack-power monsters again. A kid making the textbook example of a beginner's mistake.

"Then my turn. Draw."

I drew a single card. Now then. I wonder if it's about time I lost. I do have my pride as a duelist, so I've gone at him seriously without letting up, but it's about time to let my junior hold his head high.

Rather, I just want to go home.

With that thought, I lowered my eyes to my hand... and noticed something. After thinking a moment, I shifted to action.

"First, I use 'Angel's Feather Duster' to destroy all your facedowns."

"Muh."

"Then I summon 'Hell Franken' and activate its effect. By paying five thousand lifepoints, I can special summon 'Ultimate Dragon' from my deck."

"What!?"

"And I activate the magic card 'Massive Growth', doubling Ultimate Dragon's attack power."

"H-hah!?"

"With nine thousand attack points, I attack your lifepoints directly!"

"E-e-eh?"

"You're at zero, it's my win."

"....."

Griel-kun in a daze.

Crap.

I one-turn killed him.

I planned on conceding the trophy, but one in a turn. No, I mean, I had all the necessary cards in my hands. Who wouldn't!?

As I clenched my teeth in delight at the first one turn kill in my life, Griel-kun began shaking as he hung his head.

Crap, did I make him cry? I thought, when he sprung up his face and grasped at my chest with the force of a raging inferno.

"... Don't get on your high horse, plebeian!"

He snapped.

I get how you feel. Anyone would snap after a one-turn kill.

“This is mere child’s play, is it not!? Strength on the table is of no use in reality!”

He was being a complete sore loser, but instead of refuting, I handled the situation like an adult.

“Yes. You’re right about that. There’s no point in being strong at something like this. So don’t you think it’s about time we finished up?”

When I said that, Griel-kun was hard pressed for words.

“N-nay. Even if it be child’s play, my pride won’t allow me to let it end with a loss to a commoner of your calibre...”

So which is it?

In the end, he was just irritated that he couldn’t win. He’s a kid, after all.

“Then can we save it for another day? I’m keeping someone waiting, so if possible, I’d like to return for the day. Aren’t you a bit tired?”

“I’m not in the least bit tired, but... hm. Very well. If you insist, I’ll let you off for today.”

... Why does he sound like he’s winning?

“I’m not as free as I look. This time, this park three days from now. Understood?”

If you’re not free, you don’t have to do it, the words came as far as my throat, but I frantically swallowed them down and accepted his rematch.

“... Come to think of it, you live in this area, do you?”

“Yeah. I do, but something about that?”

“Hm.”

Griel-kun’s face turned meek. “... To find the stone, the fastest, most efficient method would be to raze this area to the ground, but I can’t have this man die... so be it, I’ll go at it from a different means...” he muttered something I didn’t really get.

“Oy, you.”

“Yes?”

“Name yourself.”

Ah. Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet.

“My name's Kagoshima Akira.”

“Kagoshima, eh. I'll remember it.”

Griel-kun fearlessly smiled. He brought about himself the air as if he had recognized me as a single man, but having a kid recognize my skill in a children's card game didn't make me particularly happy.

“Kagoshima. Until the day where I triumph over you in cards, I won't do a thing to this town.”

“Mnnn. I see, thank you.”

“But at the time you fall in defeat, I can't guarantee this town's safety.”

“I seeee, then I've got to do my best.”

“Yes, that's right. Now quiver in fear. The fate of this town rests on your measly shoulders!”

My pleasant smile to Griel-kun's menacing grin.

Good grief. It's hard work, tagging along with a kid's reckless games.

From his eyes, I picked up a pitch-blackness as if he could easily destroy a single town if he was up to it, but I'm sure that was my imagination.

“Well then, Kagoshima. We will meet again in three days. If you run... you know what will happen.”

Leaving that dangerous line, Griel-kun made off.

.....

I wonder why.

I kinda got the feeling I just saved the town.

When I left Asahi Park, the sun was a step away from sunset.

I walked down the sidewalk-just about to call Kurisu-chan- only to run into some acquaintances.

One in a ponytail, the other wearing a straw hat. The ponytailed one was rolling along a large suitcase.

“Huh? Kikyouin-san. And Tama-chan.”

“Geh.”

The one who grimaced was Kikyouin Yuzuki. She was in my class, and we got along relatively well (I think). Her slender body was wrapped in a light-colored one-piece dress. Coupled with the pump-like sandals on her feet, she gave off a rather refreshing impression.

“Mn? Oh, if it isn’t the idiotic whelp. It has been some time.”

The young girl in the straw hat speaking like an old man was Kikyouin-san’s little sister Tamane-chan. I call her Tama-chan with love.

... By the way, it seems Tama-chan has still yet to remember my name, instead remembering me as that idiotic whelp.

“Been a while. Let me guess. You’re on the way back from your folks’ place?”

I said, looking at the suitcase.

“That’s right... hah.”

“What’s up, Kikyouin-san? You look like you just ran into a pain you didn’t want to get involved with.”

“... Nothing particular.”

She said listlessly, letting out another sigh.

“Your home’s in Kyoto, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was quite a hassle, goin’ around to see relatives and visit graves.”

I heard Kikyouin-san’s house was an old and honored one. As the eldest daughter, she must be quite busy this time of year.

“So you went back. Instead of Kikyouin-san, it’s like you’re Gohomin-sa—Gufu.”

I ate a body blow from her fist.

It was a light strike, but it splendidly landed in my solar plexus, so it plainly did wonders.

“Quit foolin’ around.”

“Urrghh... K-Kikyouin-san, aren’t you raising your hand a bit early? I usually get another two or three words in before you finally snap and hit me...?”

“I blew time away.”

“You’re not King Crimson...”

Just because I know she’s going to snap, it’s unfair for her to go off early. Even if I’m being hit here, I need that little thing called resolve.

As I rubbed my stomach, Tama-chan approached me.

Snff, snff, she rang her small nose like a dog or fox.

“What’s wrong?”

“You do somewhat smell...”

“Y-you’re kidding!”

“’Tis true.”

“No way...”

I fell into a boundless slump. A girl looked me in the face and told me I stink... as expected of a young girl to show little to no tact.

“Something up, Tamane-sama?”

“Indeed. While it’s faint, we sense a curse from the whelp. No... this is no curse. It must be some other power.”

“Then isn’t it Kurisu’s magic? I told you about her before, didn’t I? This girl who’s my junior.”

“No, we remember the girl’s power. But what we feel from the whelp is something different. This is a power far more stomach-churning than the girl’s... far more sinister.”

“.....”

“It truly is faint, so we can’t make it out. Perhaps it is just our imagination...”

The two discussed something with serious faces, but I didn’t care it about that. The shock of being told I stank was more of a shock than I thought. Without even trying to meddle with my depression, Tama-chan muttered in a low voice.

“We have a bad feeling about this...”

I separated from the Kikyoin sisters right after. I planned to head straight home, but as I left, “Come to think of it, I spotted Kurisu-chan back there,” Kikyoin-san said.

“Really? Where was she at?”

“Towards the mountain.”

“The mountain...? Why would she be there?”

[IMAGE]

“Don’t ask me. But I can tell you there’s nothin’ but a temple and graveyard over there. Don’t you think she could’ve gone for a bit of a late grave visit?”

“Grave visit...”

And so, I gave up on going home and headed for the cemetery.

Of course, I knew I was better off going home. If I silently went off to pick her up, there was a high enough possibility I’d miss her. More than anything, she had concealed the fact she was, “going to a grave” from me.

I didn’t know why she would hide it, but when I thought she had enough reason to do so, it seemed best to pretend I didn’t know.

But I made for the cemetery.

If I didn’t force things a bit to make contact from my side, I got the feeling she’d refrain from relying on me again. I didn’t care about keeping secrets, but I didn’t particularly enjoy being paid undo mind or restraint.

I set foot in the cemetery outside of town.

Countless lined grey and black stone grave markers. As the time to visit graves had already passed, the place was an unpopular one, and a deathly quiet one at that. Within that silent space... I spotted a single girl seriously putting her hands together.

Thanks to the foreign air she carried, her form looked like that of a pious disciple praying to god.

“Kurusu-chan.”

When I approached and called out, she opened her closed eyes and turned towards me.

“Kagoshima-senpai. Why are you here?”

“I ran into Kikyoin-san by chance, see. She said she spotted you in the area.”

“Kikyoin-senpai... I see, so she’s back from Kyoto.”

“Are you visiting a grave?”

“Yes. Thought I missed the time by a bit.”

“I don’t think you’re too off, but you weren’t able to come during Obon?”

“Umm, that’s... if I came at the right time, I might have run into one of my relatives...”

Kurisu-chan’s words muddled, she lowered her face. I looked at the gravestone.

On the inorganic black stone, the words, ‘Kurisu Family Grave’ were chiselled in.

“So this is your place’s grave.”

I said something obvious with no more intent than to confirm the obvious. And yet, “... Right. I think that’s how it works, for argument’s sake...” Kurisu-chan gave an ambiguous response. And in a somewhat discerning tone, she quietly muttered.

“This is where... my father is.”

Kurisu-chan’s father’s name was Kurisu Tooru, apparently.

I had heard before that her father was Japanese, while her mother was not. But... that was the first time I heard her father was dead.

Was she hiding it? Or did she think there was no need to say it? I don’t know what Kurisu-chan was thinking, but whatever the case, I didn’t know.

“Come to think of it, how was shopping?”

“Went without a problem, thanks to you. Ah, here’s the receipt and the change.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. You might need it for something else, right? And it would be easier for me if I just collected it all back in a lump sum.”

“You’re right. Got it.”

Kurisu-chan nodded and tucked the money away in a wallet. Of course, it wasn’t her own wallet, but the frogmouth wallet I had lent her. We took a rest at the service area right by the graveyard. Lowering ourselves side by side on the wooden bench, we happily drank the drinks from the vending machine (my treat) together.

I didn’t pursue the matter of her father.

I couldn't ask, and Kurisu-chan didn't want to talk.

"Ah, right, Kagoshima-senpai. Do you know this one?"

Kurisu-chan produced a loop of string from her pocket. The sort of yarn you could find anywhere, simply tied into a ring.

Handing the string over her hands, she began worming her fingers in and out.

"Tadaa. It's Tokyo tower."

"Ooh. Amazing."

I was honestly impressed by her art of string and fingers.

"Kurisu-chan, I never knew you did cat's cradle."

"Just a little. Do you know any?"

"Not at all. I've barely ever done it."

In my head, cat's cradle was-next to napping and gunning-nothing more than one of Nobita-kun's special skills. Compared to his other skills, it was used less frequently, so I was arbitrarily convinced it was the easiest one to forget about.

"I learned it from mother. My mother told me she learned it from father."

Without pause, Kurisu-chan spoke with her natural smile.

She said it so plainly, it was as if she was contrarily trying to make an appeal, 'I don't really care about my father, so you don't have to care either,' but that one was definitely my oversensitivity. Kurisu-chan unveiled her next marvelous technique.

"You can play cat's cradle with two people, you know."

She said as she put the string over her hands in a different shape from before. I didn't really get it, but she was probably preparing for two-person cat's cradle.

"Alright. Here you go, Kagoshima-senpai."

"No, even if you give it to me, I can't do it, you know."

"Then I'll teach you."

"You will? Then I'll give it a try."

"Please take here and here between your index finger and thumb."

"... Sorry. Where is here?"

As both her hands were occupied, I followed instruction on Kurisu-chan's line of sight, but I had no idea where she was indicating.

"It's here, you know here. Oooo."

Kurisu-chan lightly stuck out her lips to point it out.

"ooo."

"....."

Wow. That's kinda cute.

How she tapered her lips, trying her very best was a bit forcible, a tad idiotic, and kinda wonderful...! It looked like the face of someone approaching for a kiss.

"I-I don't really get it. Where?"

"Over here. Here. Oooo."

"Yeeaaah. Where?"

"Ooooooooooooo."

Now this is fun.

Really heals the heart.

But it wasn't good to tease her too much, so it's about time I got serious. I took a close look at where Kurisu-chan was pointing out. However, to a cat's cradle amateur, just getting serious didn't make me any better.

"Aaah, I can't stand to watch anymore."

There came a sudden, hoarse voice. Right after, a slender, withered hand was inserted between us. With a swoop, it took up the string from Kurisu-chan with practiced movements.

"This is how you do two-person cat's cradle. Look, this is the paddy field."

With a fed-up voice, the fingers spread out the string. It didn't look like a paddy field no matter how I looked at it, but that was what cat's cradle called the paddy field, apparently.

The one who suddenly appeared was an aged woman in glasses.

A deep blue coat, and white long skirt. The umbrella left open to her side meant she was likely using it as a sunshade.

“What’s that, boy? You’re not satisfied with cat’s cradle? This is why kids these days are... back when we were kids, we had to devise ways to entertain ourselves with nothing but a string.”

The old woman shook her head.

... I’d rather not say it, but she did seem like the stereotypical cynical elder.

“When it comes to kids these days, always on about the Famicom and 64... making all these incomprehensible blip sounds and cooping themselves up indoors...”

Her choice of hardware was half-assedly old.

If she was going with that, she could’ve said mega drive, and the gag would’ve worked.

“And then we have toys that shoot marbles from their stomachs, and those spiked top knock-offs, those shiny strange yoyos, those cars that run on battery, and those strange robots... you’ve got way too many things to play with. But only being able to play with such elaborate toys is proof of a needy heart, and lacking imagination.”

“.....”

I get her game. She’s launching an attack aimed at our specific generation. If she’s picking a fight with Corocoro, I’m game.

A quiet rage burned in my chest.

“Umm, specifically what do you mean by strange robots?”

I asked.

First, I have to make it clear what strange robot she’s talking about.

It is my belief that grouping all robot works together is-in a sense-far more insulting than pinpointing and criticizing every piece of a specific work.

That’s why that’s where the talk begins.

If she says Gundam, ‘That’s not a robot, that’s a Mobile Suit’ I’ll tell her.

If she says Eva, ‘That’s not a robot, that’s an Ultimate All-Purpose Humanoid Decisive Battle Weapon,’ I’ll tell her.

“What was it again? That one that looks like a blue tanuki.”

“.....”

While I had carried out a careful mental simulation on any and all forms of robot works, the old woman's answer was outside the scope of such simulation. To think it would be the cat-shaped robot!

No, he's a robot for what it's worth, but is it alright to categorize that work under the robot genre? He's never even appeared in Super Robot Wars...

Ignoring me as I dug too deep into it, the old woman held out her two hands maintaining the paddy field towards Kurisu-chan.

"Now take it."

"Eh?"

"Girl, you can do cat's cradle, can't you?"

"Y-yes."

Hesitant as she was, Kurisu-chan took the string from the old woman and made a shape. The old woman took it again... and so it repeated.

The flowing motions between the two were what one called two-person cat's cradle.

"You're quite something."

The wrinkles on the old woman's face sunk deeper as she smiled. Under that praise, Kurisu-chan seemed bashfully happy.

"But can you do this?"

The old woman said as she put the string over her hands. And without even looking at them, "These fine movements are to weed out the dunces," she joked, moving her fingers at a fearsome speed. After repeatedly hanging and undoing string, a single piece of art was born.

"Looks, it's a rabbit."

"Whoah!"

My voice and Kurisu-chan's overlapped in admiration.

Amazing, how should I put it, it felt like I was shown the work of a traditional master craftsman.

"That's amazing! How did you do that?"

Receiving the string back, Kurisu-chan asked brimming with interest. Just as her knowledge in cat's cradle was deeper, so was her admiration, it seems.

“If you want me to teach you, drop by my place anytime. It’s close by.”

“Is that really alright?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I was just troubled with having too much time on my hands. If a cute girl like you came over, I’d be able to kill some time productively.”

The woman said with a smile, picking up the umbrella she had placed to the side. Kurisu-chan’s expression brightened right up.

“Well, even if I say anytime, no one can say how much longer I’ve got left. Grandpa up in heaven might come for me tomorrow.”

Her face’s wrinkles deepened for a cynical smile.

... Why do the elderly tell such jokes you can’t laugh at? Those black jokes that come from their well of knowledge.

“Do you live alone, Mrs.?”

I asked, and “Yeah,” she nodded. “Grandpa went off a sudden the year before last. My daughter went off with some man long, long ago, and my son—”

The old woman stopped her words, her eyes wandering towards the cemetery.

“—Now he’s been in heaven for a long time now. Ah, no, kids who die before their parents have to spend the whole time stacking rocks by the Sanzu River. Did I get that one right?”

Her tone was quite indifferent, but—from her words came a black joke even less funny than the one before it. Kurisu-chan and I were silenced. Perhaps the old lady sensed the darkening air,

“Ahaha. Don’t make such dark faces,”

She gave a hearty laugh.

“Grandpa lived to a good age, nothing we can do about that. My son too, that was already more than a decade ago...”

The old woman continued on as if talking to herself. Behind her glasses, her eyes trailed off into the distance.

“He suddenly disappeared one day, and just when I thought I’d found him, I hear he’s dead... good grief, just what was going through his head, that stupid

son of mine.”

“...? Um, did your son get into an accident? Was it illness?”

I ended up asking. I immediately regretted asking such intrusive questions, but the old woman didn't look reluctant in the slightest, offering the lightest of answers.

“It wasn't accident or illness. Our son just suddenly up and vanished one day. Went missing. Couldn't find him no matter where we looked. It was as if he'd been spirited away.”

“... Spirited away.”

The one who said that was Kurisu-chan. It looked like the words unintentionally slopped from her mouth. She reacted as if... the term spirited away rung a few bells.

“I think it was around a year after he stayed missing. A call came in from the police. ‘We found your son's corpse’ they said. In the end, everything about that boy's been left a mystery.”

The old woman said and breathed a deep breath.

“... Oh, sorry about that. It's no fun to hear an old woman's old tales.”

“Oh no,” I shook my head.

“Then I'll be taking my leave. If I take too many detours, my son and husband might get angry with me.”

Leaving those words, she walked off in the direction of the graveyard. While she looked to be a considerably age, her lower back wasn't bent in the slightest. She stood with her spine straight, her walking form as beautiful as a model's.

“P-please wait!”

Kurisu-chan forcefully stood, smashing a high-pitched voice into the old woman's back.

“Hm? What is it?”

“C-could you tell me, you're, name...”

Once the old woman turned, Kurisu-chan asked in a fine, chipped voice. Her wide eyes projected the clear colors of unease.

“It’s Kurisu Nobuko.”

The old woman... Kurisu Noriko-san matter-of-factly stated and started off again.

The surname Kurisu.

It was the same as the one belonging to the girl beside me; of course, there was a possibility it was a coincidence. While it wasn’t a common surname, it wasn’t particularly rare either. Still... I immediately knew it was no coincidence.

Sewing her way between the gravestones, Nobuko-san came to a stop before a single marker and put her hands together.

Before the stone engraved with, ‘Kurisu Family Grave’.

The same grave Kurisu-chan had prayed to a moment before.

The father Kurisu-chan lost before she was born. Nobuko-san’s son lost over ten years ago Kurisu kept her father’s surname. Missing.

Don’t tell me, don’t tell me...



“... Hey, Kurisu-chan. Could that old woman possibly—”

Midway through my words, I swallowed my breath.

Kurusu-chan gave my clothes a firm tug.

Her delicate shoulders were anxiously shaking. In contrast to Nobuko-san walking straight and tall, her back curled smaller and smaller.

Chapter 2: Telepathy x Travel x Philosopher's Stone

Thinking back, there was an era where fantasies of the protagonist suddenly getting sent off to another world flooded the market, but—each time I read that type of story, there was something that bothered me.

It was the protagonist's family.

The protagonist should, naturally, have a family in their original world.

Abruptly flown away on the wings of some incomprehensible power, the main character gains an accurate grasp of their situation, and adjusts to this other world at a surprising speed, but what about the family they left behind?

The family that lost a precious member without knowing a thing?

There's no way they'd be able to adapt as easily as the main character.

Perhaps they pushed through night after night to search for them. Perhaps they shook in anxiety, their hearts forever plagued. Perhaps they cursed the police, whose investigations showed no developments.

“Of all the stories overflowing the world, there must always exist a ‘Focal Point’. The point the spotlight shines down on becomes the point more important than anything. The public only holds interest in the stage lit by the spotlight... the main story.”

That childhood friend of mine said, once upon a time.

“Maybe police dramas are a good example? In police dramas, you could call it almost a guarantee that a murder takes place, but there's no officer who has the time to be saddened by each and every one of them. There are even idiots who begin their investigation complaining, and I was supposed to be on a date. Yet once a single comrade dies, it becomes a huge ruckus like, this is the time to show them what we're made of. They shed tears, burn in anger as everyone plunges into the greatest heated climax. When human life is supposed to be equal, that's quite the distinction.”

In the end, that's how it works.

The part that's depicted as the most important part largely changes the

components of the story. The depictions centered around the protagonist who crossed to another world are far more flashy, cool, and comfortable to watch. What interest was there to be had in watching a grieving family?

However.

Interesting or not... what exists still exists.

Take Kurisu-chan's beloved 'Kurisu's Grand Adventure' for instance; I heard it was a so-called otherworldly summons fantasy, yet who could say if that work ever depicted such uninteresting, unexcited scenes...

"Morning, Kurisu-chan."

"Good morning, Kagoshima-senpai."

Three days passed without any particular happenings.

I had gotten largely accustomed to living with a member of the opposite sex.

When I got up in the morning, the shock brought by the fact there was a girl in my house had considerably faded.

"Wait a bit. I'll make breakfast now."

She said, putting on an apron and making for the kitchen. When I sat at the table and waited, around thirty minutes later, breakfast was ready. Made with domestic prowess I might fall for.

I had seen Kurisu-chan's cooking from a few months ago, but it looked like her skills had risen exceptionally from that point. We sat across the table from one another, "Thank you for the meal," we put our hands together.

"When we're like this, it's almost like we're newlyweds."

"Bbfff!"

When I casually threw it out, Kurisu-chan did a spit take with her miso.

"A-are you okay?"

Hac, hac, she coughed as, "I-I'm fine..." she replied.

"What happened?"

"I-I mean, you said something strange..."

"Something strange?"

"That we're like n-newlyweds, and stuff..."

"Yeah? I was just wondering if this is what it would be like if I got married to

you.”

“Mm-married...”

On my normal answer, Kurisu-chan’s hung her bright-red face.

“Ah, Kurisu-chan, there’s miso coming from your nose.”

“...!”

She leaped up, pulled a number of tissues from the box in the living room, wiped up her nose and returned.

“E-even if you notice, please don’t mention that sort of thing!”

“Eh? But wouldn’t you hate it more if I noticed yet kept silent?”

“Urk... i-in that case, can’t you, you know, more nonchalantly...”

“Ah, Kurisu-chan, now there’s CO₂ coming out of your nose...”

“...!”

Kurisu-chan tried to jump up again, likely to make off for tissues once more, but it did seem she noticed along the way, twisting her body to rapidly approach me.

“Of course there’s CO₂ coming out of my nose! I’m human.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. But you were quite late to notice.”

“Uuu...”

“Ahaha. Sorry, sorry, don’t be so down.”

Kurisu-chan really is fun to tease.

With that enjoyable breakfast over, the two of us cleaned up.

“Ah, that’s right, Kagoshima-senpai.”

Kurisu-chan said, rinsing down tableware in the sink.

“I think I’ll go to Nobuko-san’s house today.”

My hands stopped in the midst of wiping a plate dry. I ended up turning towards her, only to find she was still washing without pause. Her eyes focused in on her hands, she wouldn’t look at me.

“I see.”

I responded as I could. Three days had gone by since we met Nobuko-san, but in those three days of living together, we never brought her up. Kurisu-chan

never talked about it and I hesitated to mention it in conversation. There was little doubt that Nobuko-san was Kurisu-chan's grandmother. Not that we confirmed it, but I was convinced.

While I was often evaluated as dull, even I could hazard the guess.

But just knowing didn't mean I could do something about it.

This was Kurisu-chan's private matter. I couldn't stick my head in with half-baked emotion.

"Should I bring her some sort of present? ... wait, I don't have my wallet. Ahaha."

A cheerful laugh.

Was she putting on a firm act, or did she really think so? I was unable to make a call.

Today, Kurisu-chan had finally said she would go to Nobuko-san's house. She didn't have any plans, so if she really wanted to, she could've gone the day after we met her.

I'm sure she thought, and thought, and finally reached her conclusion.; in which case, there was nothing for me to say.

"Alright, got it. Have fun."

"If you've got time, do you want to come with me?"

"Yeaah. I'll have to decline. I've got an appointment in the afternoon."

"An appointment?"

"I have to play with a kid in the neighborhood. He's a kid nicknamed Gri—"

el-kun, I was about to continue when the phone in my pocket began to shake. When I looked at the screen, I saw it display a number I'd never seen before. I hesitated a moment before pressing the answer button.

'Hello. Is this Kagoshima Akira-san?'

Came a bright voice that was somewhat familiar.

"That's right, umm, who might this be?"

'It's me. Saijou Mutsuki, been a while.'

"Sorry for calling you out all of a sudden."

As I took my seat, Saijou-kun smiled a sociable smile and lightly lowered his head.

The place I was called to was the terrace of the Italian restaurant in front of the station.

“It might not make up for it, but this will be my treat. I did heavily insist. Order whatever you want.”

“Oh no... I don't really mind. It wouldn't be cool to let a younger kid treat me.”

“Is that so? Then I won't.”

“.....”

No, isn't that supposed to be where you say, “No, I insist”?

That's how the Japanese do it. While I truly didn't intend to be treated by my junior, that doesn't mean I wouldn't feel conflicted if he pulled back so easily.

“Don't make such a conflicted face.”

Saijou-kun corrected the position of his glasses with a merry laugh.

“In that case how about we compromise, and let me treat you on just the drinks. You won't mind that much, right?”

As he smiled at me, I gave an ambiguous nod.

How should I put it, he hasn't changed, I thought. When his words were polite and his demeanor soft, I didn't feel the slightest respect towards me. More so, I felt he was mocking me: In short, I was being made light of.

... I've always been easily made light of by my juniors. I think Griel-kun was totally mocking me.

“So what's your business today.”

I spoke up after calling the waiter and placing an order.

“You had something you needed from me, right?”

This was the second time I met Saijou-kun. Saijou-kun was a member of the movie club Orino-san was affiliated with, and I got to know him through Orino-san's little sister Oshiri-chan.

Ever since then, we hadn't particularly been in touch, so it had been quite a while since we exchanged words.

“I don’t have any particular business. I just wanted to meet you and talk. Or could it be I’m not supposed to call you if I don’t have any business?”

“.....”

You’re not.

Why is he saying the sort of thing that would make my heart skip a beat if it was said by a girl I was close to? Hearing it from a man doesn’t make me happy at all.

To be frank, I don’t think we’re that close, you know? I don’t hate you, but that doesn’t mean I particularly like you.

“Ahaha. Please don’t make such a blatantly displeased face. It’s a joke, I tell you. I have some proper business.”

Saijou-kun lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, it’s nothing important. More a report than anything else.”

“Report?”

As I responded, the food was brought to our table. Two servings of pasta, and the drink Saijou-kun said he’d treat me to (I got orange juice). The talk’s continuation would have to be over a meal.

“I’m going to go on a trip with the movie club members in the near future.”

“A trip?”

“Right now, I’m acting as coordinator, and setting up this and that. Well, it’s not a particularly large event. Just a long outing with a few close members.”

“Hmmm. Sounds fun.”

You often hear people using summer vacation for a trip. That sort of recreational event does sound very club-like.

“But you’re the coordinator? I heard you were on the younger side in the club.”

“I’m the one who brought it up, I can’t avoid a level of trouble. Even if it takes some time and effort, I wanted to go on a trip with the members I knew I could trust.”

That’s a strange way to put it. That makes it sound like there are members of the movie club he can’t trust.

“I get what you’re saying, but was that something you had to come out and report to me?”

“Orino-san’s included in the trip members. That’s why I thought I’d give you notice, for what it’s worth.”

“Why?”

“Huh? Weren’t the two of you going out?”

“We’re not, just friends.”

That’s why, even if Orino-san goes on a trip with someone I don’t know, I don’t have the qualifications to stop her. Rather, I’d plainly want her to have fun.

“Tell her to bring back something cool.”

“Got it,” Saijou-kun gave a small laugh.

“By the way, what’s the destination? Domestic? International?”

“I guess you could say it’s outside the nation. We are going to be leaving Japan.”

“That’s amazing. What country?”

“You won’t know it even if I saw it. It’s a country you’ve never heard of.”

Saying that with an air of importance, Saijou-kun set down his fork. After a sip of water, he formed a smile that seemed to hold hidden implication.

“Coming in contact with other worlds will surely be a worthwhile venture.”

“You’re right about that,” I nodded.

By other world, another planet that closely resembles the one we live in... of course wasn’t what he meant, and he was referring to a country with a different culture.

I mean... there’s no way other worlds exist.

“It seems a bigshot from that world is currently somewhere in town. They’re searching for something... If I can use him to secure a means of transportation, there’s a high probability even we will be able to go to that country.”

“... Is it the sort of country where you have to go through such a troublesome procedure?”

“Unfortunately, yes. And it brings with it considerable risk, but those parts included are the fun of an adventure.”

“In that case, couldn’t you just go somewhere easier? Is there some reason it has to be that country?”

“There is.”

Saijou-kun nodded without hesitation.

“The founder of our movie circle is currently taking a stay at our destination point.”

Founder.

Come to think of it, Saijou-kun did mention it before.

That he had to meet the founder of the organization he was affiliated with.

“Meaning you’re going to meet that person?”

“Though I say that, I haven’t sent notice. I’m thinking to suddenly barge in and shock them.”

“I see, so it’s a surprise.”

“... Pff. Ahahah.”

My aimless remark caused Saijou-kun to burst into laughter, and jovially raise his voice.

“Haha. I see, it’s a surprise. That’s a good way to put it. Kukuku.”

I didn’t know what was so interesting, but he continued his merry laugh. Once he had laughed himself out, he muttered to himself.

“I’ll lay the finest of surprises. The sort that will make our founder whose name and face I don’t know to go weak at the knees...”

I felt a chill run down my spine.

When the contents of the conversation were playfully childish, and he made the innocent smile of a kid who thought up some mischief—his eyes alone weren’t laughing in the slightest.

I picked up a strong will and a faint dark emotion. Behind his composed conduct, the sort of tension that only clads a person driven into a corner.

From there, we exchanged a few more words before I finished lunch and left the shop, but they weren’t on anything important.

In the end, Saijou-kun only wanted to talk about his trip.
As if in regards to me... he wanted to prove his resolve.

“I attack with ‘Rocket Warrior’. Alright, it’s my win.”

“... Gnnnn. Ugaaaah!”

Griel-kun cried out as he lurched towards the heavens, throwing up the cards in his hand.

“Ah, hey. Don’t throw someone’s cards. We’re not in a house, you’ll get them dirty.”

“... Why. Why can’t I win against the likes of you.”

“I think this time was close. You got my lifepoints down quite a bit.”

“Kuh. *You* think you can take pity on *me*!?”

My tact had the opposite effect. Good grief, this kid is a pain.

He glared at me like an old foe, but with his baby-face and boy’s soprano, it wasn’t scary. I stood from my seat and collected the cards he scattered.

I parted from Saijou-kun at just the right time, so I made straight for Asahi Park.

Griel-kun arrived even sooner than me, what’s more, he was already sitting at the table, showing ample motivation

His eyes lorded over me.

“Hmph. You’ve done well, daring to appear before me again. I’ll praise you for that.” He was considerably stuck up, but once the duel began, the tables immediately turned.

Five consecutive wins for me.

“Dangit. One more, Kagoshima. We’re dueling again!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I’ll just say it, but if you intentionally hold back as you did before, your life is forfeit.”

“I understand. Real sorry.”

The truth is, a moment ago, I bent my pride as a duelist to try letting Griel-kun hold the trophy, but for some reason, he instantly saw through it and snapped. According to Griel-kun, he could see through the instant I stayed my hand.

... What sort of seasoned warrior is he supposed to be? Or so it felt, but

whatever the case, I now knew I couldn't go easy on Griel-kun.

The pride to not let your opponents hold back isn't a bad thing, and I did respect it. But when I fought at full force, the result was—

“Okay, I win again.”

“Gg... nnn.”

I might sound stuck up, but I am strong. I was always the type who invested quite a bit into this sort of game, and I never lost among friends.

“Dang... I really should have removed this card, and put in that one...”

Recovering from the disgrace of defeat, Griel-kun started a staring contest with his cards, he began rebuilding his deck. The way he tried his absolute best was a bit charming to watch over.

As he gazed into the cards like a tasty meal, Griel-kun suddenly raised his face as if he remembered something.

“Come to think of it, The day before last, I went to the Adatara Hye School education institution you attend, but no one was there. What is the meaning of this?”

“I mean, it's summer vacation.”

“Summer vacation...? Ah, I see, a seasonal holiday period.”

“Do you have some business at our high school?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. I simply thought Creastia might be there. But no matter how I sharpen my senses, I cannot feel her presence. Has she already left this town behind...?”

“You're quite attached to this girl, I see.”

“Hmph. She's just an aside. That woman isn't even worth my attention.”

He annoyingly rung his nose. Despite that, I get the feeling he's moving quite assertively

“Hey, what sort of girl is that Creastia?”

When I asked out of curiosity, “She's... just a genius,” Griel-kun gave a curt reply.

“An exceedingly talented individual who strongly inherited the blood of her renowned mother. Short for her age, childish, with facial features on the cute side. She's still a student, but she has secured superior scores in both the

classroom and practicals, some have their hopes on her future.”

“Hmm. She sounds amazing.”

“For a time, I attended the same school as Creastia. Though we barely ever exchanged words. Her friends there called her Crea.”

“... Crea?”

Crea... Kuria was Kurisu-chan’s first name.

Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

With a strong sense that a foreign name was forcefully converted into kanji, a name befitting a mixed blood. Could it be the person Griel-kun is searching for is Kurisu-chan?

Could it be that Kurisu-chan’s real name was actually that Creastia something something long piece, but that would be a pain here, so she shortened it? Small-built and cute facial features did describe her perfectly.

“It’s just... I couldn’t stand her. Terribly unsociable, she rarely ever smiled in front of anyone. In practicals, her independent action stood out, and her own ability... it was often that she took action as if to show off her own genius. As if to sneer at the commoners learning through repeated effort, she easily overcame any difficulty unphased.”

“.....”

Hearing that, I was convinced my own inference was off the mark.

There was no way the woman Griel-kun was searching for could be Kurisu-chan. The woman he spoke of was far too removed from the girl I knew.

Kurisu-chan was honest, a hard worker, always smiling... she was definitely not the cynical girl he wanted.

“Creastia was stationed in this town alone as a special exception. I heard her independent action was permitted by her own personal wishes, but I’m sure she largely thought she was better off without anyone to drag her down. She really is a detestable woman.”

“From what I can tell, she doesn’t sound very charming.”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly. She really is an uncharming woman. Ah, of course...”

Griel-kun lifted the corners of his mouth into a smile

“—You could say she’s her most charming while they still call her a genius.”

It was a somewhat self-deriding, somewhat self-harming smile.

“Now then, the small talk ends there.”

Finishing up the conversation, he placed his deck on the table. He had finally completed it, it seems.

“Let the battle begin.”

Griel-kun said full of confidence. When he had already suffered twenty consecutive losses, just where was this confidence coming from.

“Yeah, yeah. But Griel-kun, are you sure you waste your time like this? Besides finding that Creastia girl, didn’t you have some other business?”

“Might you be referring to the Philosopher’s stone?”

“Right, right, that one.”

“Kagoshima, don’t misunderstand. My objective is, to the end, the philosopher’s stone, and Creastia is, to the end, a side note.”

“Personally I don’t care either way.”

“Hmph. Well, come so far, perhaps you could say Creastia has become the main. For—”

In a slightly lively voice, Griel-kun spoke in high spirits.

“I have already obtained the philosopher’s stone.”

“Hmm, I see. Good for you.”

I’m sure he just declared some random rock the philosopher’s stone, I thought as I arbitrarily nodded. I wasn’t the sort to poke at every detail of a child’s fun.

“But I never thought ‘that’ of all things would be the philosopher’s stone. Well, it’s still something of a raw ore. To draw out more effect than its base components, I’ll have to spend my time tempering it.”

“The philosopher’s stone, huh. Why don’t you bring it to school as your summer research project? Back in elementary school, I gathered strange-shaped rocks

by the river-side and presented them.”

“Hmph. The hard-headed dimwits at the education institution would never be able to make use of this legendary-class piece.”

“Hey, hey, Griel-kun. You shouldn’t say bad things about your school teachers.”

“Fufu, you have a point. It was immature of me. As long as I complete this stone, I can finally surpass that one’s caliber... I’ll obtain such power it would become idiotic to compare myself to the masses... Fwahahahah.”

Like that, we carried a dubiously unmeshing conversation, as we placed our decks in the right position, and drew five cards each.

And we raised the declaration of war.

“”Duel!””

The duels continued until the sunset, but never once did I lose.

When it came to that, the sore loser Griel-kun couldn’t keep silent, and challenged me to a rematch at the same time tomorrow. Don’t tell me this is going to continue until he wins, I thought, somewhat disconcerted, but honestly, I didn’t particularly hate it.

It was fun to be able to play card games after so long, and it was fun to see how Griel-kun grew.

Additionally... no matter the difference in skill, card games are something of a game of luck. More than checkers or chess, they were closer to trump. If repeated enough times, there will come a time where the less-skilled one will win. I doubted the day Griel-kun beat me was too far away, and in that case, I thought it would be fine to keep him company.

“That sounds like you, Kagoshima-senpai.”

The living room of my house. Once she’d heard my tale of martial victory, Kurisu-chan leaked a giggle.

“Like me?”

“You look like you’d be good at playing with kids.”

“... By that you mean, I have an exceedingly high big-brother constitution, so I’m good at looking after small children-in a good sense, right?”

You don’t mean my mental age is at a child’s level, right?

“Now who can say?”

Kurisu-chan gave a mischievous laugh, dodging the question.
Yeaaah. I kinda get the feeling she’s making fun of me. Not that I really hate it.

“By the way,”

I tried asking as casually as physically possible.

“How were things on your side?”

“Yes. It was fun. Nobuko-san taught me all sorts of games apart from cat’s cradle as well. Like tops, and juggling, and hanafuda cards.”

What I got back was, in short, a normal answer.
You could go as far as to call it exemplary.

“I see. That’s good.”

I couldn’t ask anymore.

Kurisu-chan likely noticed... that I had noticed the relationship she had with Nobuko-san. On top of noticing, she didn’t touch on it. As if to show a firm rejection, she didn’t raise the topic. To her, this was... a problem she didn’t want me to step into. She really did draw the line after all.

As per usual, she wouldn’t rely on me.

Did I lack the strength for Kurisu-chan to lean on?

“Strength, huh...”

“Eh? Did you say something?”

“No, I was just wondering what strength is.”

“? What’s wrong, all of a sudden..”

“Nah... it’s nothing.” I forcefully changed the topic. “Come to think of it, who’s the strongest character in Kuria’s grand adventure?”

“The strongest character, is it?”

“Right, right. You always get one or two of them in any manga, right? Oy, oy, how the hell are you supposed to top that, that sort of strongest character. Well, in the end, those folks are defeated surprisingly easy by the protagonist, I get that.”

“... Let’s see.”

Kurisu-chan folded her arms in thought.

“The leader of the holy congregation, Captain Greiz is extremely strong, and in pure magical power, the sage of the west, Zol-Xien is currently top in the continent... ah, but if you’re not restricting it to humans, they say there’s no magician of the modern era who can best the Goddragon Zeanos who lives in the Azalier Mountain range... if you want to restrict it to the current generation, then the one formerly hailed as the hero of Rhulein...”

It was a light question, but Kurisu-chan began seriously thinking about it.

“Ah, you don’t have to get so serious about it.”

“Y-you’re right. Umm... aah. This might be different than strongest, but there’s a kid with a far-too prodigious future ahead of him.”

“Far too prodigious?”

“A kid who continues leaving records as the youngest to perform any and every feat. National qualifications, subjugation records, development of new techniques and the like.”

“Now that’s amazing. One of those genius characters.”

“... No. Genius, and talent... it’s not on that level anymore.”

Her cheerful voice sunk a bit.

“Even wonder child is too light a term for that boy. He... is called the Devil’s child.”

The Devil’s child.

What a terrible title. Even in manga terms, it put a damper on the spirit.

“I... no, I mean, the protagonist attended the same school as him for a short while, but he skipped grades in no time and graduated. After graduation, he joined the holy congregation for a short while, but quit in no time, and is currently of whereabouts unknown. Rumor has it he’s been sticking his hands into dangerous research.”

“Ah, I see. So one of those okay, I wrote him, but how am I supposed to deal with him? Sort of strongest characters. You get them from time to time, that sort of, ‘So in the end, what was he’ character.”

“U-umm, well, something like that.”

Kurisu-chan gave a vague nod.

“His name is... Griestark D’Ifa Licuio Soel. He was a talent they said would

rebuild the fallen noble Soel House in one generation, but just where could he be, and what is he doing...”

The Devil’s child’s name was exceptionally long, so I ignored it left to right. I didn’t feel up to remembering the name of a character in a manga I wasn’t even going to read.

But to remember all of that lengthy name, Kurisu-chan must really like ‘Kuria’s Grand Adventure’, I thought when Beebeep, beebeep, the washing machine’s tone that signaled its finished dry cycle reached the living room.

“Ah, looks like the laundry’s done. I’ll go get it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

“It’s fine. Just take it easy, Kagoshima-senpai. You’re letting me stay, so you could let me do this much.”

“But...”

“It’s not just because I don’t want your hands on my undergarments or anything. Don’t worry.”

“... Hm, emphasizing the point to contrarily hurt the opponent even further, what a high-level technique.”

It kinda felt like the sort of feelings a girl in puberty has towards her father.

“Well I’ll be. You don’t have to worry. I’m not the sort of pervert who gets excited over a woman’s undergarments. I’m not like those underwear thieves.”

“Oh, you sound a bit manly.”

“I mean, what’s the fun in touching underwear after it’s already been washed?”

“.....”

“The underwear thieves of the world, in most cases, nab them when they’ve been put out to dry, but what could be so fun about that? Detergent’s a powerful force nowadays, so an undergarment that’s been washed doesn’t retain the slightest womanly component of its owner.”

“.....”

“Seriously, those underwear thieves sure are idiots... wait, what?”

By the time I noticed it, Kurisu-chan had disappeared.

How strange, I’m sure I haven’t said anything wrong, yet...

Did she lose run out of patience? Or did she think the laundry would crease if she didn’t hurry up?

... I'm sure it was the latter. That's why I'll believe. Those who believe shall be saved.

With no conversation partner, I glanced at the TV that had been left on for a while.

The evening news was playing on the screen.

'Our next story,' the anchor lady familiarly read off the news. 'Late last night, in Nasu City of the Tochigi Prefecture, a portion of the tourist site next to Nasu's Yumoto Onsen, the volcanic stone was stolen. The crime was noticed when a tourist—'

"... A stone thief?"

That was even harder to comprehend than an underwear thief.

What does stealing a stone get you?

Are they a rock collector like Ojarumaru's Kazuma?

'The stolen rock was a volcanic stone called the Sesshouseki, and as multiple stones were carried off in one night, the police are investigating under the assumption of multiple culprits—'

The Sesshouseki.

The toxic stone the fair-faced gold pelted nine tailed fox Tamamo no Mae changed into on her death. In a sense, the fox's remains, and her grave.

That Sesshouseki had been stolen by someone's hand...

"... Well, not that youkai exist in reality."

The tv soon shifted to the next headline. The television station only treated stolen Sesshouseki as a peculiar occurrence, it seems.

It was just a rock, so that sounded about right.

Come to think of it, Griel-kun also said something about a stone.

Was there an unprecedented rock craze breaking out somewhere I didn't know?

Chapter 3: Kikyoin Sisters x Playing Siblings x Hanafuda

When I looked into it, I found that, in the first place, Sesshouseki didn't refer to a single large stone, but a wide array of fragments of all shapes and sizes. Upon her death, the nine-tailed fox shifted shape into a massive, toxic stone, severing the life of any living being that got close. The name Sesshouseki came from the exceedingly brutal virulent nature of the stone. While it was feared by the people who lived around it, during the period of the northern and southern dynasties, a Soto Buddhist monk by the name of Gennou smashed the Sesshouseki, its destroyed fragments dispersing all over Japan. Meaning the item currently located near Nasu's Yumoto Onsen was one of the fragments.

(TL: Sesshouseki: lit. life destroying stone, killing stone)

(TL: Period of (Japanese) Northern and Southern Dynasties: 1336-1392)

That being the case, it's not like the nine-tailed fox ever existed in the first place. That's why that bit about toxicity was most likely inspired by the hydrogen sulfide, sulfuric dioxide, and other noxious gasses that break out in the vicinity of hot springs.

At present, it seems the Sesshouseki had become a relatively popular tourist spot.

Among my friends, I did know one individual who had paid it a visit.

'Hello, this is Kikyoin Yuzuki. Could you state your business?'

It was the self-proclaimed onmyouji.

A few months ago, when I had only just met her, I heard she dropped by the Sesshouseki when she made a trip to the Tochigi Prefecture.

"Well, it's nothing important, but,"

'Then I'm hangin' up.'

"Wait, wait! I've got business, loads of business!"

Good grief, Kikyoin-san's as cold as ever. Recently, she finally unblocked me,

so I was sure our friendship was growing bit by bit.

“They were running it on the evening news yesterday,”

Once I had said that much,

‘Oh, are you talkin’ about how the Sesshouseki was stolen?’

Kikyoin-san took a shortcut to the answer. She was so perceptive I was mildly shocked.

“I’m surprised you could tell.”

‘Somethin’ ya’d call me for, and it was on the news. Is there anythin’ else it could be?’

“No guarantee about that one. I might have just called because I wanted to hear your voice, you know?”

‘... So you wanna die?’

“I’m sorry.”

Scary. Sometimes joking around is a life or death business.

“Well, if you know, that’s good. I had a hunch you’d be the type of person who’d like the Sesshouseki, rather, I thought you’d be interested, so I just kinda thought I’d tell you.”

‘Well thanks for the trouble. ‘n wait, it’s too late. I’ve already been moving from the crack of dawn. Right now, I’m just about standin’ right in front of it.’

“For reals!?”

Isn’t she a bit fast!? Isn’t she a bit too proactive!?

“W-why?”

‘Tamane-sama snapped for real. If it’s for Tamane-sama’s sake, there’s no way I wouldn’t move, see.’

Snapped for real?

Why’s that? Is Tama-chan one of those rock enthusiasts.

“No but still, that’s amazing. It happened yesterday morning, and you’re already in Tochigi.”

‘Not particularly. If Tamane-sama gets serious, that distance’s one bound and poof.’

A question marker hung over my head at that perplexing statement. Umm... oh, I see. I'm sure she forcefully declared the grade-schooler Tama-chan as younger than that to get her on all the transportations systems for free. Gosh darn, that's underhanded. I'll have to start calling her Pay-no-in-san next time onwards.

"You sure are Kikyoin, Paynoin-san."

I promptly got to it. One of those light slip-up jokes. All of a sudden, I got the feeling a frigid malice was leaking through the phone's receiver.

'... You're gettin' carried away thinkin' I can't punch you across the phone, aren't you.'

"No, not at all!"

Well, honestly, she's right!

'... You'd better watch your ox hour.'

(TL: Ox Hour, 2 a.m. on the pre-numerical zodiac based time-scale)

What's with that novel threat? Don't tell me she wants me to watch my back at night?

While I was trembling in fear at her ox hour visit declaration,

'Hmph. Someone like you should just get too scared to sleep at two at night, so your biological rhythm gets thrown way out of whack!'

Kikyoin-san's aim was far pettier than I expected. Thanks to the long break, my biological rhythm was already all over the place. Though it's gotten somewhat decent now that Kurisu-chan's living with me.

As I thought, she puts up a strong front, but Kikyoin-san's really a kind person, or so I was nearly moved to tears when, 'Oy, Yuzuki,' I heard Tama-chan call Kikyoin-san from beyond the receiver.

'Ah, Tamane-sama. Did you find somethin'?''

From there, Kikyoin-san abandoned me and began conversing with Tama-chan.

'The piece that was stolen was the one that served as— — core, it was — —'

‘This was not the work of—— ordinary——’ ‘From analysis of the residual power, —— enemy is——’ ‘How they take our mother’s husk——’ ‘Tamamo no Mae’s long daughter—— spare no merc——’ I heard bits and pieces of Tamachan’s voice, but I hadn’t the slightest idea what was being said.

All I could tell— her tone carried with it a fearsome rage. As if she was desperately trying to contain her overflowing anger, forcefully maintaining a level cadence.

I couldn’t think of it as the voice of a nine-year-old little girl
Almost what a Youkai would howl—it was a sinister voice.

‘Hey, sorry but I’m hangin’ up. Got somethin’ to do.’

“Got it. By the way, when will you be back?”

‘Within the day.’

“It’s a day trip?”

‘Seems the one we’re after is in your direction. ‘Cya.’

The line was unempathetically cut.

I tucked the phone in my pocket and looked around.

I was currently in the yard of a Japanese-built house. A roof tiling that had completely fled out of sight nowadays. While it was narrow, a garden with an atmosphere to it. Near the tap lay a bucket and ladle to scatter water with.

A somewhat weathered detached house that’s construction easily dated back over fifty years ago.

I had gone outside to make a call, and once that was done, I returned through the porch.

In the tatami room, Nobuko-san and Kurisu-chan sat across from one another. There were cushions placed over the aged tatami, and on top of them, they amused themselves with a game of Hanafuda.

Right, this was Nobuko-san’s house. Kurisu-chan was invited again, and today, I intruded along with her. I sat to the side of the two making serious faces, watching over their match.

What they were doing at the moment was apparently a game for two called ‘Koi-koi’. While it did seem Kurisu-chan had learned all the rules last time she came around, I had barely any idea how to play with hanafuda cards.

I had hammered many a modern card-game into my head, but hanafuda was beyond my reach.

It's kinda that, you know.

In elementary school, maybe this is what those girls feel like, watching over the boys playing card games. Or perhaps, that feeling when watching that certain summer movie whose climax has them playing hanafuda in a virtual world. You don't know what they're doing, but it kinda gets you heated. That sort of thing. And while I was thinking that, the match had ended.

"Who won, Kuria-chan?"

I couldn't tell what happened, so I tried asking.

"It was my complete loss... onii-chan."

So answered Kurisu-chan.

We had both changed what we called the other.

If you're asking why it came to this, the story rewinds to last night.

Kurisu-chan had just gotten out of the bath, and gazing at her mildly reddened cheeks, I want to touch them, I want to squish them up, I was thinking when, "... And that's how it is. I'm counting on you." Kurisu-chan sat beside me on the sofa, lowering her head.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I wasn't listening at all, could you run that by me again?"

When I replied honestly, Kurisu-chan's shoulders dropped.

"God! You'd better listen this time."

"Sorry, sorry. I was just thinking a bit about the problems with annuity nowadays."

I arbitrarily played it off and formed a firm expression.

"So what were we talking about again?"

"Please make it so I'm your little sister when we're in front of Nobuko-san."

Kurisu-chan's expression turned especially serious on that one.

"Why?"

"Umm, last time I went, I let it carelessly slip that we were living together... and from there, I kinda ended up explaining that we were brother and sister."

"Oh, I see. If we're not even related, it'd be strange for a man and woman of age to be living together, after all. But that being the case, it would be difficult

to explain the situation you're in, so..."

"That's right"

"Because you'd have to start explaining from your exhibitionist tendencies."

"That's..... right."

Kurisu-chan gave the sort of nod to kill her own emotion.

"That's why I want you to call me by name... please, just don't call me Kurisu."

"....."

So that's it.

In the end, that was her aim. I don't know how much of the slipup story was true, but her deeper objective was to prevent me from calling her 'Kurisu-chan' in front of Nobuko-san.

To conceal her surname.

To conceal her identity.

When I thought calling a girl by first name would be a considerable event... I never thought it would go down like this.

"Yeah. Got it."

Without asking anything else, I took up her request.

"Then how 'bout we practice a but? Umm... K-Kuria-chan."

"That's me."

"... Haha, it's kinda embarrassing."

"Ahaha... you're right."

The two of us laughed bashfully. It was an awkward feeling words failed to describe.

"Then next up, Kurisu—I mean Kuria-chan, it's your turn."

"Y-yes."

Kurisu-chan took in a deep breath before looking up at me.

"Onii-chan..."

"....."

Oh, I see.

The setting's brother and sister, so it's come to that.

Crap, she took me by surprise.

Out of the bath, flushed face, moist hair, baggy clothing. Those upturned eyes that gazed into me inquisitively.

And... Onii-chan.

Each and every component she was composed of launched an all-out assault on me...!

“O-onii-chan, what’s wrong?”

“No... it’s nothing. I just felt like my entire body was tickled relentlessly...”

“Is that so.”

“... Alright. Kuria-chan. How about we try a different pattern?”

“A different, pattern?”

[IMAGE]

“That’s right. It’s not good to take up a challenge with a fixed perspective. Only on top of layered trial and error can we choose the most appropriate solution, or so I believe.”

“Oh I see.”

“Then try calling me by something else!”

Kurisu-chan thought for a bit and raised her head.

“Onii-san.”

“It’s not bad, but not great...”

“Yeaah. A bit iffy.”

“Ani-jya.”

“Not happening.”

“Nii-chan.”

“... Oh, that’s nice. Not half bad.”

“Nii-Nii.”

“Guuhah!”

My heart was shot through.

Nice. Splendid, Nii-nii!

... No, wait a second, I do get the feeling the simplest option of Onii-chan is still the best.

“Alright, Kuria-chan. Let’s narrow it down to Onii-chan and Nii-nii, and think about it from there.”

“... Sure. U-um, you don’t have to get so serious about it...”

“What are you talking about? A perfectionist such as myself would never permit such negligence.”

“... Never in my life have I ever considered you a perfectionist, senpai.”

“Hey now. It’s not senpai, is it?”

“Erk... O-onii-chan?”

“Or?”

“Nii-nii...?”

Good. I stuck up my finger and commended her.

Now let’s spend ample time thinking over which one to go with.

The night is still young.

Flashback over.

After thinking and thinking, the conclusion was the nice-and-simple ‘Onii-chan’ after all... I get the feeling we started with a relatively serious conversation, but why did it come to this?

Well, whatever the case, that’s just how it is.

For a short while, Kurisu-chan’s designation would be ‘Kuria-chan’, and mine would be ‘Onii-chan’.

“I was no match for Nobuko-san. I’m still a greenhorn.”

Came Kurisu-chan with a sad, yet somewhat festive smile. Seeing that, Nobuko-san also gave a delightful laugh.

“Girl, you’re weak because you’re still focusing on nothing but your own hand. ‘Koi-koi’ is the same as Mahjong, you’ll lose if you only look at your hand.”

“Urk... I don’t really know mahjong, so even if you make the comparison... onii-chan, can you play mahjong?”

“No, I can’t either. I’ve only ever played donjara.”

(TL: Donjara is a kids’ version of Mahjong with anime characters or child-friendly pictures on the tiles)

“What’s this? Kids these days don’t even play mahjong with the family anymore? Mahjong and hanafuda are things your parents are supposed to teach you, right?”

Kurisu-chan and I exchanged a look and shook our heads.

“Good grief,” Nobuko-san shook her head and breathed a deep sigh.

Nowadays, I get the feeling games with a strong gambling image like mahjong and hanafuda are dying out among the youth.

I’ll admit, mahjong’s getting popular again through manga and anime, but these days, the most I hear of hanafuda is some misc facts on TV like, ‘The word to ostracize comes from the fact the deer on the october card in hanafuda is turning its head away, deer and ten make ostracize’.

(TL: To ostracize is shikato, deer(shika) + ten(tou))

“In our house, we’d all get around the kotatsu every New Years playing family mahjong. Grandpa, Tooru, Kanako and I, we’d watch the festive decorations, sitting around the table.”

Of course, the elderly woman cynically smiled.

“That all came to a stop once Tooru disappeared.”

The air in the tatami room grew heavy in one fell swoop.

Mahjong is a table game played with four.

You can’t... play with three.

One missing family member, and the game couldn’t be set up.

“Instead we played sanma. But I always like the normal four-person mahjong better.”

Apparently, mahjong played with three people is called sanma. There are even mahjong clubs out in the world that specialize in sanma.

“.....”

So you can play with three.

You can set up the game.

... I never should've tried to sound knowing and dramatic.

“Now then. Next up, I'll teach the boy hanafuda.”

As she said that, Nobuko-san began dealing cards.

“Eh... I'm fine. I don't know the rules.”

“Rules are supposed to be learned as you play. Isn't that how life works? You learn society's rules as you live them.”

The air was one where I had no choice but to accept it, I reluctantly joined the game.

“Then I'll go brew some tea.”

“Thank you, dear. Do you remember where it is?”

“Yes.”

With an energetic nod, Kurisu-chan left the tearoom.

I picked up the eight cards I'd been dealt, and tried going over the rules I knew in my head.

First off, there were forty eight cards in total.

The forty eight cards had twelve suits, represented by each month's symbolic flower (pine, plum, sakura, wisteria, iris, peony, clover, silvergrass, chrysanthemum, maple, willow, paulownia) with four cards in each. The four cards in each month weren't exactly the same, there were variations with wild boars, and deer, with red and purple stripes and such, what's more, the pattern changed the point value. 'Koi-koi' is a game for making sets, so it starts with remembering the possible sets, and there are more than ten types of sets you can make. Like five light cards, or boar deer and butterfly, or field of flowers...

“.....”

This game is way too convoluted!

There are too many things you have to remember just to play it. I know I'm not one to say it, but if it's this complex, there's nothing we can do if it goes out of use.

These days, games are often made easy to start. Though in exchange, once you get hooked, they're a huge sink of time and money.

“... That girl’s a good kid.”

As I was frantically trying to recall the rules, Nobuko-san spoke heartily.

“Honest and sensible, on top of that, her face isn’t bad. That one’s going to be a splendid wife someday.”

She had my vehement agreement. I nodded with incredible force.

“I’m proud to have her as my sister.”

There, Nobuko-san suddenly narrowed her eyes.

“... But, it sometimes looks like that girl’s pushing herself.”

“Pushing, is it?”

“It’s different from playing the good kid. I wonder what it is... like she’s pushing herself to act out her perfect self.”

“.....”

She had my vehement agreement. Thought I couldn’t nod this time. It looked like Nobuko-san had her own thoughts on Kurisu-chan as well. As expected of a blood relative, perhaps I should say?

“Well, when you get to my age, your personality starts twisting, and you can’t help but be suspicious like me. When you spot a girl with great personality, you end up thinking there’s got to be something beneath it.”

Nobuko-san laughed cynically. I gazed at the door Kurisu-chan had left through, absentmindedly leaking words.

“... This house is quite big, isn’t it.”

It wasn’t two stories, but it was considerably vast, a Japanese-style detached residence. It seemed there were a number of rooms that weren’t even in use. It wasn’t a house meant for one to live alone. It was a house to live with a family.

“Hn. You don’t have to dance around the subject. I may be alone, but I’m living life to the fullest.”

I thought I was taking a considerable detour, but Nobuko-san saw through it.

Hmm, casual tact is difficult.

“I hit up the mahjong club two to three times a week.”

“... You commute to the mahjong club?”

“You can’t count on the country for anything. You’ve got to earn money with your own hands.”

What a gambling soul.

There should be a limit to standing sturdy.

“I go to the pachinko a lot too. That place is nice, always rowdy like a festival. The other day, I got along with the college student sitting next to me.”

“You’re the active sort...”

She really is a lively old woman.

And while she denied famicom and Nintendo 64, a pachinko is fine...

Well, I’m sure this sort of pliability is the key to good health.

“When it comes to pachinko, that machine’s getting heated these days. Umm, what was it again, that, purple slender robot...?”

“.....”

Nobuko, that’s no robot, that’s an Ultimate All-Purpose Humanoid Decisive Battle Weapon!

Like so, I thought I’d put in a sharp retort, but, “Hey, how long are you going to be yapping? You’ve got first move, hurry up,” she urged me on, so I dove into hanafuda unretortable.

I gazed at my hand once more.

... Mn?

“Umm, Nobuko-san.”

“Yes, boy?”

“What was I supposed to do with this again?”

I said as, unstylish as it was, I exposed my own hand to her. While president Kaiba might shake in humiliation at another seeing his hand, I was no president, so no problem.

The hand I was dealt contained four pairs of cards from the same month.

Seeing that, Nobuko-san opened her eyes wide.

“That’s kuttsuki, ain’t it?”

“Kuttsuki?”

“When the hand you’ve been dealt forms a set, it’s a special combination. A

hand in Koi-koi that finishes up the match the moment you're dealt the cards."

"Ummm... you mean—"

"It's like getting a Tenhou in Mahjong."

"It's like summoning Exodia in Yugioh."

".....?"

".....?"

We both tilted our heads at the other's comparison.

The hell's a Tenhou?

Is that supposed to be amazing?

"Anyways, this match goes to you."

Looks like I won.

Yeaah. I don't really get the rules, so I don't feel accomplished at all.

And it ended without me understanding what was supposed to be fun about it.

"Kuku, ahahahah."

While I couldn't find it in me to be delighted, Nobuko-san could no longer contain her laughter.

"To suddenly pull a kuttsuki in your first ever game of Koi-koi..."

She looked straight at me, speaking delightedly.

"I'm sure you'll make it big someday."

Kurisu-chan's business was over, so next came my own.

Today again, I was to have a duel with Griel-kun.

"You're really going to come along, Kurisu-chan?"

I asked Kurisu-chan walking beside me.

"You can go home ahead of me. You've got a spare key, don't you?"

"No, I'm here anyway, so I thought I'd try watching this duel thing."

"Hmhmm."

"I want to learn a thing or two from my big brother as well."

To make sure the seams didn't come apart before Nobuko-san, while we were

living together, I proposed we keep our names changed. That wasn't my personal preference or anything. Perish the thought.

“Well then, I've got to do my best to show you how cool I can be.”

“Do your best, onii-chan.”

We arrived at Asahi Park.

But there wasn't a single child in sight.

“Huh? He's not here yet?”

The two of us wandered aimlessly around the park, but the kid in the black mantle was nowhere to be seen. The table we usually (though it's only been two times so far) conducted our duels at was vacant. All that was there was a single white paper. To make sure it wasn't taken off by the wind, it was affixed with a single stone.

When I took it in hand and gazed at it,

‘To Kagoshima,

I now must take on the fox and curse user, so today's duel is on hold.

However, I will not allow you to get away with a win.

Tomorrow, same time, same place again.’

Was scrawled out in scribble-like penmanship.

At the end, something else was written in jumbled up bizarre lettering I couldn't think of as coming from this world. I could guess the end portion was Griel-kun's signature, but I couldn't tell what country's language it was supposed to be in.

He probably arbitrarily scribbled it. He's a kid after all.

“Onii-chan, that's...?”

“Yeah. Looks like it's a letter for me. Said he can't come today.”

But Griel-kun sure thought up a roundabout excuse.

The fox and curse user?

He could've come out with something halfway more decent.

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate.”

“Nothing we can do about it.”

With nothing left to do in the park, we stepped back onto the road home.

“You can’t get back?”

While Kurisu-chan was taking a bath, a call came in from Orino-san, who had gone off on a trip. Lounging around in a living room, I found myself repeating the question.

“What do you mean you can’t get back, Orino-san?”

‘Ummm, it’s a long story, and I don’t really get it either, but... it kinda seems like the gate was closed down...’

“Gate?”

‘Yeah, umm... by gate... I mean, yeah, there’s some sort of strike going on, and the public transportation’s all jumbled up, so I can’t get back.’

“That sounds terrible.”

It was rare in Japan, but apparently strikes are relatively common overseas. For example, in Italy, I hear that strikes called sciopero often break out, and have become a national speciality in a bad sense. When scioperos happen, the trains and all else shut down, and you can’t get anywhere, apparently. I guess the same sort of strike’s going on in the country the movie club party ventured to.

“Specifically what are they striking about?”

‘I’ve only gotten hearsay, and I don’t really get it either, but... apparently, at present, one of the country’s bigshots went out, and that person caused a problem somewhere...’

“Hmm.”

‘That person is called the Devil’s child or something, and I heard something about some stone, but that’s about it. I still haven’t gathered much information...’

“Hmhmm.”

Said I.

“I don’t get it at all.”

‘Yeah... I don’t get it either. What should I do...’

Orino-san said in quite an unreliable voice.

Isn’t she a bit too cornered from a little strike? I thought, anyone would feel faint of heart in a foreign land. I can’t blame her if she took on an anxious attitude as if she’d been left behind in some other world.

“What about Saijou-kun? He was supposed to be the coordinator, wasn’t he?”

‘About that...’

Orino-san struggled to say the rest.

‘Saijou-kun, he disappeared...’

“Disappeared?”

‘..... Yeah. Left the members aside and went off somewhere... I don’t know what he was thinking, but—Saijou-kun had the eyes of someone backed into a corner.....’

“.....”

Saijou Mutsuki, whereabouts unknown.

A child had gone missing in a foreign land.

Normally, that might be a situation I should worry about, but, “As I thought, it was impossible for that kid to coordinate a trip,” I muttered.

Good grief. For all the high and mighty things he said, in the end, it seems like it all came apart. Was he the sort to just throw it all out the window once a bit of an irregularity broke out?

‘... I think you’re a bit wrong there, but... yeah, let’s just go with that.’

Orino-san said and breathed a resigned sigh.

‘Anyways, right now, the remaining members have split up to search for a way to return, but I don’t know when exactly I’ll be getting back... so I thought I’d better report it to you.’

“Yeah?”

‘I might not make it in time for the second semester...’

“What, really?”

There’s more than a week to the second semester.

No matter how big of a strike it is, don't you think it's dragging on too long?

'Ah, but it really is just a possibility, that's why, in the million to one chance I can't get back, all the class work for the opening ceremony will be pushed onto you, so I had to make this call to apologize. Just in case.'

Consideration fitting of the earnest Orino-san.

Our class rep—Orino Shori. Vice rep—Kagoshima Akira.

Come to think of it, I'm vice rep, aren't I? Thanks to summer vacation, I'd completely forgotten. I got the feeling I just heard one of the initial settings from a manga that everyone had forgotten about.

"Yeah. Got it. Thanks for going to the trouble."

'Don't mention it.'

And there, it occurred to me.

"Come to think of it, did you meet the founder?"

The goal of this trip was, it's core was there, so I've heard.

'... Kagoshima-kun, why do you know about that?'

Orino-san asked in a grim voice.

"I heard it from Saijou-kun. He said the movie club's founder was at the trip destination. That everyone was going to meet that person, right?"

'Saijou-kun did...? I see, so he told Kagoshima-kun that much...'

Orino-san came to terms with it in a mutter to herself, and continued on.

'We haven't met that person yet. Everyone did try their best, though.'

"That's a shame."

It looks like Saijou-kun's surprise ended incomplete.

'Mn, huh...?'

"What's wrong."

'Hold in a second... in that case, could it be the reason Saijou-kun left us behind was to—'

The moment Orino-san was about to say something that sounded like it was nearing the crux of the matter.

“Onii-chaaan, the bath’s open.”

The voice of an out-of-the-bath Kurisu-chan resounded its way to the living room.

Her voice really carries.

I could hear the sound of the dryer, so, she was most likely drying off her hair in another room. Therefore, she must have been wringing out her voice so as not to lose out to the hair dryer, but whatever the case, she was loud.

Loud enough to hear over the phone.

‘.....’

I heard silence. I know you’re not supposed to be able to hear silence, but I picked it up by instinct. At this very moment, Orino-san was keeping quiet with a straight look on her face.

Crap.

This is bad!

‘K-Kagoshima-kun...? W-what was that just now? I thought I just heard a cute, girly voice...?’

“Umm, uh...”

‘Onii-chan? The bath?’

Orino-san pinpoint caught only the critical words.

“O-oh, you’re joking, Orino-san. If someone’s calling me onii-chan, then, of course, it must be my little—”

‘You’re an only child, right?’

Why did she bring up something so inconsequential?

‘Umm... this is that, that, you know, that.’

‘That?’

She said, painstakingly urging me on. Her level voice was contrarily terrifying.

“Umm... just over summer vacation, I’m looking after one of the relative’s kids!”

'A relative's kid?'

"Right, right! My father's little sister's grandfather's cousin's niece's nephew's daughter, somewhere around there, and anyways, a distant, distant relative's kid!"

'If she's your father's little sister's grandfather's cousin's niece's nephew's daughter, then I think the probability of her being younger than you is considerably low, you know?'

She calculated it!?

That's right, Orino-san's idiotically fast at calculations!

Almost like she's a psychic who underwent special training!

That was also part of the initial setting!

"T-that's well, there're marriages with age differences, divorces, remarriages, we've all got a lot going on."

'Hmnnn.'

"So anyway, I'm looking after the kid. Hey hold your horses there, she's just a younger relative, so none of those indecent things you're imagining—"

'I'm not imagining anything indecent! Rather, why does everyone always think I am!?'

No, I mean, Orino-san's a closet pervert.

Everyone in the ComClub knows that.

'Hmm. Well, it doesn't really matter. Whatever you do to a relative's kid doesn't have anything to do with me after all.'

She said, sulking in an easy-to-follow way.

"Yeah, anyways, that's just how it is."

I breathed out a relieved sigh.

In regards to Kurisu-chan, various circumstances were complicatedly intertwined, and at this point, it was difficult to explain. So covering it up like this was for the best.

Ah, but thank god. I somehow managed to play it—

"Fufu. But it still feels rather strange to call you onii-chan, Kagoshima-senpai.

Ah, but I-I don't particularly hate it or anything."

.....

Kurisu-chan. My cute, cute Kurisu-chan.

This is the first time in my life I'll insult you.

Are you an idiot?

'K-kk-Kagoshima-kun...?'

Orino-san's voice was clattering. Terror, unease, indignation, even across the phone, various emotions were intensely conveyed to me.

'That voice right there was Kurisu-chan, wasn't it?'

"N-no..."

'Why are you having Kurisu-chan call you onii-chan? What's more, the bath...'

"Y-you're wrong! There's a very deep reason as to why Kuria-chan's calling me onii-chan and—"

'Kuria-chan...?'

Ah, snap.

'When did you get around to calling Kurisu-chan by name?'

Crap. The habit I picked up to keep it together in front of Nobuko-san was completely turning on me.

'... Y-you've never even called me by... ah, there was that one time... but I get the feeling that one doesn't count...'

Orino-san started mumbling to herself.

Did I ever call her by name before? Though if you're talking about her little sister Oshiri-chan, for some reason, there was one time she made me call her Shiori.

'Anyways, Kagoshima-kun, please explain the situation.'

At her tone that wouldn't take no for an answer, I broke into a sloppy cold sweat.

“I’ve gotten quite used to sleeping with you around, onii-chan. Fufufu, it really is like we’re m-married, isn’t it.”

... I don’t want this anymore.

Am I paying the price for all the times I teased Kurisu-chan in one lump sum?
Can’t we settle on instalments, oh god in heaven?

‘Kago—-’

“Orino-san! If I don’t hang up now, the fees will be crazy high! International calling is extremely expensive! Well then I’m sure you have it hard, but do your best! Bring back something coooooo!”

I one-sidedly cut the call. And the power while I was at it.

I don’t know a thing.

Special technique: postpone the problem.

“Huh? Onii-chan, were you on the phone?”

Finally arriving in the living room, Kurisu-chan looked at me blankly.
She made a truly innocent expression.

“Yeah, I was.”

“Oh, so you were. Then I’m really sorry for being loud.”

“Yeah. Seriously...”



“Good grief. As always, it sounds fun around Akira. But Orino Shiori-san, no need to worry. You don’t have cultivate your imagination so. I’m sure that wimp Akira won’t do a thing.”

“—!”

“Still this time once more, the story’s going all over the place. Though I’m sure in the end, Akira himself will remain without a care in the world. Kagoshima Akira’s like a slick-polished gear without any teeth. Even if you put him in the center of the story, he’ll never mesh with anyone. That’s precisely why, around him, the story spins emptily without any real operation.”

“Y-you’re—”

“It’s the second time we’ve met like this. But last time, thanks to a disturbance,

we couldn't sit down and talk, so this might as well be our first meeting.”

“Kagoshima-kun's... friend.”

“Right. I'm Akira's childhood friend. Do you remember my name.”

“Shinose Kai-kun, aren't you?”

“Correct. I'm glad you remembered. I've also properly remembered yours. You're Orino Shiori-san.”

“... Correct.”

“Orino Shiori, eh? That's a nice name. Do you know who gave it to you?”

“... I heard my mother was the one who named me.”

“Liar.”

“...”

“Just kidding. It's a joke. Just wanted to try saying it. That's why... you don't need to be so scared. If you look at me like I'm sort of monster, it stings a bit right here.”

“... Shinose-kun, why are you in a place like this?”

“I'm not supposed to be?”

“I mean, this is—”

“That doesn't really matter, does it. What's more important than anything right now, is how you're going to return to your original world. Even you would be troubled if you were sealed in this world forever.”

“.....”

“Do you want me to send you back?”

“—! You know something, don't you!”

“It's quite simple, really. To you, it must be cruelly so.”

“What do you... mean by that...?”

“Orino-san. Would you, by any chance, like to follow me without a word?”



“

“I understand that you’re wary. But I want you to believe in me. I, a friend of

Akira... and in Akika who trusts me.”

“... Fine.”

“I know it’s tough. Thank you.”

“You really... really do know how to get back?”

“Yeah. I really do.”

“You’re not lying.”

“Swear to god.”



Chapter 4: Mini Garden Plan x Back to Life x A Flower Out of Reach

Nine-fifty in the morning. The meeting point was the fountain in front of the station, and I arrived ten minutes ahead of schedule to wait. Still, in my remaining two weeks of summer vacation, I had mulled over what I should do, but I got more appointments than I expected.

Starting with Kurisu-chan's raid, I've been busied with a wide assortment of things.

For example, today's schedule is needlessly tight. As I had my rematch with Griel-kun in the afternoon, I'd have to return home for my cards before heading off for Asahi Park.

I could've just brought the cards to start with? Well about that—considering the person I was going to be meeting, instead of carrying around a bag filled to the brim with cards, I was better off emptyhanded.

“Kagoshima!”

A voice from afar. With features that drew eyes even in a crowd, she noticed me and raced over.

A light sky-blue camisole, and considerably short denim pants. I've realized it as of late, but when she's not in uniform, it seems she just doesn't wear skirts. By that, I don't mean she was indifferent to fashion. With her splendid proportions, a style making full use of pants suited her well.

The one I waited for was Kagurai-senpai.

“So I kept you waiting. When I'm the one who called you out, my bad.”

I just got here myself, I intended to unveil the template phrase for meet-ups, but seeing Kagurai-senpai's form I was at a loss for words. Specifically speaking, her hair. Her silky hair that grew to her waist had now been cut down to her shoulders.

“W-what happened with your hair...?”

“Mn? Oh, you noticed? They say there are plenty of men in the world who can't

notice when a woman changes her hairstyle; good going.”

“Hey, when you shorten it that much, anyone would notice.”

It was definitely fifty centimeters shorter.

It was cut quite drastically.

“Well I’m just going for a new look, changing things up. How about it, does it suite me?”

Kagurai-senpai said, brushing up her hair. I gave a resolute nod.

Long hair fit her too, but a semi-short cut that just barely draped over her shoulders looked the part as well.

“But I kinda get the feeling it’s a waste. When you grew it out so long... you don’t regret it?”

“Regret, regret huh...”

Kagurai-senpai gave a troubled smile.

“I’d be lying if I say I didn’t. When I’m supposed to have already made my decision, I can’t help but... feel like my hair’s caught on something behind me...”

Her whispering voice carried with it a sorrowful ring.

...And her mouth formed a broad grin.

That was definitely a, “Whoah, did I just say something clever,” sort of smile, definitely.

“When did you get back?”

“Yesterday. I got in touch with you, first thing.”

“Hmm. That’s quite sudden. Did you have some urgent business or something?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

Kagurai-senpai said nonchalantly.

“In yesterday’s call, you said you were free today morning, so I just thought we might as well meet. Do you have any problems with that?”

“No... I don’t.”

“Then what is it?”

She gave a complacent smile, and spoke teasingly.

“I can’t call you if I don’t have any business?”

“.....”

Oooh. My heart skipped a beat.

I just got irritated when Saijou-kun said it, but I don't mind it at all with Kagurai-senpai. Rather, I'd like her to say it again and again.

“If I had to say, I wanted to show you my new hairstyle.”

“I see.”

[IMAGE]

“... In the time I have left, you don't mind if I spend it playing around, do you...”

As she said it almost as if to herself, I couldn't help but ask back.

“The time you have left? Are you talking about summer vacation?”

Mn? Hahah. Yes, of course.”

Kagurai-senpai gave a small laugh, “Now let us go. Come on,” she held out her hand.

It was a bit embarrassing, but I silently gripped that hand. It wasn't as if the crowd was so thick we'd lose one another if we didn't hold hands, but we walked with arms linked.

If you ask what we did after that, just some shopping.

You can say that plain shopping is a splendid date, but in essence, we just bought some manga and games, so it didn't feel very date-like at all.

To the letter, it just felt like I tagged along with senpai's shopping.

With shopping over, we entered a nearby casual diner for lunch. I get the feeling I saw a girl's opinion, ‘Casual diners are a huge no go for dates,’ in some old book somewhere, but the one who said it was fine was Kagurai-senpai. She had bought so much she was low on funds, apparently.

“Ah, that was fun.”

A congested midday restaurant. When we sat a four-person booth in the corner, Kagurai-senpai smiled.

“Sorry about that, having you carry my bags.”

“I don’t mind.”

Said I, lowering my gaze to the large numbers of paper bags at my feet. They contained... mountains upon mountains of dating sims (adult games included). She had also bought manga and novels for all ages, but a majority of them were items with age restrictions attached.

This was why I came lightly equipped and cardless. I had anticipated I’d probably be holding bags for Kagurai-senpai.

These sorts of games had oversized boxes. Their contents were small, so they didn’t weigh much, but they took up way too much space.

“Why do the boxes have to be so big for these sorts of things?”

I tried asking.

“Hm? It’s going to be a long story, but do you still want to hear it?”

“... No.”

Kagurai-senpai’s eyes were serious, so I cut the topic without hesitation. Those eyes were the eyes of the sort who could never stop when they started talking about something they loved. If I went on to ask her, it was certain the strings would start to unravel from the history of the game industry, and she’d have enough fuel for a long time to come.

“Anyways, thanks for today. I’m happy I got to go shopping with you.”

She said the sorta thing that’d make a man happy with the right smile, but I honestly didn’t have the leisure to enjoy shopping. I mean, this girl casually wanders into the adult corner. She swaggers in her back straight, an air of dignity about her.

... How can she have an underclassman of the opposite sex accompany her to buy this sort of thing? As if the times we lived in were different, it felt like we held different values.

Well, even so, I got to see Kagurai-senpai’s smile, so I did feel glad I tagged along.

And.

There, I suddenly felt a glance.

I wondered who it was... but it was no one.

No human at least, a stuffed animal’s gaze. The stuffed animal slightly popping

its face out from Kagurai-senpai's bag stared fixatedly at me.

"... What are you goin' all dere for, Monyumi?"

Speaking in a blatantly displeased voice was Kagurai-senpai's partner and beloved phone strap, Gakuta-kun.

"G-Gakuta!? Don't pop out like that!"

"Making that slack face of yours, I'm the one getting embarrassed just watching."

"I-I'm not making any such face!"

"Your air really has changed ever since you got back from training camp, you know that? I'd like to think not, but don't tell me you and this brat—"

"Waaa, waaaa!"

Kagurai-senpai hurriedly sealed up Gakuta-kun's mouth.

As always, when she's doing her ventriloquism, she's a rowdy party on her own. When she stuck him out of her bag herself, what is she panicking for?

"I see Gakuta-kun's been repaired."

"Yeah, finally, I'd add on."

"Hey, brat, bastard, quit acting all buddy buddy with that -kun schtick."

"Eh? That's a bit late."

That's been working fine since the first time I met him.

"It ain't late. I just happen to be marvelously generous so I overlooked it up to now. But this is a good opportunity, so how about I properly educate you? Starting next time, call me Gakuta-san or otherwise Gakuta-sama. Call me brother-in-law and you're dea—"

"Stop moving, Gakuta! Quiet down! There are people watching!"

Slipping out of the bag, Gakuta-kun tried to walk off towards me, while Kagurai-senpai frantically tried to suppress him... or so it looked like, but Kagurai-senpai was just moving him to make it look so, surely. A true-to-life puppet show.

"Keh. Keh."

Flopping down on the table, Gakuta-kun discontently turned to face the other direction... or so Kagurai-senpai placed him to make it look that way. I don't

really get it, but Gakuta-kun's in a bad mood today. He's displeased like a father whose daughter just introduced him to her boyfriend.

"So anyways, Kagoshima, you said you had plans this afternoon, but is something happening?"

"I wouldn't really call it a plan. I just promised I'd play with one of the neighborhood kids."

"Hmm. What led to that?"

"Well, this and that."

"I see. But you look like you'd be good at that sort of thing."

She said the same thing as Kurisu-chan. Just what sort of image does everyone have of me?

"... I do like playing with kids. When I return home this year, I spent all my time playing games with the relatives' kids. The parents said, 'Go play outside,' and were terribly angry."

"Hahah. Those words sting the ear of an indoor girl like me."

"What about you? What did you do back home? Just normally visit a grave?"

"No—I had something I wanted to look into."

"Oh, about that, that."

Gakuta-kun abruptly barged into the conversation.

"Monyumi. Why did you suddenly start looking into that plan?"

"Gakuta... no, I didn't have any special reason."

"... Did Hihihiko say something?"

"He didn't."

"Tsk, that blasted Hihihiko. Doing whatever he wants when I'm not around. He's always been so roundabout, sarcastic and wily, that guy."

"I'm telling you, that's not it, Hihihiko really has nothing to do with it. It was just out of curiosity. I heard the plan I thought was no more than a fictional drawing on paper was going smoothly, so I just wanted to get another look into what sort of thing it was."

"That so? Well, I don't think that'll get you anywhere. That's a plan the higher-ups are keeping under strict wraps. The confidentiality level's Triple S, it don't get any higher than that. Anything outside of the information they've permitted will never come around to us by any means."

“... You’re right. In the end, I didn’t learn a single new thing.”

“What plan are you talking about?”

I forcefully tried including myself in the talk. Normally, I’d just supervise when Kagurai-senpai got into her ventriloquism, but as we were playing outside today, being abandoned was harsh.

“Eh? Y-yeah, no, that’s... I-look, it’s almost Orino’s birthday, right? So we’re just planning what we’re going to do.”

“Hmm, sounds nice.”

“D-doesn’t it? Right, that’s right. And I decided I’d entertain her with ventriloquism so I’ve been practicing long and hard as of late. That’s why, it just ends up coming out at a place like this.”

“Eh... You can actually do ventriloquism shows?”

Kagurai-senpai’s ventriloquism was pretty much an everyday occurrence at this point, without any novelty left to it... ah, I see.

“Since you’re going out of your way to entertain, I’m sure you’re going to do something amazing!”

“... Huh?”

“Wow, I can’t wait. What sort of fun things will you be doing?”

“N-no, umm...”

“I’ll finally be able to see senpai’s one hundred and twenty percent. I’m getting hyped here. Since you’ve played out your normal tricks day in and day out, you must have incredible confidence, right!?”

“... Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. Fu, fufu... you’d better look forward to it. I’ll do it, I will, yes, I’ll be pulling it off. I’ll show you me at one hundred twenty percent...”

While Kagurai-senpais laughed triumphantly, for some reason her cheeks were twitching. What’s more, right after, she slumped down as to say, I really went and said it.

Quickly recovering, “Gakuta! Anyways, we can have that talk another time. Don’t come out until we reach home!” she shoved Gakuta-kun back into her bag.

She really was busy all on her own.

“Hah... well, my bad. Looks like I didn’t set a firm on and off.”

“Eh? To you, shouldn’t ventriloquism be your off? It’s a hobby, isn’t it? Why are you apologizing like you suddenly brought up work on your day off?”

“N-no! That’s, look, when you get to my level, it’s already something like a job.”

“I see. Well, your ventriloquism definitely is at pro level. Good enough to put on a show and all.”

“I know, right! Ahahaa. Maybe I really should just go and become a pro.”

“... Kagurai-senpai. If ‘maybe I really should just go and do it’ is how you feel, I think you’re better off calling quits. With half-baked resolve, you’re surely going to regret it later, and you’re disrespecting the people who really do perform on that path.”

“... Yep. Yep, that’s right. I’m glad to have an underclassman like you who seriously thinks about me...”

With a conflicted face, she breathed out a conflicted sigh.

From there, she thought a bit, “Hey, Kagoshima,” as if that farcical air from before was a lie, she spoke in a serious timbre.

“Do you think... there is a God?”

“... Why are you asking?”

“No reason. Just wanted to chat.”

“I see. Is that so.”

After responding blankly, I tried thinking a bit seriously.

“God, eh... I wonder. Maybe he really doesn’t exist? Honestly, I feel like it doesn’t matter either way.”

As I gave an exceedingly Japanese answer, Kagurai-senpai nodded with a bitter smile.

“I feel the same way. To elaborate further, it doesn’t really matter whether god exists or not, and thinking about it won’t get me anywhere, so I think about other things, I guess.”

It was a reasonable Kagurai-senpai-esque response.

Mine wasn’t so forward-facing, it was a more counterproductive lazy opinion. I did think he wasn’t there, but I still prayed to him, and visited the shrine every New Year. On my school bag, I had a charm for good grades and safe driving. In the end... I just didn’t think deep about it. Thinking about it seriously was a pain.

I just adequately fit myself in with my surroundings.

I was being wishy-washy.

This is conjecture, but aren't a majority of Japanese people like that?

"From the start, due to the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism, Japan got all jumbled up religiously. Perhaps you could call this sort of thing an adequately Japanese way of thought."

"In manga, God often gets power from the faith of the people, right? On the other hand, there are publications where god loses power because faith dies out. It comes out a lot."

"I see. Meaning, looking at it the other way, you can think of it that there is a god as long as humans believe in him. That's interesting, it's a bit like quantum physics."

"You're right. A bit like quantum physics."

I nodded as if I knew what she was talking about.

"But... in that case,"

Said Kagurai-senpai.

"Let's say there is a god. Then what exactly does he exist to do?"

"I mean, doesn't he help out people who are troubled?"

I somehow or another said.

If you ask when it is that humans pray to god... it's when they want help, right? Even if God was concluded to be a product of fiction, it's likely that humans would still want to be saved and pray for his existence. And if God is the entity born as an entity for people to lean on when troubled, then God's job, role, duty, reason for existence—would have to be to make people happy.

That's why.

"If there is a God, I'm sure he's got to be a good guy."

"I see..."

"But what's up with you, really?"

"It's nothing. Just some idle gossip."

After parting with Kagurai-senpai at the diner, I returned home.

I still had time to spare, and Griel-kun never specified a precise meeting time in the first place, so without any hurry, I returned at ease.

On the way, I passed by near former Gentle Breeze Park.

It looked like the plans to make in a parking lot were steadily advancing, the play equipment had been removed without exception, and the lot was leveled. Given another few weeks, the asphalt would be laid, and a splendid parking lot would stand.

A prickle of pain abruptly ran through my chest.

This was a place of memories for me.

I didn't just play here when I was small... ten years ago, I met a lady in a strange suit and a tall lady; I spotted Kurisu-chan here collapsed, I met up with Kikyoin-san here... there were various memories all centered around it.

As I gazed absentmindedly at the park, I spotted a single woman inside of it. Right beside a bench in the corner, for some reason, she was standing straight. Pure-white hair, glass ball-like eyes with no hint of emotion. Her body wrapped in a monotone outfit, a doll-like expressionless young girl.

“Yomika-san?”

I ignored the no entry sign, infiltrated the park, approached her and called out.

Yomika Eri.

Kai's friend, and a girl who resembled Orino-san to an unnatural level.

To me, that would make her the friend of a friend.

“It's been a while.”

“.....”

She turned her neck ninety degrees in my direction, and stared motionlessly at me. After taking an ample ten seconds to gaze over my face, she lonesomely spoke.

“Kagoshima. Akira.”

“Yeah. That's right. What are you doing in a place like this?”

“Standing.”

“.....”

Umm, was that supposed to be a joke?

It wasn't funny at all.

"I-I see, you're standing..."

"Yes."

"Yeah. I do think standing is a good thing, but there's a bench right next to you, so why don't you take a seat?"

"I decline."

"... I see. Then I'll take a seat."

"Feel free to do so."

"Ummm, let me guess. You're on a diet? Like that stand-on-your-tip-toes diet plan?"

"Wrong."

... There should be a limit to a conversation not kicking off.

I shouldn't have called out to her so lightheartedly... the air was a bit better with Kai around last time.

"Come to think of it, Yomika-san, you're not with Kai today?"

"Yes. My master is not currently in this town."

"Hmm. So he isn't."

I didn't know. But I wasn't surprised. Kai was always an elusive one, and he would often arbitrarily disappear without a word to me.

"Did he tell you when he'd get back?"

"No. But I do believe it will be within a not-too-distant timeframe."

"I see. Say, I never got to ask last time, but what sort of relationship do you have with Kai?"

I thought this was as good a chance as any, so I tried asking what had been bothering me.

"My relationship with my master... is it?"

"Yeah. Could it be you're going out?"

"Going out, would mean?"

"Huh? Umm... going out is going out. Do you have a relationship of man and woman, or are you just friends? That's what I'm trying to ask."

"It must be surmised that I am not in a relationship of man and woman."

"I see."

“For I have not conducted sexual intercourse with master.”

“The hell are you saying!?”

I wasn't trying to probe that deeply!

“Is that not what it means to be in a relationship of man and woman?”

“No, that might be true... if you follow it through to the logical conclusion, you get there eventually...”

“I do not know about master, but I am still a virgin—”

“I didn't ask!”

I retorted with all my might to her expressionless face.

What's with this girl.

Ignorant of the world, or rather lacking in common sense. I don't sense and spite or ill intent, so I do think she's doing it naturally. I kinda get the feeling she'll tell you anything if you just ask.

... Alright.

“Hey, Yomika-san, what are your three sizes?”

“I do believe asking that question to a woman shows a grave lack of common sense.”

“... I'm sorry.”

What am I even doing.

I can't tell what's going through this girl's head in the slightest.

“With master—”

As I hung my head over the bench, Yomika-san disinterestedly spoke.

“I do think I have a relationship of master and servant. That is the expression that fits us best.”

“Master and servant...?”

“Yes.”

She unhesitantly nodded.

“I simply follow my master's orders. That is my worth in living, and the very reason for which I have received life in this world.”

“... It's kinda that. You're beating around the bush wherever you can, but... in the end—”

Said I.

To the doll-like girl, I looked her straight in the face and spoke.

“You like Kai, don’t you?”

“.....”

Yomika-san’s eyes opened wide ever-so-slightly, forming a taken-aback expression. In place of her prior robotic gestures, it was a truly human-like display.

“I do not... know.”

She answered after some time, then proceeded to shut her mouth. As if to say she had no further intent to talk to me, she removed her gaze.

Hmmmm.

Well, probing any further would be uncouth of me. Or possible sexual harassment.

“That aside, so Kai’s out on a trip? It seems Orino-san’s out overseas... I’m jealous. Apart from club training camp and seeing my old folks, I haven’t been anywhere.”

“.....”

“But come to think of it, is Orino-san alright? She said over the phone she might not be able to get back...”

“—Phone?”

While she had entered her ignore-mode, Yomika-san suddenly bit on.

“Kagoshima Akira. You talked on the phone with her?”

“Yeah, well, I did.”

“Your phone... was able to connect?”

“Of course it connected. Didn’t you know, Yomika-san? These days you can just normally make calls to overseas.”

It’s not like she went off to another world, so there shouldn’t be a problem with at least the phone connecting.

“I see, so that’s how it is. In that case—no problem to report. I am delighted to hear it is proceeding smoothly.”

The monologue Yomika-san leaked was incomprehensible.

“What do you me—wait, what?”

In the few seconds I had my eyes off of her, Yomika-san had completely disappeared.

While I tried looking around, she was nowhere to be seen.

“... She must be quick on her feet.”

“O-out of cards!? Darnit, to think there was a strategy like that...!”

“Fu fu fu. Just goes to show lowering lifepoints isn't the only path to victory.”

“Gnn...”

Eating his fifth defeat of the day, Griel-kun grit his teeth in vexation. I'll give it to him that he didn't toss his cards like he did before. Alongside his skill in card games, it looks like his heart as a duelist was growing as well.

“... Hm? Huh?”

When Griel-kun returned his cards to the deck, I noticed a portion of the black mantle he wore was a little torn.

“What happened to your mantle?”

“Oh, nothing to worry about. It was just chewed up by a fox a bit.”

“... Really?”

Are there foxes in these parts? Even if there are, I don't think they'll come out unless you go quite deep into the mountains. Looking over his clothes again, they were tattered here and there. While he wasn't actually injured, the small scratches and dirt stains stood out.

“It's good to be energetic, but don't push yourself too much, Griel-kun.”

“Hmph. None of your business. A two-person party-nay, a girl and an animal were never worthy to take me on from the start.”

Looks like he's found someone to play with him. Since he said a girl and an animal, she probably brought a pet with her. Good grief, that's quite a friend he has there.

“Kagoshima. We can finish up here for today.”

“Oh? You're already good?”

Usually, he'd keep coming for revenge until I got fed up.

"While I hate to admit it, it seems taking on the fox was a greater expenditure than expected. I must devote myself to recovering my stamina and mana."

"So you're tired. Then there's nothing we can do about that."

"But... tomorrow morning, we will have a match here once more."

"Morning."

"Indeed, let us make it our final match."

Griel-kun was making a serious expression.

"This card game of yours was interesting. And you were strong. I shall recognize that."

"That's quite a stuck-up way of complimenting someone but, well, I'll accept it."

"However, in the end, it is nothing more than a simple tabletop game. I cannot occupy myself with it forever. I have my own goals to attend to."

"....."

"I shall triumph over you, lay the finishing blow on the fox, and leave this town behind."

"You're leaving? Are you going to your folks' place or something?"

"No, unfortunately, my situation is that I cannot go there even if I want to. My means to return have been completely cut off... but it isn't a system they can freeze forever. Half a year at most. Up to that time, I need only endeavor to complete the stone. I will search out a place most appropriate to purify it."

"....."

As per usual, I didn't get what he was saying, but whatever it was, I knew tomorrow was the last time. Tomorrow would be my last duel with Griel-kun.

"Kagoshima. It's our final match. Why not bet something on it?"

"A bet? I don't mind, but what are we betting?"

When I asked, Griel-kun gave a broad grin, glaring at me with fiendish eyes.

"If I win, I'll be taking your life."

Ah, yeah, yeah.

Life, eh. There we go again.

Why do kids absurdly and recklessly start betting life?

“Yeah. Well, why not.”

I lightly gave the okay.

“Hm. You acquiesced frightfully easily. Are you on your high horse believing there’s no way you could lose to me? Or are you so fearful you are incapable of proper thought?”

No, I’m just not taking you seriously.

It’s just...

For some reason, it seemed like Griel-kun was threatening enough to easily reap a life on my level if he was up to it, but that must be my imagination.

“Kukuh. As you cower in fear, I can’t wait to see if you can properly plan out your strategy. When you do these, these tabletop games of mere child’s play become quite interesting indeed.”

“So if I win, what do I get? I’ll just say it, but I don’t need your life.”

“Let me see, if you win... hmm. I’ll grant any one wish of yours. Money, or women, or status or fame, ask for anything. I’ll give it to you.”

“You’re shooting big.”

“Once the stone is complete, I will become an existence that stands at the summit of all forms of life. Once it reaches that point, any and everything will be to my whim. If you wish, shall I give you a single country?”

In the young boy’s eyes, a flame of ambition blazed black.

Perhaps this entire back and forth was Griel-kun’s way to try and put pressure on me. In order to bind a victory over me, with desire and fear... he was trying to use the carrot and whip to put shackles on my heart. Well, it was simply so unrealistic, it unfortunately had no effect.

“Got it. Then I’ll think up a request after I win.”

“Hmph. Now’s the last time you’ll be acting so composed.”

And like that.

It was decided I’d be risking my life in a duel.

I returned home before the sun set to find a letter from Kurisu-chan.

‘I’m going to buy ingredients for dinner.’

It said.

Gazing at the pink stationary on the living room table, I found myself smiling. We’ve grown quite accustomed to one another, haven’t we. We’ve only lived together a few days, and yet I got the feeling my life with Kurisu-chan had started to feel only natural to me. At first, I wondered what would happen, but not that I’d spent the time, it went by before I knew it.

Still, this fun time was soon to end.

A week.

Since the time she was shut out of her house owing to her parents absence, and launched an assault on my house with the mysterious declaration, “I can’t use magic anymore”, tomorrow would make it one week. Kurisu-chan’s mother was supposed to return from her trip.

“... Ah, that’s right. We’re almost out of toilet paper.”

The thought struck me just in time, I made the call to Kurisu-chan.

When I did, I heard the sound of vibration in the house.

With a bad feeling about it, I headed towards the sound only to find Kurisu-chan’s small, white cellphone lying on the sofa.

“... So she forgot it.”

I dropped my shoulders. I’ll have to buy toilet paper next time.

Putting my own phone in my pocket, I picked up Kurisu-chan’s. A white flip-phone, with a small strap attached.

A silver six-pointed star.

The design looked like it had been made from a single strand of metallic wire bent over itself.

“That’s an expensive looking strap...”

It happened when I was staring at the phone for no particular reason.

The six-pointed star abruptly began to fill with a mysterious light.

Was it the type of strap that lit up in response to calls? But I don’t think it lit up when I called before... or so I thought when—

‘Hello!? Crea!? Do you have a time? No wait, even if you don’t have time, talk with me a bit!’

From the still-closed cellphone, I heard a woman's shout. Surprised by the sudden happening, I involuntarily found myself opening the phone and pressing the answer button.

"H-hello..."

'Huh? You're not Crea, are you? Who might you be...?'

"My name's Kagoshima."

'Kagoshima!? Ah, yep, right, the rumored Kagoshima-senpai I've heard loads about you from Crea.'

"Umm, and who are you?"

'Me? I'm Crea's mother. Her mama, you know.'

"S-so it was her mother!"

I hurriedly lowered my head. She couldn't see it over the phone, but it was a Japanese reflex.

"Umm... uh, you're always looking after me."

"Ahaha. No need to be so stiff. I'm the one who should say you're always looking after my daughter."

Kurisu mama said lightly. Her voice and tone were considerably young. She gave birth to Kurisu-chan, so she should probably be over thirty, but it didn't feel like that at all.

And... while it didn't really matter, for some reason, I got the feeling I was hearing this person's voice coming from the six-pointed star strap. I wonder why. Was I imagining things? Yeah, must be my imagination.

'Anyways, Kagoshima-kun, is Crea around? If possible, I'd like to talk to her.'

"Ah, I'm sorry. She forgot her phone behind and went shopping for dinner."

'Shopping for dinner?'

Ah, snap.

'What's that supposed to mean, Kagoshima-kun? What's the situation?'

This is bad. Staying over at the house of someone of the opposite sex wasn't a permissible situation for a parent with a daughter of appropriate age. I frantically tried to think up an excuse, but unable to think up anything decent, in the end, I gave up and confessed everything honestly.

‘Haah, I see. So that’s what happened. I get it.’

“I’m sorry. Even if I was just going with the flow, I let her stay at our place without notifying you...”

‘Don’t worry about it. I should be thanking you. Umm, what was it... right, right, it all came to this because I went out on a trip. That girl really is a scatterbrain, to drop both her key and her wallet.’

Kurisu-mama sounded especially unnatural.

‘... Even so, I can’t tell if that kid has good timing or not. But I see. That’s why I can’t sense Crea’s power, and why she hasn’t contacted me in regards to the Soel House brat or the Gate...’

“Pardon...?”

‘Oh, it’s nothing. Just talking to myself here.’

“I see.”

‘But you’ve got me there... I’ve got a lot going on here myself, and when I finally found the chance to call her, Crea’s absent...’

“If you’ve got a message, I can relay it.”

‘Ah, that’s alright. I called because I was a bit curious, that’s all. I got her current situation from you, so that’s enough. Well then, pardon me.’

With a light farewell, Kurisu-mama tried to cut the line.

“Ah. P-please wait!”

I promptly called out.

I knew I didn’t want to let this chance slip by.

‘Yeah? What’s up?’

“... Could I ask you something a bit more complicated?”

‘Mnnn, that depends on what it’s about. For now, just try saying it.’

“Right away.”

And I told her about Nobuko-san, about Kurisu-chan’s grandmother.

About everything that happened between those two lately.

Just because I couldn’t ask Kurisu-chan herself, I did think it was underhanded to ask someone else... even so, I wanted to know.

‘... I see, so she met Tooru’s mother. Haha, she got one up on me. I’ve never met her before... and I doubt I’ll ever get to.’

She said in self-derision and let out a small sigh.
It sounded like there were some complicated circumstances.
I didn't intend to dig them up.
I simply...

“Why do you think Kuria-san is hiding the fact she's her granddaughter?”

That's all I wanted to know.

For a while, Kurisu-mama's words piled up, as if she was hesitating until, ‘... Hey, Kagoshima-kun. From your eyes, what sort of girl does she look like?’ she said.
“What sort...? She's honest and cheerful, I think she's a good kid.”

That wasn't my consideration for her mother, I simply answered how I really felt.

‘Thank you... but you see, in the school over here—the school before she went to that one, they didn't think of her that way. More so, she was even a little hated.’

Before she came here... Kurisu-chan before she enrolled in high school.
A side of her I don't know.

‘Over here, that girl was considered cool.’

Cool. That was a long-shot from my image of her.

‘Silent and unsociable, she rarely ever laughed in front of anyone. Nonetheless, her grades were top class at school. Of course she'd be hated. I won't say she didn't have any friends, but I think they were outnumbered by the people who hated her.’

“Why did she...?”

‘It's a bit of a long story, but... you know that girl's a half, right? This country, you see, it's a place where being a half is a terrible vice. Children of mixed blood with your place are severely hated. That's why that girl lived concealing the fact she was a half from those around her.’

“Halves are hated? Why...”

‘That's the culture.’

Her tone forced me to accept it.

If she said it was a difference in culture, that's as far as it went.

I could only force myself to accept it.

‘I, you see, this may sound like bragging, but when I was young, I was considerably famous you know My name got around quite a bit. Crea had eyes on her from a young age, just for being my daughter. That’s why... as a family, we used that.’

“Used?”

“As expected of her daughter,” “Like mother, like daughter,” to make sure everyone around was strongly left with that impression, Crea pushed herself to play the role of a genius. Just to make sure no one’s attention turned towards her father... to make sure no one gave a damn who her father was.’

And like that, Kurisu-chan lived, gathering all the surrounding attention on her mother alone... and not paying any mind to her father. In an effort to only emphasize her relationship to her mother, she showed not the slightest sign of putting in any effort, growing desperate to make an appeal to her genius nature.

To hide her father.

‘To put it simply, she played a character.’

She desperately acted the part of the genius character, Kurisu-mama said with a small laugh.

‘In all actuality, I think she had considerable hardships. That girl definitely did have talent... but that doesn’t mean she’s able to do anything. Yet no matter the situation, she wouldn’t consult with school teachers or friends. A genius isn’t meant to do that sort of thing.’

“.....”

‘Over there, it looks like she’s gotten to living without making a character, but it’s not like she completely become herself, right? Being the perfect character who never relies on anyone in a habit embedded deep in her, so it won’t heal so easily.’

I see.

That’s why she’s... so bad at relying on people.

Kurisu-chan isn’t used to asking for help. She had always lived without relying on her surroundings, without showing any weakness to others.

‘But, don’t you think that way of life is her completely denying her father? It’s almost as if her father’s her life’s disgrace she had to bury up for dear life.’

“I don’t think, that’s true...”

‘Normally you wouldn’t. But I’m sure that girl thinks that’s why she’s doing. Unlike me, she’s a little miss earnest with a strong sense of responsibility.’

“.....”

‘Don’t you think that’s the reason she can’t say it to grandma? She doesn’t know how to look her in the eye.’

I could... not accept the story.

But it was likely that Kurisu-mama’s supposition hit the mark. I somehow got a hunch.

‘... Well, I’m not standing somewhere I can act all high and mighty. Tooru’s death was pretty much my fault... the one who really can’t look Nobuko-san in the eye... is me.’

She derided herself in a weak mutter before continuing on in a strong voice.

‘That’s precisely why I want Crea to properly face. Well, let’s just leave that area to her.’

“You’re going to abandon her?”

‘I’m going to believe in her.’

Kurisu-mama said mischievously.

‘Ah, sorry. Looks like it’s about the limit. I have to return to my work.’

“Understood.”

‘Tell Crea... mnn, if possible keep quiet about it.’

“Are you fine with that?”

“Yeah. I think it’s probably best if I don’t say anything unnecessary. And it seems like she’s got a reliable senpai to boot.”

“... I wouldn’t say that.”

While I may have come off as humble, that wasn’t my intent.

It was simply a fact.

I really wouldn’t call myself reliable.

‘Oh right, Kagoshima. Lastly, I want to confirm one thing.’

“What is it?”

‘Crea said she failed in developing a new technique, did she?’

After hesitating to hesitate, “... Yes,” I weakly replied. Crap, from the flow of the conversation, I ended up leaking Kurisu-chan’s eighth-grade syndrome. How would a mother feel when they learned their child was spouting delusions?

‘... And that’s why she can’t use it. I see, then she probably didn’t fail at all. That sort of technique, after you learn it, for the next week, your magic will—’
“Eh?”

‘Ah, no, nothing, talking to myself again. Well then, if the chance arises, let us talk again.’

Like that, the call was one-sidedly cut.

When I gazed at the phone, the light had faded from the six-pointed star strap that had let off a faint glow the whole way. I looked at the screen next. When a call finishes, you usually see a window with the call time, yet all I got was a standby-screen that looked like it was still on all the default settings.

I’m sure it was just that sort of strap, and I’m sure it was just that type of model. I concluded it, and didn’t think too hard about it.

For there were other things I wanted to think hard about.

Chapter 5: Life or Death Battle x Coming Out x Return

The next morning, for the first time since we started living together, I woke up earlier than Kurisu-chan. I didn't now why. I just naturally opened my eyes. When we ate breakfast together, "Today, I'm going to visit a grave with Nobuko-san. Rather than visit, we're going to be prettying it up," Kurisu-chan said.

Come to think of it, that grave was a little bit dirty, and there were weeds growing around it. It seems Nobuko-san noticed it during her last visit and psyched herself up to clean.

Kurisu-chan volunteered to help out herself.

"I see. Have a good time. I still have a promise with the neighborhood kid."
"Got it."

Like that, we confirmed each other's plans and finished breakfast. Kurisu-chan collected up all the tableware and began washing up in the kitchen. I called out to her small back.

"Hey, Kurisu-chan..."
"What is it?"

She stopped her hands, turned right around, and showed me a bright face. So radiant it was blinding... and sorrowful.

"... Sorry. It's nothing. Ah, I'll go check the mail."

I said, leaving the living room behind as if running away. The mail was just a pretext. We didn't get any newspapers here, and the living expenses from my parents were never delivered without noticed.

I had something I wanted to say... and couldn't say it.

I couldn't take a step into the line she had drawn.

"I'm being the effeminate one here..."

Feelign a fretfulness unlike me, to at least pretend to check the mail, I walked

out.

In my house yard, Kikyouin-san and Tama-chan were asleep.

My thoughts stopped.

I rubbed my eyes wondering if I had made a mistake, but they really were there. Thinking it was a dream, I pinched my cheek; it just hurt.

“.....”

Umm. What sort of situation is this?

Kikyouin-san was asleep in the onmyouji-ish clothing I'd seen her in before. Also, while I called it sleeping, she wasn't simply lying on the ground; like the warriors and samurai that come out in manga, she sat, leaning her body against the house wall, holding her knees.

It was a sleeping form without any openings, and a sleeping form of the strong. Tama-chan was beside her, belly up, sprawled out in the shape of a star. That was a sleeping form full of openings, but in and of it self, went the full circle to contrarily seem even stronger.

“... Heeey, Kikyouin-san, it's morning. What are you doing in my yard?”

When I approached, called out, and tried to shake her shoulders, the next moment, Kikyouin-san's hand flashed. Her right hand got my neck in an eagle grip... her left hand formed made the scissors gesture stuck towards both my eyes.

“Eh, ah, oh...?”

In a single instant, my freedom was completely sealed off. As the sudden suffocation and danger of losing my eyesight froze me up, Kikyouin-san opened her eyes, “... Mnn? Ah, what, it's just you,” she muttered half-asleep and released me.

“Good grief, don't approach me when I'm sleeping. I thought you were an enemy.”

No, no, isn't that strange? I just tried to wake her normally, why did I get into

such a thrilling predicament? For her to maintain her guard even when asleep, just what sort of world did this child live in?

Does her heart still linger in the days of assassination?

“Umm... Kikyoin-san, why are you sleeping in our place’s yard?”

When I timidly asked, Kikyoin-san groaned, stretching out as, “We were moving since yesterday... or want, today morning, and we finally reached our limit. Your house just happened to be close, so we used it for a one-hour rest. It’s a pain to set up camp, after all.”

She answered listlessly.

“Still... in these games of tag, they often say the side being chased has it harder, but that’s limited to when the chaser has enough information on the target. No matter how you look at it, the side chasing has it harsher...”

She complained as she rolled her shoulders to stretch. It did seem she was telling the truth about only sleeping an hour, there were light bags under her eyes.

She looked considerably tired.

“Mnn, is it already morning?”

Tama-chan woke as well.

“Kaaah. Now then. Let’s go, Yuzuki. The enemy should still be in these parts. While it seems they’ve skillfully erased the traces of their power, they can’t fool our nose.”

Tama-chan shifted from her slack face to one filed with ambition. Kikyoin-san silently nodded.

“... Are you alright, Yuzuki?”

“I’m fine. Didn’t even need that hour. Until we get back what was stolen, We can’t be slacking off left and right.”

“Our apologies. If only our nine tails’ power got through, but... thanks to mother’s husk in his hands, our power is completely...”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine. And What you want to protect is what I want to protect. Let me push myself a bit.”

Kikyouin-san and Tama-chan looked like they were conversing in a world of their own.

A world I don't know.

A world I can't interfere with.

"Sorry for the intrusion."

Kikyouin-san said curtly before turning to leave.

"Hey, wait. I don't really know what's up, but you'd be better off resting a bit more."

Unable to see her clearing pushing herself hard, I ended up speaking out.

"Oh shut it..."

Kikyouin-san said irritably and glared at me with cold eyes.

"If you don't really get it, then leave us be. It's not like it's got anything to do with you."

"....."

Her words stabbed deep, deep into my chest.

Nothing to do with me...

Right, that's exactly it. It's got nothing to do with me. When I can't do anything, there's no way I have any right to run my mouth. Ignorant and unrelated, I'm always the outsider. A complete intruder. That's why to Kikyouin-san... and to Kurisu-chan, there's not a single thing I can say.

"... W-wait, what's with you? Why are you getting' depressed?"

As I stood unable to say anything, Kikyouin-san spoke a little impatiently.

"Ah, god. What are you doing? It's not like you at all!"

"... S-sorry."

"Don't apologize! ... 'n wait, that was my bad. I'm a bit irritable."

With an awkward face, Kikyouin-san softly apologized. An honest child properly apologizes when they think they've done wrong. But—

"... But you were telling the truth when you said it's got nothing to do with me. I'm sorry for saying something arbitrary when I'm irrelevant."

"Hah?"

It was resolutely mocking, “Hah?”

“What are you sayin’ so late in the game? You knew full well you were irrelevant from the start, didn’t you? You sayin’ arbitrary things is nothing new. Why should you start carin’ now?”

She intensely persisted with a chastising voice, from there, lowering her eyes to the ground, this time continuing on in a whisper.

“... When I had only just transferred, did you forget what you told me behind the gym?”

“Eh...”

Kikyoun-san sucked in a deep breath.

“I’m absolutely no use at all. Even if you’re troubled, I don’t think I can help you.

I can’t do anything, but I can cheer you on.

I’ll tell you to do your best. Is that not enough?”

As if reading off from a memo, she recited the lines I said once before. Ah... come to think of it, I did say something like that.

I recalled what I was on the verge of forgetting.

I resolved myself in my own way, made my own sort of decision, and put in my own feelings...

I had decided to cheer everyone on.

That was supposed to be my self-insult... and my pride.

“You said somethin’ so high-and-mighty to me. Could you stop actin’ like you’re goin’ to ruin it all now? ... Just a little, I thought, that sounds nice, you know.”

She added the latter half on in a small voice before turning her face the other way.

“Kikyoun-san.”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“... Shut it, die.”

I spoke.

“Do your best, Kikyouin-san.”

“I’ll do just that, Kagoshima.”

Kikyouin-san laughed. Fatigue still lingering in her expression, it was clear as day she was putting up a strong front, but it was the sort of strong-willed smile that suited her.

By the way, this was the second time she ever called my Kagoshima.

It really had been a while, so I ended up smiling in delight.

Watching over the two of us exchange a laugh, “Ah, youth,” Tama-chan took on the attitude of an old lady watching over the young’uns.

When I reached Asahi Park, Griel-kun had already taken his seat.

“I’ve grown tired of waiting.”

“I kept you waiting, huh.”

I took the cards from my bag and handed them all to Griel-kun.

In less than ten minutes, he had constructed his deck. It looked like he already had a recipe in his head.

With the cards remaining, I constructed the strongest deck I could possibly imagine.

To make sure I had no last regrets. To absolutely not lose.

“Do you remember our bet?”

“If you win, you kill me. If I win, I get to wish for anything.”

“Hmph. You understand yet you still show up. I praise your pluck, if that alone.”

We exchanged words as we positioned our decks.

“This is our honest to goodness final battle. Come at me with all you’ve got, Kagoshima.”

“Just because it’s the last time, you’re not getting off easy, Griel-kun.”

“Duel!”

My last duel with Griel-kun... was the height of brutality.

An incessant ebb and flow of attack and defense.

At the end of the end, it looked like Griel-kun had caught up to me. At the rate things were going, he'd either surpass me, or I'd stop him in his tracks. It pained me a bit there was no audience.

The way the upperhand of our struggle to the death shifted at a dazzling pace was truly dramatic. When looked on from the side, it was undoubtedly a battle worth seeing.

If this was a weekly-serialized manga, the arc would run over a whole year... in an anime, putting in numerous flashbacks, it would take seven weeks. Our level was simply that high.

“... You've grown strong, Griel-kun.”

In the midst of battle, my words of admiration naturally leaked from my mouth.

“No one would ever believe you didn't even know the rules a week ago.”

“This is my natural right.”

And...

The battle reached its climax.

“Kuku, so the term a dying whisper was one saved for your sorry state.”

If you wished, you could call it a battle or luck, yet you could just as well call it a bout of skill. I... was cornered to the very brink. Barely any lifepoints remaining. No monsters on the field. Two desolate cards in my hand. In contrast, Griel-kun was furnished with a plentiful hand and plenty of monsters. A huge pinch.

“My turn...”

Now what do I do. To be blunt, the situation is desperate. If I don't do something this turn, I'll definitely face defeat on Griel-kun's.

However...

In my deck was aub a single card that could turn this situation around. If I could pull that card here, it would be possible to turn anything around.

Looking at it the other way, if I didn't draw it, I was over.

The next card I drew... would decide my fate.

“What’s wrong? Hurry and draw!”

Griel-kun urged me. I let out a breath, and wiped the sweat oozing down my hand on my thigh. I was more nervous than I thought. I felt the hastening of my pulse painfully so.

It couldn’t be helped.

I mean, if I do lose, my life is...

“... You really have grown strong.”

I stopped the hand reaching for my deck, and frankly praised him.

“Hey, Griel-kun. Do you think card games are fun?”

“They’re games, of course they’re supposed to be fun. But that is precisely why, no matter how far it goes, it is no more than child’s play. Even if I were to triumph over you, the joy and satisfaction I can reap from it are limited.”

“You’re right”

Without going against him, I affirmed his opinion.

“It’s just as you say, card games are no more than a child’s fun. Even if you’re strong, it’s not much to brag about; there’s nothing shameful about being weak. It’s simply a game.”

So you see, I added on.

“No more betting lives on card games, okay?”

I said what wholly denied each and every card game manga out there.

“... What, did you say?”

When I said something exceedingly obvious, Griel-kun threatened me in an irritated voice.

“Now that you see your defeat, you beg for life...? Hm. It does look like I evaluated you too highly. You started valuing your life so late in the game?”

“Yeah. Of course I value my life. That’s obvious.”

“You...”

“You can say I’m begging for my life, and you’d be right. I really don’t want to die over losing a card game, after all.”

I managed to boldly get back in my groove.

Well, I was driven to the wall because Griel-kun was stronger than I thought, so to make sure nothing troublesome happened after it was over, I did make the statement to try making it so the bet itself never happened, but... more importantly. Even if it was a joke, I wanted to give one last lecture to Griel-kun who wagered life so easily.

“Betting your life on everything you come across is only cool in the realm of manga. Life, you see, you shouldn’t gamble with it so lightly.”

“... Foolish. Spare me the pep talks. No matter how many excuses you line up, at the moment you lose, I will take your life. That was the promise, wasn’t it?”

“That’s why I want to make it so it never happened. I want you to cancel it.”

Griel-kun made an expression of the utmost irritation, glaring at me as if to shoot me dead.

His child face didn’t scare me.

“In the first place, you said something unreasonable to. About granting any wish, that’s impossible, right?”

“It is not impossible! For a wish of the likes of a plebian like you, my power is more than enough! No matter how vast your wish may be, as long as I complete the stone—”

“It’s impossible.”

I said strongly.

“Umm... the philosopher’s stone, was it? Well, even if that legendary stone did exist, you laid hands on it, and obtained unfathomable powers. Powers strong enough to rule over the world.”

“T-that’s...”

Griel-kun stifled his words, he went silent.

Now I finally realized.

Why I was able to interact with Griel-kun so comfortably.

From time to time, I could feel a dreadful thirst for blood, and a hostility that sent shivers down my spine, but for some reason, I was never afraid of him.

That was... because this child was simply so childish.

His thoughts, speech and action, they were all infantile.

Even if Griel-kun had some terrifying power, the ability and cruelty to calmly wipe a town or two off the map... this child was still, only ten years of age.

“... I-I’m...”

Griel-kun spoke in a hesitant voice that didn’t suit him.

“I just... those folks who mocked me for my youth, who arbitrarily placed expectations on me, and arbitrarily feared me, who pitied me for my environment... I wanted them to know my power...”

“Meaning, you want to get back at those around you.”

A childish goal, I think.

“Griel-kun, are you sure that’s all you want to do? In the million-to-one chance you obtained the power to rule the world, would you be satisfied that you could do it?”

“.....”

“You’re a child, Griel-kun.”

When I informed him, he grit his teeth in vexation.

“... So you too. You’re also going to make fun of me for being a child...”

“I’m not. I’ll never make fun of you for being a child. I’m cautioning you because you’re still a child.”

It seemed like he hadn’t noticed his own childishness, so I wanted to teach him.

“You have to think a bit harder and imagine it. What exactly you want to do. And... what it means to rule the world.”

Griel-kun hung his head without a word. His eyes that glimmered with pride now swayed in anxiety. Just as I thought, this kid’s act was terribly cheap. That’s precisely why... precisely because I knew that man, I couldn’t help but see this child as small.

Compared to his bottomless depth, and wisdom to see through everything, this child looked like no more than just that.

“This is something my childhood friend said to me.”

I gave as a preface, imagining his bitter and sweet smile as I spoke.

“To be able to make the world as you please is... nothing more than despair.”

“... What does that mean?”

“Mnn, you see. What was it again?”

Dangit. Kai gave me an extremely easy-to-follow yet intellectual explanation, but I couldn't recall it at all. I couldn't help but arranging it in my way to try saying something wise.

“For example, let's say there's a girl you like. If you use a special power to make her like you, that will just feel empty, won't it?”

It may have been a dubious comparison, but I got across what I wanted to say. To summarize, if everything goes your way, life is boring.

To my explanation, Griel-kun nodded with an ambiguous expression.

“So if you really do like Creastia-chan, then you shouldn't rely on some incomprehensible power. You've got to polish yourself as a man.”

“Wha ga hah!?”

Griel-kun suddenly opened his eyes wide.

“I-I like Creastia, you say!? Cease this foolishness!”

“Oh? You don't?”

He was looking for her quite heatedly, so I was sure that was the case.

“I-I don't! Definitely not!”

With his face bright red, he shook his head left and right.

“... It's just, in the past, when I told Creastia, ‘Shall I take you as my companion?’ she politely declined, is all!”

“That means you like her, right!?”

That far exceeded my expectations. I never thought he'd already confessed. What's this, when he said she wasn't cute and he hated her, it was all to hide his embarrassment?

“... Wait, Griel-kun. How old were you, by the way?”

“I was seen, she was twelve.”

“Then of course she’s reject you!”

Before it came to like or dislike, I don’t think she even took you seriously. Even so... Griel-kun was suddenly starting to look shoddy.

In the end, I wonder if this kid just came to town because he wanted to see this Creastia girl.

“So Griel-kun, you wanted to find her and confess to her?”

“No... I don’t particularly think anything of Creastia anymore. I want her by my side so she can bear witness to just how great of an existence... ah, I see.”

Griel-kun interrupted himself there with a weak laugh. Not that smile he stretched himself to fit, that smile to show his own strength. This one was a childish, young smile that suited his age.

“So this is what it means to be childish...”

“That’s right. But now that you’ve managed to admit that you’re childish, that’s the first step to adulthood.”

While he tried to raise himself up, saying something more mature than he was,

“... It’s the first time.”

Griel-kun looked down, his words leaked out.

“It’s the first time someone’s given me a lecture from on high. Is this sensation what it is to be scolded. Hm. That’s quite the interesting experience.”

“So you were raised spoiled silly.”

“Hmph. I was treated as a tumor, nothing more.”

Once the conversation had gone so far, I finally remembered and reached for the deck.

“I’ve said what I wanted to, how about we end this duel already?”

Now then.

Do I pull my trump card or not?

If I were the protagonist of some anime, at a scene like this I would draw it at a rate of roughly one hundred percent. They’d manage somehow another with

something cool like friendship power or the heart of the cards.

But I'm not the protagonist.

That's why the card I drew wasn't the one I needed.

The result went right with probability.

"Ah man, so I couldn't draw it after all. Shame."

I got my hand together, returned it to my deck, and rested my right hand on top.

I surrender. I signaled my defeat.

This duel was my loss.

"So I fell through at the end of the end. Congratulations, Griel-kun."

I had resolved myself, but losing was irritating after all. I pushed down my embarrassment and gave Griel-kun some genuine praise.



“.....”

Griel-kun’s expression remained conflicted, eventually “Hmph,” he rung his

nose and returned to his usual pompous air.

“With this, I’ve finally managed to surpass you. Good grief, now that it’s over, it was quite the letdown. Somewhat insufficient even.”

“Now about my life,”

“... I don’t need it. Taking your life will hold no meaning to me. I shall cancel our bet. Be grateful.”

“That’s good. But not getting you anything feels a bit loss, so I’ll treat you to some juice to celebrate. Wait right here, I’ll go buy some.”

I stood from my seat and walked off towards the vending machine.

There, “Kagoshima,” he called out to me.

Terribly serious, but a small voice it was.

“Am I... wrong?”

“Who knows?”

As the question was simply too vague, I tilted my head.

“I don’t know something like that. You look like a smart kid, so why don’t you think about it on your own?”

“... I see, you’re right.”

Griel-kun nodded meekly.

It happened as I was buying juice at a slightly-distant vending machine.

“Found you! You stone thief!”

“Now! Return our mother’s husk!”

“Wha-! The fox and the curse user! Curses, now of all times...!”

“Quit runnin’! Hey, wait!”

“You’re not getting away today...!”

From behind me, I heard someone’s voice.

I had my misgivings and returned in a hurry, but Griel-kun was already gone. Only the scattered cards remained.

“... Huh? Did he go home already?”

I didn’t even get to say goodbye.

Feeling a tinge of loneliness, I collected up the cards in my bag. After a while, I reluctantly drank down the juice I never got to hand to Griel-kun, and threw the empty can into the trash.

“Now then,”

That’s my promise taken care of, it’s about time I put the biggest problem in order.

I no longer had any hesitation. Thanks to Kikyoun-san, my heart was prepared. I lectured Griel-kun all too self-importantly, even I wouldn’t let myself remain deplorable forever.

Now.

How about I go to my slightly-too-good-for-me little sister.

In the rest area near the graveyard, Kurisu-chan sat on the bench alone. It did seem the cleaning was already finished, there was a trash bag sealed next to her.

When she noticed me, Kurisu-chan stood and waved her hand.

“Onii-chan. What’s wrong? Did you already finish that duel of yours?”

“Yeah. Well, something like that. Where’s Nobuko-san?”

“If you’re looking for Nobuko-san, she went off towards the temple to borrow the restroom. Apparently, that’s the only bathroom in the area.”

Nobuko-san... is it.

Thinking back, Kurisu-chan had always called Nobuko-san Nobuko-san. She called her reservedly and unfamiliarly.

“Kurisu-chan.”

I didn’t call her Kuria. I continued on calling her as I usually did.

I needed no preface.

Nearly this whole week had served as all the preface I needed.

I’d even say I was a little too late to say the line.

“Why won’t you call her grandma...”

“... Eh?”

At my sudden statement, Kurisu-chan opened her eyes wide and lost her words.

“She’s your grandmother, right? That person’s your grandmother, isn’t she?”
“That’s...”

Kurisu-chan looked at me as if she had been betrayed.
Why?

Why are you saying that to me now?

I thought you understood, Kagoshima-senpai.

I thought you would respect my feelings.

It was almost as if I could hear the cries of her heard.

“I mean, I mean...”

“You can just come forward, can’t you? I’m my grandmother’s granddaughter, you can proudly introduce yourself.”

“K-Kagoshima-senpai, that has nothing to do with you!”

Kurisu-chan raised her voice and rejected me.
Nothing to do with it.
That word really did pierce my chest.

“... I really don’t have anything to do with it. But let me say my piece.”

It’s already.
I had already readied my resolve.

“Kagoshima-senpai... you can only say that because you don’t know what sort of girl I am... because you don’t know how I’ve always lived my life...”

Of how she treated her father as if he was a disgrace on her life.
I had heard of her guilty conscious from Kurisu-mama.
Perhaps there was something else as well. Perhaps there was a grave reason I still didn’t know about. Even so... I spoke.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t know how you’ve lived your life. I mean, you won’t tell me anything.”

I won't force out what people can't or don't want to say. That's my principle and how I interact with people. I don't think that I was wrong... but perhaps there were exceptions.

Perhaps there were cases where it should be forced out.

Kurisu-chan.

You had always drawn the line. No matter how well we got along, you constantly took a step back to stay in your lines. That's fine. If you say that's your lifestyle, I could only accept it as is. But if you weren't going mere, I had to go over. If you took a step back, I simply had to take a step in.

"No matter what reasons you have, I don't think it'll make for a reason to not call your grandma your grandma."

"... Please don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong!"

She glared over at me, speaking in a shout.

"I'm... I'm fine the way things are! When you don't know a thing, please don't say something so self-important!"

"... Haha. What's this, Kurisu-chan. So you could make a face like that? So you could put out a voice like that?"

I ended up laughing out of turn.

This was the first time I saw her seriously angry, seriously showing.

She finally... slammed it at me.

That, for some reason, made me excessively happy.

"Sorry, but I'll be having my say. I don't know what country you come from, but this is Japan: the country of seniority. Being a senpai is simply that important."

That's why, I'll do some senpai-ish things from time to time.

I'll meddlingly stick my head into my kouhai's affairs.

"... I have no qualifications to call that person grandma!"

Kurisu-chan struck me with her scream, biting tight on her lip. Tears surfaced in the corner of her eyes.

"... This is fine. I knew that Kurisu Nobuko-san—my papa's mother was living in this town from the moment I came here. But I never went to meet her, I

made sure we would never meet... I had no idea what face I was supposed to make when I saw her..."

"Meaning you're going to stay like this from now on, never introducing yourself?"

"Yes."

"In that case—"

I said.

"Why do you keep going to her house to play again and again!?"

"..."

"If you really want to stray strangers, you just don't have to get along with her..."

A few days ago. Kurisu-chan and Nobuko-san met by chance.

Originally, it was a relationship that should have ended with passing each other by.

But Kurisu-chan wouldn't just pass by.

Instead of passing... she met.

"... You wanted to play, didn't you? You just wanted to play with your grandma, didn't you?"

"I..."

I spoke as she looked like she'd burst into tears at any moment.

"If you want her to pamper you, then let her. Quit spending all your time lining up excuses, you just have to be honest."

"... I'm scared."

Kurisu-said.

Shedding tear after tear.

"If she learns I'm her granddaughter... would Nobuko-san come to hate me? Mama who killed papa and I, would she come to hate the both of us? Would I end up gouging out the wound she was on the verge of forgetting...?"

"You're thinking too hard about it."

I said with a bitter smile, placing a hand on her head.

"Look here, Kurisu-chan. You don't understand the first thing about the

existence called the grandmother. Grandmas, you see, they're lifeforms that find their grandchildren so adorable they don't know what to do with themselves."

"... What's that supposed to mean."

"So I'm sure it'll be fine. It'll work out, somehow."

"How arbitrary."

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

"... Ahaha. How senpai-ish."

Kurisu-chan finally regained her smile. While her eyes were filled in tears, as if some veil had been lifted, it was a bright smile.

There, Nobuko-san finally returned.

"Mn? Huh? What's this, the big brother came too?"

"I was just passing by. I've got other business to attend to, so I'll be going."

I passed by Nobuko-san's side.

I said everything I wanted to. I had no reason to stay any longer. Or rather, it was better off I wasn't there. A family gettogether. I wanted to let them be alone.

... Well, that being the case, I was all-too worried about the details, so I secretly watched over them concealed in the shade of a tree. I had the heart of a big brother watching over his little sister.

"N-Nobuko-san..."

After staying quiet a while, Kurisu-chan finally opened her mouth as if she had resolved herself.

"Do you want to play cat's cradle?"

"Oh? What's this all of a sudden? I don't mind, though."

Nobuko-san sat beside Kurisu-chan on the bench.

And they began two-person cat's cradle.

Mutually tussling with the string, they constructed complicated shapes.

"... I learned cat's cradle from my mama."

Eventually, Kurisu-chan spoke.

"Mama told me she was taught by papa."

“Hmm. Is that so.”

“And I hear papa learned it from papa’s mama.”

“Hmm. Meaning from your grandma.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Kurisu-chan held her words for a bit. “... My papa was already gone by the time I was born... so it’s not like he taught me directly.”

“I see...”

“Papa, I hear he... died protecting my mama, and me in mama’s stomach.”

“... Girl?”

Nobuko-san made a dubious expression. It was surely because all Kurisu-chan’s anxiety and conflict had come out on her face. Tears started pouring from her eyes again

“... Even if I say it, I know you might not believe me, I think there’s no way you’ll ever believe me, but—”

Her cat’s cradle weaving hands stopped. The string fell apart, the shapes dissolved.

No matter how complex a figure you depict... no matter how complexly you intertwine the threads, the string of cat’s cradle is nothing more than a loop. Once it dissolves, it becomes surprisingly simple.

“I’m your granddaughter...!”

Kurisu-chan said.

“Your son Tooru-san was my papa! Papa married mama, and I was born! My name is Kurisu Crimson Kuria! I had some circumstances, so I could never say my family name was Kurisu over there, but me and mama, we decided in our hearts that our last name would always be Kurisu!”

From the young girl’s mouth, the feelings she had held in flooded out as if the sluice gates were open.

“That’s why... that’s why you’re my grandma! You’re... my grandma...”

Alongside her flood of tears, Kurisu-chan spat everything out.

Well said, I praised her courage in my heart.

Now the problem starts here... or perhaps not. I honestly wasn’t worried in the slightest.

This is just a hunch, but I think Nobuko-san already noticed the fact that Kurisu-chan was her own granddaughter.

I'm sure she was waiting for Kurisu-chan to say it.

I mean, Kurisu-chan was her real granddaughter.

There's no way a grandmother wouldn't notice her own—

“Eh? For real?”

Said Nobuko-san.

She was making a wholly curious face. As if she was taken off guard.

..... The term 'for real' was not a recent creation, its use dates back quite a long way. So it's not a term limited to the youth, and I get the feeling it's been circulating through the world for an exceedingly long time, so I can't declare it would be strange for someone of Nobuko-san's age to use the term, but... beside the point.

Wait a second. Hold it, Nobuko-san...

“Eeh? Girl, you're really my granddaughter? Really? You're not trying to pull a fast one on me, are you?”

“Y-yes.”

“Hah, hmm...”

Kobuko-san gave a sort of admiring, sort of surprised face my words failed to describe.

“Well now, what am I supposed to say here... anyways, that's a surprise. You almost sent me right to the grave there...”

“Eeh!? I-I'm sorry!”

“A ha ha. It's a joke. My heart isn't made of weak stuff. But you're not kidding, are you girl?”

At Nobuko-san's question, Kurisu-chan gave a small nod. “Yeaah. Then let's see,” Nobuko-san started to think.

“Then you're a girl that stupid son of mine planted when he went missing... I'll be real here, even if you tell me that all of a sudden, it doesn't really hit home.”

“As... I thought. I’m sorry.”

“No, you don’t have to apologize for that. Still, what are we going to do about this...”

Nobuko-san’s wrinkles dug into her face as she gave a troubled laugh.

“There’s no way to make sure you’re my daughter, and I don’t really feel like proving you’re not... but I do like you quite a bit.”

“Eh?”

“Girl, do you like me?”

“Y-yes.”

“Then it all checks out.”

With a refreshing smile unbefitting her age, Nobuko-san pat her knees.

“Whether we’re related by blood or not, let’s not mind the small details, and get along as we have. I’m always at that house, so come and play anytime.”

“... Yes!”

Kurisu-chan gave an energetic nod, a truly delighted laugh.

“U-um... so I have just one request...”

“What is it?”

“Is it alright if I call you grandma...?”

“Oh, that? I don’t mind. Call me whatever you want. Then why don’t I call you Kuria now?”

Nobuko-san produced a handkerchief from her pocket.

“Good grief, this tears are ruining your pretty face. Go up there, and the temple has a good bathroom. Go wash your face.”

“Yes, thank you, No... Grandma!”

Kurisu-chan took the handkerchief and bounded off with light steps. Left alone, Nobuko-san softly gave a wry smile. A gentle smile fitting of an old woman.

I quietly left the tree shade and walked over to her.

“Nobuko-san.”

“Oh? What, it’s the big brother. You were still around?”

“Why did you tell a lie?”

Said I.

“You really already noticed she was your granddaughter, didn’t you?”

Nobuko-san opened her eyes wide, before narrowing them inquisitively

“... Why do you think so?”

“Intuition, something like that. No, more than intuition, a hope, perhaps? If you already knew everything, I got the feeling it would make for a nicer story.”

“Hah? What’s with that.”

Nobuko-san offered a letdown laugh.

“Well for argument’s sake, it’s not like I don’t have a basis.”

I said, shifting my gaze to the cat’s cradle string Kurisu-chan left behind.

“When you first called out to us, it was when Kurisu-chan was teaching me cat’s cradle, right?”

The cat’s cradle she learned from her father, through means of her mother. The cat’s cradle Nobuko-san taught her son.

“I can’t do cat’s cradle, so I can’t say for sure, but couldn’t it be that there’s some sort of ‘habit’ to the way Kurisu-chan does cat’s cradle?”

Couldn’t it be that it caught her attention so she came over to us? Hearing my reasoning, much like a culprit whose truth had been revealed by a detective... she didn’t accept it.

“Hah? Completely wrong.”

She said.

... Huh?

“U-umm... I’m wrong? There’s no special habit or region-specific technique to Kurisu-chan’s cat’s cradle.”

“There’s no way there is. Hypothetically, let’s say there was. This old lady’s eyes can’t see the niceties of someone’s cat’s cradle from afar, right?”

“.....”

She's got a point there.

Which means... my deductions were completely off.

Uwah, how embarrassing...

"The reason I called out to you two was because I went and saw it."

Nobuko-san said with a sigh.

"That day, it's not like I came to visit the grave. I had some business at the temple, and was just walking down a path nearby. And on the way... I saw it, a girl I'd never seen before desperately putting her hands together in front of our family grave."

So she was already seen at that point.

Even if she couldn't see the fine details, she could at least tell the position of the grave.

"So I grew curious and called out."

"Did you talk to her because you knew she was your granddaughter?"

"Just thought it would be interesting if that was true. I thought maybe god had prepared a little gift for this old lady nearing her expiration date."

A cynical smile, and in a tired tone, she went on.

"In the first place, no matter how you look at it, the two of you being brother and sister was really pushing it. Your faces couldn't be any further apart, and your acting was terrible."

"Urk..."

I had nothing to say to that. It was an incredibly crude way of covering it up, after all. Only a considerably dense person would be fooled by those makeshift measures.

"And... the way the girl looks at you isn't how a sister looks at a brother."

"Eh...?"

"Ah, not, it's nothing. I'm sticking my nose where it doesn't belong."

"... But Nobuko-san. In that case, why did you say, 'For real'? You could've honestly told her you already knew."

"Humans, see, when we get older, our personalities twist out of shape. An emotional reunion, you'd call it? I'm too shy for something like that."

In the end, was she really just embarrassed?
She really was an aged woman.

“... Even so, Tooru’s daughter, huh.”

Nobuko-san narrowed her eyes trailed in the distance, oftly spilling her words.

“Ten years ago, I was so curious, so worried where my son died and what he was doing... but now that it’s come to this, it doesn’t really matter.”

Doesn’t really matter.

How much had this person gone through until she got to the point where she could talk about her son’s death like that? A lot happened, put into words, it could be summed up as that, but there were surely troubles and conflicts that couldn’t be expressed in words alone.

“That girl, how and where Kuria was raised, who and where her mother is... that doesn’t matter either. For some reason, right now... I’m just happy. Must be my age, I’ve already stopped caring about all the small details.”

“.....”

“So Tooru fell in love with some woman, and made a daughter... she’s grown up so splendidly...”

Nobuko-san put her hands together on her lap, clenching them strongly. As she turned her head down, I couldn’t make out her expression. But a single drop of water fell onto her clenched hands.

“That’s good... truly, wonderful...”

I could feel various feelings embedded in those short words. Those multifaceted overlapping complex emotions, over many a month and decade... and on top of them, this person said that’s good. There was nothing to hate or resent.

All that was left was delight.

“Nobuko-san...”

“Mn ... A ha ha. No, you’ve got me there, when you grow old, your tear glands grow weak. Good grief, this is a bother... wait, boy?”

“Itz good izn’t it...”

“Why are you the one crying harder...”

Nobuko-san turned a cold shoulder to my tears. Her own had completely tried up.

Urgh, it's no good. I'm so moved the tears aren't stopping.

I'm weak to this sort of thing.

Nobuko-san let out a deep sigh.

“You're a strange one, you know that.”

So she gave a fed up smile.

After separating with Nobuko-san, I returned home with Kurisu-chan. We walked side by side down the residential district lit up by the evening sun. It's not as if anything changed as a result, and it's not as if any single thing had been resolved; even so, as she walked beside me, Kurisu-chan made an unclouded face.

As if she had somewhat taken a load off her mind.

I had no lingering regrets of my life living with Kurisu-chan coming to an end.

“Is it about time for your mother to return from her trip?”

I asked as we walked, and Kurisu-chan's body was startled into stiffening up.

“U-umm... she was actually scheduled to get back today, but it kinda got postponed, it seems...”

“Oh really? Was there a strike at her destination or something?”

“Something like that!”

Hmmm. Is that the next big thing? Strikes?

“So, if you'd let me stay a little longer, I'd be—ah.”

Kurisu-chan stopped both her words and her walk.

“What's wrong?”

When I turned, she was closing her eyes. Her mouth sealed as well, she was concentrating. It looked like she was sensing something, that her consciousness was wholly directed unto herself.

“... It's back.”

She opened her eyes wide, twirling to face me, “It’s back! It’s back, it’s back, it’s come back Kagoshima-senpai!”

Gripping my hands, she happily bounced up and down.
Back? What’s she talking about?

“Ah, do you mean your mother’s back from her trip?”
“Oh? Ah, yes, that’s right! Uwah, hooray, hooray, hooray!”

Kurisu-chan showed delight as if she had regained who she was. She must have been considerably happy her mother returned.

“Hah, that’s good... ah, it’s been a long while since I could feel the power that fills the atmosphere.”

Abruptly, her full-face smile froze up. A few seconds later, “– Wait, whaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?”

She raised a cry similar to a shriek.

“W-what is this magic!? Why is Griestark D’Ifa Licurio Soel in this town!? Rather, this world!? And the one fighting is Kikyoun-senpai!? But Tamane-san’s with her, and this power is the power of the nine-tailed fox!? E-e-e-eeeh!? And the power Griel has, don’t tell me that’s the philosopher’s stone!? Eh? How did he obtain the stone, eeeh!? What exactly is going on in here!?”

Kurisu-chan held her head as she fell into panic.

Magic. Nine-tailed fox. Philosopher’s stone.

... It’s her eight-grade syndrome.

She had kept it concealed in her body this whole week, but having come so far, it had grown to the point where her desire was exploding out, it seems. Eighth-grade syndrome full throttle.

“I-I’m sorry, Kagoshima-senpai! I have to go!”

“Eh? Where?”

“Where... umm, ummmmm.”

Kurisu-chan made a troubled face. After her eyes swam here and there, she stuck out her chest and boldly declared.

“To save the world!”

I cracked a smile.
At such eighth-grade syndrome, at such childishness, at such fun.
And... at such coolness.

“Got it. Have fun.”
“Here I go!”
“Don’t be back too late.”
“Got it!”

Kurusu-chan gave a large nod, and by the time I noticed it, she was gone.
I turned to the sky, to find something soaring through it at a tremendous speed.
A bird, a plane, superman, or perhaps even... a witch.
But hey, it’s probably the bird.

The place I parted from Kurisu-chan was near former-Gentle Breeze Park.
The empty park that’s play equipment had been taken away. Within that, as
once before, a single girl was standing.
Yomika Eri. She was standing in a position not the tiniest bit different the other
day.
... What should I do?
The talk didn’t get anywhere last time, and the air turned dubious. Should I
ignore her today? She does seem like she’s hard to please, so if I act too buddy-
buddy, she might hate me for it.
It happened as I was hesitating like that.
Yomika-san crumbled right at the knees.

“.. Eh?”

When I focused my eyes to look, her complexion was considerably bad. She
was ghastly pale. As her skin was abnormally pale to begin with, she looked like
no more than a corpse at this point.
Her breath was rough. Containing her chest with one hand, she repeated short
and shallow breaths. Yet even so, she remained expressionless.

“Yomika-san!”

I infiltrated the park and raced over to her.

“What’s wrong!? Are you alright!?”

“Kagoshima—Akira.”

Yomika-san looked up at me, muttering indifferently.
Indifferent to the end.

“Does your chest hurt? Can you stand? Should I call an ambulance? Or could it be some sort of chronic illness...?”

“Leave me be...”

Brushing off my hand, she stood right back up as if nothing had happened at all. While she maintained her expressionlessness, her breath was rough after all. She seemed to be in considerable pain.

“... Are you alright?”

“I am alright. My entire body hurts as if it is being drawn and quartered, my brain feels hot as if it is boiling over, but it is no problem at all.”

“... Hey, what are you even doing?”

“I am pushing myself.”

Yomika-san said.

“I... must push myself. For someone like me, nothing more than a replica, if I do not push myself like this... I will not be able to use the ‘power’.”

“Power...? Eh, what? What do you mean?”

“My role this time is... to affix the coordinate axis.”

Affixing her eyes on blank space, she began murmuring to herself.

“In order to lead the original in another world to this one... to support her unstable power far too great... I am activating the ‘power’ to serve as a guidepost on this side. Using my feeble power one could only call an inferior imitation... I will urge the original to awaken.”

Between she and I, we will work together to wrench open the dimension.
With her inorganic eyes, she indifferently muttered as if confirming her own job to herself.

“... What are you talking about, Yomika-san? What power do you mean?”

“《Book Marker》.”

“... Book marker? Are you talking about Shiori...?”

Bookmark would be the English translation of Shiori.

Shiori... Orino Shiori.

Orino-san's name... was Shiori.

Though I was sure it was a coincidence.

"... Hac, hac."

Holding her mouth, Yomika-san crumbled at the knees in the same way as before.

I reflexively caught her.

"Yomika-san! A-anyways, you've got to stop that!"

Unable to watch her in pain, I ended up crying out. But she wouldn't deal with the likes of me. Her hollow gaze was focused elsewhere.

Somewhere that wasn't here... somewhere not of this world.

"I am... ashamed of myself... an inferior copy such as I, can only be unsightly."

In my arms, she whispered incoherently in a soft voice.

"I will keep pushing myself... to reach less than a tenth of the original..."

"....."

"But I cannot have any complaint. Completing the original is... master's dearest wish."

"Master..."

It's for Kai?

She's going through such pains for Kai's sake?

Still entrusting her body to me, Yomika-san slowly lifted her right hand. She reached out as if to grasp hold of the sky and hold it in place.

"-GK1FSBH9889F35VKHWVSJBU346H8575494SNJHBBKD
3719YIO379KFM829FJBS38291USBFOW3910EVNV47OK281
9ZKINFLSNVOSF6NS839RFIVNSROVNJSRJRIBSKRH39282
KF91VJNFIGVNLWO827295KD255HD721KQPVKI321SN456F
VISU-"

Like a broken doll, Yomika-san continued muttering incomprehensible words. When a majority of her face parts wouldn't move in her expressionless state,

her lips alone shifted at an unnatural pace.

It was terribly eerie. As if I couldn't pick up any humanity. Fear instinctually budded in my chest, and I could no longer take a single move.

“– AOIV3FH8916ALO—Complete...”

It seemed like an eternity, once the long, long spell was over, Yomika-san's hoisted right arm fell. She brushed me off and stood on her own.

“With this... there is only one role left for me. That is... the final role.”

She muttered with a pale face,wantering off with unsteady, uncertain steps.

“W-wait!”

I called out without hesitation.

“Are you alright?”

“I am alright... this is likely a summer cold. Once I get home, warm myself and sleep, I will be better.”

“SOsummer cold...? Then What did you say back there? About book marker and the original...”

“The heat got to my head, so I ended up spouting incomprehensible drivel. My apologies. Please forget about it.”

“.....”

I couldn't believe her. While I generally believed what people told me, I could tell it was a clear lie. Yet owing to the dangerous air she let off, I couldn't pursue the subject.

“Also... thank you for catching me.”

Yomika-san turned right around.

“If possible, please catch the girl who is about to fall in twelve seconds.”

“Eh?”

“That is your duty.”

Leaving those words, Yomika-san left.

I was left with nowhere to turn, standing stock still on the spot. From beginning to end, Yomika-san was full of mysteries. Is this what you call being spacey...? Once I had through about ten seconds, “Kyaaaaaaah!” A voice came from on

high. I looked up and at that moment—

“W-whoah!”

I was crushed by someone who fell from the sky. For argument’s sake, my body did move to catch them on reflex, but with my physical strength, catching a single person at that speed was impossible.

Alongside the individual, I tumbled over the ground. The rotation stopped with me on the bottom, and that individual mounting me.

Who was it, good grief... I thought, as I reached out my right hand to remove the. And touched something soft. Squeezing it kinda brought me happiness. In order to ascertain the identity of that mass, I fondled it a few more times.

“Mn. K-Kagoshima-kun...?”

A familiar voice. I blankly raced my face.

“... Orino-san?”

The one mounting me was Orino-san. Which means the one who suddenly fell from the sky was Orino-san.

... Which also means, don’t tell me the thing I’m fondling in my hand is— Feeling a fear that drained my complexion coupled with an arduous excitement, I turned my eyes to my hand.

I was holding... her upper arm.

Her upper arm bare from the summer shorts she wore. Without any excess fat, but that being the case, not too much muscle. It was squishy, and truly comforting to touch.

... An upper arm, eh.

Dammit, read the damn mood, oh hand of mind. This is where you’re supposed to use the confusion to cop a feel. Hah... Well, whatever. I’m here anyways, let’s squeeze it a few more times for old time’s sake.

...

“... Kagoshima-kun? How long are you doing to squeeze me?”

In a mounting position, Orino-san let down a voice willed with bloodlust.

“Wah! I-I’m sorry, couldn’t help myself!”

“Youlcn’t help yourself?”

“For old time’s sake.”

“What time is that?”

“No, see, they often say it. A girl’s upper arm is about as soft as their breasts.”

“You were thinking something like that as you groped me!?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’m reflecting on it. Your anger is fully justified.”

“W—well as long as you get it... it was an accident, and you just touched my upper arm a bit... b-but even if it’s my arm, if you touch it like that’s it a bit embarrassing, so—”

“There’s no way your breasts are like this. I’m sorry for treating them as equivalent.”

“That’s why the apology was for!?”

We held that back and forth as Orino-san got off of me. She was in casual clothes; a light short-sleeve shirt, a short skirt that went to just above her knees. There was a casquette cap on her head. It was a fashion style that truly gave off that travel feel.

“Orino-san... when did you get back? Did the strike break up?”

“Ah, y-yeah! I-it worked itself out!”

“I see, that’s good... so why did you suddenly come and crush me?”

When I asked, Orino-san made an incredibly troubled face. She seemed considerably panicked as she began explaining the reason.

“Umm... that’s, umm... wh-when I got back, I was in a bit of a strange mood, so when I spotted you, Kagoshima, I thought I’d just embrace you a bit...?”

What’s with that reason...

Was Orino-san that sort of character?

“L-look! I was out overseas! In that country over there, that much is just a greeting!”

“Oh, I see. There are various ways to greet people overseas.”

“Right, right. By the way, Kagoshima-kun, what are you doing here?”

Orino-san suddenly changed the topic. I got the feeling she was trying hard to avoid the topic, but well, that’s surely my imagination.

“It’s... not like I was doing anything particular. I just spotted Yomika-san, so I over.”

“Yomika-san?”

Oh, I see. Orino-san doesn't know her. I met her once before with Orino-san's little sister Oshiri-chan, but Oshiri-chan was asleep at the time. There's no way she could've conveyed the info on Yomika-san to her big sister.

“Yomika-san is Kai's friend.”

“Kai...”

Orino-san's expression suddenly sunk.

“By Kai, you mean Shinose-kun, right? Your childhood friend.”

“Yeah, something up?”

“I... actually met Shinose-kun. At the trip's destination.”

Met Kai at the destination?

“Hmm... Ah, but come to think of it, I did hear that Kai was out on a trip. I see, I see, that's quite the coincidence.”

“... Yeah. And so, the truth is, up to the very moment, I was with Shinose-kun. I was able to get here because he taught me how to get back...”

How to get back? Hmm. Is she talking about how to ride an airplane?

“Kagoshima-kun, who is Shinose-kun?”

Orino-san sounded serious to a scary extent.

“Who can say? I don't know myself?”

“You don't know? You're childhood friends, right?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded without hesitation.

“I don't really get him, but he's a precious friend.”

Orino-san looked like she couldn't accept it, but it was impossible for me to explain any further.

Kai is a friend.

As long as I knew that, it was more than enough for me.

“But how... did Shinose-kun know about...”

Orino-san made a brooding face as she thought to herself.

But soon, “Ah, that’s right,” she raised her head.
She firmly grasped both my shoulders. Seemed rather desperate.

“Kagoshima-kun. What happened with Kurisu-chan?”

“.....”

Crap, it totally slipped my mind.

The problem I put off was now too late to resolve.

“Why was Kurisu-chan calling you onii-chan? Why was she in your bath? Why were you living together?”

Scary...

Orino-san, you’re scaring me.

“N-no wait, Orino-san. That’s not what we were talking about, right? Weren’t we discussing the identity of my childhood friend?”

“I couldn’t care less about that.”

She stated definitively.

I got the feeling she brushed something incredibly important under the rug for a petty reason but... well, must be my imagination.

Overpowered by the intensity of an encroaching Orino-san, I frantically began giving excuses.

Thanks to my careful and thorough explanation, I got Orino-san to understand, but as it was an unavoidable fact that Kurisu-chan spent seven whole days lodging with me, Orino-san made a somewhat disapproving face.

“... No fair.”

Was her impression. What was unfair?

The fact Kurisu-chan did all the housework?

After that, Orino-san quickly disappeared. It seemed she still had things to do with the members in regards to the trip.

I returned home alone. By the time I reached, the sun had already set.

A few meters from the door, I could hear someone coming from the opposite direction. It was Kikyoin-san in her onmyouji-ish attire. The dirt on her clothing had increased considerably from this morning, and the fatigue on her face had

multiple.

On Kikyoin-san's back was Kurisu-chan in her witch cosplay.

"... What happened? Why are you carrying Kurisu-chan? What's the situation?"

"Nothing really."

Kikyoin-san offered a painstaking response as I called out. Kurisu-chan on her back was sound asleep. She showed no signs of waking on my call.

"Ah, but you came at the right time. Look after Kurisu, will you."

She said and entrusted Kurisu to me. Still not knowing what was going on, for the time being, I carried her on my back.

"Haah, that's a load off my shoulders, My apologies to Kurisu, but that was a troublesome trek."

"Hey, really what happened."

"Nothing really. Just disciplined a naughty kid a bit."

"Naughty kid?"

"Well, while I say that, he practically foiled himself. I don't know what happened, but that kid's combat power dropped drastically. Seems he had some indecisiveness in battle."

"..."

"What's more, Kurisu-chan joined the fray along the way, and took all the cool parts. Good grief, it's good and all that she learned an outrageous new technique, but don't just fall asleep as recoil."

She grumbled sarcastically, lightly tapping the sleeping Kurisu-chan's head.

"Kikyoin-san, sorry. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's nothin'. Talkin' to myself."

"Hmmm. Ah, right, I was checking the news on my phone, but it looks like the Sesshoueki's back where it's supposed to be."

Today evening, it was back before anyone realized it. The thief must have returned it on their own, or so the newscasters surmised.

I planned to surprise her with the news but, "That so. Hmm. Tamane-sama sure works fast," Kikyoin-san's reaction was considerably light. Rather, I was ignored. She suddenly started talking about her little sister who had absolutely

nothing to do with it.

“Anyways, I leave Kurisu to you. I think she’ll wake up soon enough, so look after her ‘til then.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well ‘en, I’m goin’ hom and goin’ to sleep. I’m so sleepy, I’ll pass right out...”

Rolling her neck and shoulders, she passed by beside me.

“Umm, I don’t really get it, but good work.”

I raised one hand to invite her into a high five.

After some hesitation, “... Mn. You said it.” She answered the high-five a little embarrassed.

Gazing at Kikyoun-san as she made her way off, I called out to the young girl on my back as well.

“Good work.”

I got back some sleep mumble.

“... Gwod vrk”

Epilogue

For the time being, I put Kurisu-chan to bed on the sofa; she woke up after around four hours. Once she was un and about, the first thing she did was make a call to her mother with the star-strapped phone.

Naturally, I didn't know what she was talking about, but as she spoke on the phone, she gave off the kinda feeling as if everything had been wrapped up nicely.

“Was that your mother?”

“That's right. The philosopher's stone was returned to his resting place, that boy returned to his original world, and the blockade on the gate was lifted... no, I mean, it looks like I can go home now.”

“I see. Good for you. With this, you can finally go home.”

This was the end of our life together.

When I thought over it, it was sad after all.

“... Today's the last day of living with my onii-chan.”

“Yeah... wait, you don't have to ball me onii-chan anymore, do you? Nobuko-san already figured it out.”

“You're right, it's kinda become a quirk.”

Kurisu-chan giggled. Being called onii-chan in her lisping voice was becoming a quirk for me in a separate sense, so it really was time for it to stop.

“Then it's about time you went home. It's getting late, I'll walk you there.”

“Ah, u-ummm...”

Kurisu-chan hesitated and hung her head. Fidgetting her intertwined fingers in front of her chest, she looked at me with upturned eyes.

“C-c-can I stay just one more night?”

“Pardon?”

As I tilted my head, Kurisu-chan's spoke with reddened cheeks.

“Err... just for tonight, can you stay as my big brother?”

Did I have any reason to decline? I did not.

I was sure it was simply a pain to return so late at night, but that was no trouble to me. She had stayed over a whole week. Adding on another night wouldn't amount to much.

That being the case, it was already night, so when it came to things to do, sleeping was all that was left. I wanted to do something special to commemorate the last day, but it was too late to prepare something now. Without any special occurrences, we spent our time together, changing into our pajamas and preparing to sleep once eleven came around.

“Good night, Kuria-chan.”

“Sweet dreams, onii-chan.”

I headed to my room. Kurisu-chan to my mothers.

I got into bed, closed my eyes, and at that moment—tap, tap, came a knocking on the door.

“Kurusu-chan?”

When I raised my torso and permitted entry, the door feebly swung open. Kurisu-chan in her pajamas, her face dyed a shade of crimson.

“What's wrong?”

“U-um, I-I had a bad dream, can I sleep with you...?”

“That was fast!”

Only around twenty seconds had passed since we parted in front of the room. You're telling me in that space of time, she slept, dreamed, got up, and came here? She falls asleep easier than Nobita-kun.

“... And wait, what? Sleep? Together?”

“I-I-I'm so scared I can't sleep alone anymore! It was a really scary dream where loads of ghosts and ghouls came out! I'm begging you!”

Come to think of it, Kurisu-chan was no good with ghosts. If the dream really was that scary, I get why she wouldn't be able to sleep. But from her atmosphere, I was hard-pressed to pick up the slightest hint of fear. More so, a devilishness as if she was scheming something was... no, it's not good to suspect

people like that.

Still, sleeping together... in this narrow bed?

“Wait a second, I’m going to have a good long think about it, so...”

“I’m begging you.”

“No, but...”

“When a little sister has a scary dream, a big brother is supposed to sleep by their side and tell them it’s okay!”

Her tone didn’t take no for an answer.

“Or could it be when you said you’d be my onii-chan for this last night, you were lying to placate me?”

“Guh...”

“You said if I wanted to be pampered, I should let it happen, right?”

“Gnn...”

What is this feeling that my words are being used against me?

And why is it that Kurisu-chan has a somewhat mischievous smile on her face?

“Yeah. Got it. If you had a scary dream, nothing we can do about that.”

I consented out of necessity. “Thank you,” Kurisu-chan lowered her head and closed the door.

... As I recall, a court case decided that in the case where a man and a woman are alone, and the woman is the one to close the door, that action counts as legal consent, apparently.

Meaning.

If I make a move on Kurisu-chan now, it won’t be a crime...!

... Wait, what the hell am I thinking about? Kurisu-chan had a bad dream, leaving her with no choice but to come to me. I shouldn’t hold such unpure thoughts.

As I was grappling with myself, Kurisu-chan wormed her way into the bed.

“... Ehehe.”

Popping her head out from the covers next to me, she smiled in bashful delight.

“... Kurisu-chan, are you really afraid?”

“O-of course I’m afraid! I’m shaking like crazy! Ah, erk! N-no wait, I’m inflicted with sleep paralysis!”

“Now that was sudden!”

“I-I can’t move! I’ve been sleep-paralyzed, and my body won’t move a muscle! There’s no way I can leave the bed like this!”

“Your mouth is moving ridiculously fluidly though!”

And I get the feeling her lines are overly explanatory. No, now’s not the time to worry about that. What to do, how were you supposed to cure sleep paralysis again?

“Wait right there! At a time like this, I should call Kikyouin-san. She seems like she’d be an expert!”

“Y-you can’t!”

When I was about to leap off the bed, she gripped me by the hand and stopped me.

“If you call her at this hour, Kikyouin-senpai will be fuming.”

S-sure enough... what’s more, she looked especially tired today. If I woke her up by phone, I can’t even imagine how much of her anger I’d garner.

“I’ll be fine. I’m sure I’ll get better if I sit still.”

Kurisu-chan insisted, so I returned to the bed and reverted to my original position.

“... Kurisu-chan.”

“What is it, Onii-chan?”

“How long are you going to be holding my hand?”

When I’d already returned to the bed, Kurisu-chan wouldn’t let go of me. Furthermore, when I wasn’t paying attention, she had shifted to a firm hold. Where finger intertwined with finger to form a strong grip.

“I’m sorry. I’m paralyzed and I can’t move my hand either.”

She said nonchalantly. Then how did you even grip me, or so I couldn’t retort. The sleep paralysis was all her personal testimony. Therefore, anything she says pertaining to it must be the case.

“Then you’ll have to sleep holding it, is that alright?”

“There’s no helping it. It’s sleep paralysis, after all.”

“I’m sorry if I sweat.”

“That goes both ways.”

Her body heat was conveyed through our linked hands. When I lightly squeezed her’s, a similar squeeze was returned. That soft and small hand was extremely warm.

... How should I put it, rather than having my heart racing or my body stimulated, this situation was simply embarrassing. Beside me, a few decimeters from my head was Kurisu-chan’s face. She seemed bashful as well, as her face was flushed. But for some reason, Kurisu-chan made a smile the whole time.

An alluring... a devilish smile.

“... Onii-chan.”

Kurisu-chan turned her head towards me. Her face grew even closer, my heart throbbed.

“Thank you?”

“Yeah? What are you thanking me for?”

“Everything. This and that and eeeeverything.”

Kurisu-chan spoke in a bounding voice, but soon some part of her smile grew sorrowful. The tone of her voice dropped ever-so-slightly.

“... I thought I would live my whole life without relying on anyone. I had a circumstance where that’s what I had to do, and I thought that way of life was strong or cool. I would always try to convince myself so...”

“.....”

“But that’s wrong. That’s not strong or anything.”

“You’re right. I do think a girl like you would have a brighter future if you could accept the kindness of others just a bit.”

“... That’s not what I was talking about.”

“Oh, missed the mark?”

“Hah... let’s just go with that.”

Kurisu-chan said sulkily.

“... Is it passed midnight yet?”

Kurisu-chan quietly said, so I checked the room’s clock.

“Yeah, five minutes passed.”

“Is that so, in that case, it’s already over.”

“Over? What’s over.”

“I’m done calling you onii-chan.”

It looks like tonight really did mean just today night.

“I get the feeling it’s a waste. If you want, you could call me it a little more.”

“I can’t, I won’t say it again. I’ve got to make a clear distinction.”

Her chiding smile turned into one with hidden implication.

“Our sibling game is over. From now on, just as we were before, and even more so than that, let’s get along.”

As her large eyes looked straight at me, for some reason, she seemed extremely mature. I could no longer think of her as a little sister, or feel a want to make a little sister of her.

As a single woman, I thought she was beautiful.

In the end, Kurisu-chan’s sleep paralysis didn’t dissolve until morning, she spent a night her hand linked with mine.

Another Epilogue: Shinose Kai x World of Death x ???

We woke up at ease the next day, ate something like brunch together, and by noon, Kurisu-chan had returned home.

“Yeaah.”

I groaned in the living room much the same as a week before.

Before my eyes, a mountain of homework.

Completely untouched.

“This is bad...”

I don't intend to blame Kurisu-chan for it, but in the end, I couldn't do a lick of homework this week. I should've thrown out my pride as a senpai, and confidently opened the books in front of Kurisu-chan, I regret. This is truly what they mean by hindsight is twenty-twenty.

“Now let's get to it. It's about time I showed what I'm made of.”

I resolved myself, reached out and—my phone shook. I crumbled down. What is it this time? Am I fated to never do my homework? Feeling an irritation, I opened up the cellphone.

“—Eh?”

By Orino-san's story, almost all the movie club members that accompanied her on the trip managed to make it back to Japan safely. Excluding only a single Saijou Mutsuki.

Having gone missing at the trip's destination, he had still yet to get in contact. It was unclear whether or not he returned to Japan, and taking it a step further, it was unclear whether he was even alive.

“Hah, hah.”

Blasting my bike off from my house, I arrived at Asahi Park in no more than five minutes. Getting my breath in order, I stepped off my ride. I looked around I spotted him soon enough.

He sat at the table set I had used as a card game field not too long ago. While I say he was sitting, it wasn't on the chair but the table. I did find it rare for the mockingly polite boy, but at the same time, it did seem fitting of him.

“Saijou-kun...”

I called out to the boy of whereabouts unknown. He suddenly called me, and without listening to a single word I had to say, he one-sidedly called me out. I thought I'd come and give my complaint. What were you doing this whole time? Orino-san is worried. I hear Kirako-san's worried too. Of course, I'm no exception. Don't go off recklessly on your own again. And for argument's sake, I'm the older one here. If you've got some business with me, don't call me out, you have to come to my place... or so, I planned to really give it to him.

But a single look at him, and those thoughts were all blown away. I shuddered as I swallowed my breath.

“W-what happened, with those injuries...”

Saijou-kun’s form was far too painful to look at.

The glasses that could be called his trademark were gone, in exchange an eyepatch sealed up his left eye. His head was wrapped in bandages, his right leg was affixed in a plaster cast. Sirht beside him was a crutch, and I presumed he had to use it to hobble his way here.

The clincher was... his left arm.

At first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. But the moment the wind picked up, my doubts changed to conviction. The long-sleeve shirt he wore took a large sway. His left sleeve where his left arm was originally supposed to be, swam through the breeze like a carp streamer.

It wasn’t there?

His left arm... wasn’t there?

“It’s been a while. Kagoshima-san.”

Turning towards a speechless me, he sent a smile no different than his usual one.

“Ahaha. Please don’t look so surprised just because you come across a one-armed person. It’s fine. Eventually, I’ll grow in a new one like a Namekian.”

“... Was it an accident? Or...”

“For argument’s sake, I cut it off myself. In order to escape the enemy, I tried leaving it behind like a lizard detaches its tail. In exchange for a life, a left arm is a small price to pay.”

I couldn’t tell what he was saying. It was too far from reality, my head was wholly failing to keep up. “Here,” he pointed at his eye.

“This one’s also all ruined. It was completely crushed. Glasses and all. Aaah, I really had a liking for those glasses.”

He continued talking in a voice, cheerful to an unnatural extent.

“So my losses total one pair of glasses, an eye, and an arm. Good grief, my character’s gotten a sudden upheaval. You think they’re putting too much into

my setting? Losing an eye and an arm, it's cool if it's just one of them, but it gets dicey when you buy into both. What do you think, Kagoshima-san?"

"... What happened?"

Ignoring his stupid question, I enquired.

"I lost."

Saijou-kun erased his smile. His remaining right eye gazed at me.

"It was my complete defeat. I was hammered into the ground until there wasn't an untouched inch of my body. It feels like the word defeat was carved big and grand in the depths of my heart."

"You lost... to who...? Don't tell me the founder? Did that bastard give you all those injuries?"

"I wish. In the end, I wasn't even able to meet that person. These wounds are all from Utsurohara-san."

"Utsurohara..."

"He stands at the summit of the lone four Rank Ses. A psychokinesis special. At present, the strongest psychic the institution has to offer... I never imagined that man would have connections to the founder. Well, that doesn't really matter."

"....."

"By which I mean to say, it all ended without me even seeing my foe's face. That's why it was a complete defeat."

"What do you—"

"The surprise failed. There's nothing more miserable than a surprise the target already knows is coming. It truly was embarrassing. Ah, I feel like dying ten times."

Saijou-kun left me by the wayside to mutter to himself. His body shook in humiliation and disgrace. Perhaps because he gripped it too hard, blood oozed out of his remaining right hand.

While he seemed to be feigning composure. His overly intense emotions leaked out of his entire body.

"When you get down to it, I was dancing on his palm through and through. My existence was let swim for no other reason than this scheme. I was simply

used to lead Orino-san to another world... to awaken her.”

Saijou-kun spat out the words, laughing at himself.

“I noticed it the moment the gate was sealed off, but it was already too late. I recklessly went on a suicide mission, and at the end of the end, this is where I end up. There’s no salvation for my ilk.”

“.....”

The words wouldn’t come out. His utterances were far too incomprehensible, but more than that, Saijou-kun was too scary; I couldn’t move a muscle. He was scary. Everything about him was scary. The person before me made the eyes of someone who had lost everything in life. The one who scattered that cheery smile, that impertinent yet somewhat unhateable Saijou Mutsuki... was long gone.

The one here was a defeated man.

Having his own lack of powers drilled in to a detestable extent, a miserable defeated.

“Oh, I’m sorry for complaining so much. It’s not like I called you out here to have you hear that—upsie daisy.”

He said as he unsteadily stood from the table. But at present, on top of his one arm, one leg was in a cast. His balance crumbled, he was on the verge of collapse.

I reached out my hand, hurriedly supporting him up.

“Thank you.”

Said Saijou-kun.

“And sorry. Right now, I’m simply getting my revenge, and this is childish harassment. My pointless struggle at the end of the end. What they call a Parthian shot.”

Something flashed between us.

... Kchck.

“Huh?”

It was more hot than painful. My chest was hot. My left chest felt as if it was blazing up.

Without even the time to feel nauseous, a liquid flooded up into my mouth.

A red and syrupy liquid.

Is this blood, I thought, as the pain finally came. A pain that broke my imagination. More painful than any injury I had received before. An agony amongst agonies.

Ow, ow, owow, owow ow, ow, owowow—

“It’s a good knife, isn’t it? It’s been made special, and it cuts better than a surgeon’s scalpel. This is the knife I used to sever my left arm.”

[IMAGE]

The voice of Saijou-kun before me felt terribly distant.

There was a red speck on the eyepatch over his left eye. Not just the eyepatch. On his face, and his shirt and his cast, all over his body, a red liquid was splattered.

Oh, I see.

That’s my blood, ain’t it.

I folded at the knees. Crumbled. Fell like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Saijou-kun simply dodged me, he didn’t hold me up. For that sake, I collided relentlessly with the ground.

There was no pain. The pain had quickly disappeared.

Saijou-kun looked down over me. He stared fixedly. As if he was observing an insect.

“In a drama, whenever the heart is staved through, the knife is often thrust in vertically. I think they do it because it looks nice, but in all actuality, if you stab vertically, the ribs get in the way. You’re actually better off stabbing level. If you do that, you can slip through the gaps in the ribs, and even with minimal power, you can easily get the blade to the heart.”

While he was fluently unveiling some miscellaneous knowledge, a sea of blood formed. He must have severed some vital vessels along the way as well, the blood flowed idiotically. It showed no signs of stopping.

A knife was stabbed into my left chest.

I have to pull it out. I have to hurry and pull it out. While my mind thought it, my hands wouldn't move as instructed. Ah, but weren't you not supposed to pull it out? If you pull it, the blood all comes out at once, so I read in a doctor manga that instead of pulling it out, you should just get to the hospital as-is... Then I sure am glad my hands can't move, or rather, I didn't even have to remove it for this much blood, blood, blood...

Aah, aah, aaaa...

My consciousness was faint. I felt sleepy. So sleepy I couldn't help myself.

I'll sleep.

I'll die.

— ...

“Huh? You're already dead? That was easy. Well, I guess that's what you get from a civilian who hasn't received any training. I don't even have to confirm the cause of death, it's hypovolemic shock from bloodloss. What's this, what's this, when I try to kill, he really does die.”

.....

“... But of course not. There's no way it would end here. There's no way he'd die. There's definitely no way in the world this one would die.”

.....

“You're watching from somewhere, aren't you? Hurry and come out—won't you, God?”

《Finishing Stroke》

Something flashed between us.

But at the same time, someone suddenly stepped in. By the time I noticed it, I was sandwiched in between someone and the boy.

Almost like a bookmark—that was stuck into the story.

Grey hair close to white, and a gray kinagashi close to black.

“Kai...!”

My childhood friend, Shinose Kai.

He was making awfully cold eyes. Silently, he lifted up Saijou-kun’s hand he had grasped. Something fell on the ground. It was this and pale, a knife that looked like it was made of ice.

Even once the knife had fallen, Kai didn’t let go of the hand. He put power into his slender arm, squeezing it tight.

Right after, a dull sound like a dead branch had snapped.

“That smarts, aarrgh...”

Saijou-kun raised a groan and retreated back. His right arm was bent in a strange direction. It was gradually swelling up, but with only one hand, he was unable to hold down his right arm.

Was it broken?

Did Kai break it with nothing but grip strength?

“A, aaah..... a, aha,ahaha, ahahahahahahahahahahahahahah!”

His groan changed into a laugh. While his expression looked pained, even so, Saijou-kun laughed. It was a laugh of madness.

“Looks like I’ve finally been graced with the honor of your face.”

The boy covered in wounds prattled on.

“As I thought, to you, Kagoshima Akira is your lifeline—your key individual, literally so. The key, and a vital role. If I tried to kill this man, I trusted you would surely save him.”

I simply stood between the two. It felt like I had been completely left behind. I couldn’t follow where anything was going.

“In your plan to artificially raise Orino Shiori, this man fit to be the singularity point at the center was an absolute necessit—”

“No.”

Finally, Kai opened his mouth.

“That was up to a short while ago.”

His voice was calm to an unnatural extent. I couldn’t feel the slightest human

character. While he usually made a gentle smile, today his expression was terribly cold.

“The cage of death remnant is already completed.”

Said Kai.

“Raised in a world of psychics, she came into contact with onmyouji and youkai, she experienced the technology of the future, she experienced a country in another world. And this time, to tie it all together, I had her transcend dimensions. The process I prepared was all carried out in turn. All that’s left is to leave a little time... and ‘that’ will awaken”

And Kai directed his eyes at me for just a moment.

“That’s why Kagoshima Akira is no longer needed. I don’t need that one anymore.”

As if gazing at a toy he’d grown tired of, a manga he’d read enough times to grow sick, cold enough to send shivers down my spine, sharp eyes.

My chest throbbed in pain.

When it wasn’t as if I had been stabbed with a knife, it hurt as if I had been pierced.

I felt I had been abandoned.

I felt I had been betrayed.

When I hadn’t swallowed down a single piece of the situation, I was wrapped in a sense of loss as if God had abandoned me.

“... or so it should have been...”

Kai’s eyes narrowed, he made a self-deprecating smile. He ran his hand like a comb through his gray hair.

“Why did I end up saving him, I wonder. When I saw the moment Kagoshima Akira would lose his life, my body went and moved on its own. I thought I would abandon him, thought I would turn my back, and yet—I couldn’t stand to watch it. I’ve seen the instant life disappears again and again, and yet...”

His voice that questioned himself was faint, ephemeral, as if it would disappear at any moment.

To Kai's inner conflict, "I couldn't care less about your game of friends," Saijou-kun rejected it in a voice with no leisure to spare.

"If you'll let me introduce myself again. It's a pleasure to meet you, and an honor to finally lay eyes on you. I'm surprised to see you're far younger than I imagined."

"Don't say what you're not even considering. I'm just matching this body to Kagoshima Akira. You've at least researched that much, haven't you?"

In regards to Saijou-kun's snarls, Kai spoke from up high. While both seemed to be rearing for a fight, it went without saying who held the advantage. A fight between an adult and a child, or perhaps god and man.

"My name is Saijou Mutsuki. What's yours?"

"Shinose Kai is the name I use for Kagoshima Akira, so it's not how I'd introduce myself to you. I'm no cat, but I don't have a name yet. I didn't have anyone to name me."

"I'm sure your developers... the fine ladies and gents of the Inoue Big Three simply felt too inferior to name you. Don't you think they saw it as blasphemous to give you a name?"

'Inoue Big Three'. I had heard it somewhere before. Where was it again? As I recall, a little while ago, when I happened to catch sight of the mail delivered to Kagurai-senpai—

"You've done your research. You really are a prodigious talent."

And without wondering at all how it came to pass, Kai began talking about himself.

What he'd never talked to me about, who he was.

"The 'Mini-Garden' plan started up in an era far ahead of the current one. Saddened by the knowledge of the eventual demise of their race, what the humans began—a plan to make God with their own hand and plead for salvation."

An imagined god cannot mankind.
But a manufactured one can.

Not particularly intrigued, Kai added on.

“Hahah, they sure think of some interesting things. Just because they can’t do anything on their own, they make a god, and have that guy save them... to make this world as a whole, that god’s mini garden.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’d appreciate if they considered what I’d be going through, having to tag along with that farce.”

“So you’re... the god dropped down into the world by the Mini-Garden plan. Not the Creator, a so-called creation.”

“Precisely.”

Said Kai.

“I’m the god born by the hand of man. A synthetic... failure of a god.”

While he was laughing, his smile was terribly sorrowful.

“The one they gave a power that could rule the world and an undying body... the one they shoved an unreasonable demand onto, a miserable, unshapely god.”

“I see, then the plan you’re proceeding right now would have to be an extension of that Mini-Garden plan. But if I may, could I ask you something?”

While he sought confirmation, Saijou-kun pressed forward without waiting for a response.

“I understand that your goal was to awaken Orino Shiori’s power. If your powers are omnipotent, then hers must be almighty. I understand your desire to take hold of it, painfully so.”

However, Saijou-kun went on.

“What are you even doing? With that far too elementary, fundamental mistake?”

“.....”

“That’s the only part I can’t understand. I don’t think, nor do I want to believe by any means that you’re stupid to the extent you’d make such a slip-up. What

exactly— are you trying to accomplish?”

“What I want to accomplish? That goes without saying.”

Kai Laughed.

The usual one I knew, his bitter and sweet smile.

“A god exists to make people happy, you know?”

That was... the same view I held.

Eventually, Kai slowly held up his hand.

“That should be about enough. I have nothing more to say to you.”

“You won’t let me take the secret with me to hell?”

“Unfortunately, that’s an impossible request... you’re not going to hell.”

A bewitching light dwelled in Kai’s eyes. An inhuman glimmer that made me doubt his humanity. Unstable and uncertain, yet a contradiction with an overwhelming sense of presence. In order to overturn everything, godlike was the only term I could use to describe it.

“Saijou Mutsuki. I shall show you my respect.”

The air trembled at his stately voice.

“You did a splendid job as my ‘enemy’. You were more remarkable than I expected, and sly more so... In the long, long time I lived, you’re the man who got closer to me than any other.”

It was such untainted respect, a eulogy with nothing extraneous mixed in.

“Which is why... I shall dispatch you with my own hand. You are a human who must be put to an end here and now.”

“‘Tis an honor. For thereupon it gives meaning to my fighting back”

Saijou-kun didn’t move. While he looked like he had given up on any and everything, still, even so, he didn’t fold to the enemy before him. And... the oracle spoke.

“《Finishing Stroke》—application.”

《Needless Character》

It happened in an instant.

[IMAGE]

He disappeared.

Saijou-kun disappeared.

It truly was sudden, he vanished without a trace.

The space where he was up to a moment ago was left gaping, wide open.

“Eeh...? W-where is he? Where did he go...?”

“He didn’t go anywhere. He simply disappeared. Saijou Mutsuki no longer exists anywhere in the world. Not the past, the present or future. His existence has been completely erased from this world.”

Kai indifferently answered.

“To express it more precisely, instead of disappeared, he never was.”

“He never was?”

“Saijou Mutsuki was an abandoned child. He was endowed with his Telepathy ability from the moment he was born, and his parents crept out by it abandoned him at a young age—meaning, as long as he is a single human, his parents exist. Just now, I leaped to the past, made it so his parents never met—and made it so he was never born.”

That was, well, quite a simple story.

The parents never met, so the child was never born.

Because he was never born, he never existed to begin with.

“... Wait, there’s no way you could possibly do that. Rather, that’s totally the grandfather paradox right there... if Saijou-kun never existed, then you would never have been able to erase Saijou-kun in the first place—”

“As I exist outside of the world, ignoring those contradictions is my convenient ability.”

“.....”

I didn’t get it.

But I could at least understand that it was made that Saijou-kun never was. His possessions, the knife and crutch had disappeared as well. All traces of him

were gone. He had, word for word, disappeared from the world without a trace. And one other thing—

“Your memories should soon correct themselves along with the world as a whole. To make it so everything’s consistent.”

I could instinctively tell this was Kai’s doing. This man... had killed Saijou-kun.

“... Hey now, don’t glare at me like that. It’s not like I killed him or anything. Without the slightest pain, Saijou Mutsuki merely left the stage like an actor who had lost his part to play. I haven’t done anything wrong. And that man tried to kill you, you know? I protected you, I should be asking for your gratitude.”

“... Don’t screw with me.”

When he just killed a human being... snatched away their existence from the root.

In a sense, he had led him to a result worse than death, yet without shying back, he says he hasn’t done wrong?

“You can really, really say something like that...!?”

“If I really could—this whole thing would be a whole lot easier.”

“Eh...”

“I know. I know...”

Kai looked at me. In that instant, the suspicion in my chest faded with a puff. The various pitch-black emotions seething up all retracted in.

He was crying.

Quietly, quietly to no end.

Shedding tears of anguish, he was far too transient, far too weak, as if he would break at the slightest touch.

“Someone like me’s a god, they say. Isn’t it laughable?”

“Kai...”

“But it’ll soon be over. Just a little longer, and it will all be over.”

“... Wait, wait Kai! Anyways, just bring Sai—”

—jou-kun? Back? Back to what?

Huh?

Was it Raijou? Was it Saijou?

Was it Matsuki? Was it Yayoi?

I can't remember. Whoever he (she?) was, was rapidly being lost from within me. That person's sociable smile, their somewhat detestable light tone, their cheeky attitude, their glasses, their clever head, their noble ambition, their wound-ridden form, it all crumbled away.

_____kun...

Another Epilogue

“Oh, if it isn’t Kai. What are you doing here?”

“I’m out on a walk. How about you, Akira?”

“Ummm, I’m on a walk too... I think? This is strange. Why am I in a place like this?”

I was supposed to have my hands full being chased around by summer vacation homework, and yet, why did I hop on my bike, and make the trek all the way to Asahi Park? It’s almost as if someone called me here.

“Did you throw your homework up in the air, and run here to escape reality? Good grief, Akira, you’re terrible at planning things through.”

“Yeah, you may be right. Hey, Kai. If you’re free, can you help me out with my homework?”

“Don’t want to.”

“Stingy bastard.”

“I’m not stingy. I’m saying it with your best interest in mind.”

“Fret not, I don’t need that sort of adult-like concern...”

“Haha.”

Like that, we repeated a conversation with no substance and immediately parted.

As we went our separate ways, “Come to think of it,” Kai said.

“It’s almost Orino-san’s birthday.”

“Oh yeah. That’s true, but why do you know that?”

“You told me the other day, didn’t you?”

Did I? Well, if Kai says so, then I’m sure I did.

“Are you planning anything?”

“Mnn, it’s still largely pending. Thought I think we’re going to do something with everyone from the club.”

“You should give her a big celebration. Please... make it the best birthday she could ask for.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. In that case, do you want to join in?”

“No, I’ll have to refrain.”

“I see... hey, Kai.”

“What’s up?”

“Aren’t you a little worn out? Your face is pale. Are you okay?”

“... Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks for worrying for me.”

I returned straight home, and immediately embarked on my homework. As there weren’t any particular hinderances, it went smoother than I expected. With heart and mind, I solved problem, and problem, and problem, cheating a bit from time to time. And like that, as my homework was clearing itself out, by the time I noticed it, the night had worn on.

“... I should sleep.”

Perhaps because my head was worn out, when I bot under the covers and closed my eyes, I fell right asleep.

I saw a dream.

By the time I noticed it, I was in a park in the fall, where the fallen leaves danced. It was Asahi Park, where I headed today for some reason. Lowering myself onto the wooden table set, I dazed out. I kinda knew it was a dream. When you’re in a dream knowing you’re dreaming, what did you call it again? A lucid dream?

“No, strictly speaking, you can’t call this a lucid dream. It’s said that a lucid dream is a phenomenon that occurs when your frontal lobe is still half-awake, but right now, you’re comfortable fast asleep. When my charming character has disappeared, you’re a cold one, you know that?”

Before I knew it, there was someone across the table.

I a frivolous tone, the child spoke out lines as if he was reading my heart.

“This is a dream I’m showing you.”

“Who are you...?”

I asked the boy I’d never seen before.

A sociable smile. A detestably light tone. Shirts. Suspenders. Glasses. Someone I didn’t know.

“Ahaha. It looks like It’s true, I really never was. I guess I should say as expected of god. To be able to freely erase whoever he wants to, how truly godlike of him. It’s an ability like the completed version of the ‘Dictator Switch’.”

He gave a joyful laugh.

“Well, it looks like my telepathy alone just barely remained. At present, I’m in a strange state, where only my ability still remains in the world. Only this detestable ability that accompanied from the moment I was born, I guess even God couldn’t erase it so easily.”

“.....”

“That being the case, I’m sure this is just a time lag. I shouldn’t have long. That’s why I decided I’d intrude on your dreams a bit.”

“Do you have some business with me?”

“Yes. Though there are loads of other people I want to talk to as well. But, well, I mulled and mulled, and in the end, decided I’d meet Kagoshima-san.”

He said, and earnestly lowered his head.

“I’m sorry I tried to kill you.”

It was a sincere apology. And like that, I thought.

“Tried to kill... what?”

“Or maybe, sorry I actually might have killed you once or twice? Well, they’re pretty much the same. With murder and attempted murder, if you only look at the result, there’s a huge difference, but they’re the same in essence. The intent doesn’t change.”

He lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“... At the end of the end, I did what I shouldn’t have. So I received divine retribution. That’s all there is to it. That’s why I’ll graciously accept this punishment.”

“I don’t really get it, but—”

I spoke my mind to the unfamiliar boy. In a fluffy, literally dream-like state, without thinking too deep about it.

“You shouldn’t kill people.”

“... You really are that, you know. The template wimp protagonist. When you can't do anything yourself, you never fail to line up pretty words. It's irritating just talking to you.”

“.....”

I couldn't return anything to that hostile look, and severe cynicism. All I could do was remain silent. There, he suddenly made a gentle smile, “But,” he added on a word.

“It's precisely because you're like that, that I wanted to see you in the end.”

He said as he leisurely stood.

“I'm sure you're special to that man as well.”

“That man...?”

“Even through my ability, I couldn't see his heart. But it was oozing out so hard, it reached me anyway. The unfathomably deep sadness that lies at his base...”

“.....”

“Good grief, this sounds like it's becoming a girly conversation. As a manly man, I don't appreciate these developments.”

So... I'll be taking my leave.

He said. He walked past me, proceeding forward with unhesitant steps. At the end of his path... a soft light. The sort of gently light that enveloped everything around it. I gazed at his back as he made off towards it.

“I could try acting cool, saying I leave with no regrets. I've got plenty of things to regret. But I got to see the last boss's face at the end, so I'll just say it wasn't bad. It was a relatively fun life.”

His feet stopped, he turned my way.

“The rest is up to you, 'kay?”

I... silently nodded.

I kinda got the feeling that was what I had to do.

He made a satisfied smile and started walking again.

And the unfamiliar boy melted into the light.

Postscript

A story is a peculiar thing indeed; the protagonist must always wind up at the eye of the storm, and that's seen as only natural. For example, in regards to mystery novels, the question of, "Why does the protagonist get drawn onto incidents wherever they go?" has become one that's most embarrassing for the one asking the question.

But if there are stories where the protagonist can conveniently slip into the midst, then don't you think it's fine for there to be a story, where the protagonist conveniently fails to slip in? And like that, this is the fifth volume of this series, bringing it back to its roots.

Well then, thanks to the following.

My editor. I'm always, always in your care. I hope you'll keep looking after me. My illustrator Takatsuki Ichi-sama. Thank you for the wonderful illustrations once again. I'm always waiting hopefully for the moment a new illustration is delivered.

And my greatest thanks to all your readers who tagged along all the way to volume five.

Well then, if the chance arises, let us meet again.

– Nozomi Kota