

御影瑛路

Biji Mikage

イラスト×鉄雄

穴工ろの箱と
零のマリア6



「あたしは、醍哉のこと、愛してる」

空ろの箱と 零のマリア6

御影瑛路
イラスト 鉄雄

Kokone Kirino
桐野心音

一輝と同じクラスの少女。
明るくて社交的、すこしお
節介焼きな少女。世界を
支配すべく箱を使用した大嶺醍哉とは幼稚園か
らの幼馴染み。

『罪と罰と罪の影』

対象とする相手に、箱の使用者である
醒哉の影を踏ませると発動する。

相手の心層にある、罪の意識を強制的
に想起させ、「支配」下に置く。

支配された人間は、醒哉の意のままに
操作できる。

Daiya Omine
大嶺醒哉

銀髪にピアスを身につけた、頭
の切れる皮肉屋。目的のため
ならば騙す事も殺す事も厭わ
ない。自身の箱「罪と罰と罪の
影」を使い、一輝と対峙する。

Kazuki Hoshino
星野一輝

O.に目を付けられて観察対
象にされている、ごく平凡な、
しかし「日常」に異常な執着を
見せる少年。醒哉の「罪と罰と
罪の影」を止めるため、願
い潰しの銀幕と対抗する。

『願い潰しの銀幕』

醒哉の箱「罪と罰と罪の影」を潰すため
だけの箱。

彼の「願い」を放棄させるため、「映画の
上映」という形で精神を攻める。

一度、願い潰しの銀幕に取り込まれる
と、内部から出る事は決して出来ない。

Yuri Yanagi

柳 悠里

引っ込み思案で大人しい、小動物的な少女……ではあるが、その本質には、新藤色葉にもひけを取らない狡猾さを併せ持つ。



Aya Ononashi

音無彩矢

自らを「箱」と自称し、他者の「願い」を叶えるためだけに生きる少女。一輝への執着を捨てるために、麻理亜の名前を捨て、彩矢として生きることを決意した。



「あっ」

「なんちゃってですよ、大嶺さん。怒らないでください。違うんです。私はちゃんと、大嶺さんの手助けをしてるんです」

「作戦を漏らしたことが、俺への手助けだと言いたいのか？」

「そうです」

「つまり、こう言いたいわけか。自分のしたことは」

「星野一輝を、願い潰しの銀幕の中に呼び寄せる行為だと」

「そうです。それが何よりも確実な脅迫になると思いませんか？ ねえ、音無さん。カズキさんはこうすれば来ますよね？」

「……ああ。間違いないだろうな」

「ほら、私は大嶺さんの手助けをしただけですよ」

散らばっていた視点が収束し、俺は一点を見つめる。

「ずいぶんと久しぶりな気がするな」

そこにいるのは星野二輝。

俺は、願ひ潰しの銀幕がもたらすかったるさに耐えながら、立ち上がる。

「そうだね。僕もそう感じるよ」

言つて、わずかに微笑するカズ。

その手にはなにやら無地のプラスチックケースをぶら下げている。

だからそのケース以上に、その最強の武器を手に行っている右手の状態が気になった。

「カズ、その手はどうした？」

カズは右手に包帯を巻いていた。まだ痛めたばかりなのか、包帯から血がにじんできている。

「……けじめだよ」


一歩前に進む、カズ。

対峙する俺と、星野二輝。

ああ――

寸分も疑いようもない。

怠惰なる遊戯から続いた、俺とカズの対決は、ここで終結する。

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with shoulder-length, wavy brown hair and a gentle expression. She is wearing a pink collared shirt under a red and white diamond-patterned cardigan. The background features soft-focus flowers in shades of pink and blue. On the right side, there is vertical Japanese text in a stylized font.

「私は、星野くんを諦めたことを、
思い出しちゃったから」

Kasumi Mochi

茂木 霞

事故に遭っても前向きに生きている少女。一輝のかつての片想いの相手であり、彼女も同様に想いを寄せていたはずが、今は……。

Designed by Toru Suzuki



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Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria 6	
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Intermission

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 22:00 ◆◆◆

Maria Otonashi's elder sister, Aya Otonashi, is dead. That's what the records say, at any rate.

I discovered this before the events of the 'Game of Idleness'. I had been doing some digging into Maria Otonashi's background, hoping to improve my control over my 'box'.

Maria Otonashi.

She is the second daughter of a high-ranking executive who worked for a large finance firm. The house she lived in with her family—her father Michishige, her mother Yukari, and her sister Aya—was part of a wealthy neighborhood in the Hyougo prefecture. The age difference between her parents was rather great; when Maria was fourteen years old, her father was already in his sixties, while her mother was just thirty-five. On top of that, Maria's mother was Michishige's third wife.

Clearly, Maria's family situation was rather... complicated. This held equally true for Maria's relationship with her sister Aya. Aya's birth mother was Michishige's previous wife. In addition, Aya was only three months older than Maria, and thus they were both in the same grade.

In order to avoid drawing attention to this state of affairs, Michishige sent them to different elementary and junior high schools.

According to my sources, the two girls were polar opposites.

Aya, the elder sister, really stood out. She was extremely bright, athletic, and popular to boot. No one was surprised when she took on prominent positions like president of the student council; every student knew her name.

Her little sister Maria, on the other hand, was quiet and reserved. Apparently, her failure to stand up for herself led to a lot of teasing while she was in elementary school. That might have been why she frequently complained of headaches or stomachaches, which allowed her to stay at home or seclude herself in the infirmary and avoid her classes. Needless to say, her grades left much to be desired.

However, the true problem student was not Maria, who wouldn't open up to anyone and was frequently absent, but Aya, the seemingly superb student.

Sometimes, an overly gifted student can be a source of trouble, especially if she's fully aware of her gifts, and displays them unabashedly.

Aya was more academically talented than her teachers, and didn't hesitate to correct their errors. When bullying took place in her class, she dealt with it far more effectively than any teacher could. When there

was a disagreement with a teacher in class, she singlehandedly refuted him even though that teacher was supposed to handle the matter.

Aya rapidly proved that she was sharper-witted than her teachers, and the difference in ability was so glaring that even her classmates were aware of this.

There was no way that they would respect such incompetent teachers. Aya had deeply undermined the authority of the entire staff, eventually resulting in disobedient behavior on the part of all her classmates. Their condition deteriorated—not blatantly, but in an uncanny manner that would not become noticeable until some serious incidents occurred.

For example, some of her classmates engaged in self-mutilation and attempted suicide.

Three teachers lost their jobs because they came in contact with Aya. One became a burnout, one attacked a student, and one fell in love with Aya and began to stalk her.

Despite their disparate personalities and different birth mothers, Aya and Maria seemed to be on good terms. They were often spotted chatting over the phone, or spending time together on weekends, holding hands. A classmate of Aya's who joined them from time to time told me:

“They were totally close to one another! And more than sisters or friends... twins? No, that still doesn't feel right. I guess what fits best would be... lovers?”

My investigation failed to uncover any dark side to their relationship. Considering the “complexity” of Maria’s family environment, I came across remarkably few problems. There were no recorded incidents involving Aya’s mother (who Michishige had divorced after Maria was born), either, because she had been taken care of with a generous financial settlement. Apparently, Michishige was fully aware of his unconventional familial situation, and had properly dealt with it.

Of course, my knowledge is limited to what can be learned by reading documented records and via secondhand inquiries. It’s impossible to learn the details of what went on between them without actual firsthand involvement. However, it’s definitely true that there was no obvious familial crisis, as was the case with Ryuu Miyazaki and Riko Asami.

However, the Otonashi family is no more.

Everyone except for Maria died in a traffic accident.

The details of that accident remain unknown because there were no witnesses; two cars collided head-on, and the driver of the other car died instantly.

Save for Maria, who had stayed home, they all died. That’s an unchangeable fact.

Maria Otonashi was alone.

Unable to open up to anyone outside of her immediate and deceased family, Maria Otonashi was alone in the truest sense of the word.

After her parents' estate had been dealt with and custody of Maria awarded to Michishige's younger brother Kyohiko, Maria disappeared without a trace.

That is nearly the sum total of what I could learn about Maria Otonashi.

I don't know how she came in contact with the miracle of the 'boxes' after that, nor do I know what made her want to become *a being that grants wishes* and enabled her to acquire her 'Flawed Bliss'.

That being said, it had to be related to the loss of her family.

Their deaths transformed Maria and instilled an abnormal desire for self-sacrifice in her heart, indirectly giving birth to the transcendent person she is today.

Interestingly, she was given the opportunity to reinvent herself. Thanks to the repetitions of the 'Rejecting Classroom', she had all the time in the world to do so. She evolved into a copy of Aya of sorts, perhaps thinking that by becoming her perfect sister, she could fulfill her new goal.

Ah, armed with that stack of information, I should have understood the true nature of 'O' far earlier.

...No, not quite. Linking 'O' to a thing as earthly as her family had been problematic for other reasons.

The better you understand the supernatural, the more it loses its mystery. Unless you believe blindly in it and abandon all attempts to comprehend it, you will be unable to master a ‘box’. You mustn’t try to draw meaning from the mysterious.

However, the act of renouncing deeper thought is the very thing that I hate the most.

That condition contradicts my ‘wish’, so there’s simply no way I could meet it. Since that keeps me from mastering a ‘box’, I thus had to set strict restrictions on the capabilities of my ‘box’. But thanks to those restrictions, I was able to obtain a ‘box’ that I can actually handle—the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.

Understanding ‘O’ was only a matter of time.

‘O’.

All along, it was just the initial letter of “Otonashi.” And given that Otonashi uses her sister’s name, I’m sure that the correct interpretation of that letter is as follows.

‘O’ stands for—
“Aya Otonashi.”



Otonashi, Yuuri Yanagi and I are still inside the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’, the ‘box’ that consists of a crimson movie theater.

The theater is so insanely sterile that it seems designed solely to erase dirty beings, and I feel its constant overbearing pressure. It keeps chipping away at my will and slowly crushing my ‘box’.

As I resist this pressure, I am mulling over a particular question.

—It’s odd.

I look around.

We are in a completely dust-free red corridor that forms a perfect circle, and is connected to four theaters. Before us lies the entrance hall. A digital info panel is displaying the message “The movie Repeat, Reset, Reset has ended.”

So far I have been shown three movies against my will.

“Close-Up Goodbye”

“60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart”

“Repeat, Reset, Reset”

They each revolved around my past, viewed from the perspectives of Miyuki Karino, Haruaki Usui, and Maria Otonashi, respectively. It’s a gorgeously produced presentation of my sins intended to exhaust me, so to speak. Given the number of theaters in this complex, there is obviously one movie remaining.

Its title reads “Piercing at Fifteen,” and it’s scheduled to run from 22:30 to 24:00. My defeat is practically set in stone if I don’t manage to stop everything before midnight.

But it’s odd.

I thought that this duel had already been ended.

“Oomine, why are you frowning?”

Someone asked me a question because of the expression on my face.

Maria Otonashi.

...No. She is no longer that reserved and timid girl; I shouldn't call her that.

“Aya. I have a question.” I speak her name tentatively, yet it feels oddly fitting.

Ah, no wonder. When I first met her within the ‘Rejecting Classroom’, she was “Aya Otonashi” and no one else. The girl who is standing before me right now is the personality created during the countless time loops as she pursued her ideals, “Aya Otonashi.”

It was beyond my power to call her “Maria” when we were trapped in those endless iterations. In the first place, *Maria* is a false name that should have sunken into oblivion; it was but a whim that made her mention it. No person named “Maria Otonashi” existed, nor did Aya ever intend to allow such a person to exist.

The miraculous feat of overcoming that intention was a feat that only Kazu could pull off, as one of the few people who could retain their memories across those iterations.

In a way, Kazu thwarted Aya Otonashi's plans and changed fate.

I, on the other hand, could not bring about such a miracle. It was impossible for me to remember the name “Maria” during those loops.

Therefore, she is and will remain “Aya Otonashi” to me, even if she borrowed that name from her elder sister.

Without displaying any special reaction to the way I addressed her, she replies, “What is your question?”

I describe the oddity that I have observed: “Why hasn’t the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ ended already?”

Aya raises an eyebrow.

“What are you talking about? It’s because Hoshino hasn’t destroyed it, that’s plain and simple enough.”

“Don’t you see what I’m getting at? I’m wondering why he hasn’t done so already. His will was broken the moment you abandoned your identity as Maria Otonashi. Wouldn’t he naturally give up on this battle? Why is the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ still intact?”

Right, Aya Otonashi’s presence here indicates that the fight should be over.

Because that means Kazu’s scenario of absolute despair has come to fruition.

But why are we still here then? Why hasn’t he given up?

“It seems that you understood nothing, Oomine. You are unaware of Hoshino’s true caliber.”

“What do you mean?”

“I simply mean that his will hasn’t broken,” she says without moving a muscle.

“Hah?”

What’s that supposed to mean?

Kazu's goal is to provide Maria Otonashi with an everyday life free from 'boxes'. But that's obviously not possible anymore, since Aya has decided to erase "Maria Otonashi" once and for all and enter the 'Cinema'. Kazu's goal has become impossible; he should know that better than anyone else.

And yet his will is unbroken?

"So—you mean—he still thinks he can rescue you?"

"Exactly. That guy is abnormal. He doesn't give up as long as he has a goal, whether it's actually achievable or not. I'm starting to believe that he's incapable of giving up to begin with."

Incapable of giving up...?

That's absurd. But as it stands, the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' hasn't ended yet. In addition, I don't think Aya would misjudge Kazu's nature.

In other words, she's right.

Which means that...

"...Ah, crap!"

This battle has always been focused on breaking his spirit.

Kazu isn't able to achieve his goal now that Aya has made her choice. He has effectively lost. I'm convinced of that, no matter what *he* thinks.

However, his defeat doesn't mean that I'll be victorious. If I don't do anything, we will both suffer defeat. If his will doesn't break and this 'box' isn't destroyed, I will have to watch the fourth movie, Piercing at Fifteen. After that, my 'box' will break

whether I want it to or not, and if that happens, my attempt to make the world a more ethical place by producing ‘Dog Humans’ will go to waste.

As things stand right now, I will lose as well.

How did it come to this? Everything went according to plan. I even managed to nullify his Trojan horse, Yuuri Yanagi, and bring Aya Otonashi here.

Nonetheless, I’ve reached a deadlock. I’m cornered even though I haven’t lost... What on Earth is that guy? An undefeatable boxer or something?

I’m starting to understand why ‘O’ said that I couldn’t win against Kazu.

“Otonashi-san.” Yuuri Yanagi suddenly breaks her silence in order to speak to Aya.

I listen up in case her comments could lead to a solution to my current dilemma.

“In the last few minutes, you’ve stopped calling Kazuki-kun by his first name, haven’t you?”

Despite getting my attention, all she has to offer is pure rubbish.

That really rubs me the wrong way.

“What about it, bitch? Had to confirm if Kazu’s available now that he and Aya have gone their separate ways? You’re a nuisance, so shut the fuck up.”

“Eeeh?! What’s with that abusive language?! That’s nasty! Beside, haven’t you been treating me like air for far too long?!”

“Of course, your time in the sun’s over. Aya is already Kazu’s enemy, so your value’s gone down the drain. Be a good little bog body and keep silent, or you’ll just get us all bogged down.”

“I-I’m not even allowed to speak?!”

I ignore her since any response would be a complete waste of time.

Though she’s right—Aya has changed how she refers to Kazu. Most likely, now that they’re enemies, she can no longer refer to him in such a familiar way.

Enemies.

Enemies...

“By the way, Aya, let me get this straight: Can I count on you for help? Kazu won’t leave you alone as long as his will remains unbroken, so you also need to defeat him.”

“Yeah, you can. I can’t just turn a blind eye to Kazuki Hoshino. He may be unarmed, but I can’t let my guard down. I still consider him the greatest obstacle between me and my goal.”

“I guess so. So, I think it’s a good idea to join forces until he’s taken care of. What do you say?”

Aya keeps silent for a moment, but eventually opens her mouth. “...I detest that ‘box’ of yours, the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’. Your approach sacrifices others, which goes against my principles. While I do agree that we are alike, I won’t ever agree with your approach.”

“...So you have no intention whatsoever of cooperating with me?”

In that case, my hands are tied.

Kazu still hasn't given up despite the dire straits he's in. If there is a way to break his spirit, then Aya's bound to be part of it.

"No. I shall give you a hand."

It comes as no surprise that I'm relieved to hear her say that.

"Crushing him definitely comes first in my book. What I mean to say is that I feel no obligation to assist you—I'm just optimizing for my own goals. For instance, you're constrained by a time limit, but I'm not. That difference may end up hurting you."

"The same goes for me. I'll betray you if required."

"Fine."

"Okay, then how do we get started? I can't come up with an obvious way to break his spirit right now, but you can, right? Tell me: What is the most effective way to attack Kazu?"

"....." Aya remains silent.

I'm posing this question for two reasons. First off, she might actually be able to come up with something I overlooked, since she knows Kazu so well. The other reason is that I want to confirm she really has completely abandoned him.

While I'm pretty sure she has cut off all ties, I remember the depth of their relationship. It wouldn't surprise me if her feelings for Kazu were still present at some level. She might propose a half-hearted plan because deep down, she's still attached to him. If that's

the case, she'll be a burden as a partner, and I'd be better off taking advantage of her as much as I can while keeping her away from Kazu.

However, Aya's reply is:

"I'll just have to forget about Hoshino."

It's a reply that rules out any lingering attachment to Kazu that I feared she might still possess.

"I can easily forget about him if I use my 'Flawed Bliss' on one of his friends. Nothing will remain of what he and I built up within that repeating world. That's all we have to do."

Her plan will—

Her plan will succeed.

Kazu only hasn't given up—and still has hope—because he knows that he's someone special to Aya.

Put differently, that's all he has left; without it, he won't even have a glimmer of hope anymore.

So they just have to become strangers. The special bonds between them just have to vanish.

However—

"But Aya..."

Her suggestion makes my hands tremble.

How can she say something like that without flinching?

He and Aya were a team; they depended on each other, and they formed strong bonds. Deep bonds that shaped them into totally different people.

Nevertheless, Aya Otonashi proposed to *trash* those bonds without a second thought.

“Aya, are you really okay with that?” I ask offhandedly, but the answer is apparent.

She is. Otherwise, she wouldn’t propose something like that to begin with. A superhuman like Aya feels nothing at all even if she has to forget about Kazu. There is no comparison between me and an ubermensch like her.

However:

“I’m not.”

“..What?”

I freeze.

I didn’t expect that. I would have been unsurprised if she’d said that she didn’t care at all, but I didn’t see *that* coming.

“Of course I’m not okay with that. If I were, I wouldn’t have tried to stay with Hoshino for so long. I would be denying the truth if I refused to admit how dear he was to me. As long as I deny that, I can’t oppose him.”

Aya is clearly saying that it hurts to forget about Kazuki Hoshino.

But that doesn’t make sense!

“But then—”

How can she make such a proposal? One that completely and utterly tramples her own feelings?

“It doesn’t matter what Hoshino is to me.”

“...Why?!”

“Because my feelings do not pose a threat to my plans.”

“———” I hold my breath, because Aya is speaking with absolute conviction.

“I don’t take heed of feelings that stand in the way of my goal. My mind is not that weak. My will shall not be swayed by my own feelings.”

Seeing how transcendently she behaves—how she can examine her own feelings from a completely detached perspective—one thing is evident.

She’s telling the truth.

“I’m not a human. I’m just a being that grants wishes. In other words, a ‘box’.”

Of course that’s just a figure of speech; Aya is by all accounts a human. She is merely saying that she lives her life with inhuman resolve.

But she really does live that way.

For Aya, the sole meaning of life is achieving her goals. She doesn’t let her feelings or desires interfere with those goals in any way—not even for her dearest friend or to avoid her own death.

—Machine...Puppet...‘Box’.

I also aspired to such perfection.

I also sought to create a perfect world.

But after seeing how she burst the boundaries of humanity, can I really imagine myself at her level?

“

.....
—Impossible.

It would have been easier to tolerate if she'd said that she were okay with forgetting about Kazu, because that's something even I could do by hardening my heart.

But that's not it. Even while experiencing such extreme feelings, Aya Otonashi can flawlessly pursue her goal.

I can't do that.

Impossible.

At the end of the day, I'm just human.

Even worse, I am—

Suddenly, the 'Shadows of Sin' within me start to go on a rampage.

“Argh!”

Even worse—I might lose my ability to resist the pain caused by the 'Shadows of Sin', even though I accepted that pain in order to [control] others. The 'Shadows of Sin' shriek and rage whenever I leave them an opening. And they're only getting worse.

I clench my teeth. Aah, dammit! It feels like bullets are running through my veins. Why does self-inflicted pain hurt so much?

Will my 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' break after I've watched the next movie? ...Haha, can I even hold out until the movie starts? Maybe I'll be ruined even before that. The pain is unbearable; awaiting my inevitable ruin is equally unbearable.

Why am I mediocre to the core?

Why was I born as a regular person, incapable of performing miracles?

I touch my piercing. I want to change. I don't want to revert to the fool that I used to be. I want to keep offering resistance against this godforsaken world.

But,

But,

But, in reality—

Light. Darkness. Sea. World. Hotel. Womb. Joined hands. Tears. Victory. World. Skin. Cold. Cold. Catcher's mitt on my left hand. Numbness. Difference in talent. Envy. Dream. Confession. Anxiety. Cigarettes. Burns. Shivers. Fear. Hatred. Hatred. Hatred. Hatred. Hatred. Hatred. Hatred. Sin. Punishment. Justice. Sin for justice. Piercing.

I touch my piercing again, breathing restlessly.

When did I create a hole in my ear? That thought forces me to recall the person I hate the most. Miyuki Karino.

Rino was unable to repent for what she had done. She didn't realize that she had done something wrong. I had to make that clear to her. I couldn't hold off on teaching her a lesson for what she had done to Kiri; doing so was the only way for me to live with the unfairness of the world. That's why I acted the way I did. I decided not to forgive her until she showed regret. But Rino wasn't aware of her guilt; she could only offer superficial apologies. Because of that, I couldn't forgive her, nor did I intend to. "Please tell me what I have to do!" *Why can't you come up with that yourself?* "I love you. I did what I did because I've always been in love you, Dai-chan." *Stop fucking with me. Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you? No, you're not, are you? You're blaming me. I'm the very thing that makes Kiri suffer, that's what you're trying to tell me, you piece of shit.* Before I knew it, I was beating Rino. I couldn't believe what I was doing. Attacking a childhood friend of mine didn't feel real. Resorting to violence caused my mind to separate from reality. Even though I could feel the violence I was doing, it was like an out of body experience. That guy beating Rino wasn't me; it was a stranger dwelling within me who had defied my control. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" *You don't say sorry to someone who hurts you, damn it!*

Nothing was solved.

Nothing was solved.

There was no solution for anything.

I was completely powerless without a 'box'.

I know. I'm perfectly aware of the nightmare Rino went through in that hotel. I know how Rino feels about me. I know she has lots of strengths: she's cheerful, sociable, considerate, sympathetic, and she's delighted by good things and saddened by bad things. I know she's not a bad person. Yet, I can't forgive her. I can't. I can't forgive her. That's why a conflict occurred. Even though attacking her was anathema, I had to do it. Consequently, I fractured my mental perception of Rino and erased the part that caused the conflict. I forgot that we had been friends since childhood.

And so I cornered Rino.

I dyed my hair and got a piercing. I wanted to become a different person from the old "Daiya Oomine." If my sociability was the reason for what had happened to Kiri, I wanted to destroy it.

I don't need anyone to tell me that I'm nobody special.

I can't become like Aya Otonashi.

The only thing that distinguishes me from your run-of-the-mill person is that I look at things from a more abstract viewpoint.

And that's fine.

—That's perfectly fine.

I finally manage to push back the 'Shadows of Sin' and regain control of myself.

"What's wrong, Oomine?"

"A-Are you okay?"

Aya and Yanagi are talking to me.

“.....It’s nothing.”

...Hell, why am I so nervous?

I may still have weaknesses, but there’s no need to be so pessimistic.

If I can’t handle my feelings, I can just suppress and keep ignoring them. I don’t have to confront them head-on like Aya does. I’ve always known how to sidestep my emotions, and thanks to my workaround, I’m able to think rationally. That’s a great weapon. I should be proud of my qualities.

After getting a grip, I speak up again.

“Aya. Getting back to your proposal, I agree that we should make use of the ‘Flawed Bliss’ to defeat Kazu. Do you already have a specific plan?”

“No, not yet. I’ve only just come up with that idea, after all.”

I thought so. Aya Otonashi is surprisingly bad at coming up with manipulative schemes. Her upright principles impact her ability to engage in indirect attacks. Yeah, even Aya has weaknesses; why bother comparing my strengths with hers?

“Can I ask you to share your thoughts, Oomine?”

“I’m pretty sure that making you lose your memory will prove effective. But there’s no point unless we let him know about it, right?”

“He would find out about it soon enough even if we didn’t, right?”

“Soon enough for you, maybe, but I don’t have time. I need to confront him directly with your memory loss.”

“Mm, fair enough. In other words—”

“Yeah, we’ll have to use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ right before his eyes.”

“While it is possible to slip into a ‘box’, it’s impossible to get out. I’m in here now, so that means that we’ll have to—”

“Call him into the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’,” I say as I complete her sentence.

That’s the prerequisite for breaking Kazu’s will.

“But how do we do that? It’s much more beneficial for our enemy to hide somewhere safe and wait for your ‘box’ to break. Hoshino just needs to wait another two hours or so. I don’t think he would risk coming here.”

“That shouldn’t be too much of a problem if we use my ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.”

“Besides, who do you plan to use ‘Flawed Bliss’ on, Oomine?”

“It depends on what Kazu does next, but right now the three of us are the only ones here. Which means that there’s only one real candidate,” I say while looking at Yanagi.

“Huh?”

“Great news, isn’t it, Yanagi? You’ve just gotten a new role and regained some value!”

“Eh? Huh? Ah...” she mutters, turning pale as she realizes what I’m driving at.

Aya steps between me and Yanagi and takes on a protective stance.

“...Sorry, but I have no intentions of using my ‘Flawed Bliss’ on anyone who doesn’t seek my help. Not even when it’s required to defeat Hoshino.”

I see. Her rules remain the same even when she’s made up her mind—she doesn’t privilege efficacy over avoiding the use of others?

...No, in a sense that was to be expected. If she acted otherwise, it would contradict her goal of *making others happy*.

“Okay. I guess I’ll have to find someone else then.”

I immediately realize that she won’t give in, so I use some empty words to smooth this matter over for now.

Aya nods slightly. She seems content.

To be honest, it’s a breeze for me to make Yanagi ask for help since I have absorbed her ‘Shadows of Sin’. She suffered deep scars during the ‘Game of Idleness’; since her *sin* is worse than most people’s, simply rubbing a bit of salt into that wound will do.

Of course, Yanagi isn’t the only candidate. I could use any of Kazu’s friends to make Aya lose her memories of him.

However, I can’t blindly hope that someone will show up. Yanagi is necessary since we need a guaranteed sacrifice.

After reaching that conclusion, I return my attention to our discussion.

“We’ll bring Kazu into the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ before the last movie ends, and then we’ll use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ on one of his friends before his eyes. Now how do we actually accomplish this?”

“Yeah. You stated that doing so wouldn’t be difficult; could you elaborate?”

“How to go about it, hm...”

How about threatening to kill Aya if he doesn’t abandon the ‘Cinema’? I don’t know if the threat is credible or not, but Kazu is likely to obey if Aya’s involved, even if the threat seems fishy.

So can I use the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ and communicate that threat to him? That would work, but it might be surprisingly difficult to reach him in the time I have left. Jeez, if I had the help of ‘O’ it would be no prob———

—Do you have a wish?

———No, wait. I’m forgetting something important. How did Kazu obtain the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’, anyway?

He obviously received his ‘box’ from ‘O’. He asked ‘O’ for help in order to defeat me.

‘O’ is on Kazu’s side, not on mine.

I know for sure that ‘O’ gave him a ‘box’. Unless they have become enemies since then, I have to account for the possibility that they’re cooperating.

Let's pretend that I executed my plan to threaten him with Aya's death. Even if I succeeded in communicating my threat, isn't it possible that 'O' might reveal that it's just a bluff if she doesn't like the direction that things are taking? Can I rule that out?

No, I can't. That scenario is perfectly plausible.

So I'll also have to outwit 'O'.

'O' isn't quite omniscient, but she seems to be aware of almost everything that happens. If I blurt out my plan, chances are that 'O' will become aware of it. However, 'O' can't read minds. I can hide my intentions if I keep silent about them; she's no more than human in that respect.

In other words, I have to make Kazu come here of his own accord, while making 'O' believe that things are going well for Kazu and hiding my true plan from Aya.

...What the hell? That's ridiculously complicated.

"Oomine, you've relapsed into silence. Are you having trouble coming up with a plan?"

I gaze at Aya's face.

Expressionless. A face that is concealing her feelings.

Suddenly, a few lines from *Repeat, Reset, Reset* come to mind.

*"I know what such a 'wish' leads to. It ends in,
Ruin."*

“But what would I do if you learned about the ‘boxes’ and obtained one nevertheless? I would not take it from you. I’d oppose every other ‘owner’, but I might not oppose you.”

“Maybe I’d team up with you again—No, that’s out of the question. I wouldn’t cooperate with you. Nor would I want to interfere in any way. Our aims just happen to lie in the same direction. We were never supposed to become partners. Yes, in reality, we are—”

“Kindred spirits, I guess.”

“...How nostalgic,” I mutter thoughtlessly, and immediately regret doing so.

Those sudden memories of what she said to me in that movie... no, during one of those endless iterations, are confounding me.

—What is ‘Aya Otonashi’ to me?

For Kazu, ‘Aya Otonashi’ is an enemy. He wants to bring Aya—no, in this context I ought to call her Maria—into his everyday life, and because ‘Aya Otonashi’ is the reason that Maria calls herself a ‘box’ and has given up on being human, she represents the greatest obstacle to his goal.

However, for me it’s quite the opposite. I don’t want her to be ‘Maria Otonashi.’

“.....”

I don’t?

Why?

Because Aya's goal and mine are similar? Because we're cooperating? Because we were also cooperating within the 'Rejecting Classroom'? ...I feel like I'm still missing something. None of those possibilities feel quite right.

My need for her is more fundamental than that, which means that it must be related to my goal.

There's no need for me to be the one who accomplishes my goal. In the near future, I will break under the burden of my sins, and I won't have achieved my goal by then. But I don't mind. I don't mind as long as there is someone who takes on my will like Shindou, and the world eventually changes for the better. I don't care if I die, hated by everyone and treated like trash.

But in that case—

Aah... I got it. I know what Aya Otonashi is to me.

Aya Otonashi is my source of hope.

If she manages to fulfill her wish for a world where everyone is happy, my own goal will be achieved as well. If her wish comes true, mine does as well.

The way she lives her life makes me believe that her wish might actually come true, even though hers is far more difficult to achieve than mine.

Her aloofness.

Her nobility.

Her correctness.

Her integrity.

She's so transcendent a being that even my 'wish' could be saved.

No, not only my ‘wish’.

She could save every ‘owner’.

She’s a beacon of hope for every ‘owner’.

That’s why she has the same name as ‘O’. She is a being that grants the ‘wishes’ of all people.

She is a noble being that has to be protected.

That’s why I mustn’t admit defeat.

I can’t forgive Kazuki Hoshino for trampling on our ‘wishes’ for a reason as mundane as wanting to be with “Maria”; for such selfishness.

We have to crush Kazu.

“I just came up with a plan.”

For the sake of all: I’ll deceive Aya, ‘O’ and whoever else it takes, and throw Kazu into the depths of despair.

“Let’s use Kasumi Mogi.”

Kazu.

I won’t let you regain the zeroth Maria.

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/11 FRI 22:03** ◇◇◇

How can I describe this paradoxical feeling?

Nothing has changed within me, and yet I have clearly changed.

All that happened was that I came to understand myself better; I’ve read my own manual, so to speak. But that was enough to change my world. My whole body feels refreshed somehow, as though someone has

poured menthol into my bloodstream. My mind becomes clearer minute by minute and everything muddying up my thoughts has disappeared.

The haze that hung over the world is clearing.

Now I can focus solely on saving Maria.

That's the change that occurred within me after I obtained the 'Empty Box'.

“Uwa, what’s wrong with that girl?”

That’s the first thing Haruaki says, his face chalky white, after he enters this tunnel. We’re under an elevated railway that runs along the river on the outskirts of the city. His eyes are fixed on Iroha-san. She’s passed out and is leaning against a wall covered with obscene graffiti that couldn’t be further removed from “street art.”

“D-Don’t tell me you killed her... Hoshii?”

“She’s alive!”

“B-But there’s loads of blood...?”

Both the ground and the wall are splattered with a red liquid, as are her clothes and her face.

“That’s just artificial blood.”

“A-Artificial? Really?”

Haruaki squats down, touches the red liquid on the ground, and sniffs it. At first he wrinkles his brow, but he realizes that I was telling the truth and nods lightly a few times.

“Y-Yeah, that’s not blood. But still, how did this happen? Why is she out like a light?”

He closely examines her face and checks her breath and pulse. From where I am standing, it's hard to make out her face because our source of light is a dim lantern.

What have I done to Iroha-san? Explaining that would take way too long, so I decide to answer just the first half of his question.

“Daiya and Iroha-san tricked me into betraying Maria in her presence. I completely fell for it, and now Maria's inside the ‘Cinema’!”

“So Maria-chan has found out about Daiya's ‘box’?”

“I guess so.”

Haruaki knows how serious this is, so he stands up with a frown and gazes at me.

“Why didn't you call me before it came to this? Don't you trust me enough to rely on me?” he asks in a threatening tone. His height allows him to be quite intimidating when he pressures me like this.

“I do! I just couldn't call you because I was told to come alone.” Even as I speak, I realize that that's not the only reason. “...No, I wouldn't have called you even if I hadn't been told that.”

“But why?!” he shouts, vexed beyond belief that he wasn't able to stand by my side in my time of need.

What a great, reliable companion.

I'm really glad that we were able to become friends.

“It's the other way around! I'm really relying on you.”

“Huh?”

“For real—I've been relying on you this whole time...”

Otherwise, I wouldn't have pulled him into this affair to begin with; I wouldn't be blaming myself for telling him about the 'boxes'

"...I-If you trust me, then why didn't you...?"

"You were with Kokone, weren't you? I wanted you to keep protecting her! You know why, don't you?"

"Ah..." Haruaki scratches his cheek abashedly.

"Right... We thought that Daiyan would attack Kiri next."

"Yeah, chances were that this affair was just a red herring that Daiya set up."

Yes. We were sure that Daiya would aim for Kokone. We thought that Kokone was in more danger than Maria or I.

We had good reason to think so.

We thought that Daiya would have noticed by now that I'm not the 'owner' of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema', and once that happened, he would attack its 'owner' before anyone else.

In that scenario, he would have attacked Kokone before Maria.

But he didn't.

"So Daiyan still hasn't realized who the real 'owner' is?"

"Looks like it."

The 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' exists for the sole purpose of destroying Daiya's 'box'.

He should have grasped its nature when Yuuri-san entered the cinema, because it's still only *his* past that's being displayed.

But then why hasn't he noticed that I'm not the 'owner'?

It's certainly possible that I would obtain a 'box'; as a matter of fact, I intended to reach out to 'O' and defeat Daiya with a 'box' if worse came to worst. Again, that'd only be in the worst case scenario, but I did plan for that contingency.

But even if I did obtain one, I wouldn't be able to wish for something like that. My 'box' would never be something like the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema.' I can't choose a 'box' that only saves Daiya.

I mean, such a box is only possible for someone who thinks about no one but Daiya from the bottom of his or her heart, isn't it?

It's impossible unless you're someone almost blindly fixated on Daiya, right?

There is no way I could deal with that. I consider him my friend and value our friendship, but I'm afraid my feelings for him are not strong enough to leave me blind to the rest of the world. I'm unable to embrace a 'wish' that is limited only to him and no one else.

If he had properly confronted himself with the question of who the 'owner' of that 'box' is rather than avoiding the issue, he would have realized as much.

But he couldn't.

Why?

Because his ‘box’ has led him astray.

If he can’t even realize who the true ‘owner’ of the ‘Cinema’ is, it’s clear that Daiya’s methods are flawed. If he can’t even recognize the person who has such strong feelings for him, it’s clear that he’s mistaken. Because Daiya is trying to become cold-hearted, he is deliberately shutting that person out of his mind. He’s closing his mind, blinding himself.

Nonetheless, he claims his ultimate goal is oh-so-lofty?

He claims that he wants to correct the world even if he has to pay with his life?

“.....hehe...”

Hilarious.

That’s stupid.

Such a person could never accomplish anything of value.

A blind man wants to lead the way? I bet he’ll end up wandering off in the wrong direction—he’s only going to make things worse.

And for that he wants to deprive me of Maria?

Who does he think he is?

“.....”

I look at Iroha-san, unconscious and covered in crimson red stains.

She was also wrong. She also tried to take Maria away from me.

That’s why she got her just deserts.

I told Haruaki that Iroha-san's alive—and that's true—but I did steal her *raison d'être*. She might not be able to recover, as the miserable image she presents may well portend.

But so what?

“.....hehehe...”

Yeah, I'll do the same to Daiya.

His despair will be orders of magnitude greater than Iroha-san's, for his 'wish' originates from within himself. He won't be able to recover when he finds out that his 'wish' won't ever come true. On top of that, he's responsible for Koudai Kamiuchi's death. A cruel reality is awaiting Daiya once he can't escape anymore.

But I'll crush him.

I don't give a shit about a blind man's 'wish'. It's his own fault if he dwindles into misery when his 'box' is crushed. You madman—you reap what you sow, don't you?

So.

Give Maria back to me already, you blind bastard.

Before the Show Begins



Scene 4
『Piercing at Fifteen』
(1/3)

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen 1/3

1. RIVERSIDE - DUSK

A broad river, viewed from midair, is glowing in the evening light. Two junior high school students in their last year, DAIYA and KOKONE, stand out from the crimson glow of twilight. They walk hand in hand while looking straight ahead.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Daiya and I have
been together for
as long as I can
remember.

DAIYA squeezes her hand.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

He's present in my
every memory.

She releases her grip on his hand.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

The only way to
move on from the
past is by parting
from him.

2. KOKONE'S ROOM - 17:00, HALF A YEAR AGO

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

The two of them are sitting on KOKONE's bed, still wearing their school uniforms.

KOKONE

Mm... ahh...

DAIYA pulls his lips away from hers. KOKONE is wearing glasses, and her hair is raven black. She casts her eyes down in an embarrassed manner.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

It's all thanks to Haru-kun that my relationship with Daiya finally changed. Only after seeing Haru-kun and me together did Daiya become aware of his feelings and ask me out. But in my honest opinion, it took him way too long to get here.

DAIYA entwines his fingers with hers and begins stroking KOKONE's hair with his free hand. His gentle smile charms KOKONE and she presses her head against his chest.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

After all, I've always been in

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

love with him,
from the time we
played house as
kids. I was
perfectly aware of
my own feelings
and his, even
though he had yet
to notice them
himself.

DAIYA puts his arm around KOKONE.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Before going out
with Daiya, I told
Rino that I'd
always loved him.
She gave me a
suspicious look
and asked whether
that was truly
romantic love, but
I definitely think
so. At least in my
memories, I've
always felt that
way. I've always
hoped that he
would reciprocate
my feelings.

The camera pulls back to show a full-on
view of KOKONE's room. The setting is
muted. Brown and white objects like her

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

desk, a sound system and plush toys are scattered about.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

My room is saturated with Daiya. When I listen to love songs, his face would come to mind, and when I read a romance manga, I would identify with the feelings of the protagonist to the point of tears at times. I would sometimes write 'Kokone Oomine' in my notebook while studying and smile to myself. I was always thinking about Daiya in this room.

DAIYA

Kokone.

KOKONE

Mmm?

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Just recently, Daiya has started

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

calling me by my
first name. I'll
never forget the
first time it
happened. Oh, his
tomato-red face
has been forever
seared into my
memory, from that
time he failed
miserably at
suavely saying my
first name.

DAIYA

I love you,
Kokone. Forever.

KOKONE

Mm. I believe you.

DAIYA smiles happily like an innocent boy.

KOKONE smiles in response.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

I really do, from
the bottom of my
heart. Not because
I'm blinded by
love, but because
I can feel that he
must be telling
the truth.

KOKONE traces DAIYA's lips with a finger.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

I would give up
anything for his
happiness.

3. RIVERSIDE - DUSK

KOKONE steps into the river without
removing her sneakers.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

My world was warm.
Warm like Daiya's
body. That gentle
world I lived in
gleamed lightly,
just like a French
movie I had once
seen, and made me
feel as though I
was surrounded by
the purest bliss.

Step by step, KOKONE walks further into the
crimson river.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

But I was
mistaken. I didn't
realize that other
people didn't live
in the gentle
world that I
dwelled in. I
didn't know that
the world others
saw could be cold,
stained, or

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

fierce, and that
coming into
contact with the
worlds of such
people would also—

Some garbage floating down the river
touches KOKONE's soaked body.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Stain my own
world.

DAIYA quickly follows her into the river.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Daiya...Don't tie
yourself down with
your promise to
love me forever.
Your happiness is
more important to
me than my own.
I'll do anything
for you, so—

She gets embraced by an equally soaked
DAIYA.

DAIYA

Kokone, don't
worry. I'll stay
with you.

KOKONE trembles in his wet embrace.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

KOKONE

You're cold.

DAIYA hurriedly lets go of her.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Should I keep you
from becoming
happy, I'll make
it easier for you
to throw me away,
okay?

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/11 FRI 22:15** ◇◇◇

We should avoid Daiya's [servants].

While we still didn't know what to do next, we left the underpass to avoid coming across any [servants]. It would be a bad idea to stay there any longer.

We had no choice but to leave Iroha-san behind. Of course we didn't want to, but the artificial blood would have made us look way too suspicious if we carried her home; plus, we would lose precious time. I regretted it, but she'd have to hang on for two hours until we could put an end to this battle.

Haruaki suddenly and uneasily says, ".....Um, Hoshii, I'm not sure if I should tell you, but..."

“Mm? What’s the matter?”

“You’ve got one hell of a scary look right now! I bet you’ve gotten really cross with Daiyan, haven’t you? Leaving that senior girl behind makes perfect sense, too, but you were totally cold when you did it...”

“Huh?”

Was I?

I didn’t notice myself...but I guess it’s true. Something’s definitely not right with me at the moment, considering that I just silently called Daiya a blind bastard.

“I guess it’s natural to lose it when he stole Maria-chan from you, but if you don’t calm down, you might lose ground, no?”

“Yeah.”

Calm down, Kazuki. Calm down and come up with a way to get Maria back.

“And to be honest, I still want to help Daiyan...although I know it won’t be easy.”

Truthfully, helping Daiya had completely slipped my mind. I was ignoring everything except for Maria.

“...Yeah.”

Of course I also want to save Daiya if possible, but if I think about Maria right now, I can’t help but get angry at him. I can’t keep myself from thinking that such cheap pity would only get in my way.

On the other hand, if I avoid thinking about Daiya, I might end up defeated. But yes...I'd better think about something else now, about something that lets me forget about my anger. And that's— ".....Kokone."

Right.

In that case, the first thing that comes to mind is Kokone Kirino.



Two days ago on the evening of September 9th, Kokone called me into her room.

It was the first time I'd seen it. The room was steeped in dark colors and seemed superficially stylish. However, it also made a strange impression on me. In a way, the room seemed to lack coherence and its style seemed fake; a room like that really didn't suit Kokone. I could sense some sort of artificial obligation on her part that drove her to live in such a room.

Well, I couldn't help thinking that way, knowing what I did about Kokone.

That room represents her transformation.

And it stands for—forgetting Daiya.

"...You don't need to hide it anymore. Tell me what happened to Daiya."

Kokone has decided to abandon her denial of Daiya and engage with him instead.

The first thing I thought upon hearing that was:

Thank God.

I had planned to tell her about Daiya either way. No... I had no other choice. Disregarding Kokone or keeping her in the dark in a fight against Daiya would be impossible.

Thus, I was grateful that she had made up her mind and prepared herself of her own accord. After all, the things I had to tell her were sorrowful topics that I would have rather kept silent about.

—The mistake that Daiya committed in the past.

—The pain that Daiya is suffering in the present.

—The tragic end that awaits Daiya in the future.

That knowledge would surely cause her to blame herself.

That knowledge would surely sadden her.

That knowledge would surely keep tormenting her.

But I told her nonetheless.

I told her everything about Daiya.

Kokone lost her voice that day.

When I finished my explanation, she just kept gazing at the wall behind me in a completely dumbfounded manner.

Since all she would do was breathe rhythmically without displaying any other reaction, I left for the time being.

The following day, she told to come to her bedroom once more. When we greeted each other, I noticed that her eyelids were swollen, but apart from that she *looked* like she always did.

But once I had closed the bedroom door, she immediately started undoing her shirt buttons.

It was all so sudden that I couldn't react properly. I should have looked away, but I just stood there, flabbergasted.

With a deadpan look throughout, she finished removing everything from her upper body except for her bra. She then turned around and showed me her back.

“Look!”

I almost asked what I was supposed to look at.

But I noticed on my own.

First, I noticed the “mark” below the hook of her bra.

It was a burn scar, most likely inflicted with a cigarette pushed against her skin. And not just once; there were so many grim and violent burn marks all over her back, it looked as if someone had dumped a giant heap of trash on a pure white snowfield.

And all those burn marks formed meaningful phrases; the obscene kind that you'd be hard pressed to find in even the filthiest of public toilets.

“___”

Squashed.

My feelings were squashed.

Those marks had an immense impact.

“Uh..uh..”

Tears began to stream, unbidden, down my cheeks.

Thoughts like “*poor Kokone, it must have hurt, they won’t ever completely disappear, that must be why they broke up*” only came up later. At that moment, my only possible response to the sight of those marks was to burst into tears.

Kokone turned around to face me. Ignoring my overflowing tears, she cheerfully said:

“You’re a lucky guy, Kazu-kun, aren’t you? Getting to see a hot girl with E-cups in her undies!”

While she joked like always, Kokone was...crying.

So our talk continued as we both sobbed.

“A childhood friend of mine named Rino did that to me,” Kokone said as she rebuttoned her shirt. “As you know, Daiya had great looks and superb grades; he was very popular back in the day—to the point where some people called him the prince of our school, in fact. He wasn’t always so gruff and didn’t used to have silver-dyed hair and piercings. Oh, I was such a poor match for him. I looked really drab, with my totally unstyled black hair and lame, oversized glasses. Pretty much a plain old run-of-the-mill girl. You’d totally laugh if I showed you a picture! ...Although I can’t laugh myself.”

I shook my head.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a good match or a bad match! I’m sure Daiya didn’t care.”

“Mm, he didn’t mind at all!” Kokone finished buttoning up her shirt and looked at me. “It’s the girls who had fallen for Daiya who cared.”

I started to realize how those marks might have come about.

“...Did that girl you mentioned, um, Rino, care about whether you were right for him?”

“Mmmm, not all that much, I think?”

“So...?”

“Err, let me tell you one thing at a time. First off, a couple of things about Rino: She’s one year younger than me and was also one of Daiya’s childhood friends. The thing is, she’d also liked Daiya for a long time, although I fell in love with him first. But she gave up on him and started dating a boy named Kamiuchi. The person...Daiya killed.”

That was a surprise. I hadn’t known about their backstory. Daiya’s reactions to Koudai Kamiuchi within the ‘Game of Idleness’ seemed relatively mild, all things considered.

But given the final outcome, it’s easy to suspect that their common history might have driven Daiya to choose a murderous resolution to that game.

"Kamiuchi did a horrible thing to Rino, and I don’t really get why he did it. Rino was still deeply hurt, so she tried to ease her wounds by demanding Daiya’s attention.

But you know, Daiya and I were already a couple by then. He loved me, not her. He *was* gentle with her, but they'd never be more than friends. When Rino realized that, her wounds got even worse. She kind of went psycho after that. She somehow got mad at me because in her mind, I'd snatched him away from her."

Kokone was still crying, and paused to blow her nose. But the flow of tears didn't stop.

"Rino claimed that she only started dating Kamiuchi because I'd stolen Daiya from her, so I was responsible for what Kamiuchi did to her. At that point, Rino really believed that I was to blame for everything."

"And that's why she did *that* to your back...?"

"Yeah, but I don't think she would have gone that far if she had been alone."

"Which means that there were..."

"Right, there were several people involved. You see...I think the problem was that there were lots of people around Rino who could share in her hate and escalate it even further. It was unfortunate that no one realized that Rino was out of her mind, so things escalated from there."

I finally understood what she had meant earlier.

"The girls who thought that you didn't suit Daiya?"

"Yeah. They didn't just have a problem with it...they seemed to think that I had committed an unforgivable sin. I was some kind of wicked witch who was keeping their prince all to myself!"

...What the hell?

I don't get it. An unforgivable sin?

Kokone and Daiya were a couple in love. That's all.

"What the... but that's stupid, no matter how you look at it. You didn't do anything wrong."

"It doesn't matter whether I was wrong or not. A bunch of people were annoyed by me, so they wanted to do something about it. That's all. It doesn't matter if they were just jealous. It's much easier to attack someone you don't like if you tell yourself she's evil."

"How could they think you were evil when you hadn't done anything wrong?"

"That's simple; they just created some trumped up reasons. You know, things like 'ew, that girl doesn't greet us properly' or 'she's arrogant' or 'she's acting like a bitch' or 'she wants to use Daiya to show off' or 'she seduced him with her body'. They come up with whatever they feel like. And then when they had their group trash-talkathons, they could egg each other on and make me out to be a figure of evil. People instinctively do stuff like that without really thinking about it. They create a fake enemy and then take the offensive to vent their annoyance."

Suddenly, the two classmates who had spoken out against Kokone came to mind.

As far as I could tell, they were also badmouthing Kokone out of jealousy. They got ticked off because she's popular with the boys and vilified her to relieve their irritation. It might have also pissed them off that Kokone was on good terms with Daiya.

Considering her history, no wonder Kokone freaked out.

“You know, Rino only went so far overboard because she was encouraged by the people around her. They weren’t even aware of how evil their acts were. They thought it was right to teach a devil like me a lesson. Who knows, maybe they even thought they were performing an act of justice? One thing is clear: They didn’t realize what they were doing. And that’s what made them lose touch with reality.”

“What the...that’s obviously just ridiculous if you possess even the slightest bit of objectivity...”

“But they couldn’t see that. They had stopped thinking.”

“...Stopped thinking?”

“Yeah. It’s the thing that Daiya often rails about.”

Aah.

It’s the thing that Daiya detests.

He thinks that it’s the mindless fools who destroyed their happiness, and because of that, he wants to create a world without them using a ‘box’. So that what happened to Kokone won’t ever occur again.

“I think it was about a month later that they finally came to their senses. A few of them even apologized to me after realizing what they had done. But what’s the point? Why would I forgive them? My burns won’t go away thanks to an apology, will they? There would have only been a point if they came to their senses *before* doing that to me! How dare they try to relieve their guilt

by apologizing? ...When I said something along these lines to them, they actually complained that I was *horrible* for treating them like that when they were apologizing. Well, fuck'em, those filthy whores!"

Of course, Kokone was still crying while spitting out such vulgarities.

"I can't return to who I was, no matter how much they apologize. I can't return to the time when I didn't hate anyone."

She continues.

"My relationship with Daiya won't return, either."

But there was one thing I didn't get.

"Why?"

"Mm?"

"Why did you need to split up? He still loved you even with those silly marks on your back, didn't he? I mean, didn't he care for you? Why did you have to split up?"

Kokone grew silent.

She gazed at the ceiling as she sniveled. I gathered that she was trying to organize her thoughts.

Only then did I realize that my question might have been cruel. Was there really a point in asking her that? After all, their unwilling split-up is already set in stone. Explaining why it happened is bound to be painful.

While I was regretting my question, Kokone finally opened her mouth.

"Kazu-kun. Do you think I'm cute?"

"Huh?"

I thought that she was just kidding around like she normally did. I thought that she was trying to evade my question.

“Am I cute? Properly cute?”

But her expression was incredibly serious.

I had no idea why she was so desperate, but I could read from her face that I wasn't allowed to answer flippantly.

“...You are cute!”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I'm not engaging in flattery, I really do think so. And I'm not the only one; you're popular with the boys from our school, aren't you? Didn't you tell me the other day that the number of confessions you've gotten was in the two-digit range?”

“You're right. I'm totally popular. At the moment, my value is higher than that of that blatantly rowdy and delinquent Daiya, right! Hell, I'm a luscious high school girl! With an E-cup at that! I'm invincible!” However, the grin she had frantically assumed while engaging in self-praise disappeared instantly, and her lips started to tremble. “.....But it's no use.”

“N-No use...?”

“I can't get rid of the impression that I'm just a fugly bitch. I can't help feeling like a worthless pig.”

“W-Why? I can assure you, that's just—”

“I know! I'm sure I'm pretty cute! I know! I worked hard to become like this, after all! I went to such lengths because I thought it would get better if I really became

popular!” Kokone grabbed roughly at my arms. “But it was no use...! Those feelings don’t go away even though I realize that it’s just in my head! I can’t help but feel ugly! The impression that Daiya and I don’t match and that I’m a worthless person won’t disappear! Objective facts and popular esteem have no effect!”

“B-But why?”

“It was inevitable! Do you think that it wouldn’t have any effect on me when people *honestly* think that I’m a wicked devil? Even worse, I used to be a shy and silent girl, don’t you understand what that means? Do you think I could in all honesty still think positively of myself after being treated like shit, burned with cigarettes and told off as a devil, a bitch, a whore? I can’t! I couldn’t! Can you imagine a whole bunch of people doing horrible things to you? Who are *seriously* thinking that you’re just scum who deserves it? Of course I would start to think so, too! Of course I would think that I deserve it! That was the only way to put up with all that stuff! Those marks have stolen all my self-confidence, self-respect, and everything I hold dear!”

A trauma that can’t be healed by the truth.

I don’t think that I fully understand it.

But there was one thing that I did understand.

Kokone’s iron grip was hurting my arms.

“I thought that my self-hate would drive me into my grave. So, I, so, I—” Kokone wiped her tears away. “I had to overcome it!”

Kokone had no other choice. She would have broken otherwise.

“I had to change, I had to abandon my old self!”

That’s why Kokone started wearing contact lenses and dyed her hair; she tried to become fashionable. She tried to take on a cheerful personality and become popular—and succeeded. She tried to regain self-confidence by looking down on the people who spoke ill of her.

But at the end of the day, the shadow that had rooted itself in her heart didn’t disappear. She couldn’t regain the things the marks had stolen from her.

And—

“I also had to abandon my love for Daiya!”

Her past and Daiya were so closely linked, that there was no way around abandoning Daiya—her past—as well.

Kokone finally noticed how tightly she was gripping my arms and released me.

“...I’m sorry, Kazu-kun.”

I shook my head.

I’m to blame for making her say such things.

She took a deep breath to calm herself down.

“I didn’t want to split up with Daiya, either, but there was no other choice. It’s unbearable even if he just hugs me, seriously; my entire past leaps at me when he does, intimidating me like a giant menacing truck. My back

fires up and starts to ache like when they burned me, and then I feel I'm a worthless person. I can't help it. So... being with him is agonizing.”

They simply *couldn't* be together anymore.

That's the reason their relationship ended.

—That's terrible.

That's the only comment I could make.

Suddenly, Kokone said to me, “Hey, Kazu-kun, you once confessed to me, didn't you?”

“Uh-eh?”

Why is she bringing up that ancient history? I looked her in the face, but I couldn't read her intentions from her smile.

I never confessed to her. Well, I technically did, but it was really the act of a girl who took control over my body.

But as far as Kokone knows, I actually confessed to her.

“I was thrown for a loop! Unlike all the other confessions I've received, I was happy about yours. I thought that becoming your girlfriend might be the right choice. You wouldn't care about the burns on my back, after all, and you'd accept me as I am.”

“...Um, Kokone—” I said, but she continued before I could explain anything.

“I thought that Daiya might finally be able to move on, too.”

I held my breath. Not quite sure what to say, I just waited for her to continue.

For whatever reason, Kokone put on a mischievous smile when she saw my confusion.

“I totally didn’t expect that Mari-mari had a hand in your confession, though!”

...come to think of it, we never corrected the excuse that we came up with to explain that situation.

“I-I’m sorry...Um, to tell you the truth, it was actually because of someone else’s ‘box’. The explanation Maria gave you was just a convenient white lie...”

“...Aaah...I see, a ‘box’, was it! Now it finally adds up. Man, those ‘boxes’ sure cause a lot of trouble, don’t they? ...But I guess in retrospect, I’m grateful? I think it was necessary for me to earnestly think about going out with you, Kazu-kun.”

“Why...do you think so?”

“Say, do you remember that I burst into tears during our music class?”

“Yeah.”

That was the incident when I was getting a beating from Daiya after I regained control of my body. Afterwards I learned that the ‘owner’ had not only made me confess to Kokone, but even urged her to respond.

“You know, Daiya and I, we thought that it would be best for us if we started seeing other people. We really intended to do so when we found a worthy opportunity. And that opportunity arose when you confessed to me. I imagined myself going out with you and Daiya dating a different girl. But when I looked at Daiya while thinking those thoughts—”

She smiled bitterly.

“I burst into tears.”

She quickly lost even that bitter smile.

“And then I finally realized.”

She contorted her face in a painfully bitter and sorrowful manner and said:

“I was still deeply in love with Daiya.”

I was sure she wanted to deny her feelings. Over and over. That’s what her bitter expression conveyed to me.

“In reality, I wanted him to be there only for me.”

For if she admitted it, she would no longer be able to wish for Daiya to become happy with someone else.

“I realized that my feelings for him wouldn’t go away even if I went out with you, Kazu-kun. And I kinda also realized that it was the same for Daiya. Our problem won’t be resolved until I return to who I used to be. As long as I can’t accept him like I used to. Even if it’s a hopeless cause, that’s the only way.”

A tragedy.

“Daiya couldn’t bear it any longer, could he?”

The world around them changed, but they couldn’t. They couldn’t accept reality.

“So he obtained a ‘box’. But doesn’t that—” unable to bear it any longer, Kokone pressed her forehead against my shoulder. “Doesn’t that mean it’s my fault that Daiya’s life has gone off the rails?!”

I couldn’t see her face.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

“I’ll do anything. I’ll do anything if I can save him. If we need a ‘box’, I’ll do it! Take my life and do whatever you want!”

I unwittingly repeated those alarming words, “...your life?”

“Yeah. I’m serious.”

She was. For sure.

She was willing to sacrifice herself for Daiya.

And as a matter of fact, Daiya has already sacrificed himself.

Had it not been Daiya but Kokone who resorted to a ‘box’ first, it would have led to a different yet similar tragedy.

Their feelings for each other are destroying each other.

That’s their ugly yet beautiful romance.

Aah. Let’s pretend that incident with Kokone’s back never happened.

There would have been no problem with their romance; it would have stayed enviably perfect. No ugliness would have existed. They would have been happy with each other.

One single misfortune disturbed the equilibrium.

All it would have taken was one fewer mistake. What if Rino hadn’t been Daiya’s childhood friend? What if Rino hadn’t gone out with Koudai Kamiuchi? What if he hadn’t done that horrible thing to Rino? What if Kokone and Daiya had hidden their relationship? What if

Kokone had had a slightly bolder personality? What if there had been someone who stepped in to stop the bullying? What if Daiya had noticed Rino's absurd plan? What if Haruaki had been more open about his affection for Kokone? What if I had known them since middle school? Just a tiny difference could have changed fate, and we might have been laughing together right now about the past.

Even as such thoughts come to me for the first time, I realize that Kokone and Daiya must have thought about those what ifs a thousand times, and they must have hated this world for ruining them. But for the smallest "what if..."

That is the true reason Daiya is fighting his losing battle of correcting a world he doesn't even care about.

...What about Kokone, then?

"Kokone."

"Mm?" she muttered as she pressed her forehead against my shoulder again.

"What would you use a 'box' for?"

"I would use it for Daiya! I would wish for a world where we can be happy!"

But there is no such future.

Daiya has reached a point of no return.

That 'wish' won't come true, and Kokone must be aware of that.

"But I'm a bit uneasy: Could I use it without putting any strange stray thoughts into it?"

And that's why she said that.

She finally raised her head, wearing a weak smile, and said something to me that was enough to convince me that she could never return to who she used to be.

“Could I fulfill that ‘wish’ without also wishing for everyone but Daiya to go to hell?”



“Ah, no no! Sorry! I don’t want you to die of course! Ah-uh, Haru-kun neither! I totally think the world of Haru-kun, really!”

She quickly and not quite successfully tried to gloss over her initial statement. Because she said she was fond of Haruaki, I inadvertently replied with the following question:

“Didn’t you think about dating Haruaki?”

Kokone widened her eyes, and then smiled sadly.

I immediately realized: *Aah... Kokone was perfectly aware of his feelings for her.*

“I did!” she said in a cheerful unaffected tone. “But it’s no good. Haru-kun knows my past.”

“What’s with that queer look you’re giving me, Hoshii?” Haruaki says to me with a frown as we walk along some godforsaken street.

I recall what he confessed to me the other day.

—I had a crush on Kiri.

—Oh, but you know? I don't have those feelings for her anymore.

—Don't mind me if you want to go out with Kiri, Hoshii! You guys would make a great match.

Did he know that he can't save her? That he would only make her suffer like Daiya has because they know about her past?

Is that why, like Kokone and Daiya, he told me that I should go out with Kokone?

Is that why, like Kokone and Daiya, he has no other choice but to disregard his own feelings?

Although, if I asked him that, he would just evade my question.

Perhaps he doesn't really know either.

“...Haruaki...?” I ask something else instead. “You said that Kokone is broken, didn't you?”

My words seem to have surprised him; he unwittingly stares at me. But after taking a deep breath, he regains his smile.

“Yeah, I did.”

“What makes you think so?”

Haruaki puts his hand under his chin and thinks for a few moments.

“If for example, you saw someone drowning before your eyes and you could easily save him, would you do it? Please imagine it and answer me seriously.”

I imagine someone drowning in the sea, a boy who is desperately screaming and flailing about. I am carrying a life preserver and could save him without any personal risk.

“Well, sure, I would save him!”

“Why?”

“Huh? Isn’t it normal to save someone if you can do it without a problem? There’s no deeper reason to it. Well... but if someone died before my eyes, I think I would have regrets. Or even worse, I might end up permanently traumatized.”

“Right? It’s the same for me.”

That’s self-evident.

But posing that question suggests—

“Do you want to say that Kokone wouldn’t?”

“No, she told me that she would.”

“Oh...”

I was caught by surprise. Given the course of our conversation thus far, I was quite sure she would reply differently.

But Haruaki isn’t done yet.

“But when I asked her the same question, she first asked the following:” He smiles bitterly. “*Who is the person?*”

At first, I fail to understand what’s wrong with her question, but then I start realizing that something’s off about it.

“Normally, you would save that person unconditionally if you can. Because normally, you’d imagine it’s someone weak who deserves and needs your help.”

Some people might ask the same question as Kokone did without any deeper meaning.

But if Kokone had casually asked that question, Haruaki wouldn’t be mentioning it now. He noticed something abnormal.

“But Kiri doesn’t just think it’s someone who needs her help. She starts by worrying that it might be a trap, set to hurt her. Kiri can’t even save someone from drowning until she knows whether it’s an enemy or not. Imagine how suspicious she has become of the world. And that ties her hands, even though she would regret letting that person die as much as we would.”

Why did he ask her such a question anyway?

Maybe he had guessed to a certain degree that she would answer like that? Maybe he had acquired a certain understanding of Kokone and wanted to confirm it by posing that question?

“Because of the bullying she’s encountered, Kiri considers others as enemies by default. That keeps her from making the right decisions. She is drowning in negative feelings, hating her fate and everyone and everything that made her who she is today. Kiri can’t escape, and therefore she can’t do what she wants; what she’s supposed to do. To me—”

Haruaki pauses for a moment.

“To me it seems like she’s broken.”

I realize upon hearing those words: He still has a crush on Kokone.

After all, Haruaki has a much deeper understanding of the darkness surrounding her than I, even though I have heard about it from her firsthand. There’s no way he could acquire such insight without still deeply caring about her.

Haruaki continues with a tinge of resignation.

“As long as Kiri can’t put herself first, she won’t change.”

I’m sure Haruaki is hoping that things are different for her sake. Not that he wants to date Kokone, but that her relationship with Daiya could resume. He is wishing for her to become happy with the man she loves and loves her back.

When I arrive at this conclusion, a new thought crosses my mind.

—Putting one’s happiness above anything else.

Haruaki said that she needs to become able to do that.

But is he capable of that himself?

Is there a solution?

What are the proper relationships for these three people?

If only they could turn back time, that would be outstanding.

But even if they used a ‘box’ that could grant any ‘wish’, that’s impossible.

What they need is to build a new, ideal...or at least stable, set of relationships.

But I still fail to see a solution, and I’m sure they don’t either.

I don’t see a goal we can strive for, so there’s nothing I can work toward.

The one thing I know is that as long as Daiya’s ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ exists, they can’t move forward.

Aah, but that’s not an excuse. I’m not trying to fool myself anymore.

I act only for Maria’s sake, and not for my friends Daiya, Kokone and Haruaki. I’m not going to crush the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ for their sake; I’m only doing it in order to save Maria.

Saving them is out of my hands. I can only pray that the final outcome of my efforts will happen to make them happy as well.

But I do pray profoundly for such an outcome.

I pray, hoping that my prayers will lead the way to a novel solution.

“I hope you’re okay with that, Haruaki...”

“.....Mm?”

Apparently, he accidentally heard my whispers.

“Nothing.”

I’ve rearranged my thoughts.

I’m calm now.

I should focus on what's within my grasp.
That is, squashing Daiya's distorted 'wish'.

Right—I'm a being that *crushes others' wishes*'.

“Haruaki, what should we do next?” I ask, having settled my priorities.

“Hm...I guess the safest choice would be: wait for the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' to end.”

“Probably, yeah.”

But neither of us feels confident. We know all too well that Daiya expects us to play the waiting game. Therefore, he will definitely go on the offensive to destroy the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' with his native cunning and his 'box'.

Time is getting short, so he may choose desperate measures. He will try to hunt me down with the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'. He will activate the thousand [servants] who he used before when searching for me and Maria.

Being hunted by a thousand people was a terrifying experience. I felt as if the entire world were persecuting me.

But his next [order] won't be anything as harmless as a scare tactic. In the worst case, he might [order] them to kill the one he believes to be the 'owner'. He might try to kill me. He might use his thousand [servants] for a direct attack.

It comes as no surprise that I'm trembling.

They say a cornered rat will bite, but Daiya couldn't be less rat-like. I may have cornered him, but he's a *lion*. One small slip and he might turn the tables at the very last moment and crush me to death in his jaws.

“What should we do...”

“Hm...no, I guess our only option is to hide. He can't attack if he can't find you, right?” Haruaki says. He's correct. “I mean, it's almost impossible to find someone who's hiding within two hours, even with a thousand searchers. They can't leverage the Internet properly either, at least in such a brief span of time... And if we hide, we'll hide together with Kiri, okay? We don't know when Daiyan will start to wonder if she's the 'owner'. ...Ooh! I was just rattling on, but that might be a great idea, actually! I think we'll be OK if we hide where she is right now!”

As an aside, Kokone is currently hiding in the dorm of a baseball club, thanks to a friend of a friend of Haruaki's who's got some mutual baseball interests. Until a bit earlier, Haruaki was there himself.

We brought her there after hearing the details about the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' from Yuuri-san. We thought that it would be harder for the [servants] to find her if she hid with a casual acquaintance rather than being on the move. Daiya doesn't know about that connection, let alone the location of that dorm.

Indeed, we should have no problem holding out there for two hours.

However, in that case—

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

“Daiya won’t let us stay hidden.” He won’t let such a situation come to pass. “He will do something to lure us out. Should he use Maria to threaten me again, I’ll have no choice but to play along.”

“Uh, I see...”

“...mm? But...” I say, as an idea pops into my head midsentence, “...yes, we just have to make sure he can’t threaten us...?”

Haruaki tilts his head. “Hm? What do you mean? It’s up to him if he wants to threaten us or not, no?”

“We just have to do this.”

I take out my cell phone and turn it off.

“...? Uh, how does that keep him from threatening us?”

“You can only threaten someone if you can get in touch with him. No matter how much you want to order someone to do something, you simply can’t as long as you can’t reach him, right?”

“Hm? Well, yeah, but if Daiyan were about to harm Maria-chan, she would be in danger whether or not he reached you, wouldn’t she? Aren’t you just ignoring the risk she’s in by covering your ears?”

“But Daiya doesn’t actually want to harm Maria, right? That’s only a pretext to lure me out! If he can’t make that threat to begin with, there’s no point in laying hands on her.”

“...I see.”

“Therefore, I’ll hide as you suggested, and then I’ll arrange things so that Daiya can’t get a message to us. Once I’ve done that...”

“...Daiyan will no longer be able to call you out and you can hide and wait! ...Er, that means that Kiri and I also have to turn off our cells. He could also try to use us to reach you, after all. All right! I’m going to e-mail Kiri to turn hers off, then I’ll also turn off my phone.”

Haruaki starts composing an e-mail.

I suddenly wonder if I should have realized this sooner. Maybe that would have made our lives a lot easier?

...No, not really.

That strategy would have worked if I’d been on my own, but back then I had to protect Maria. I couldn’t just bury my head in the sand without putting her at risk.

Ironically, this method only works because of Maria’s absence, and because I’m just as cornered as Daiya.

“Okay. Let’s join Kokone ASAP before the [servants] find us.”

“Gotcha! Then let’s—” he suddenly breaks off.

“Haruaki?”

Haruaki is frozen, staring at his cell phone.

“...Did Daiya already send you a message?”

He ignores my question and pokes at his cell phone with look of deadly seriousness. He loads his 1seg¹ TV app and stares at the screen.

...Why would he suddenly want to watch TV?

He seems to be unable to find what he's looking for, so he switches to his browser and starts a web search.

“What’s wrong, Haruaki?”

“...Kiri sent me an e-mail and told me to turn on the TV. Whatever it was, it was only on for a few seconds anyway. She must be pretty confused, too.”

He falls silent again, but after a few moments he finds what he was looking for and raises his head.

“...Hoshii. Looks like we were a hair too late,” Haruaki says as he holds out his cell phone.

It’s displaying a news program from a video site; the weather forecast, to be exact, broadcast live with a city in the background.

“—Huh...”

However, there is something quite inappropriate in that forecast.

A naked woman. A skinny, fifty year old brunette is crawling on all fours and barking. There’s something written in large letters with a permanent marker on her body below her pendulous breasts, but it’s hard to make out because of what she’s doing.

“Come to the cinema!”

1. 1seg (ワンセグ wansegu?) is a mobile terrestrial digital audio/video and data broadcasting service in Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1seg>)

It's only displayed for an instant, though; the camera pans away instantly and the show moves back to the studio. The video ends there.

“...Hoshii, can we really keep ignoring Daiyan if he's even willing to use the TV to threaten you? ...We can't, can we?”

“Yeah... we can't.”

Let's pretend Daiya ordered one of his [servants] to announce on TV that Maria Otonashi will be killed if I don't come to the cinema. In that case, he wouldn't care if the message reached me or not, because he could carry out his threat on the assumption that I saw his message.

I can't ignore that risk.

If I keep ignoring him, he might just escalate his tactics. He might even make his [servants] do something that would ruin my everyday life forever.

Right now, I'm considering the worst case scenario: Daiya might harm Maria.

Now that I've learned of his tactics, I can no longer feign ignorance. Even threats that don't reach me have an impact.

“Tch!”

Now, it's actually much worse if I don't receive his messages. Since there's no point in keeping my cell phone turned off, I switch it back on.

As if by magic, I immediately receive a call.

I flip open my cell and take a look.

“Kasumi Mogi”

“Found youuu!”

I haven’t picked up the call yet.

The ring tone that’s still playing confirms it, but there’s an unfamiliar sound accompanying the ring tone.

Screech screech screech screech.

The sound of wheels.

The sound of a wheelchair.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 22:12 ◆◆◆

Why should I put all my eggs in one basket?

I think highly of Iroha Shindou, but I never expected that her mission would have a 100% success rate. Because of my time limit, it would be fatal for me if I relied on just one person and that person failed to deliver.

Therefore, setting up Shindou’s attack wasn’t the only thing I did with my [servants]. While she was working toward *showing Otonashi how Kazu would betray her*, I also had a few other things going in parallel.

I also tried to convey a message to Kazu over the TV. I gave [orders] to eleven sinners who I considered guilty enough to turn into ‘Dog Humans’. Their task was to write “Come to the cinema!” on their naked bodies and

expose themselves on TV. There's no way to guarantee that they successfully accomplished that goal, but my guess is that one or two of them must have succeeded.

When Aya entered the cinema, I first thought that that maneuver was now a waste, but it just acquired new relevance.

That maneuver prevents Kazu and the others from breaking off contact with me.

He just needs to wait until the end of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' to defeat me, so his optimal strategy was to hide from me and break off contact. But if I'm able to create a massive commotion on TV and it even spreads over the web, there's a high probability it will reach him or his allies, and then he will realize how risky it is to shut off communications.

My 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is a lot more effective when I can establish contact.

We are still in the entrance hall; *Piercing at Fifteen* has not started yet. Since my actions will be highly circumscribed once the movie begins, I have to map out my strategy in advance.

17 minutes are left until the movie starts, but I only have 12 minutes because we'll be teleported into the theater five minutes before that. Damn...I'm constantly short on time.

"So, to summarize," Aya starts to recap the plan I have given her. "We'll have Kasumi Mogi use the 'Flawed Bliss'. Since she is still in distress due to her

disabilities and unrequited love for Kazuki Hoshino, she won't turn it down. And then I will forget about Kazuki Hoshino.”

I nod. Aya continues.

“Since Hoshino doesn't want Mogi to recall the ‘Rejecting Classroom’ and her partial paralysis makes her a liability, it's safe to assume that he hasn't partnered up with her. In other words, once your [servants] have made contact with her, you can carry out your plan without worrying that he'll get in your way. Moreover, she's a sitting duck because we know that she's in the hospital.”

Well, to be honest, I don't care about Mogi as long as Kazu comes here. But of course I stay silent.

“Kasumi-san...”

The cheeky little minx butts in again. Shut up, bog body bitch.

“...You're saying rude things about me in your head, aren't you? It's written large all over your face! I'm really good at reading expressions, you know?”

I decide to join her one-sided commentary.

“...I'll ask just because: You know Mogi?”

“Well, she's a rival in love and we share the same enemy, after all. We occasionally exchanged information at the hospital. Ehehe!”

“Planning the perfect crime to get rid of Otonashi, huh? How’s it going? Is that wheelchair substitution caper coming together? Pretty clever to use the fact that people think Mogi is unable to move on her own for your alibi!”

“Why is your murder scheme so specific?! Could you please change your opinion of me?! It’s about time you did!”

“But putting that aside, why did you suddenly speak up when we mentioned Mogi? Is there something on your mind?”

“Eh? ...No, nothing in particular...”

What a waste of precious time. I should just permanently ignore that girl already.

“All right.” How am I going to use Mogi...?

Although to be honest, it would be more effective to use Aya rather than Mogi as a decoy for Kazu. It may sound pretty obvious, but it’d be optimal to have my [servants] threaten him with Aya. They could tell him something like this:

“If you don’t come into the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ before the day ends, I will kill Maria Otonashi.”

I guess I could go with a time limit set to five minutes before midnight. That threat would be effective; Kazu couldn’t be sure whether I’m serious about killing her or not, since I’m obviously stuck between a rock and a hard place.

So why do I plan on using Mogi nonetheless? Why do I need to take this step when I'm going lose a considerable amount of time by involving her?

Sure, Aya has to believe that we'll have Mogi use the 'Flawed Bliss'. But there's another reason.

Like I just said, using Aya is a very effective threat. The problem is that it's too effective.

If I used her, my victory might seem certain.

To whom?

—To 'O'.

"I just had an idea about how to get Kazu here," I say to Aya.

"Tell me."

"We'll just have one of my [servants] break Mogi's fingers."

".....What are you talking about?"

As I expected, she wrinkles her brow.

"We'll force him to come here by making him watch as her hands are ravaged. He can't possibly keep listening to the sound of a girl's fingers breaking, especially one he used to love, can he? Especially since that girl only has use of her upper body; her hands are even more dear to her!"

"I won't approve of that!"

"I thought you didn't like Mogi? Didn't she even stab you once?"

"How many times do I have to repeat myself before you get it? My personal feelings are of no consequence. I won't let anyone get hurt, no matter who it is."

Well, I expected such a reaction. There's no point in getting on her bad side right now.

"...Okay. I'll scrap that idea."

I pretend to give in.

She can't check on the [orders] that I give, so it doesn't matter what I tell her. There's no need to keep my word. I'll break Mogi's fingers whether Aya approves or not.

That fake speech was for the benefit of 'O'. I need 'O' to believe that this is my trump card.

For Maria's sake, Kazu might abandon Mogi even if her fingers are being broken right before him. Kazuki Hoshino is capable of anything, no matter how extreme, once he has made up his mind.

I'm sure 'O' realizes that as well. For that reason, 'O' won't take my victory for granted; she will conclude that she can continue to observe without interfering because it seems like my plan will fail.

In reality, threatening him with Aya will be my real plan. But I'll keep that to myself by making 'O' believe that threatening Kazu with Kasumi Mogi is the crucial point.

It's arguable whether it's even possible to deceive a being like 'O'.

My answer to that is:

—It is.

It seems that 'O' can observe the whole world. However, 'O' said it's similar to looking at the earth through the lens of a satellite camera. If that's true, it

should be impossible to understand what my intentions are at the finest possible level of detail. That's the weakness of 'O'.

Therefore, my deception is possible. Like a conjurer who distracts his audience with a gaudy performance while carrying out his trick, I will hide my plan to threaten Aya by threatening Mogi for now.

Of course I can't say for sure how 'O' functions, so I can't just relax. I have to be prepared to change my plan on the fly if necessary.

But I'm already in the process of understanding the thought patterns of 'O'. I was almost led astray by her god-like powers, but—for better or for worse—I found out her true identity, allowing me to analyze her more precisely.

The nature of 'O' is not that of a god or a devil, but that of a peculiar human. Her intelligence seems to be very high, but it doesn't exceed the bounds of humanity, either. There's nothing truly mind-boggling to worry about. I bet the personality of 'O' was created in imitation of the real 'Aya Otonashi' by a certain little sister.

In that case, I should be able to predict her course of action with my keen analytical skills.

For example, there is one thing I can say for sure. 'O' is going to appear before me once more before this day is over.

"...Iroha!" Yanagi yells suddenly. I turn toward her.

Iroha Shindou is standing in front of the info panel. She's obviously exhausted; her clothes are covered with red paint and her face is stained with dirt.

“W-What’s wrong, Iroha? Isn’t that blood? Are you wounded?”

All aflutter with worry, Yanagi rushes over to Shindou.

“It’s artificial blood. I’m not wounded...but I guess you could say that I was killed.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“My ‘box’ was destroyed.”

Yanagi’s eyes widen in surprise, while Aya frowns sternly.

I also have a bunch of nagging questions, but there is one thing I have to say first.

“What’s with this silly performance, ‘O’?”

Yanagi and Aya turn their surprised faces from ‘O’ to me instead.

“.....Oh?”

Shindou’s exhausted expression changes back to *her* usual look of gentle charm.

But I have to say—I go off on a complete tangent while looking at her face—that gentle expression and the look on Kazu’s face when he sent me here really resemble one another.

“Geez, it’s really regrettable that you won’t let me deceive you at all, Oomine-kun! Would you mind telling me what gave me away?”

“..Well, just a gut feeling.”

In reality, I've been expecting her arrival for a while. Given her personality, 'O' will want to observe me and Kazu close-up.

Of course I don't tell her any of that. I mustn't let her think that I can win, so I should avoid raising uncalled-for suspicion by giving up my real plans.

'O' doesn't seem to suspect a thing. I guess she's not too interested.

".....'O'." Aya has been scowling at us with hatred in her eyes while we talked.

"Long time no see," 'O' says.

"Have you finally decided to give me a new 'box'?"

"There's no way I would do that, is there? I even bothered explaining to you once that you're about as interesting to observe as a vacuum cleaner. I have no plans to intervene for someone like you who's basically a dumb robot!"

While observing them, I wonder: *What's with all this crap?*

Why does 'O' act so offensively while claiming that she has no interest in Aya? 'O' doesn't act like that around anyone else. Why doesn't that make Aya suspicious?

This train of thought is forcibly interrupted by 'O', who focuses her attention on me once again.

"Oomine-kun. I want to tell you something. Can you spare me a moment?"

That's surprising. 'Surprising' because I was convinced that 'O' wouldn't depart from her neutral stance as an observer unless Kazu were to fall behind.

I look at my watch while pulling myself together and reflecting on my failed predictions.

22:19

"I hope what you've got to say is worth my time? I have fewer than six minutes left to talk freely. If you're just looking to chat, then I'm afraid I'll have to refuse."

If I choose to listen to 'O', I will have no time left before I get forcibly transported into the final theater, and I won't be able to act freely anymore.

"It's something important!"

That's all I needed to hear; I can't turn down her offer now.

"Got it."

I have nothing left to do anyway, except for repeating the plan to Aya. I have already given my [orders] regarding Mogi; one of my [servants] and fanatical believers is already on the way to Mogi's hospital.

"Excuse me, but could I ask the others to leave? This is for Oomine-kun's ears only," 'O' says to Aya's dismay.

"Wait. Why—"

"Sorry," I cut her short, "but there's no time for questions. Please just hold back your objections for now."

While Aya still seems displeased, she doesn't say anything else.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

As soon as Aya and Yanagi have disappeared, I quickly start the conversation. “Make it short,” I tell ‘O’—who is still assuming the shape of Shindou.

“Mm, I shall,” ‘O’ agrees, and gets straight to the point. “Kazuki-kun and I have become enemies.”

She drops a bombshell.

“___”

I’ve been caught by surprise. To be honest, I would like to mull over this revelation for a bit, but time is running out.

Ignoring my unsettled feelings, I ask a question of paramount importance for me.

“Are you on my side, then?”

My heart and mind may be in disarray, but I’m still able to put two and two together. There’s no time to confirm or delve further into her statement right now; I have no choice but to assume that she’s telling the truth, and ask if it’s advantageous for me.

“I won’t side with you.”

“Why not? Kazu has become our common enemy, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t think that your approach is sufficient to break his will. In other words, I see no benefit in helping you.”

“But you won’t get in my way to make him win, right?”

“No, I won’t! In fact, let me tell you something that will please you: Your plan of using the ‘Flawed Bliss’ right before Kazuki-kun’s eyes is the best action you can take at this point. I promise.”

There’s no time to confirm that, either. I’ll have to take ‘O’ at her word.

“Let me ask another question; why has Kazu become your enemy when he used to be the person you were most interested in?”

“You make it sound as if he couldn’t become my enemy because he attracted my interest, but it’s exactly the opposite! He attracted my interest *because* we’ve been enemies all along.”

“Don’t waste my time. I want to know what has turned you against each other.”

“Now aren’t you a boring fellow? If you consider me a being that preserves Maria Otonashi as ‘Aya Otonashi’, then you can consider Kazuki-kun a being that erases ‘Aya Otonashi’ from Maria Otonashi. It’s completely natural for us to oppose each other, is it not?”

“I guess so. He may believe that too. But...so what? Sure, Kazu is exceptional, but he’s also just a human. Are you telling me that he has a special power that lets him erase you, even though he’s just a human?”

“Yes, he does. Kazuki-kun has obtained the power to forcibly crush ‘boxes’.”

I’ve been proceeding without pause up to this point, but I’m forced to stop momentarily.

“...a power to crush ‘boxes’?”

Isn't that cheating?

For a moment there, I thought she was talking about the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema,' but that's wrong. That 'box' is specially tailored to crush *my* 'box'.

"Why does Kazu have such a power?"

"Just like I did, he has received a power from the 'Flawed Bliss'."

"I don't understand. How would Kazu have gotten a power from—No, I'll have to swallow that for now, but there's still something that doesn't make sense. I don't know exactly when Aya obtained her 'box', but I'm pretty sure they didn't know each other at that point, right? Then how can Kazu have been influenced by the 'Flawed Bliss'?"

"It's not all that difficult: My counterpart existed from the very start, but that position was left blank because Maria Otonashi was unable to imagine something capable of opposing me. But the role of the counterpart was there—just unoccupied! And eventually, someone worthy of that position appeared: Kazuki Hoshino, the aberrant human who was a 'savior' for a certain being. There was but a slight time lag."

I see. The powers of a 'box' allow for causality violations.

That being said, something else has been bothering me.

"There's something I want to know."

"What would that be?"

"What the hell are you?"

“‘What’? Now that’s a crude question. Your question’s wording is too vague to answer!”

“I know that you’re based on the real Aya Otonashi. I also know that you’re under the influence of the ‘Flawed Bliss’. However, I don’t quite get how Kazu is your counterpart, and how he can erase you with his special power.”

“Aah, your understanding was incomplete? You see, the primary purpose of the ‘Flawed Bliss’ is to let me exist as ‘O’, because that’s how it grants ‘wishes’. As a consequence, I would no longer be able to exist as ‘O’ if the ‘Flawed Bliss’ were destroyed.”

Those new truths leave me completely amazed, but I have no time left to deal with my emotional confusion. I try to respond to ‘O’, depending entirely on dispassionate logic.

“Does that mean that, strictly speaking, I have used Aya’s ‘Flawed Bliss’ as well?”

“I suppose so. I wouldn’t exist without the ‘Flawed Bliss’, after all.”

“But doesn’t that mean that it’s untrue that Aya loses her memory when she uses it? After all, she still remembers everything even though I am using a ‘box’.”

“Oh, it’s not a lie. She only loses her memory when she decides to use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ of her own accord.”

“What a convenient exception.”

“I wonder...Don’t you think that that’s what the ‘boxes’ are like to begin with? Maybe you should think some more about why she loses her memory, anyway.”

Upon hearing that advice, I recall the farcical conversation ‘O’ and Aya engaged in earlier.

Why is Aya so dense when it comes to the question of just who ‘O’ is? That’s what I thought back then.

I realize why.

The answer is: Because otherwise, the ‘Flawed Bliss’ wouldn’t work.

Aya mustn’t realize that ‘O’ was created by her ‘Flawed Bliss’, let alone that the character of ‘O’ strongly resembles that of the real ‘Aya Otonashi.’ She mustn’t find out *how* her ‘box’ grants ‘wishes’. If she did, her ‘Flawed Bliss’ wouldn’t be *flawed* but simply *defective*.

Therefore, she has to *forget* whenever she learns the truth behind that system.

Aya and ‘O’ are merely actors in a grand *game of cat-and-mouse*: she supposedly obtains a new ‘box’ from her nemesis, so that she can make her ‘wish’ perfect and *unflawed*.

However, she won’t ever be able to obtain the ‘box’ that she’s yearning for. Of course not.

The very act of fighting against ‘O’ means that she is trapped in the ‘Flawed Bliss’ herself.

“___”

What the hell?

How futile is that? That's like making sandcastles that collapse as soon as the tide comes in. That's what Aya has been doing all this time? That's what she has killed her own personality for, spending a whole lifetime in torment? That's what she is risking her life for?

“.....”

Has Kazu noticed how futile her efforts are? No, I'm sorry to say this, but he's not smart enough to analyze her so critically.

But he must be intuitively sensing the underlying tension.

He must be grasping the truth of her 'box' by instinct. Right; that's what Kazuki Hoshino is like.

Therefore, he will try without fail to crush the 'Flawed Bliss' in order to free Maria Otonashi from this self-defeating system. And needless to say, the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' will be in his way.

“How exactly does Kazu crush 'boxes'? How can he crush mine?”

“If Kazuki-kun touches your chest, he can take out your 'box' and destroy it. He did just that with Iroha Shindou's 'box'.”

“...What? Shindou was really defeated? ...No, more importantly—”

—Just by touch? Huh?

That's not good.

I'm currently trying to get him into the 'Cinema'. However, if I manage to do that but he can destroy my 'box' just by touching me—

“Hell, I’m up against the wall.”

If I wait here, my ‘box’ will be destroyed, but if I call him here and he touches it, it will be destroyed just as well. What is this shit? That’s unfair as hell!

Okay, I should think this through in specific terms. For example, I could put my arm around Aya’s neck and take her hostage to prevent him from touching me.

However, that’s impossible. I’m not morally opposed, but it’s physically impossible; I will be in the theater by that point. The ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ forces an unbearable listlessness upon me when I try to do anything other than watch the movie that’s playing. I can’t threaten Aya while resisting that listlessness.

So do I have to make Aya use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ and forget about him whether he’s here or not?

But that’s not possible, either; things won’t go so smoothly. Aya said that she won’t use her ‘box’ on anyone who doesn’t literally ask for it, and her principles are unbending. I don’t have enough time to pressure Yanagi or Mogi enough to make them want to use a ‘box’. Kazu would crush my ‘box’ before that.

...No, there’s another basic concern that arises if the power of the ‘Flawed Bliss’ is equivalent to using a ‘box’ from ‘O’.

“Can a person who has already used a ‘box’ use the ‘Flawed Bliss’?”

‘O’ answers me without showing any special reaction. “You can’t use the same ‘box’ twice, but if it’s a different one, then it’s possible! Personally, I won’t give a ‘box’ to the same person twice, though.”

Which means that in theory, Yanagi and Mogi can use the ‘Flawed Bliss’. But how do I get them—

“.....Gh!”

My thinking suddenly slows down. I’m approaching my limit. My head hurts because of the information dump that I have yet to fully process. I’m probably at my limit when it comes to astonishing facts that I can accept and understand without switching off my mind.

I look at my watch. I have one minute left before I get teleported into the theater.

“‘O’.”

But there is still a matter that I have to confirm no matter what. Something I’ve wanted to ask ever since I found out what ‘O’ really is.

“Yes?”

Depending on the answer, my will might break. That’s how crucial my question is.

“Is the ‘Flawed Bliss’ an external ‘box’?”

There are two types of ‘boxes’: external and internal. The type of a ‘box’ is determined by how strongly the ‘owner’ believes that his or her ‘wish’ can possibly come true in the real world.

So let's pretend the 'Flawed Bliss' were an internal 'box', reflecting the scenario where an 'owner' didn't believe in her 'wish.' While it can vary depending on its level of power, an internal-type 'box' usually does not affect the real world. That means that all the miracles that have been called forth by a 'box' up until now—the 'Rejecting Classroom', the 'Sevennight in Mud' and the 'Game of Idleness'—would have taken place in a fake world. This whole story would be no more than a dream of Aya's.

Of course, the same would apply to the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

I can't accept such a laughable outcome, nor would I be able to endure it.

If her 'box' is not external, all my actions will have been rendered futile.

"Yes, it is; and level 10 even. She believes that she can make others happy with absolute purity. Rest assured, your concerns are superfluous."

It sounds like she's telling the truth.

Aah, that's a relief. The things I've done won't be rendered null and void.

All of it—my plan to improve the ethics of the world, the punishment I have inflicted on previously unpunished sinners, the pain I've suffered due to the 'Shadows of Sin', the damage I have dealt upon Iroha Shindou, my murder of Koudai Kamiuchi, or the many lives I have twisted with my 'box'; nothing will be rendered null and void.

I'm relieved... I should be.

Truth be told, as an 'owner', I've instinctively realized that my 'box' is an external one. But since I'm a person who doesn't trust his gut instincts, and this is a matter of crucial importance, I wanted to have additional confirmation.

All right, there's another vital question; one that arose when I heard about Kazu's power.

"Kazu is a being that crushes 'boxes', right?"

"That's what I said, yes."

"We could become 'owners' because we were attracted by our 'boxes' and accepted them. But a person who destroys the 'boxes' is essentially the opposite of who we are."

'O' is listening to me with an ever so gentle and sublime smile.

"Can someone who denies 'boxes' so much become an 'owner' himself?"

'O' gives me a short and precise answer.

"No."



Right after that exchange, I experience my n-th teleport and end up sitting in front of a screen once more.

In five minutes, the last movie, Piercing at Fifteen, will begin.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

I am surrounded by inanimate individuals who are mere shadows of themselves. Compared to the audience for the other movies, the number of faces that I recognize among those expressionless puppets has increased. Behind and to my right is the real Yuuri Yanagi, and behind and to my left is Aya Otonashi. The version of ‘O’ who had taken on Shindou’s appearance is no longer present.

Moreover, the abnormality particular to this ‘box’, the pitch-black void, has come even closer and is only two seats away from me. The absolute darkness—the abyss.

Finally, next to me sits—

“Ah.”

Of course.

Kazu can’t become an ‘owner’. He couldn’t have created this ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’. In fact, he couldn’t possibly create a ‘box’ that exists solely for the sake of crushing my ‘wish’.

Then who is the real ‘owner’ of this ‘box’?

Someone who thinks only of me—

Someone who could make a ‘wish’ just for me—

There is only one person who could do that.

Ah, sitting beside me is the lead character of this final movie.

—Kokone Kirino.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

The air conditioning in this theater is too strong. I feel as if the unnaturally cold air is ripping holes in my skin. I touch my piercing. I have already created so many holes in my body, but it's still not enough. There aren't enough openings.

Kokone.

No matter how many holes I make, you just won't leave my body. Just seeing you like this causes you to return. The warmth you gave me when I embraced you won't stay away from me. The gentle warmth that used to surround us conflicts with reality, and seeks to drive me crazy with the grinding sound that it produces.

There is no way in hell that I can finish watching such a movie.

My mind is going to break in the midst of this movie.

Why—

Why—

Why—

Why did it come to this?

The 'box' I'm opposing is Kokone's?

I've been fighting against Kokone?

No.

We're not fighting, no. Something's awry.

Then who am I fighting with?

What am I fighting with?

How could we have become happy?

Wrong.

It's wrong to have such thoughts.

I didn't choose happiness.

I chose justice.

This outcome was to be expected.

This has always been a story of my ultimate ruin.

Aah, my mind will break soon. I'm going to plunge into ruin. But that's fine. I just have to grasp, seek, and act on what's right, and my body will keep fighting on its own.

I know what this situation is.

It's called despair.

But a long time ago, I already gorged myself on more despair than I can bear.

Aah.

The screen flashes white, and in the next moment projects a red light. A familiar scene is coming up—the end of a world.

We shall now see the cheesy love drama of a naive middle schooler. It'll be a smash! Get your tissues ready! You all love this shit, don't you? Stuff where someone suffers, where you can feel good as you shed some tears of pity. Why don't you have some popcorn as you enjoy the show?

May I ask for a round of applause, everybody?

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap clap.

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/11 FRI 22:31** ◇◇◇

Mogi-san isn't able to roll her wheelchair on her own yet.

That means she didn't come here by herself, and she wasn't the person who said "found you."

"Heh, haha! Lucky me!"

An innocent looking girl is pushing Mogi-san's wheelchair.

But that impression of innocence only lasts for a split second. Originally inspired by my fleeting glance at her plainly bobbed black hair and neat blue sailor uniform, once I look her in the eye, that false facade is blown away.

We're in an empty alley. Under the glare of a street lamp, her eyes are glittering so strongly that one could almost believe that they've lost their ability to reflect light properly. Her eyes look like aluminum foil constructs.

Those eyes are abnormal.

"Found y-o-u. Kazuki Hoshino, Kazuki Hoshino, Kazuki Hoshino!" she says in a lively fashion as she spins around. Suddenly, she stops and scowls at me with lips pressed tightly together. "Master Daiya's enemy."

I instinctively realize that she is one of the fanatics that Yuuri-san mentioned.

“Mogi-san... what’s going on...?”

Mogi-san’s face is chalk-white. She is still in her pajamas; she was probably kidnapped by that fanatic.

“S-She just turned up and abducted me without a word...I was really scared...but I can’t defend myself...”

Right, she can’t fight back in her current condition. This girl—no, Daiya—has definitely resorted to dirty tactics.

“I had no idea what was going on. Before I knew it she had taken me out of the hospital, and then she took away my cell phone and called you, Hoshino-kun. Only then did I realize why she carried me off.”

“My cell rang roughly at the same time as when we were found...which means that we just happened to be nearby...”

We happen to be near the hospital right now. It’s unfortunate that Daiya’s minion found us so quickly, but I guess I would have picked up when Mogi-san called anyway. It was only a matter of time until this aluminum-eyed girl would have found us.

The girl starts stroking Mogi-san’s hands and begins to speak once more:

“I’m breaking them.”

“Huh?”

Because those words didn’t seem to match the situation at all, I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“I’m breaking her fingers. You know, this girl’s. Sorry.”

Mogi-san’s eyes widen, and she looks up at the girl.

Taken by surprise, I try asking some obvious questions to play for time.

“W-Why would you do that?”

“Um...because I was [ordered] to. By Master Daiya.”

“Wait a sec!” Haruaki stops passively watching and steps in. “What good will that do?”

“What good? As I said, this was an [order].”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! What’s your aim? *Daiya Oomine* wants to demand something from *Kazuki Hoshino*, right?!”

“Ah, right. Exactly! I was told to force *Kazuki Hoshino* to enter some kind of ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’!” the girl answers as though she doesn’t care at all about her actual objective.

As a fanatical believer in *Daiya*, she probably doesn’t care about the means or ultimate ends of what he tells her to do. She just blindly executes her [orders] with zero sense of priority.

“Do you feel nothing when you look at *Kasumi*? How can you be cool with this?” Haruaki reproaches her, visibly pressured by her statements.

After hearing what he has to say, the girl leans over *Mogi-san* and tilts her head forward at a right angle, looking at her face from an upside-down perspective. *Mogi-san* utters a little shriek as a face suddenly appears before her.

“I’m sorry for her,” the girl admits, much to our surprise. “But I’m more pitiable.”

“W-What?!”

The girl raises her head and whispers, “I’m infected with AIDS, you know? I’m going to die in the near future. Mm, I’m so pitiable.” But her tone stays indifferent throughout. “So? She’s also pitiable, and what of it?”

Nothing matters. To that girl, Mogi-san’s being “pitiable” is just another thing that doesn’t matter.

The one exception is her belief in Daiya.

She’s insane.

Haruaki is left at a complete loss, overawed by her insanity.

I’m convinced that this girl will break Mogi-san’s fingers one by one without batting an eye. Without feeling anything, without thinking about what she’s doing.

I look at the girl and,

“.....Hah...”

I can’t suppress a sigh, followed by a laugh.

“Whoa whoa!”

—What’s wrong, Daiya?

Are you okay with this, Daiya? What happened to your hatred of mindless people? Isn’t this girl the very textbook example of a mindless fool?

“What’s so funny...?” the girl asks as she glares at me with her aluminum foil eyes.

Are such eyes scary?

Not to me.

Quite the opposite, actually: thanks to them I can perceive her as just an obstacle.

They let me perceive her as a meaningless obstacle to which rules don't apply.

Becoming thoughtless, blind and obedient, and abandoning all independent thought—"Eh? Ah!"—also creates lots of openings.

The girl lets out a startled gasp when I suddenly rush toward her. However, her lack of independent thought keeps her from reacting properly.

I jump behind her and strangle her with both hands.

"Ah, gh!"

She lets go of the wheelchair in surprise.

"Haruaki!"

Despite being thunderstruck by my sudden action, Haruaki follows my lead. He quickly grabs the wheelchair and drags it out of range.

As she coughs away, I grab her collar and forcibly push her to the ground, without releasing her for a single second.

Her eyes have lost their aluminum foil-like glimmer and are now just wide open. Her panic is clearly visible.

But so what?

You can go feed that panic to a dog or whatever.

"You know, fanaticism is all well and good, but..."

I hold my right hand above her, pause, and then thrust it into her chest like a sword.

"GHA!"

"You also need will and resolve."

I take out one of the mass-produced copies of the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

Despite my explanation, however, he still seems uneasy.

“...? Is there something else?”

“Ah, yeah. Um...you sure don’t hold back, do you?”

“Hold back? Why should I? That girl was about to break Mogi-san’s fingers, wasn’t she? She wouldn’t have hesitated, and you know that, don’t you?”

“Y-Yeah. What you did was, yeah, correct.”

Correct.

Yes, correct.

And that makes me wonder why Haruaki’s so unsettled.

Anyway, Mogi-san is my priority right now. I crouch down and smile at her.

“Are you okay?”

“T-Thank you.”

Even though I speak to her gently, she seems to be just as unsettled as Haruaki is.

“.....”

...Okay, I’ll admit it. My behavior was a bit strange.

While I silently try to justify my actions, seeking to convince myself that there was no room for any restraint, I gaze at her and notice something.

“Mm? Mogi-san? Is there something hidden in your left breast pocket?”

“Uh,” she utters as she averts her gaze.

What’s with that reaction?

What...? Before I can get any further, Haruaki pats my back.

“We’re in trouble, Hoshii! That scream freaked out the neighbors!”

I look around and notice that the entryway light of a nearby house has turned on, accompanied by raised voices.

Of course. Maybe there’s not much traffic around here, but it’s not completely desolate like the underpass where I dealt with Iroha-san. That makes me realize once again just how reckless the aluminum foil girl was, trying to commit a crime in such a place.

“What should we do? I don’t want to lose time here having to explain what happened!”

“Although I’m concerned about her, we need to take off. Let’s at least lean her against a wall; if we leave her lying on the ground, they might think that we assaulted her. I guess the police will take care of her.”

I nod, and we proceed per Haruaki’s suggestion.



After hurrying off, we head toward the dorm where Kokone is hiding.

However, we have a problem. Mogi-san.

She doesn’t know about the current state of affairs. But I can’t just tell her about the ‘boxes’ and get her involved.

On the other hand, we can't drop her off at the hospital, either, because Daiya might give another [order] that targets her.

Should we partially explain what's going on? And is it okay to involve her even though she can't even move on her own?

"Mogi-san, what do you want to do now?" That question escapes my lips, as I'm unable to come to a decision on my own. Yet, I know that she's incapable of making an informed decision when she's so completely in the dark.

Haruaki continues to push her wheelchair, and Mogi-san remains silent for a few seconds. She finally replies in an uneasy manner:

"What would...work best for you?"

That sounds like a perfectly legit question, but something bothers me.

What she's saying simply isn't natural. Wouldn't you normally ask what's going on first, or act all confused?

"I'm sorry, Mogi-san!"

"Eh? Ah!"

That thing she's hiding keeps bothering me.

I thrust my hand into her jacket and feel something hard. She turns bright red and offers some slight resistance, either due to panic or embarrassment from my touch. But she resists so weakly that I easily take that hard object away from her.

It turns out to be—

"A stun gun...?"

Why? Why is Mogi-san carrying such a weapon? Did she really have the time to secretly pick up a stun gun when she was abducted by that fanatic? Why would she even have a stun gun lying around in her hospital room, anyway?

The most reasonable answer would be:

Mogi-san prepared the stun gun in advance.

In other words.

She knew that she would be attacked by one of Daiya's fanatics.

“.....”

Moreover, I noticed something when I touched her.

Something that's easy to notice now that I've obtained the 'Empty Box'.

—Mogi-san is an 'owner'.

—Mogi-san is a [servant].

If she knew that she would be attacked, why didn't she use the stun gun right away? Who was this stun gun meant to be used on?

What kind of [order] did Daiya give her?

If he gave her an [order], who would the target be...?

“I didn't want to say it,” Mogi-san whispers. “I didn't want to say that I regained my memories of the 'boxes'. Because—”

She weakly squeezes my sleeve.

“Because I also remembered that I gave up on you.”

“Eh?”

I totally didn't expect that.

I thought that as a [servant], she was [ordered] to attack me, but now that I think about it, Daiya wouldn't bother using Mogi-san so inefficiently.

Then the reason she seems so uncomfortable is...

"I recalled what happened within the 'Rejecting Classroom'," she says sadly.

...because she didn't want me to know that her memories of those days of despair have returned.

"But I've almost completely forgotten about the details, probably because my memory was already pretty mangled and disordered when I was inside that 'box'."

That was a real stroke of luck. If her memories had returned completely, she might not even be able to talk to me.

"But I must have caused you and Otonashi-san a lot of trouble. I somehow know that. And there's something else I remember."

She lets go of my arm.

With the brightest smile she can muster, she says:

"You clearly rejected me."

Right.

Our romantic relationship ended then, once and for all.

It ended.

I spent a lifetime to end it.

That decision is absolute and must not be revoked.

And yet I was so heartless as to keep a picture of her beaming smile on my cell phone. That was a mistake. I didn't properly stay the course.

“But that doesn’t change anything, Hoshino-kun. You have been and will remain my source of hope.”

Mogi-san seems very cheerful as she speaks to me.

She can accept that? Well, that’s still not an excuse for me to avoid saying anything; I owe her so much more and she deserves to hear me say it.

But it’s Mogi-san who lets me off the hook.

“Mm, but right now we shouldn’t be talking about me, correct?”

“Well, but—”

“Oomine-kun is planning to make Otonashi-san lose her memory!”

“—!”

The things I wanted to say to Mogi-san are all blown away.

I’m really sorry, but she’s right—I have a new top priority right now.

After all, Maria losing her memory would be—a fatal blow.

My goal is not simply destroying Maria’s ‘Flawed Bliss’—it’s persuading her to abandon her ‘box’ of her own accord.

But there’s obviously no way to persuade her if she loses her memory. In Maria’s eyes, I would be reduced to just another stranger. Given her iron will, it’ll be hard enough for me to convince her as she is now—god forbid I end up trying to do it as a stranger to her.

Letting her lose her memories of me is equivalent to losing all hope.

But how would they do that? ...No, it's easy enough, isn't it? They just have to use the 'Flawed Bliss' on someone. Maria mentioned that she could erase her memory using that method.

"Tch, Daiya...!"

Not bad! No matter how tightly he's cornered, he still manages to hit me in my one soft spot!

"Mogi-san," I address her as I grind my teeth, left with no choice but to collect more information. "How did you learn about that?"

"You have already noticed that I'm in possession of a 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', right?"

"Yeah."

"I received an [order] earlier."

"What did it say?"

"I was told to prepare for an attack by a [servant]. And I was told to get in touch with you."

In other words, that stun gun really was meant to defend her against that girl, after all. She probably refrained from using it right away because the girl stole her cell phone and because she knew that the girl would try to establish contact with me.

"You wanted to get in touch with me to tell me about Daiya's plan to erase Maria's memory, right?"

"Right!"

Okay, got that. I have, but...

“But hold on, why would Daiya do that? Why would he want me to find out about his plans?”

“Eh?”

Mogi-san’s reaction makes it all clear.

Right. Of course he wouldn’t do that.

That [order] comes—from a different [master].

But there should only be one person apart from Daiya who has the power of a [master], namely, Iroha-san. I doubt he would entrust anyone else with that power. Besides, Iroha-san said that she was the only other [master].

“But—”

But there is one person who Iroha-san might have secretly given that power to. Someone she trusts, someone sensible enough to stop her when it came down to crunch-time.

The name of that person is—

“Yuuri-san.”

Surprise shows on Mogi-san’s face.

“...What?”

I was pretty confident that my reasoning was spot on, but it seems like I got the wrong idea.

“Looks like...I was wrong?”

“You’re not!”

“Hm?”

“Why do you address me by my last name even though you use Yanagi-san’s first name when you talk to her?”

“.....”

Huh?

“You’re bothered by *that*?”

“I-I am!” she complains while blushing.

As it seems, I was wrong about being wrong.

“...Um...”

Anyway, the originator of Mogi-san’s [order] was Yuuri-san, after all. She wanted to communicate what happened inside the ‘Cinema’ to me by using Mogi-san.

That proves that I was right to send Yuuri-san to Daiya.

However.

Sending her there also created a problem: Daiya might use Yuuri-san to erase Maria’s memories of me.

“Hoshii, what next? The situation has taken quite a turn. Hiding like I suggested before is pointless, right?”

I nod.

“I don’t think we can avoid Daiya’s threats by hiding anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“And his [orders] are likely to become more extreme. He can even use the media, after all.”

Haruaki falls silent, perhaps thinking back to the woman who appeared as a ‘Dog Human’ on TV.

“His fanatics are also dangerous, although we were able to fight off that aluminum foil girl without too much trouble. I really didn’t think that they believed so

blindly in him! I'm afraid that they might attack us even without being [ordered] to, once they learn that Daiya is about to lose his power.”

“Ugh, then what are we gonna do?”

There's only one solution.

“I have to enter the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’.”

I would have preferred to just wait it out, of course.

However, I will enter the ‘Cinema’.

That means that I'm going to use the ‘Empty Box’ to destroy his ‘Shadow’. In other words, I'm going to use my power to crush ‘boxes’ before Maria's very eyes.

I didn't want to demonstrate that power to her.

I mean, is it possible to persuade her to choose to abandon her ‘box’ when she knows that I could easily crush it? That's like an attempt to persuade that comes with coercion and threats; like holding a knife and telling someone “cut yourself with a knife please. Oh, but I certainly won't do anything to you!”

I know that Maria has permanently abandoned me, but doing *that* will further aggravate the situation.

That said, I have no other choice.

If I sat on my hands by staying here in the real world, and Maria lost her memory because of Yuuri-san, my defeat would be absolute and irreversible.

I gaze at the palms of my hands.

They're completely normal hands, and smaller than Haruaki's.

But the haughty power of crushing ‘wishes’ dwells within them.

“With these hands, I will defeat Daiya,” I say as I clench my fists.

Haruaki has been watching me and nods slightly at this juncture. “I see, you’re going to Daiyan.”

After he speaks, he gazes into the distance, thinking—or wavering—about something.

“I have a request,” he says as he fixes his determined gaze upon me. “Take me and Kiri with you.”

He bows his head.

No, he goes even further. He gets on his knees and prostrates himself before me.

“H-Haruaki...”

“Please!” he shouts as he presses his forehead against the ground. “I want to save Daiyan, and if anyone can do that, it’s Kiri. Their relationship is as broken as it gets. They torment each other, I know. But still...but still I think that she is the only one who can save him.” He raises his head, eyes slightly wet. “I want to help them so that they can live with each other! Even if things end poorly, I want to see things through to the end, no matter what it takes.”

The seriousness of his request is evident.

However, I hesitate to respond.

I’m considering the disadvantages that would accrue if I bring them with me. Maria is and will be my top priority.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (1/3)

I'm disgusted by my cold-heartedness, but then again, I'm Maria's 'Knight'.

"Hoshino-kun..."

At first, I thought Mogi-san was about to reproach me.

But something's weird; she has turned pale.

"...What's wrong?"

"I just, I just got a message from from Yuuri-san," Mogi-san continues. "Otonashi-san has become a [servant]."



Scene 4
『Piercing at Fifteen』
(2 / 3)

scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen 2/3

11. PARK - DAYTIME

The camera focuses on a baseball field within a spacious park. The sound of children at play echoes in the background, but no one is in the vicinity of DAIYA and KOKONE.

Raven-haired DAIYA is standing on the pitcher's mound, while KOKONE is perched on home base, her back against a wall. She is wearing her glasses.

The scenic view to the rear of the park is illuminated by gleaming fields of golden wheat.

DAIYA

Here we go!

DAIYA throws a ball in a gentle arc to make it easy for KOKONE to catch. Visibly tense, KOKONE readies herself and holds out her glove. The ball bounces off her glove and rolls away. She hurriedly picks it up and tries to return the ball, but her throw does not quite reach DAIYA.

This cycle repeats several times.

DAIYA

You totally suck!

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

DAIYA laughs heartily while retrieving a ball that has flown completely off course.

KOKONE

Uuh! I'm sorry!

KOKONE somehow manages to catch the ball by holding out her glove with both hands, but she fails again when she tries to return it to DAIYA.

KOKONE

Daiya...isn't
playing catch with
me boring?

DAIYA

Well, I can't get
any real practice
in like this,
that's for sure.

He picks up the ball that comes rolling toward him.

DAIYA

But that's cool!

KOKONE

But I can't throw
far enough...and
my pitches always
go astray...

KOKONE throws the ball off to the side once again, and DAIYA chases after it.

DAIYA

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

You can throw them
wherever you want!

He bends down and picks it up.

DAIYA

I'll pick up every
single one.

DAIYA smiles, and he means what he says. Nevertheless, KOKONE does not want to depend on him forever, so she runs up to him to get some tips on how to play properly.

KOKONE listens carefully as DAIYA explains things like throwing techniques and proper stance. He somehow seems to be enjoying it.

KOKONE

Okay, here I go!

KOKONE throws a few balls; her form has improved a tiny bit. As time passes, she gradually improves.

KOKONE

Go!

The ball flies directly toward DAIYA's glove.

DAIYA

You did it.

DAIYA smiles.

KOKONE

I did it.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

KOKONE smiles.

12. PARK - A WINTER NIGHT

DAIYA's hair is dyed and his right ear is pierced. He is fiercely flinging a baseball against a concrete wall. Every time the ball bounces, it makes a loud thumping sound. There is no one catching his throws; he's all alone.

The fields of wheat have been scythed bare.

DAIYA
...Hah...hah...

He winds up and pitches.

Because he's put far too much reckless strength into that throw, the ball flies high, right into the fence above the wall, and gets stuck.

He cannot retrieve the ball.

DAIYA stands there silently, scowling at the baseball.

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)
Purity is

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)
beautiful

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

fragile

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

and irreplaceable.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 22:50 ◆◆◆

I'm at my limit.

An alarm bell is ringing in my head like an emergency earthquake alert.

Displayed onscreen are Kokone Kirino, back before she dyed her hair, and my boyish and naïve former self.

I was prepared.

I was prepared for what "Piercing at Fifteen" would show me.

But forewarned was not forearmed; the pain I bear as I watch remains.

"—Ah."

Ill will.

Ill will.

—Ill will.

It's as though ill will were crucifying me in my seat with its sharpened blades. The world's color has changed, stained with a muddy color called *reality*. I'm stricken with a feeling that the entire world is opposing me.

All the ill will I have gotten used to is eating away at me once more.

The world in the movie is so beautiful that the difference, the dirtiness, of the world today stands out with horrible starkness.

Aah.

I want to pass out.

I want to be released from this torture.

“Master Daiya.”

My fading consciousness is pulled back to reality by a voice that addresses me with a disgustingly exaggerated title.

Struggling against the listlessness that the ‘Cinema’ brings to bear, I brace myself and turn my head toward the voice. An unfamiliar woman is standing near the entrance of the theater. Although I fail to recognize her right away because of my weakened state, I quickly realize who she is. Her face isn’t very familiar, but among my [servants] only my most fanatic worshippers call me “master.”

It is not, however, the fanatic middle school girl I met previously in Shinjuku; she’s not my only fanatic worshipper. Ah, I remember now. The woman walking toward me is a university student who repeatedly tried to commit suicide. Like the other fanatic, she mistakenly experienced a theophany in my presence when I used the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ on her.

Ironically, someone that impure is the only thing that can calm me down right now.

It's probably because she's a reminder of the reality I've experienced, which is the opposite of the warm scene set in that movie. How terrific that someone as terrible as she is allows me to get a grip.

“What's the matter?”

While my headache and nausea are still plaguing me, I have pulled myself together enough to remember the task I had assigned to that believer. I told her to observe Kazu.

I gave my other fanatic, the middle school girl, the [order] to use Mogi to force Kazu to come here—breaking Mogi's fingers if necessary. At the same time, I also [ordered] this university student to secretly follow and monitor the middle school girl. I was fairly certain that Kazu would be too busy dealing with Mogi and the first fanatic to detect the presence of yet another one of my [servants].

I also [ordered] her to enter the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ afterwards and report to me.

The university student reaches me and crouches down like a faithful slave. She is visibly nervous.

I draw the obvious conclusion:

“Did the threat fail?”

“Yes.”

That's only natural given the power that Kazu has obtained. I gave that [order] before speaking to 'O', and I've since learned about Kazu's 'box' crushing abilities. So I've already written off this attack.

However, I didn't expect the message that follows.

"But that's not all; he has seen right through your plan!"

Unable to stomach her message, I frown. "What do you mean? How much does he know?"

"He knows that your goal is to erase Aya Otonashi's memory, Master Daiya!"

"What?"

How could this happen?

It goes without saying that I haven't mentioned such a plan outside the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema', so there's no way it could have leaked out.

"If anyone could have told him, maybe it was 'O'? ...No, it's unlikely that she'd do that after saying that Kazu's her enemy. So that leaves—"

"Excuse me, but Kasumi Mogi was the one who leaked the plan."

"Mogi?"

Mogi knows what's going on in the 'Cinema'? How is that possible?

I consider the question momentarily and come up with an answer right away. I turn around and look to my right.

The source of the leak; the girl I previously considered to be out of the game entirely.

“Yuuri Yanagi.”

“Eh? Yes?” she says as she widens her eyes. She looks totally clueless. Nevertheless, slowly but surely, I’m starting to understand her play-acting.

“Shindou shared her power with you? Without my approval?” I say, having grasped the situation.

Yanagi doesn’t bother to dissemble, and flashes a cheerful smile instead. “Ufufu,” she giggles before her face turns ice-cold. “It can’t be helped if you found out. Yes, you are right. And Kasumi-san is my one and only [servant],” she admits.

Her provocative attitude causes the fanatic university student beside me to scowl at her with blatant enmity. While signaling with my hand to the fanatic to keep back, I continue to speak with Yanagi.

“Did you forget that my victory will help you to get closer to Kazu or what?”

“Hah? What are you talking about? I said this before, but why would I submit to someone who once killed me? It’s nauseating that you seem to think that you can control a girl like that, so could you please go die in a fire? ”

This girl is too much.

With the power of my ‘box’, I can stimulate her ‘Shadow of Sin’ and torment her as much as I want; I can command her to do anything I want. Despite that, she still finds ways to defy me.

I wait for her next few words, planning to torment her with her ‘Shadow of Sin’ once she has spoken.

However—

“Just kidding,” she says with a smile.

“What?”

“Just kidding, Oomine-san! Please don’t get angry. Things aren’t as they seem—I’m helping you out like I promised.”

I definitely can’t trust her, but I decide to hold off on stimulating her ‘Shadow of Sin’ for now, and instead investigate her true intentions. “You claim that leaking my plans helps me?”

Sounds like a crappy excuse to me.

However, Yanagi answers “Yes!” with utter conviction.

What’s with this attitude?

Yanagi isn’t dumb. She should be perfectly aware that as a [master], I’m practically holding a knife to her neck. How can she be so confident that I won’t use that knife?

“Just imagine how Kazuki-san would react if he learned that you are trying to erase Otonashi-san’s memory.”

I finally understand what she’s getting at.

“So you’re saying that what you did was,” I conjecture, “a trick to lure Kazu into the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’?”

Yanagi gives me a slow, stressed nod. “Yes. Don’t you agree that that is the ultimate threat? There’s no need to do something as horrible as breaking Kasumi-san’s fingers!”

That strategy involving Mogi was just a feint, a now pointless countermeasure intended for ‘O’. It’s understandable that Yanagi would consider it an ineffectual choice.

“Otonashi-san. Kazuki-san will come, right?” she says as she turns to Aya for confirmation.

Aya, who has kept out of our conversation thus far, answers: “...Yeah, without a doubt.”

What she says can be taken for granted.

“See, I did help you, Oomine-san!”

Thanks to Yanagi, Kazu’s coming here.

We’re going to confront each other directly.

Geez..., I think silently, *thanks for dumping this mess in my lap.*

It’s not like I didn’t consider using the plan to erase Otonashi’s memory to threaten him; I was well aware that I could bring Kazu to me that way.

But why would I take such a risk?

If he learns about our intentions beforehand, he can better plan his response—the likelihood that he can impede our plan rises. This becomes all the more pressing because he possesses the overwhelming ability to destroy ‘boxes’.

If Yanagi wanted to help me out, she should have come up with an entirely unrelated strategy and disclosed *that* to Mogi.

That aside, it surprises me that she's willing to go so far to separate Kazu and Otonashi...

"Kazu would hate you for this."

"Of course not! What are you talking about?" she counters casually. "After all, I tried everything in my power to keep you from hurting Kasumi-san, and on top of that, I leaked your plan to him, didn't I? If anything, he has reason to thank me, and certainly no reason to hate me."

...What is she talking about? But now that I think about it...she's right.

From Kazu's standpoint, Yanagi's choice to disclose my plan makes her appear to be an ally. It's also true that she tried to protect Mogi. This girl is really living up to the role Kazu has given her.

She is carefully plotting to maintain her favorable position in his eyes.

"So much for *helping me*..."

Her actions even serve to protect her. Now that Kazu knows that I'm trying to erase Aya's memory, he'll realize that Yanagi is a likely target for the 'Flawed Bliss'; his natural response will be try to prevent that—to come up with a way to protect Yanagi.

What Yanagi has done is increase the probability that she'll be saved.

"—well, that's what you might think, Yanagi, but you just dug your own grave."

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

“Huh?” she utters, widening her eyes. I grab her ‘Shadow of Sin’. “—Ah, AAAH!!”

She gets to taste the sin of the murders she committed inside the ‘Game of Idleness’.

“AAAAAAAAAH! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

There’s no way she could endure that pain.

“I considered it necessary to use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ right before Kazu’s eyes to create a massive impact, but it’s a different story if he knows that I’m going to erase Otonashi’s memory and we know that he’s coming here. Kazu will know what happened if Otonashi has already lost her memory before he arrives. By confronting him in that manner, we will break his will.”

Yanagi tumbles off her seat.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

“Rejoice, for your actions have brought ruin upon Kazu. Now despair and yearn for the ‘Flawed Bliss’.”

Her sin is murder.

Yanagi might be crafty, but at heart she’s a good person—pure, the opposite of a criminal. There’s no way she could endure such a heavy sin.

And yet—

“.....I refuse,” she squeezes out, astounding me. “I refuse. Doing that would be losing to the ‘Game of Idleness’. No doubt I’m a monster for doing what I did, but those actions were unavoidable. There was no other way to survive. If I didn’t have any other choice—right or wrong doesn’t matter—I just have to accept it.”

“Stop spewing crap, murderer.”

“Shut up! I won’t render his efforts futile. Kazuki-san visited me every single day when I’d shut myself in at home and patiently explained to me that I’d had no alternatives. He has forgiven me. So no matter how painful they are, I won’t lose to my sins...I won’t!”

“...How long are you going to be able to continue saying that?”

No matter what she says, she won’t be able to hold out for long. I’ll just have to wait until she begs for mercy.

However.

“Stop it, Oomine!” Aya yells. “I won’t use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ if you force someone to ask for it!”

I let go of Yanagi’s ‘Shadow of Sin’.

“Don’t you dare do that again! Okay, I’ve decided: I *absolutely* won’t use my ‘box’ if you make someone suffer for it!”

She’s dead serious.

And so Yanagi escapes from her pain.

“Uh...aah...aah...” she groans as she scowls at me with tears running down her cheeks. “...Uh...haha...did you hear that...? She’s not going to use it for you the way you want... serves you right!”

With the last of her strength, she pulls herself onto her seat and collapses, completely still, while slumped over. She whispers “Kazuki-san...”—appealing to Kazu’s sympathy even though he’s not here? Either way, I understand now: Yanagi informed him of my plans because she wanted to stop me.

“Tch, stupid bitch...”

What a shame. My plan would have worked if I had properly won her over.

...Or was it because of Kazu that she could resist the power of my ‘box’? Because Kazu fought the ‘Game of Idleness’ and patiently helped Yanagi to recover from it as well?

A wave of exhaustion flows over me. I plunk down into my seat.

Meanwhile, the fanatic girl is still positioned somewhere between squatting and standing, and looking at me in a worried fashion.

She is getting on my nerves.

“Get lost.”

“Huh?”

“Get out of my sight.”

She seems unhappy, but since she believes in me completely, she’d never refuse my orders. She stands up and obediently leaves the theater.

“__”

Scene by scene, the movie continues to play.

In just a short while, I’ll have to watch Rino burn Kiri’s back with cigarettes.



Okay, my advantage has been countered by Yanagi. My headache and my nausea have gotten worse, and I'm constantly weakening, but I have to order my thoughts and deal with the situation anyway.

While holding my head, I try to revise my plans.

My situation has taken a turn for the worse after the end of *Repeat, Reset, Reset*. There are 5 changes that I know of:

- 'O' is no longer on Kazu's side.
- Kazu now has the power to crush 'boxes'.
- I realized that Kokone Kirino is the 'owner' of the 'box' I'm in.
- Kazu is coming here.
- Aya won't use the 'Flawed Bliss' if I force someone to ask her for it.

Given new information, I also have to modify my tactics. I originally thought that I just had to break Kazu's will; break his will and have him abandon the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

I was wrong. Even if I managed to defeat Kazu, I'd still lose because Kiri would maintain the 'Cinema'.

Nevertheless, it's still necessary to break Kazu's will; I absolutely have to disable his destructive power.

The following conditions are sufficient for me to achieve my victory:

1. Bring the 'owner' of the 'Cinema'—Kokone Kirino—here before September 11th ends and make her abandon her 'box'.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

2. Break Kazuki Hoshino's will before he can touch my chest. Do so by making Aya use the 'Flawed Bliss', which will also erase her memories of Kazuki Hoshino.

What the hell? How can I possibly meet these conditions?

For starters, how am I supposed to get Kiri to come here? How am I supposed to make her abandon her 'box'? How could I possibly persuade her when the purpose of her 'box' is single-mindedly devoted to destroying mine? There's no way I could reverse someone's firmly held beliefs in a single hour. Instead, I'd have to find a way to destroy her 'box' by force.

But I don't have any means of doing so. It's impossible.

Besides, how am I going to get Aya to use the 'Flawed Bliss'? I'll be forced to bring one of Kazu's friends here who, in addition, will have to be interested in the 'Flawed Bliss'. Even if I managed to do that, I doubt that person would be able to make the final decision to accept the 'Flawed Bliss' that quickly, which will give Kazu the opportunity to destroy my 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'. After all, he just needs to touch my chest.

Impossible.

Unless I could perhaps control Aya Otonashi's actions, it's impossible for me to win.

"....."

Wait.

Ah, so, would that be the solution?

There's only one condition necessary for my victory.

That is—

—making Aya Otonashi my [servant].

There's only one way I can get rid of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'—use Kazu's power to destroy it. I can even use my [orders] to tell someone to kill herself. If I threatened to make Aya commit suicide, Kazu would have no choice but to obey me and crush Kiri's 'box'.

I would also be able to force Aya to use the 'Flawed Bliss' with an [order], and defeat Kazu by erasing her memory in front of his very eyes.

If I make Aya Otonashi my [servant], I can fulfill both victory conditions.

However.

"There's no way I could do that...", I whisper, as I watch Kiri desperately struggle against her attackers on-screen.

"Stop it! W-Why are you doing this to me, Rino?!"

Aya Otonashi is defined by her iron will. There's no way she would become a [servant]. Even thinking about going there is a waste of time.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

My will power drains away as the shriek echoes from the speakers, chipping away at my heart.

I try to touch one of my piercings and fail. I can't even bring myself to lift my hand to my head.

End.

End.

End.

End.

End.

Just end! Fuck it!

“—It’s...”

It’s enough.

Time to give up.

Time to give up on trying to realize my ideal world with my own two hands.

“...Should I kill them?”

Kazuki Hoshino and Kokone Kirino.

It’s possible if I use my [servants].

If I do so, I can erase both the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ and Kazu’s power to destroy ‘boxes’.

I know. My mind will collapse if I do it. I’m already at my limit; I will break without fail.

However, I won’t be able to stay sane for much longer anyway. I have to find someone who will take on my burden before it’s too late; I have to give the power of the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ to someone who is able to use it properly.

Even Shindou was defeated. She was a person who seemed to be capable of adopting my goals—albeit in a relatively distorted fashion—but she lost her ability to use the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.

My fanatic worshipers are out of the question. They are only fit to obey a leader, not to give [orders]. I try to run through the faces of all of my [servants], but there doesn't seem to be anyone who would suit my purposes.

There is no one who would want to sacrifice himself for a better world.

There's simply no one.

Such a person—

Such a beacon of hope—

A person who would adopt my goals as his own just—

“

after all”

Just one.

There is just one person who, in fact, may be a lot more capable than I am.

The girl who declared herself to be a ‘box’ and abandoned everything for her goal.

Aya Otonashi.

The moment I realize this, I am struck by a flash of inspiration.

It's like throwing the shuffled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle on the floor, and watching the pieces all somehow spontaneously lock together to form the completed image. As ridiculous as it sounds, my entire situation really has become that clear.

I stand up. Until a moment ago, I had lost so much energy that I couldn't even touch my piercings, but who cares anymore? Opposing the compelling force of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema', I turn around to face Aya.

I feel so awful that I worry that I might throw up blood when I try to speak. A powerful bout of dizziness is messing with my sense of balance, causing me to stand askew.

However, before I know it, I start to smile.

"Aya, you've always sought a new 'box', right? And you've been chasing after 'O' and the 'owners' to get one—all to perfect your 'wish'."

Aya frowns at me.

"It's also why you spent a lifetime inside the 'Rejecting Classroom' and stayed with Kazu: because he attracted the interest of 'O'. You have devoted your entire life to that goal and you continuously worked toward it. You exist solely for that goal."

"Yeah, right. What's your point?"

In reality, her efforts are futile; Aya can't possibly obtain an ideal 'box'. That's why she never grasps what 'O' truly is and keeps fighting against her.

Her '*Flawed Bliss*' tries to stay *flawed*.

But that's because she's fighting on her own.

What if there were someone who could share her burden?

What if she found a kindred spirit?

"Rejoice."

What if there were someone who happened to have a similar ‘box’?

“Your wish is about to come true.”

Aya realizes that I’m serious, and she stares closely at me.

“Where is it? Where is the ‘box’ that I’m seeking?”

The ‘Flawed Bliss’ and the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ are similar.

They were both created by strong beliefs, yet in many ways are fragile and cold. At the same time, they can be used for almost any purpose.

I’ve always thought that they felt alike.

“It’s right here,” I say as I point at my chest. “The ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ is the ‘box’ you seek.”

Right, with my ‘box’ she can finally escape the quicksand-like trap of ‘Flawed-ness’ she’s caught in.

Aya has been observing me with eyes wide open the entire time. She now casts her eyes down toward the ground and shakes her head.

“Do you realize how nonsensical you sound? Your ‘box’ is not what I’m seeking. A ‘box’ that sacrifices others is far from my ideal; in fact, it is the exact opposite. What you did to Yanagi earlier should be proof enough.”

“That’s because I’m the one using it,” I counter, drawing her gaze once again. “You’re right; when I use it, my ‘box’ creates sacrifices because that’s how I was trying to change the world. However, it goes without saying that you can do more than just create ‘Dog

Humans' with this power. At its core, it's a power to control others. No, describing it that way gives it a negative connotation. In your words—"

I look deeply into her strong-willed eyes and say:
"—it has the power to guide others."

Aya's expression changes.

Ah, just as I expected. She is interested in this 'box'.

"It does have the power that you're looking for," I say with conviction. "The power to guide others to happiness."

"No way—But, but..."

While she is still trying to deny it with empty rationalizations, she has already realized—

That I'm telling the truth.

That this is the 'box' she has been searching for.

I walk toward Aya Otonashi.

All this time, the listlessness generated by the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' is still tugging at me. In addition, I feel my 'Shadows of Sin' eat away at me with every step I take. I stumble back and forth as I walk, supporting myself by grabbing the theater seats as I proceed toward the back where Aya is sitting.

"—Hehe."

Even though I feel horrible, I can't suppress the pleasure that wells up within me.

After all, I have finally found the answer.

From the very moment I obtained the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’, I was prepared to pay with my life for using it. I was prepared to go crazy in the near future and die a shameful death.

By its nature, this ‘box’ is designed to be passed on. But who was to be my successor?

Perhaps I have known the answer all along.

After all, didn’t I label her my source of hope earlier?

While I don’t know if it’s because we’ve worked closely together in the ‘Rejecting Classroom’ or if it’s simply because I noticed her transcendence, I’m sure that some part of my brain had already decided who this ‘box’ would eventually pass to, right when I first obtained it.

If that’s true, then the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ is in reality—

A ‘box’ made to be passed on to Aya Otonashi.

“.....Hah, hah...”

I finally reach her seat.

While she is visibly hesitant, she shows no signs of trying to escape.

“Stand up, Aya.”

She is staring up at me.

“Stand up and accept the ‘box’ you have been seeking!”

A few moments pass.

However, Aya eventually stands up.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (2/3)

She stands up, knowing full well what I'm about to do. The light of the screen causes her to cast a small shadow.

I look in her eyes.

There is no hesitation in them anymore.

She has already prepared herself to accept it.

“Very well.”

I'm the one who has to accept her first.

“Show me your sins, Aya Otonashi!”

So I sayeth as I step on her shadow.

“—Ah.”

I step on it and see a sin.

Aya Otonashi's...no, Maria Otonashi's sin.

That is,

That is—

“ —

—

————

————— ”

I collapsed.

I passed out momentarily.

Did I also scream? No, I guess I wasn't even able to do that?

I reflect on the memory I just saw.

It wasn't the most gruesome of the thousand sins I've seen, nor was it the cruelest. But gruesomeness and the like are distinct from the pain that accompanies a given sin; the level of pain I suffer is the level of pain that a person suffered subjectively at the time of her sin, and has nothing to do with the objective cruelty of the sin.

So what's the damage Aya Otonashi sustained back then?

A stinging pain as though a thousand knives had pierced my heart, my eyeballs had been squashed with pliers, my fingers had been torn off one by one, my guts had been thrown into a blender, nails had been hammered into every single pore of my skin, and on top of that every inch of my body is on fire. Her sin feels like molten steel that is melting my body into a lump.

What the hell?

My hands can't stop violently shaking and my eyes are still wide open in shock.

She—

She was bearing such a load all this time?

“.....Gh!”

I struggle to my feet and gaze at Aya Otonashi.

In order to make her a [master], I first have to temporarily make her a [servant]. In order to do that, I have to swallow her 'Shadow of Sin'.

And if I do that, Aya will relive her sin.

But will she be able to withstand the pain?

Regardless, I don't intend to back off.

I'm not in any position to hesitate.

“Here we go.”

I grab her ‘Shadow of Sin’, which I had absorbed after stepping on her shadow, and swallow it.

“——!”

Aya tenses up and grabs her chest.

But that’s all she does.

I can’t hide my astonishment. “.....How can you be okay?”

Aya Otonashi is standing there without a problem.

“I’m not okay.”

Upon closer inspection, I can see cold sweat on her face. She is gritting her teeth in anguish. But as someone who lost consciousness after contact with her sin, it’s hard for me to believe that’s the extent of her reaction.

“How can you still be standing? You shouldn’t be able to endure that. I’ve experienced it firsthand—I can tell.”

“Unless I’m wrong, your ‘box’ causes people to recall their *sins*?” Aya says. She is staring at me, iron will glowing in her eyes, even as pearls of sweat are running down her cheeks.

“Yeah, so it should be impossible for you to bear your sin if you are confronted with it so suddenly.”

“It’s not so sudden.”

“What?”

Aya lets go of her chest and catches her breath. She’s practically back in fighting trim.

“I endure this pain 24/7. I have grown accustomed to it.”

She isn't making sense.

If I were to take her at her word, that would suggest something absurd.

My 'box' makes people recall their *sins*, or their feelings at the time when they sinned. Sinners typically block that dark memory from their daily lives in order to live with some peace of mind.

But what if Aya didn't do that? What if she hasn't forgotten about that trauma for a single second?

"I am always conscious of my sin."

If so, she'd get accustomed to that infernal anguish and it would become just another part of her everyday life.

If she has always lived with this pain, there's no reason she'd get overwhelmed after being confronted with it.

"I won't be forgiven. That's why—"

But hey? How can a human being possibly live that way?

No...I see.

That's why.

"That's why—I can't live as a human."

That's why she could become 'Aya Otonashi'.

She's always conscious of being a sinner. By refusing to forget about her sin, she keeps punishing herself.

That's the ethical way to carry out sin and punishment.

That's what left her bereft of her humanity and turned her into a 'box'—into 'Aya Otonashi'.

By aggressively suppressing her true self, she can focus on a single 'wish'. She can devote herself entirely to a single goal.

For the sake of everyone else's happiness.

She calls forth feelings of respect, envy, rapture, and veneration.

She embodies the sad outcome that awaits a true 'owner' at the end of the road.

But this is exactly why there is no one more suited to accepting my power.

Aya Otonashi.

Please live on for the sake of our 'wish'.

Sorry Kazu, but I absolutely refuse to return 'Maria Otonashi' to you.

I absolutely refuse to let you crush our 'wish'.

“I give you my power. I give you all the 'Shadows of Sin' that I possess.”

Giving her my 'Shadows of Sin' has no direct effect on me. I can still control my [servants].

My mission, however, has changed.

My most important task is to get rid of Kazuki Hoshino, the man who has a deeper influence on her than anyone else, and his power to destroy ‘boxes’. I must assist her as she lives for the sake of our ‘wish’.

“Are you ready?” I ask, but Aya is ignoring me. She is staring straight ahead.

“I was always trying to imagine,” she whispers, “how I could help people become happy; what kind of ‘box’ I would need. Happiness is not something I can just create and force upon them. Nor is it attained by throwing them in a paradise and releasing them from their anxieties and worries. Eventually, I arrived at the conclusion that *flawless* bliss is only possible when you envision and work toward your own ideal form of happiness.” She clenches her fist impotently. “What I needed was the power to guide people,” she says in an emotional manner. “I can’t believe that I just had to change my perspective a bit to realize it.”

Finally, she looks at me.

“Oomine. I didn’t think much of the fact that we were pointed in the same direction, but I’ve changed my mind. You taught me that wonders such as this are possible... I see, so that’s what it means to be kindred spirits.”

“Kindred spirits...yes,” I nod and pass on my ‘Shadows of Sin’.

Come to think of it, an idea came to mind when I gave Shindou a few ‘Shadows of Sin’: a truly strong person might be able to remain unaffected when he swallows other people’s ‘Shadows of Sin’; in turn, that might make me lose confidence in my fitness as a ruler.

“.....Hm.”

Aya Otonashi easily stomached the 998 ‘Shadows of Sin’.

Thus, she became a [master] and, just as I originally planned, my 999th [servant].

“Oomine,” the new ‘owner’ of the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ says to me: “Thank you.”

However, not a sign of joy appears on her robotic face.



After repeatedly supporting myself with the theater seats, I shakily wend my way back to my own seat at last.

Listlessness attacks me at once and presses like a heavy weight upon my shoulders, relieving me of my will to move.

Nonetheless, I mustn’t switch my mind off yet.

Now that Aya has become a [servant], there is only one hurdle left to overcome in order for me to meet my victory conditions.

That is, to bring Kiri—the ‘owner’ of the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’—here.

Once she's here, I'll just threaten Kazu and have him crush her 'box'.

"Kokone, I love you!"

My voice resounds from the speakers of the theater, and I can't help but react.

I've been looking at the screen for a while, where I am currently tearing up while embracing Kiri in the classroom.

However, Kiri just stands there stiffly, her arms dangling like those of a lifeless puppet.

My self of yesteryear repeats his cry.

"Kokone, I love you!"

That's how I tormented her.

I tormented her by trying to convey my straightforward feelings for her. Tears appear in her empty eyes.

But my feelings didn't reach her as forthright love; instead, they appeared like the product of an obsessed and diseased mind.

—Don't abandon me when I love you so much!

To her, my words must have sounded like...like a threat forbidding her to change, forcing her to maintain her identity as the girl she considered ugly and worthless.

I was a horrible guy.

I couldn't stay like that.

I had to change the world around us.

I had to reform the people who victimized her, who would keep her in her current state. Not the evil ones who had to be purged—Rino and her companions weren't evil—but the mindless fools. They only see what's in front of them, but not the ultimate consequences of their actions. I had to fix that. By fixing that flaw, tragedies like Kiri's would no longer occur.

Kokone Kirino would have been able to stay who she was.

Right?

For a just world.

Nothing else matters.

My happiness and Kiri's happiness are irrelevant.

“—Aah.”

I got it.

I'll just have Kokone Kirino use the 'Flawed Bliss'.

Her heart is already broken, so she will certainly seek it. If I use her for that purpose, Aya's memory will be erased, breaking Kazuki Hoshino's will.

—Isn't there something fundamentally wrong about that plan? No there isn't, right?

The moment I thought about using Kiri, I also came up with an easy way to lure her here.

No, it's simple. As her childhood friend and ex-boyfriend, it's only natural that I could easily come up with any number of methods to bring her here. If anything, I should be reflecting on why I didn't come up with something like that earlier! Was I secretly holding myself back or something?

I [order] one of my fanatic worshipers: “*Send an e-mail to the following address—*” I think of her e-mail address, which I have long since memorized. “*—and write in that e-mail:*”

Kiri wouldn’t come if I just told her to do so.

However, she will come if she thinks I am crying out for help. She will come if she thinks that I am at my very limit. That’s just her nature—she’ll choose my happiness over hers.

I determine the most effective message to convey my cry for help to her, and [order] my [servant] to use it. That awful message is the same horrible line that appeared in the movie. “*Kokone, I love you!*”

That being said...

Yeah.

I’m at my limit.

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/11 FRI 23:02** ◇◇◇

“Maria has become a [servant]?” I parrot back what Mogi-san has said.

“Kasumi...what’s that supposed to mean? W-Why would Maria-chan...?” Haruaki asks as he raises his head while continuing to kneel on the ground.

“I-I only repeated what Yanagi-san told me, so I don’t know anything else...”

How could this happen?

Daiya's 'box' had no effect when Iroha-san stepped onto my shadow; when Daiya steps onto Maria's shadow, it should be equally ineffectual.

Unless she wishes to accept it of her own volition.

"—!"

Suddenly, my cell phone beeps, notifying me of a new e-mail. As I take it out, it beeps once again.

"..W-What the?"

Given the situation we're in, it can't be a good sign to receive multiple e-mails in a row.

I'm unfamiliar with the senders' e-mail addresses. I try opening the second e-mail, but it only contains the letter "O", and even as I read it, a new e-mail arrives.

Five more e-mails from unfamiliar addresses reach me in 5-second intervals. They all contain only one letter, and chronologically sorted, they form the following text.

"F"

"O"

"R"

"G"

"E"

"T"

"M"

"E"

The identity of the sender couldn't be any clearer.

"Maria...!"

So it's the truth.

It's true that she has become a [servant].

No, even worse.

“Maria has given [orders] to at least eight different people...”

Maria has become a [master].

“...Why...did it come to this...?”

Yet another e-mail reaches me while I’m still mired in confusion. The sender is yet another unfamiliar e-mail address, but this time, the e-mail contains more than one letter.

“Watch the news”

With bated breath, I start up the 1seg function of my cell.

I immediately see what she was referring to. The newscaster cites the following text:

“Breaking news: Katsuya Tamura, a victim of the so-called ‘Dog Human’ phenomenon, has just regained consciousness. This is the first known case of recovery. The official police statement is that they have taken Tamura-san into protective custody, he is calm and showing no signs of confusion. Furthermore, he claims that he has no memory of his time as a ‘Dog Human’, that he killed his parents and that he is willing to accept any form of punishment. —We have just received additional breaking news. Yasumi Ishikawa, another ‘Dog Human’ victim, has regained consciousness as well and...”

What's going on? Why did Daiya release the 'Dog Humans' now, of all times? Didn't he plan to make the people of the world reconsider their ethics by mass-producing 'Dog Humans'? Isn't releasing them rendering his efforts futile?

Or is it Maria who's doing that?

But then why is Daiya permitting this?

One would think that Maria has taken over the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'!

".....Good lord."

Is that possible?

Did Maria seriously wish for the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' of her own volition? Did Maria become a [servant] and [master] for the sake of using that power at will?

If that's true, then why?

"—No, that's..."

As clear as day.

If that's true, her motive is obvious.

Her only 'wish' is to make others happy. She cares about nothing else. Therefore, what she is doing now also serves that ultimate goal.

In other words, Maria determined that the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is capable of bringing about happiness.

I know she's been searching for a 'box'.

And the 'box' she chose is the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'? The power to control others?

"What...the hell..."

I grind my teeth.

Doesn't that basically imply that Daiya is the person who best understands and most needs Maria?

Over—

“Over my dead body.”

I know what she is going to do next.

Unlike Daiya, she's not going to make a big spectacle. She will approach people one by one, and intervene where needed to guide them to attain happier lives.

That's an impossible and endless undertaking.

A life wasted on serving others.

Despite that, Maria would gladly devote her entire life to the happiness of others.

She would be delighted that she has finally taken a step forward.

“Over my dead body,” I repeat to myself.

She is only acting this way because she is obsessed with 'Aya Otonashi.'

She is completely disregarding herself.

“I will.....”

In that case, my answer isn't hard to reach.

“I will also crush.....”

I won't leave her any hope as 'Aya Otonashi.'

The only thing 'Aya Otonashi' will get from me is *despair*.

“I will also crush that 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' you cling to!”

Is it the ray of hope you have found after so long?

I don't give a fuck!

Cry as much as you want, I won't hold back from crushing your 'box'.

I have made up my mind.

The question now is how to pull off my plans.

Daiya can [order] Maria. He can threaten me as much as he wants. By threatening to use the 'Flawed Bliss' on Yuuri-san, he can get whatever he wants from me. If he orders me to destroy the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema', I'll have to destroy it. If he orders me to let Maria go, I'll have to let her go.

"Ngh..."

Then what can I do?

Daiya is still standing between me and Maria. Unless I find a way to oppose him, I will fail to recover Maria and lose.

—A way to oppose him. A way to oppose him...!

What comes to mind is—

My gaze wanders to Haruaki, who has been asking something of me. He wanted me to bring him and Kokone with me into the 'Cinema'.

"Haruaki."

Right, at the end of the day, she's Daiya's only weak spot.

"Let's meet up with Kokone."

A shiver runs down my spine.

A shiver runs down my spine because of what I am planning.



Mogi-san said that she wanted to support me, but we couldn't just take her into the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema', so we hurriedly returned her to the hospital. After that, we met up with Kokone.

We had called Kokone in advance, so she was already waiting for us in a parking lot near the dorm.

As soon as we meet, Kokone jumps into my arms, clinging to my chest.

"Daiya just sent me a message," she says in a trembling voice, "saying that he loves me."

She doesn't look up at me.

Even if she weren't shaking like a leaf, I could tell that she is crying.

"This is the first time he's said that to me after he realized that I've changed."

Haruaki bites on his lip as he silently listens to her.

"I've made my choice. And I'm going to have my way," she says as she raises her head and looks at me with bright red eyes. "I will go save Daiya."

Her resolve is unshakable.

"Kokone..."

He must have told her indirectly that he loves her via e-mail. It's obviously a trap, but that won't stop her.

However, that happens to support my own plans.

“Are you willing to do whatever it takes?”

“I am. I’ll put my life on the line if that’s what it takes.”

That’s the answer I wanted to hear.

That’s the answer I wanted to hear, so I can take advantage of her in order to oppose Daiya.

“Kokone. Haruaki. Let’s enter the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’.”

I will make use of Kokone’s passion for Daiya, but solely to recover my Maria.

Yet, Haruaki smiles at me.

“You’re taking us with you? Thanks a bunch, Hoshii!” he says as he grips my hands. Firmly.

“T-That hurts, Haruaki.”

But he doesn’t loosen his grip, his eyes remain fixed upon me, and tears start running down his cheeks.

“Thanks, Hoshii!”

Even though bringing Kokone with me doesn’t mean that Daiya will be saved.

In fact, Haruaki is most likely going to witness Daiya’s destruction. And yet Haruaki sheds tears of relief, incorrectly believing that I made this decision for the sake of Kokone and Daiya.

He finally lets go of my hands.

They have become hot.

“Ah—”

My heart suddenly heats up; so much so that it’s hard to bear.

The pure tears they shed for Daiya attack me.
And they make me realize.

“Ugh...gh...”

I look at my hands that Haruaki’s tight grip have warmed. These hands possess the power to crush ‘boxes’ and knock out others’ ‘wishes’.

These hands prove that I have strayed from the path of humanity.

My intention to exploit their feelings for the sake of Maria proves that I have strayed from the righteous path.

For what I am going to do is—

“AAAahh...”

When did I go so far astray? No, wasn’t my attempt to kill Iroha-san already proof that I’ve got some screws loose? I had already been messed up mentally back then; I just didn’t notice because Iroha-san happened to survive.

I want to pray for Daiya. I want to pray for Daiya’s happiness together with Kokone and Haruaki. I want to cry together with them. I want to share their feelings and ride to his rescue together.

But I can’t.

I will recover Maria. I can’t help but prioritize her above everyone else. There’s no helping it.

I have changed for good.

By obtaining the ‘Empty Box’, I have been recast into this monstrous shape.

“Uh...uuuuuh.....”

I shed tears.

But mine are not beautiful tears like Kokone's and Haruaki's, shed for someone else. They are hideous and egotistical tears, shed in lamentation of what I have become.

"Haruaki, Kokone."

I can only put my honest feelings into words.

"I really love you two."

That's the one thing I can say with sincerity and honesty.

Haruaki embraces us.

Kokone is crying out loud.

It feels like a horrible sin to shed such monstrous tears. Kokone's tears drip onto my cheeks, their purity seeming to silently condemn me and making me even sadder.

"I love you, but I may betray you."

They look at me with rounded eyes.

"I'm sorry. No matter what, I will do anything it takes to save Maria. I will even exploit your feelings to recover her. I might not be able to save Daiya. I might corner him. But I really really think that I want to save him. Sorry. But I can't commit to that from the bottom of my heart. Sorry. I'm sorry that I can't wish for his rescue with all my heart." My tears won't stop. "Please forgive me."

For a while, we remain silent, hugging each other in a tight circle.

Kokone is the first to speak up.

“It’s okay,” she says as she sobs. “I’m no different. I can only act for Daiya’s sake. I couldn’t act for my own, even if Haruaki wants me to.”

She pushes away from my chest, slipping out of our circle, and smiles at me.

“I forgive you, Kazu-kun, so please forgive me too.”

Looking at their tears, I can only say:

Just like the four movies Daiya has been watching, I can’t imagine how this story could have a happy ending.

Where did I make my crucial mistake?

When did things start to go wrong?

If I was mistaken from the start, was Daiya right about correcting the world?

I don’t know.

I don’t know, but we have to go.

To the shopping mall where the entrance to the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ can be found.

To Daiya.

To Maria.

But before that, I shall carve a reminder that I have gone astray into my body.

Yes, I’ll do it to the part of me that possesses the power to crush ‘boxes’. I’ll choose my right hand.

Once I’ve done that—

I will go and watch the end credits of this story.



Scene 4
『Piercing at Fifteen』
(3/3)

scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen 3/3

95. BLUE BACKGROUND

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

Please...

96. WHITE BACKGROUND

KOKONE (MONOLOGUE)

May Daiya find
true happiness.

97. BLACK BACKGROUND

98. RED BACKGROUND

◆◆◆ **Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 23:40** ◆◆◆

I am losing my mind.

The pictures on-screen tear away all conscious thought and take me back in time, forcing me to remember my former self. My thoughts return to my old patterns. I lose my sense of time and place. Am I seated? On-screen? In the past? I don't even care.

On-screen, I'm a middle school student holding his head in his hands.

He's silent, but I remember what was running through my head at the time. Now that I've traveled back in time, I'm repeating the same thoughts as well.

—What was I² supposed to do?

—What was I supposed to do?

—What was I supposed to do?

I may have reached my absolute limit, but I will not lose track of my mission. I will stay tenaciously aware of my goal, so that I respond automatically—no matter how disarrayed my feelings are.

Kazuki Hoshino is coming here.

I'm going to defeat him and release Aya from his claws.

Then we will change the world.

And just then, the entryway opens.

My eyes regain their focus and fix upon a single point.

“It feels like it's been a long time.”

Kazuki Hoshino is standing there.

I stand up as I fight off the listlessness of the ‘Cinema’. Under normal circumstances, I would probably have trouble standing up. I touch my piercing to reassure myself and turn toward Kazu.

“Yes, I also feel that way,” Kazu replies with a bland smile.

2. Daiya is referring to himself in a different and more boyish manner here, *boku* (僕). Whenever you see “I” underlined, it means that he is using this boyish version.

He is holding a plain plastic case. What else has he prepared? I decide not to waste any time mulling it over, since he already possesses the ultimate weapon, capable of destroying ‘boxes’.

I can’t help but wonder about the condition of his powerful, red right hand.

“Kazu, what happened to your hand?”

His right hand is bandaged. Blood is still seeping into the bandage.

“...It’s a symbol,” he explains briefly and then shuts his mouth.

“He cut his hand with a knife all of a sudden. It’s going to leave a scar...Frankly, I have no idea why Hoshii did that...” Haruaki adds in Kazu’s stead.

I deliberately avoid responding to him and shift my gaze.

I see—Kokone Kirino.

—Creak.

It comes as no surprise that my heart aches, almost breaks, when I see her. My heart has already suffered serious damage just from seeing the fake puppet of Kiri sitting beside me, so my reaction to the real Kiri is unsurprising.

However, my feelings don’t matter.

“So what are you planning on doing now, Kazu? You can’t win anymore, and you know that. Aya Otonashi has become my [servant],” I say, making the assumption that Yanagi has kept him up to date.

Kazu answers without moving a muscle, “That pale face of yours really gives the lie to your claims, Daiya.”

It may sound like an attempt at provocation, but in reality, it’s just an expression of pity.

Kazu takes a step forward.

We are facing each other.

Ah—

There’s no doubt about it.

The battle we started in the ‘Game of Idleness’ will end here.

“Okay, let’s clarify our positions, shall we?”

Kazu looks silently at me.

“First, I’m going to destroy the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’, and then I’m going to have Aya use her ‘Flawed Bliss’ and forget about you.”

I will first use his power to destroy Kiri’s ‘box’, and then I will use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ on Kiri.

“What are you going to do, Kazu?”

“I’m going to crush your ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’, either by force or by waiting until the day is over. And I’m also going to destroy the copy you gave Maria,” he announces, causing Aya to raise an eyebrow. “And finally, I’m going to take back Maria.”

Aya replies with a straight face: “That’s pointless. No matter what, I won’t return to you.”

Kazu bites his lip for a split second, but the glare he’s directing at me doesn’t weaken at all.

“I—,” he bites his dripping bandage. “I won’t retreat.”

I’m slightly alarmed by his abnormal behavior.

However, before I can respond, something unexpected happens.

“Kazuki-san!” Yanagi shouts as she jumps to her feet and rushes toward Kazu. While hurriedly climbing over the seats that separate them, she continues: “Destroy my ‘Shadow’!”

Even though Kazu must have been surprised, he reacts with terrifyingly minimal hesitation and holds out his bandaged right hand toward Yanagi.

He thrusts it into her chest.

“Mm...ah...AH!” she groans as his right hand dives into her chest.

Kazu pulls out his hand. He’s holding a painful-looking, palm-sized black ‘box’ shaped like a spiky chestnut.

“Ahhh...” Yanagi passes out and slumps to the ground.

Kazu looks down at her.

His series of movements seems almost robotic—programmed in advance.

There is a short silence.

At last, I realize what Yanagi was trying to accomplish. She must have wanted to have her ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ destroyed so I could no longer [order] her around. She acted swiftly in order to maximize Kazu’s advantage.

I couldn't possibly predict her actions; Yanagi wasn't supposed to know about Kazu's new power. She must have eavesdropped on my conversation with 'O' and concealed her knowledge until now.

Sure, she beat me to the punch, but I wasn't planning on using her anyway. What she did has no influence on my strategy.

However, after seeing *that*, I have broken out into a faint cold sweat.

"The power to crush 'boxes'..."

After witnessing such an unfairly powerful ability...

There's a huge difference between hearing about it and actually witnessing it. It's as if he were shoving a machine gun in my face with his finger on the trigger.

One false move and my 'box' will be destroyed.

But his astonishing lack of hesitation, and the indifferent attitude he displays after using his power make me realize once again: he's no longer the friend I used to know. The absurd wound he has inflicted on himself proves that he's been vastly changed, that he's been reborn.

As a being that destroys 'boxes'.

As a being that opposes 'O'.

And that's the very reason he can smile the same way 'O' does.

However, even though he didn't move a muscle when he used his power, his face contorts after a certain girl speaks.

"What's with that power?"

Aya's horrified words.

"Kazuki Hoshino, why do you have such a....? No, it doesn't matter. Witnessing that has convinced me," she continues bitterly. "You are an enemy."

Kazu bites his lip.

It must hurt to be called an enemy by the very person he is trying to save.

"Aya, I shouldn't have to say this, but keep away from him. He would destroy your 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' without batting an eye."

"...You're right. It seems like he'd just have to touch my chest. The 'Flawed Bliss' is also in danger."

"No, Kazu won't destroy the 'Flawed Bliss'. He should be aware that doing so would completely and utterly wreck your personality." The look on his face proves me right. "Of course, I'll keep away from him as well."

Having made that clear, I have to proceed to the next step of my plan without making a single mistake.

"Kazu, I demand that you destroy Kiri's 'box'."

"Daiya..." Kokone mutters.

I continue my order before any of my feelings can escape: "You know what happens if you refuse to obey, right? I repeat: Aya Otonashi is a [servant]. I can make her do whatever I want. Kazu, don't you dare try to play any tricks. I'll also set a time limit. It's twenty to twelve right now; you have until a quarter to twelve to destroy Kiri's 'box'!"

"....."

Kazu remains silent.

His only option is to find or create an opening in my defenses to destroy the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.

That’s why he brought Kokone and Haruaki with him.

While he is trying to create an opening, I am trying to do whatever it takes to counter him. That’s what this fight is about.

His attack begins.

“Daiyan, let’s stop all this. I can’t stand to watch any more.”

As I expected, the attack begins with an attempt at persuasion from Haruaki.

“What are you doing this for? Who’s going to gain anything from it? You? Kiri? That’s bullshit—just look at yourself! You’re just going to ruin yourself and Kiri if you go on like this!”

But even though I expected this, even though I was prepared for this, I’m still affected; these words come from the bottom of Haruaki’s heart.

“Please stop it! For Kiri’s sake as well!”

I don’t respond.

“Please...please...” he cries, begging me from the bottom of his heart.

Once again I think...

Haruaki is so radiant that I feel as if I’ll never match him.

He was the first person I’d ever looked up to. Not just for his baseball skills—but also his straightforward, truthful, and resolute nature—the qualities that drive

him to choose what he thinks is right, even at the cost of his boundless potential for baseball or the girl he loves. Haruaki has always possessed qualities that I can't even dream of attaining.

That's why I couldn't stand to make him a [servant].

Hey, Haruaki...I have more respect for you than you might believe.

“Say something, Daiyan!”

But still.

I cannot withdraw this ‘wish’.

“Someone has to take action.” I speak without hesitation. “Who is at fault for what happened to Kiri? Me? Kiri herself? Rino? Yeah, we all were, but the fundamental problem lies elsewhere. Therefore, I'm going to make a fundamental change to the world. That's my path.”

Haruaki falters before countering: “That's ridiculous. Even with a ‘box’, you can't succeed!”

“Whether I can or not, I'll just do it.”

“Why would you have to do that, Daiyan? Why do you have to suffer even more?”

“I have decided to sacrifice myself.”

“And what about my feelings?! I don't want to see you and Kiri plunge into disaster! So you're going to sacrifice these feelings as well, Daiyan?!”

I answer without missing a beat.

“Yes.”

Haruaki snaps his eyes wide open.

“That is what sacrificing myself means.”

I leave him at a loss for words.

Right, that's the meaning of sacrificing myself. I'm perfectly aware of that.

I also have to sacrifice the feelings others have for me.

That's why I severed my bonds with them—with Kokone and Haruaki.

“You can't be serious...,” he says, clenching his trembling fists. “You can't be fucking serious...Daiyan...”

It seems like Haruaki's attack ends here.

I turn my gaze away from him and scowl at Kazu.

“Kazu, hurry up. Hurry up and crush the ‘Cinema’.”

I inconspicuously wipe away the cold sweat from my forehead.

Even though I may seem cool and collected, I have sustained damage.

The ‘Shadows of Sin’ inside me are about to begin raging because of Haruaki's honest plea. They are about to burst through their limits and rip my body open.

I'm at my mental limit. A single word could tip me over the edge and end it all right now.

Throwing it all away—what a comfortable thought.

But I—

I look at Aya Otonashi.

But I am going to die together with all these *sins*.

I fiercely press my throbbing chest.

I have to prepare myself—

The next attack is starting. He'll get me if I let my guard down for just a second.

—For the main attack.

“Daiya, thank you for your message.”

Kokone Kirino.

Kiri walks toward me.

“It was bait in the trap to lure you here. You completely fell for it,” I squeeze out as I tightly grip my chest.

“I knew it was a trap.”

“I guess so.”

And yet she came anyway because of her unparalleled feelings for me.

Step by step, she draws closer.

With every step she takes, memories of our past flash across my mind.

Age 4—I make her cry in kindergarten while quarreling over some candy; I begin to cry myself when the teacher scolds me.

Age 7—I save Kiri from drowning in the sea by helping her cling to a swim ring³; I comfort her while she cries.

3. A swim ring (also known as an inflatable lifebelt, swim tube or rubber ring) is a toroid-shaped (hence the name “ring”) inflatable water toy. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swim_ring)

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (3/3)

Age 9—I find her crouching by the side of the road during a festival, crying into her yukata because she had gotten lost, and I take her by the hand and lead her home.

Age 11—In order to avoid being teased by our classmates, I say horrible things to her and make her cry; afterwards I go over to her place and apologize.

Age 12—Kiri starts skipping school when I tell her that I've been accepted by a renowned private middle school; she starts crying in relief when I tell her that I won't be enrolling there.

Age 14—We kiss for the first time. She breaks out in tears right afterward, and because I don't know what else to do, I just keep stroking her head until she stops crying.

For some reason, she was crying in each of those memories. The strongest images I have of her must be those of her depending on me.

Aah, but this really hurts.

Each of those memories turns into an attack that tries to chain me to a normal life. Each of them loads additional weight upon my shoulders.

As I'm being tormented, Kokone Kirino walks up to me and stops before the seat next to mine, right in front of the shell of herself that the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' created.

I can see her face in duplicate.

The real Kiri tilts her head up slightly and looks into my eyes.

“Daiya, let me reply to your message.”

She—

“I love you too.”

—embraces me.

“Wha...!”

She shouldn't be able to do that.

She should no longer be able to take me into her arms.

If she does, she will remember the horrors from her past, be reminded of the wounds on her back, and eventually give in to the urge to vomit.

Yet Kiri is still embracing me.

Has she...has she overcome her trauma on her own?

However, Kiri rules that right out: “You know, Daiya, I haven't overcome anything. I'm still a wreck inside and I don't know what to do about it.”

Then—how can she be embracing me?

“But I realized something,” Kiri says. “You mean everything to me.”

Kiri is shaking. Like she said, she hasn't overcome her past; it's only by tolerating the anguish that assaults her that she can hold me tight.

That's the only way she can embrace me.

“I love you! I love you! ...I...love you!”

Yeah, I think, the closer we are, the more we hurt each other.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (3/3)

But what if we could overcome our past somehow,
what if we kept believing in each other?

That would be—the one thing I have desired above all
else.

“Gh...”

Another memory crosses my mind, a memory of the
day I decided to change the world.

“You’re cold.”

Lit by the evening sun, floating on a cold, red river,
Kiri rejected me. I was helpless, unable to even embrace
her and condemned to feel our bodies grow colder and
colder.

But if I can embrace her like this...

If I can finally, belatedly, warm her up now...

“U..gh...”

Kokone.

I want to be released from this burden, too!

Is it really okay if I’m just being myself? I would do
anything for you, Kokone. I would spare no effort to
make you happy.

Kokone continues.

“I would do anything for you, Daiya!”

I finally come to my senses.

I grab her shoulders and push her away.

“Daiya...?”

Kiri would do anything for me?

I would do anything for Kiri?

Both statements are true.

And that's what's fatally wrong about them.

They aren't healthy—they're abnormal.

We weren't always like this; we used to be a normal couple; each of us a completely normal lover who wouldn't sacrifice himself or herself or act only for the sake of the other person.

Our transformation is the very proof that we haven't been able to lead a normal life.

We keep wrecking each other by sacrificing ourselves for each other. That's our reality. It's even more true if she claims that I mean everything to her.

Right, we can't return, after all.

We can't return to the time when our relationship was pure.

—Do you have a wish?

I do.

I do have a wish.

I want to smash this godforsaken world that has tainted all of our memories.

That day, surrounded by red, red water, I swore:

“I will change this world.”

I won't abandon my new self.

I won't remove these piercings.

Instead, I will discard these feelings, these memories, these recollections.

“Kiri,” I say loud and clear, “learn to live in a world without me.”

That’s my answer.

Tears start to stream from her eyes.

I avert my gaze from her and scowl at Kazu.

—I made it through this attack. He has exhausted his ammunition.

I look at my watch. It’s 23:44.

“It’s time. Crush Kiri’s ‘Cinema’. You know what will happen to Aya Otonashi if you don’t.”

“It’s such a shame,” Kazu whispers. “It’s such a shame that things have to end this way.”

Kazu also starts to cry and falls to his knees.

“Uh...gh...”

Kiri realizes that it’s impossible to change my mind. She walks away from me, staggering toward the screen.

Kazu stands up and heads in that direction as well.

My gaze automatically jumps to the screen.

“I would give everything for Daiya’s happiness,” the Kiri onscreen says with a blank look. *“Should I keep you from becoming happy, I’ll make it easier for you to throw me away, okay?”*

“Daiya.”

The real Kiri speaks up.

She is standing near the middle of the screen, blocking out the projected image.

“You plan to plunge into ruin, right?”

“I guess so, that will be my final ending,” I casually reply.

“Do you think I’ll let you?”

“Why would I need your—”

“I won’t!”

With those words—

Kiri thrusts a knife into her stomach.

Blood squirts onto the screen.

“Huh?” I whisper like a dope.

I’m embarrassed to say that I’m at a complete loss; I can only watch as her blood slowly spreads across the screen.

Kazu acts without hesitation. He rushes to Kiri.

I naturally assume he’s trying to save her, but he surprises me—

“It’s a real shame, Daiya, that you’re leaving me no other choice!”

—He ran to Kiri in order to block me.

“I did what you told me to do. This will also destroy the ‘Cinema’, won’t it?”

He just stands there in the pool of blood that Kiri is shedding without moving a finger to help her.

“What the...what the hell are you talking about?”

“Well then, Daiya,” Kazu says, ignoring my comments. He violently swipes at the tears on his face and glares at me. “If you try to approach Kokone, I will crush your ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.”

He places his plastic case on the ground.

“There are medical supplies in here. Kokone won’t die immediately, but if she remains untreated for more than ten minutes, she’ll be beyond help. If you use the contents of this case and staunch the flow of blood from her wound, odds are that she will survive. I instructed Kokone precisely where to stab herself. If you come to her rescue, she will survive, but if you just stand there, she will die. She won’t make it to midnight, so the ‘Cinema’ will be destroyed before then and you’ll have your escape route. Once you’ve escaped the ‘Cinema’, you could certainly find someone to use Maria’s ‘Flawed Bliss’ on. But Kokone will be dead.”

Kazuki Hoshino speaks in front of the blood-stained screen.

“If you want to save her, come here and let me crush your ‘box’.”

I’m sure he isn’t aware of this.

But Kazuki Hoshino, the being that destroys ‘boxes’, is smiling in a charming fashion just like ‘O’.

“To be honest, I have doubts,” he says in a dispassionate manner. “You claim that you have chosen a better world over Kokone, but is that really true?”

He continues as he gazes at the bloody bandage on his right hand:

“Here’s your chance to prove it!”

“__”

I am speechless.

I understand what he’s getting at, but I don’t understand *him*. I’m hopelessly confused.

I was wrong.

I thought that Kazu was abnormal, and I expected his abnormality to have worsened.

But I completely underestimated it.

It’s just as Aya said; as long as he has a goal, he will not give up. He even resorts to tactics that no person in his right mind could come up with.

In pursuit of his goal, Kazu can even blank out his own will and act automatically like a machine.

In a sense, that’s what I’ve been aiming for. The ideal way to exist as a being that grants ‘wishes’.

However, I think as I regard his smile, while I do want to emulate Aya Otonashi, I definitely don’t want to become like Kazu.

Everyone has stopped speaking. All I can hear is the movie, which heartlessly continues to play, and Kokone’s groans.

Haruaki is the first to break the silence. “Hoshii...I don’t know about any of this! You didn’t tell me you’d do this!”

“I’m sorry I kept you in the dark. Otherwise, you would have stopped me.”

“You fucking bet! That’s...that’s crazy! I’m going to save Kiri, whether Daiyan moves or not!”

“I’m going to give her the coup de grace if you try to help her.”

“What?!”

“I’m serious.”

He is. Otherwise, he wouldn’t resort to such an insane method in the first place. The ‘symbol’ of his abnormality that he inflicted on his right hand proves that his words are 100% true.

Haruaki also realizes this and doesn’t say anything else. His shoulders, however, are shaking and his eyes are wide open.

A question escapes my lips.

“Kazu, are you okay with letting her die?”

“That’s a strange question,” he replies. “Of course I’m not okay.”

His answer resembles that of a certain girl who has spent virtual lifetimes in order to replace someone.

“I would regret it for the rest of my life. I might not be able to bear the burden!”

But they are different in a way.

“However, I did what I did while keeping that in mind.”

Unlike Aya, Kazu hasn’t made a choice.

Most likely—he can’t even choose to act differently.

Maybe he’s confused as to why he has taken such measures, but he can’t act differently. This is the form his insanity has taken.

“Kazuki Hoshino...you are insane!” Aya bites her lip and pauses. “What you’re doing doesn’t even qualify as a proper method. Someone in his right mind wouldn’t ever hit upon that idea. By doing this...by viciously taking advantage of Kirino’s irrational weakness when it comes to Oomine, you completely destroy the everyday life you have been so eager to protect. You realize that, don’t you? It’s proof that you’ve become insane.”

Indeed.

“You really aren’t the Kazuki Hoshino I knew. What has become of you? Have you been possessed by a demon?”

Kazu answers clearly but sorrowfully:

“I’m your knight.”

“My, what?”

“I will come to your rescue even if the world itself opposes me. I will defeat and kill whoever stands in my way.”

“I’ve never asked for that! And certainly not from a devil like you!”

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” he counters, leaving Aya speechless.

Kazu looks at me.

“By the way, what are you waiting for?”

It’s easy for him to say that!

“You can’t decide, can you?” he says and completely takes me by surprise with his next words. “Well, that’s fine too.”

“Hah?” I can’t hide my surprise. “That’s fine, you say? You can’t be serious? Are you cool with her dying in the face of my indecision? Your plan is only successful if I go save her, right?”

“Daiya. I’m sure you know who I am doing this for, right?” he asks in response, ignoring my question.

I know perfectly well: it’s all for Aya’s sake.

“Maria is now in possession of the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’, and she’s going to work toward a slightly better world, right?”

Kazu holds his right hand before his face and closes it, as though he were confirming something.

“So I’ll crush it. She doesn’t need such a dumb ‘box’.”
Finally, I understand.

“Don’t tell me...”

One corner of his mouth curls up. “Looks like you finally understand. I said earlier that I have my doubts about your resolve, but I’m convinced I understand Maria’s. I have spent a lifetime together with her. There’s no way I could be wrong.”

Aya Otonashi has devoted her life to the happiness of others, and therefore, she can’t tolerate sacrifices.

And right now, there is someone dying before her very eyes.

Then—

“Aya will save Kiri whether I do anything or not.”

I see, I thought he was targeting me with this trap. But he wasn’t.

It was a trap set for me and Aya at the same time.

Aya bitterly admits: “Yeah, I’m going to save Kirino. I’ll have to surrender to Hoshino’s power.”

“Aya...! Isn’t this the ‘box’ you have been seeking all along?!”

“It is. I have spent more time than anyone else searching for this ‘box’. Maybe my earnest desire would have finally been fulfilled. Maybe I will never come across such an opportunity again. I know...I know...but...” She clenches her fist. “But still!”

Right.

That’s *Aya Otonashi*’s way of life.

Kazu is shamelessly abusing her.

Aya is going to save Kiri, and Kazu is going to destroy her ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’. Kiri will survive thanks to Aya’s assistance. *Piercing at Fifteen* will end, activating the final effect of the ‘Cinema’ and destroying my ‘box’.

Our ‘wishes’ are going to come to naught.

I do have a countermeasure.

Aya Otonashi is my [servant]—I could [order] her to stay still.

But,

But,

“Daiya,” Kazu says to me, “You can’t possibly be thinking of using an [order] so that Kokone dies?”

Exactly. It’s just as he says.

But haven’t I come to the conclusion that he has to be stopped no matter what?

Haven’t I decided that with utter conviction?

Then—am I going to use an [order] on Aya to let Kiri die? Am I going to kill Kiri?

What the...?

What the...?

What the FUCK?!

“Ah,gh...”

Kiri throws up blood.

She tilts her head toward me and whispers:

“Please...”

“Even if I have to die,”

“May Daiya find true happiness.”

Tears flow down her cheeks.

Just as they did in my memories where she depended on me—

“Kokone.”

All.

All the movies have been played in the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ flash through my head in a split second.

Kokone Kirino. Haruaki Usui. Aya Otonashi. Miyuki Karino. Koudai Kamiuchi. Tragedies, tragedies that torment me. The images entangle me like a long piece of filmstrip and burn themselves painfully into my mind. Rejection, rejection, rejection, too much rejection

for me to take. There is not the slightest hint of gentleness. My vision becomes mosaic-ed, colored, sepia-toned, mosaic-ed once again. The emotions behind those images infiltrate me, overwriting me, erasing me, leaving only Kokone Kirino behind. I wanted to smash the world into pieces because I only wanted you, I only wanted you, I only wanted you.

Ah, and now the ‘Shadows of Sin’ will feast upon me. They will devour me. At last, they band together, capture me and start to consume me. There is no pain. Black blood gushes forth from the wounds that they rip open with their sharp claws, drowning the world. They devour my entire body, leaving nothing behind. I am a huge black swamp of blood. The swamp is incapable of thought.

So it passively recalls its memories.

A frozen red world unfolds, trapped by the evening sun. A single girl stands in the midst of this desolate red world. Her back slowly shrinks as she walks into the cold red water. The sound of ripples. Turn around turn around turn around turn around I just want her to turn around. I reach out. I reach out and take her hand.

Say it.

—I will change the world for your sake.

Time is running out. But now, 0-hour on my countdown is when Kokone will die, instead of when the ‘Cinema’ will destroy my ‘box’.

Time is running out.

“—Aah.”

I intended to change the world. I intended to make people realize *what* guilt truly meant by mass-producing ‘Dog Humans’. I intended to rid the world of mindless people. I was okay with destroying myself as long as someone succeeded me. I thought that Iroha Shindou might be able to do it. I was convinced that Aya Otonashi would be able to do it. I had decided to create a gentle and stable world where no tragedies would ever occur again, a world where no one had to share our fate. I was willing to pay any price, even my very soul.

A gentle world.

A just world.

Yeah, it was a pure and honest wish; I strove harder than anyone else to make it come true.

However.

However.

I just can’t stand in front of this pool of blood and do nothing.

—I know.

—I knew.

right,
in reality,
all I ever wanted,
when I took your hand,
in that red world,

was for you to turn around.

Where am I?

In a crimson theater. Right, a theater.

That means a movie is playing.

I mirror the movements of the image on the screen.

“I”

“*I*”

I fall to my knees.

The middle school boy falls to his knees.

“I didn’t care about myself.”

“*I didn’t care about myself.*”

I cover my tears with my hands.

The middle school boy covers his tears with his hands.

“I only wanted you to be happy.”

“*I only wanted you to be happy.*”

“Kokone,”

And so—

“I’ll save you!”

—I’ve lost.

I open my eyes.

They have been open all along, but I open my eyes.

Aya is reaching for the medical supplies.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (3/3)

Without missing a beat, Kazu thrusts his hand into her chest and takes out a ‘box’. It’s the copy of my ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’ that I gave her.

Her copy is shaped like a perfect cube.

Kazu crushes it.

Aya continues to attend to Kokone without faltering.

I can no longer do anything.

I can’t move. I can’t even fight back the listlessness that the ‘Cinema’ is forcing upon me.

Therefore, I just stay on my knees as I watch the end of *Piercing at Fifteen*.

The last scene takes place in the corridor of our middle school.

Kokone looks at my right ear and sadly says:

“You went and got a piercing?”

My onscreen self is now silver-haired. He replies:

“Yeah, because I hate piercings.”

“Is that,” she says while maintaining her sad expression, *“a cry for help?”*

Someone’s alarm starts to ring.

“It’s midnight,” Haruaki mutters.

The moment he says that, the pitch black hole—the abyss—leaps at me and penetrates my chest. The theater around us begins to get sucked into the hole, shrinking and distorting into a sphere.

I feel something as the absolute void engulfs me.

Loss.

And then I realize that I have just lost the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’.

At last, the theater has completely lost its shape and transforms into a red sphere, while the abyss grows and grows, engulfing more and more of me.

But what awaits within is not darkness, but light.

Light.

Within that sea of light, someone slaps me on the shoulder.

◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/12 SAT 00:00** ◇◇◇

We are in front of the multiplex on the third floor of the shopping mall. We have been transported out of the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ back to the place where we entered it.

I can hear the sound of a siren nearby; I had called for an ambulance in advance. It should arrive here shortly. The place where I told Kokone to stab herself isn’t as fatal as I suggested to Daiya; at the very least, she wouldn’t have died within ten minutes. Besides, Maria has the medical knowledge needed to administer proper first aid. Unless she has very bad luck, Kokone will survive. My plan will have succeeded comprehensively if she fully recovers. But even if things go smoothly—

—I’m sorry, Kokone, I’m really sorry.

Unable to look at her, I peer around instead.

Now devoid of people, the shopping mall leaves an uncanny impression. I remember coming here once, just the four of us. Although I was forced to cross-dress, I definitely think of it as a good memory. However, my memories of this place have now been permanently stained with blood and are set in stone.

My everyday life crumbles into little pieces.

I refocus my gaze. I can see five other people.

Haruaki, clenching his fist; Kokone, lying on the ground; Maria, treating Kokone, and—

Daiya stares with widened eyes at the person who just put her hand on his shoulder.

“Yes, Daiya,” I say to him. “You were wrong from the very beginning; you had already lost.”

I look at the person who helped us and continue.

“The ‘owner’ of the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ was Miyuki Karino.”

Miyuki Karino.

Clad in the uniform of an all-girls’ school, she is gazing sadly at Daiya.

This all started when I discovered that Karino-san had obtained a ‘box’. Just as an ‘owner’ can sense others’ ‘boxes’, I have also developed a sense for them due to constant exposure.

Her ‘box’ was thoroughly devoted to Daiya. Upon realizing that, I decided to take advantage of her and give up on the idea of becoming an ‘owner’ myself.

“If you had properly reflected upon yourself, you would have noticed Karino-san. You would have discovered that she was the real ‘owner’. But you didn’t.”

Daiya gazes silently at me.

“You were shutting her out of your mind.”

Karino-san silently takes a few steps back. Even though she prepared that ‘box’ for Daiya, there is nothing she can say to him.

“Her ‘wish’ was to have you all to herself. But ‘boxes’ also grant the negative feelings that are hidden beneath ‘wishes’: while she undoubtedly holds you dear, she also bears a grudge against you for not granting her any peace. Most of all, she realizes that she *can’t* have you all to herself.”

That’s why the ‘Wish-Crushing Cinema’ tormented Daiya with images of the past and tried to steal his dearest ‘wish’ from him...and lasted for a single day.

“It wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Kokone. Only Karino-san could form a ‘box’ in such a distorted manner. You would have realized that if you had reflected upon yourself—but look at what ended up happening.”

Daiya convinced himself that Kokone was the ‘owner’ and stopped there.

Because only by blinding himself could he work toward his ‘wish’.

“Since I knew who the real ‘owner’ was, I realized that everything you said about your resolve and your beliefs was false; it only seemed to make sense because you weren’t aware of yourself anymore. You know, plunging into your own ruin, you always seemed...”

My voice suddenly starts to shake.

The feelings I have bottled up all this time while facing Daiya start to overflow.

I look at Kokone, all covered in blood.

What have I done?

I’m unable to return to my everyday life after hurting Kokone so much and deceiving Haruaki. These scars will never go away. My friendship with Haruaki will never return to what it used to be.

What have I become?

But I had no other choice, now that I have obtained the ‘Empty Box’.

“You always seemed to me...”

I can’t hold my tears back.

“As if you were crying for help.”

In the end, I had no other choice but to corner a friend who was crying out for help.

“Enough,” Daiya whispers, his face turned toward the ground. “I don’t care.”

With these words, Daiya slowly staggers toward Kokone.

“Kokone,” he says, looking down at her while she breathes rapidly.

Scene 4: Piercing at Fifteen (3/3)

He touches one of the piercings in his right ear—the first one he ever chose.

He tears it out.

Blood drips down from his ear, but he doesn't seem to feel any pain. With a gentle expression on his face, he takes Kokone's hand.

“Kokone,” he says again. “I love you.”

His expression resembles the smile that I had only ever seen onscreen.



After The Curtain Falls

◇◇◇◇ **Kazuki Hoshino - 09/24 THU 12:25** ◇◇◇◇

Another day is about to pass without my speaking to anyone else at school.

We're currently on lunch break. I stretch and look out the window. The weather today is nice, the sun is shining gently down into the classroom, but stormy weather is expected tomorrow.

I feel a sudden stabbing pain in my right hand. The wound there has already closed, but I still feel some twinges from time to time.

My right hand retains a deep, straight scar.

Whenever I look at it, I think:

—I have done something that will never disappear.
I look around the half-empty classroom and sigh.

Kokone is still in the hospital. While her condition isn't critical, the wound I inflicted on her is anything but shallow. Her stomach will scar over, adding to the many 'marks' she already bears on her back.

Mogi-san is also still hospitalized. Outwardly, she hasn't changed, but her attitude toward me has become more distant.

Yuuri-san is often absent from school, probably because she hasn't fully digested the events of the 'Cinema' yet. In fact, she is absent today. When we talk, she always tries to appear cheerful, but it's painfully obvious that she feels anything but.

Iroha-san is completely avoiding me. Yuuri-san told me that I shouldn't worry about it, but she might be lying to try to give me some peace of mind.

Haruaki hasn't spoken to me since that day.

I leave the classroom.

I suddenly lost all motivation to stick around for afternoon classes. Spending time in this half-empty classroom would just give me a headache.

On my way to the shoe lockers, I hear the term 'Dog Human' spoken by two chatty girls as they pass me by. 'Dog Humans'.

In the end, they didn't have any lasting impact. Once all the victims regained their memories, the riddle became less interesting, and the media soon stopped reporting on it. The variety show that had continuously focused on the issue also jumped to a new scandal: some extramarital affair involving a key member of an idol group and her producer.

Given the scale of the incident, people won't forget about the 'Dog Humans' as quickly, but it is starting to fade into obscurity; the topic isn't hot anymore.

The current state of affairs is unlikely to have caused people to seriously reconsidered their morals. There isn't much discussion of the phenomenon online, either. Currently, cyber-dwellers are getting worked up by some anime writer who insulted a fan. Word of the incident has spread rapidly and devolved into a shitstorm. Someone was even arrested for making a

death threat. I can't deny that I'm just a bit annoyed that what Daiya has tried to achieve, is being equated with a trivial incident like that.

That being said, I don't think that Daiya's efforts were entirely futile: I'm sure there are still some people who reflect on the problems that he brought to the fore. In order to maintain the attention of the masses, however, he would've had to keep going. All topics have expiration dates of sorts.

I reach the shoe lockers. No one reproaches me for leaving early as I change into my leather shoes.

The students playing baseball and basketball on the school grounds catch my eye.

This school hasn't really changed, either, despite the creation of so many [servants]. They have all forgotten about the 'box', although a few of them may have suffered serious after-effects. But that isn't enough to have a real impact on everyday school life.

"....."

I wonder why?

For some reason, I feel a bit uncomfortable. Even though I stopped Daiya, even though that was what I wanted all along, it saddens me somehow that nothing has changed at all.

I mean, reflecting on what resulted, what are any of us capable of achieving?

If Daiya couldn't change anything even though he was willing to accept self-destruction, how much meaning can be found in our existence? Why is it that

everyday life remains unaffected even though one student suffered a serious injury, another student quit school, and another student disappeared without a trace?

...No, this thought is far too Daiya-centric.

In fact, that's why I believe in the sanctity of everyday life; why I believe that I can save Maria by making her part of this self-equilibrating everyday life.

The reason I am being so sentimental right now is—although he might not agree anymore—Daiya is my friend. I feel that his endeavors deserve to pay off at least a little bit.

“Daiya...”

Daiya has disappeared again.

After that incident, I only met him once. He stopped dyeing his hair and removed his piercings, and came to school to hand in an official withdrawal form. I screwed my courage to the sticking point and tried to talk to him, but he just smiled weakly and then ignored me.

I have no idea what Daiya plans to do now.

I leave school, get on the train, and finally arrive at a very familiar five-story apartment complex. I have never pressed any button in this elevator apart from *1F* and *4F*, and that's not about to change. I press *4F* like I always do and head to room *403*.

I take the duplicate key Maria gave me and unlock the door.

Before me lies an empty room without any furniture.

No one is present.

I briskly remove my shoes and make myself at home again in this empty apartment. But there is no sign of Maria anymore.

Nowhere.

I could endure the lack of furniture; there were never many things here to begin with.

What's unbearable, however, is the lack of peppermint fragrance in the air.

The scent I associate with Maria is missing, making me realize that Maria won't be returning.

"Maria..."

She disappeared.

Once she finished treating Kokone's wounds that day, she disappeared. I never let her out of my sight, but she must have bided her time, and somehow found an opportunity to slip away. I immediately searched the area, but failed to find her.

She is still registered at school, but I doubt she plans to return, especially since she also moved out.

Most likely, she doesn't plan on ever meeting me again.

Of course I'm going to recover her nonetheless. I'm going to succeed.

"—aahAah!"

I can hardly breathe; I feel as if the oxygen in my lungs is being sucked away. My chest throbs with pain because I want to see her, because I want to see her so

much. I tear up. I can't even tell if I'm sad or embittered or feeling some other emotion; it just hurts so much that I can't hold back my tears.

And then I think:

"I won't let you!"

I won't let her escape.

I'm going to find her whatever it takes. Whatever. It. Takes. If I have to kill every single person on this planet, I'm ready to engage in mass genocide at the drop of a hat.

I take out the peppermint oil I bought earlier and start walking around the apartment, dribbling the oil on the floor. However, the nostalgic fragrance that spreads about brings me no comfort. It's not enough. A few drops of oil is never going to be enough for me.

Give me air to breathe!

"Hah...ah...hah!"

Oh Maria.

The real Maria without a 'box'. The pure Maria I haven't encountered yet.

—the Zeroth Maria.

Where are you?

If it would release you, I would gladly rip open Aya Otonashi's skin!

—Click.

Suddenly, the door handle turns downward.

I'm very nervous. Needless to say, I have no right to be here, yet I'm carelessly sprinkling aroma oil as if it were my own home. If someone from the management company is coming in, I'm screwed.

However, when I see who it is, I realize that my concerns were silly.

It's much worse.

It's the worst thing that could happen.

“‘O’.”

She has again assumed an appearance that somehow resembles Maria's.

The two of us have met several times now. Not all of our encounters changed things for the worse, but it's a different story this time.

'O' stands before me as an *enemy*.

She has come to fight me.

With a smile as repulsive as ever, she asks:

“Are you ready?”

—For what?

'O' answers:

“To say goodbye to this world!”

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/24 THU 10:45 ◆◆◆

Even after losing the ‘Shadow of Sin and Punishment’, I⁴ could remember most of my knowledge concerning the ‘boxes’. I don’t know why, but I assume it has to do with my knowledge of them even prior to obtaining one.

I walk along the streets of Shinjuku. It’s crowded. But unlike last time, I’m not struck by a dizzy spell. I don’t see any sins when I step onto someone’s shadow. While I know that people are hiding polluted sludge within their bodies, the crowd no longer resembles a wriggling garbage sack.

They’re just people.

I reach up to touch my piercing, but remember that I won’t find anything metallic there anymore. I smile wryly instead.

In the middle of the crowd, I suddenly get down on my knees. I stretch out my back and gracefully prostrate myself.

No matter how you look at it, what I’m doing is just plain weird.

—All right.

4. Daiya now refers to himself throughout as *boku* (僕), as he used to in his earlier, more carefree and innocent days.

I raise my head. Several people are giving me wry looks, but most people just ignore me and try not to get involved. That's the limit of the influence I can wield by doing something weird. That's all the influence I can wield now that I can no longer control anyone.

I no longer have the power to achieve anything.

“Heh...”

That's okay.

People pass by indifferently.

Yeah, that's right. To me, the world has become a group of people that I will never have anything to do with again.

And that feels incredibly relaxing.

However—

As I get back on my feet, someone suddenly pats me on the back.

I turn around.

“Ah, it's you?” I say as I contort my face. To be honest, I'd rather not see that face again. “Do you still want something from me?”

In response to my attitude, she widens her eyes and starts desperately babbling. I don't understand a word of what she's saying in her agitated state, but after I patiently listen to her for a while, I finally understand what she wants from me. Apparently, she still wants me to act like a god and save the world.

“You want me to guide you? That’s impossible; I don’t have that power anymore. ...What? You don’t care if I have that power or not? You’re not making sense. Anyway, let me make this clear: I don’t want nor do I intend to do something like that again.”

She isn’t happy with my answer. She gets all worked up once more and tries to persuade me. What a stubborn girl. She doesn’t even remember the ‘box’ I used on her anymore.

“Responsibility? Yeah, I intend to turn myself in once Kokone gets better. Murdering Koudai Kamiuchi was a great sin, after all. ...Mm? That’s not what you’re talking about? Then what do you mean by *responsibility*? ...The responsibility for guiding you? But I released you, didn’t I? What else would you want?Huh? You’re wrong. Your life doesn’t belong to me. It never did. It belongs to you and no one else.”

She still refuses to give up.

“Could you please stop it already? Don’t expect anything else from me. I’m just a high school student—no, I’m not even that anymore. I’m just a failure who couldn’t even properly attend my classes—I’m just a human!”

She desperately tries to change my mind.

Guide me, she says. *Save me*, she cries.

How do you want me to do that, for crying out loud? It seems futile to engage with her any further. I turn around.

“Live your own life from now on.”

We are done with each other.

That's what I tell her.

I distinctly reject the remnant of my now lost power.

In the next moment, I feel a burning pain in my back.

“Huh?”

My energy drains away and I fall to my knees.

In a matter of moments, they're stained with the blood streaming out of me.

I spit out blood and look at the face of the person who stabbed me. Only now do I notice that I may have been talking with her, but I didn't really take heed of her. I treated her like a delusion within my own mind.

Only after being injured like this could I truly recognize her.

Only after injuring me like this could she make me recognize her existence.

“A human you say? Who are you kidding?” she says as she looks down at me with vacant eyes. “You are a god.”

The bob-haired middle school girl drops a large kitchen knife and starts to spread my blood on her face like make-up.

“How am I supposed to continue living when you're not a god? Take responsibility! Please take responsibility for what you've started!”

The people around us finally take notice of what's going on and start to scream.

“You're not allowed.”

She laughs with tearful eyes.

“You’re not allowed to return to being a human.”

She dashes off with these final words, bumping into person after person.

She quickly disappears. But it won’t be long until she breaks under the burden of what she did. She’s up against a wall. This world will never be so gentle and just as to protect her.

That’s what my failed attempt at guiding people as a would-be god has brought forth.

“—Ha.”

I spit out some more blood.

“—Haha.”

So this is the result of what I did, huh? It’s so horrible I have to laugh.

But now that I think about it, it shouldn’t come as a surprise. Why did I think that I could get away without being punished, anyway? Did I think that the consequences of my actions would magically disappear?

Even after losing my power, I still corner others, and others corner me.

What goes around comes around. I was expecting my ruin all along, so in a sense, my expectation just came true.

However.

Even though I realize that I’m to blame...

“.....this is...a bad joke...”

I lament.

I don't wish for my own ruin anymore. I don't desire such an outcome. Yet I ended up this way because I put the gears of fate in motion toward my own ruin.

I have passed the point of no return long ago? Well, shut up. What should I do then? I mean, I—

“.....I want...to live...so badly!”

I spit out these heartfelt words along with more blood.

It aches. It hurts. It hurts. It aches.

I want to live.

Kokone.

Kokone, I want to see you.

I was blind and now I see what's right. I don't care if I can't do anything. I don't care if I just become a burden. I still want to be with you. I realize that this is what I want, what I was supposed to do...and yet!

My wish ends up getting crushed like this?

Don't fuck with me!

Clenching my teeth, I struggle to my feet.

I mustn't lose like this. I mustn't die here. The nearest police station should be right around the corner. I have to get there.

No one bothers to help me as I stagger through the crowd, dripping with blood. Each and every person just tries to avoid me. I wasn't able to change the world's indifference.

Is this my just desert?

After the Curtain Falls

I try to laugh, but I can't. I've reached my limits rather quickly. I can't push my legs anymore; my consciousness is slowly fading away. The world starts to whirl around me.

It ends here.

I slump powerlessly to the ground.

And then I think,

If there were anyone who could save me in this situation, she would be the very manifestation of hope.

“Oomine! Are you okay?!” I shout as I take him into my arms.

“...Aya?” he whispers and closes his eyes.

His gray jacket is soaked in blood. His wound is deeper than Kirino’s, and I don’t have any first aid supplies on hand.

I immediately realize that he is beyond help.

I didn’t randomly run into him. I had nowhere else to go, so I had been following Oomine. There was no greater significance to my actions; he had once given me the opportunity to make my ‘Flawed Bliss’ flawless, so I was hoping that he might give me another chance. Absurdly. Naïvely.

So when he whispered, “You did come, after all,” I figured he’d noticed that I was tailing him.

But I’m sure that’s not it. I must still represent his hopes, even now that he has lost his ‘box’.

While I am truly proud of this, I find it vexing that I can’t seem to meet his expectations.

“Hang on, I’m calling an ambulance. Try to stay conscious until then,” I say hurriedly, knowing full well that it might already be too late.

Oomine slowly speaks through his pain, “Use it.....on me...”

“What? What are you trying to say?”

With the last of his strength, Oomine spits out the only way to save him.

“Use the ‘Flawed Bliss’ on me!”

Erasing my memories of Kazuki Hoshino.

That's what it means to use my 'Flawed Bliss' on Oomine.

No, I still can't say that I'm okay with that. Even after I've witnessed what he's become. The practically eternal length of time we spent together lets him rule over my heart whether I desire it or not. Yes, rule over it. Kazuki has taken root throughout the human parts of my heart. He is everywhere and it's impossible to remove him.

I won't be the same person anymore once I forget about Kazuki. I will turn into a being that's similar, but different—with the same body and the same goal.

Abandoning oneself brings about fear.

Ah...why didn't I act before things got to this stage? Why didn't I immediately cut Kazuki loose?

Did I give in to indolence and wallow in the coziness of living with him? Did I enjoy my lifestyle, neglecting my goal?

—No.

I shake my head mentally. My bonds with Kazuki are anything but weak. They aren't something I could have severed with a simple change of heart. It was unavoidable that our bonds grew so strong, given the existence of the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

I'll admit it.

There are absolute bonds between Kazuki and me; bonds that were fated to develop.

I'm going to cut them.

“—!”

...Don't flinch. You have done this many times already.

But, then—

I can't help but wonder.

Does the word “me” have any meaning when I keep disappearing? Do “I” really exist when I will eventually vanish?

What am “I”?

But suddenly, I start to feel foolish.

“Fufu...”

What's there to wonder about?

I have already found the answer a countless number of times.

“I” am—a ‘box’.

I am a ‘box’, and my sole meaning is to grant the ‘wishes’ of others.

And right now, right before my eyes, there is a person who seeks my ‘Flawed Bliss’.

I smile at Oomine.

“Okay, I'll use it!”

There is no hesitation.

A ‘box’ mustn't hesitate.

“Please.” Oomine stretches his blood-stained hand out to touch my cheek. His touch is so weak that I realize he is at his absolute limit. “I don't want to die.”

Suddenly, I remember a person who had a similar ‘wish’ and was trapped in a world of endless repetitions, because she couldn't wholeheartedly believe in her own survival.

Oomine is a realist. He won't be able to disregard his fate.

Epilogue

*In other words, even when he uses the ‘Flawed Bliss’—
I cut short my train of thought.
If someone asks for salvation, I shall grant it.*

I take his blood-stained hand and put it on my chest.

And then—I vanish.

I vanish.

I vanish.

I sink toward the bottom of the sea. It’s completely dark and I’m unable to see anything, even my own hands. I lose my shape. I stop feeling my cold, frozen body. I don’t know where I am. Perhaps I’m the deep sea itself.

I can hear laughter from afar, many laughing voices. But they’re not real, and I don’t approach them.

Because people can’t see themselves here, there is no need to show off. My hard shell has been crushed by the water pressure, and my soft spot has been exposed—it’s something that no one must see. It’s my weak self. My former self. But it doesn’t matter because no one else is here.

The world is far away.

Everyone is far away.

“—Ah.”

A light that shouldn’t be here turns on and interrupts my solitude; it’s a light that lacks gentleness—a strong spotlight that singles out sinners. Its brightness causes me to squint my eyes.

She appears.

I call the name of that girl.

“‘O’.”

However.

She’s not. No, she is ‘O’, but she’s not. This charming smile belongs to—

“Aya, Onee-chan.”

I understand everything now.

How my ‘box’ works. That my ‘Flawed Bliss’ stays flawed. That my efforts are futile. That everything I have done is no different than wandering aimlessly through this pitch-black sea. That I keep erasing my memory to avoid noticing this.

I understand everything.

But then...?

But then, what am I doing all this for?

“Maria,” she calls my name. “You remember my ‘wish’, don’t you?”

“Of course!”

That’s the only way I can atone for what I did.

The only thing I can do for my beloved sister.

Aya-Oneechan says her favorite phrase:

“I want to help others become happy.”

“Mm,” I nod.

“Will you keep granting this ‘wish’ of mine?”

“Mm.”

Aya-Oneechan gives me a charming smile.

I am so happy that I try to smile as well, but because my face is frozen, I can’t tell if I succeeded.

Epilogue

“You will have to keep wandering for that reason, Maria. You will keep seeking perfection even though what is flawed will forever remain flawed. You will keep forgetting about yourself as you search for something that doesn’t exist.”

“Perhaps...”

“But that’s what you wished for.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean by that?”

“Your ‘wish’, Maria, is to strive for your ideal,” she says, smiling oh-so-dearly at me. “But once your ‘Flawed Bliss’ became flawless, wouldn’t you realize that there is no Aya Otonashi within you?”

“Aah, I see.”

What I have been doing is—

“—————Anyway.”

There is one thing I’m sure of.

I won’t stop. No matter how pointless it is, and even if it’s no different from endlessly diving into the sea.

Right, I—

“I don’t need anyone to stop me.”



I wake up. I am in the middle of Shinjuku, sitting with one knee on the ground. I’m positioned as if I were holding someone, but there is no one in my arms.

I notice that I’m drenched with blood. I have no idea why, but oddly, I feel no surprise or fear.

Epilogue

While I don't remember anything else, I do know what happened to me.

I have used the 'Flawed Bliss'.

There is a white space in my head; a hole of such size that I can't possibly fill it. The hole is so gigantic that my body starts to shake just because I'm thinking about it.

I see. I vanished.

I stopped being myself once again.

I almost lose my balance as I get to my feet—I'm surprised by how light my body feels. I look at my reflection in a shop window. My face looks horrible, as if all the sorrows of the world have rained down upon me. In addition, my slender body feels very unsteady. Well, I guess that's what happens when I neglect to steel myself properly.

I take a step only to realize that I don't know where to go.

Without any memories of my family and friends, I have nowhere to take refuge.

Because I suddenly came to a halt, a busy-looking businessman bumps into me. He looks at me, clicks his tongue and walks away.

—Where am I?

—Who am I?

It feels as if I'm wandering through the depths of the sea.

“ ”

Suddenly, I get the feeling that someone called out to me.

Epilogue

The name that person used felt very amicable and warm. For some reason, I feel as if that voice could clear up the riddle of my identity in a matter of moments.

I turn around.

However, I only see people who are completely indifferent toward me. No one here could have called out to me that way.

“ ”

Again.

It's a voice that shakes my heart.

But then I notice: even though I feel that person calling out to me, I don't know what that voice is saying.

“What...?”

I touch my cheeks.

“Why am I crying?”

I don't know what's going on.

But it must have been something very dear to my former self.

While it doesn't matter anymore, it must have been something that was not supposed to be lost.

But...

It doesn't matter to me.

I wipe away my tears. My eyes are dry now.

I haven't forgotten my goal. What's of paramount importance to me is granting others' 'wishes'. That's all. Whatever my former self held so dear has to be cut away.

No, that's already been done.

All right, I shall go meet 'O' again.

“...Eh?”

Epilogue

*What was that thought that just ran through my head?
I try to remember, but I can't. I can't recall what I was
thinking a second ago, but I also feel that it doesn't really
matter.*

I will keep wandering. That's all.

And once more, I forget the true identity of 'O'.

Author's Notes

Hi, I'm Eiji Mikage and you've just read Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria 6. I visualized the end of this tale long ago, so actually writing it down is deeply touching.

This may be a bit random, but my motto is that "a pro must not be human."

It's a statement that Ou-san, a person who I deeply respect, made on TV when he still was the coach of the Hawks⁵. This may not be the exact wording, but I think he said something along these lines:

"Every human makes mistakes. But players who think that they are permitted to make mistakes because they are only human will inevitably make the same mistakes again. Therefore, pros must not be human."

I was quite impressed. I thought that his powerful awareness of the role of a professional allowed him to achieve such great success.

This principle isn't limited to professional baseball. I think in order to achieve true followthrough with one's will, it is necessary to aim beyond the limits of humanity. I am still far from that realm, but I want to work hard to get there someday.

On to the thank-you note.

5. The Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks (福岡ソフトバンクホークス Fukuoka Sofutobanku Hōkusu?) are a Japanese baseball team based in Fukuoka, Fukuoka Prefecture. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fukuoka_SoftBank_Hawks)

I want to thank my editor, Miki-san. Despite your packed schedule, your assistance was flawless.

Thank you, Tetsuo-san, for the gorgeous illustrations you create for every volume. My anticipation of each new set of drawings encourages me as I write this story.

All right, there is one more volume left in this tale. Looking back, this project was so hard to write that I almost gave up while working on the first volume. I've finally come this far, and I will definitely finish what I have started, so I would really appreciate it if you accompanied me to the end of my journey.

Furthermore, I will announce a new work in spring⁶. I think that readers of this series will also enjoy the new one, so if you'd like, do give it a shot.

I'm working passionately on both series, so please don't push me too hard to get the last volume out already, okay?!

Well then, I hope we will meet again soon!

—Eiji Mikage

6. F ランクの暴君 堕ちた天才の凱旋 (F-Rank no Boukun - Ochita Tensai no Gaisen), illustrated by 南方純 (Sunao Minakata)