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S.vs.S-1



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Set position, takeback. Step, throw, strike.

At that moment, body becomes a spring.

Doesn't matter who the batter is - don't let them so much as touch the ball.

Charming smoothness in movements of body, bones, will.

Waist and elbows, having lost their humanity from repeated movements, raise a mountain of corpses.

Here is a pan, heated by happy shouts.

Resounding yells of approval, warming with a hint of laurel wreath.

Fiery sunshine.

Lung-burning smell of summer.

A female figure, drooping her head.

Chillingly blue sky without a single cloud.

Baseball field, like water-colored universe, and I stand in the middle of it.

But anyway, who said that this will end too?

An unsightly foul while passing.

An irreversible "wild ball".

A seemingly comical, or rather theatrical selection of middle-fielder.

I hid my eyes under waves of disgusting sounds.

And then...

Then was the first time I heard the sound of a breaking bone.

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All the plans for summer went back to the starting point.

We were expecting the battle days until at least the first week of August, but just as our long-awaited summer vacation started, the days betrayed our ideas and put an end to fights.

-- Yeah, what a twist. It's almost refreshing, don't you think?

Turning back, I asked the two people behind me, but got no answer.

The day after the case in Shikura high school №1...

Until yesterday, the loud stadium was embraced in silence.

Earth, color of a black tea brew, basked in summer sunlight. Blue sky, as far as eye can see, numbing the feeling of perspective. A level landscape, with no teams, no balls, no nets, reminding of a horizon.

Today is the 21st of July, summer vacation.

There are no students at the stadium, and the building feels abandoned as well. Even for a post-holiday this gloom is too extreme.

And so, we decided to use that extremity.

-- Wow. How do you have a key from the back gate, Ishizue-senpai? If we decided to get in sneakily, we could just go over the fence. Were you thinking of a revenge after graduation?

-- Nope. Sorry to disappoint you. I'm not that bored and I'm not that calculative. I was just borrowing it all the time, with no real subtext. I also have the club key, want to open it too?

-- Nah, what's the point... But how did the local guys let that happen anyway? Isn't it, like, a protection of some sort, turning a blind eye to that?

-- Happened before. If you want to do it yourself, I can teach you, but you don't need that. Need to catch the monkey though, Kirisu, or else it's going to break into school.

"Yeah", replied Kirisu Yaichiro, confused, and walked forward.

Yes, today we're here illegally. Stadium is more or less fine, but they won't turn the blind eye if we try to get into the building.

-- Hey you, dumbass! Stop right there!

Kirisu's huge body curved the shoulders and went into crouching style.

The target - third accomplice of our shameless stadium crossing and the initiator of the whole scheme, Tsuranui Mihaya.

-- Uwooh, a gorilla! Not a small bug, but a huge gorilla is running at me in a straight line?! What, just what is it with this beast?! Did it go crazy about me in this summer heat?!

-- Waaah, go die, you monkey! I'd rather die than lust for you!

Like in good ol' rugby.

Kirisu runs into Tsuranui with a wall-crushing force, and both roll, setting up the dust. No exaggeration here, it was a killing blow.

-- Ah the youth. It's nice to move in such heat.

As for me, even just breathing is like death.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I sit in the shadow of a tree for a better view.

As I left the direct sunlight the temperature became bearable, but the afternoon heat of the stadium became even more intense. I've started seeing mirages, as if the place has begun to turn into desert. And from above - a high-pitched squeal, drilling into the head, cicadas screeching. "Making noise with a good rhythm" - that sounds better, but working without a second of rest is against labor code, stop it already. Come on, the summer is long. Be more moderate, think of a long and peaceful pension.

-- Or don't, it's the seventh day in such heat. Better get out of here while you're still alive... Ah, damn, it somehow became even hotter.

At the stadium Kirisu and Tsuranui are already in the arm locking stage. With a bit of tears in eyes - possibly because new clothes have now turned into sand. And the creepiest thing about it is that Kirisu has done zero damage so far.

On a side note, when it appeared that this empty-headed girl actually comes from a good family and is seriously practicing sambo, and when everything was over, it was already year 2006.

That would be much later, and for now the temperature is thirty five degrees. No precipitation expected this week. Merciless, scorching mid-summer sun is not letting me out of my corner, and only Tsuranui's energy wells forth.

Every year during summer, the city turns into hell.

Tightly packed buildings, obstructing the wind; thoughtless people with overheating air conditioners; building walls reflecting sunlight, burning the earth. If you're not one of those air conditioner sinners, and not wealthy enough to seek shelter in family restaurants - if you're a simple schooler, then this is a rough season for you. Well, you also struggle with the majesty of cold in winter, and one could say you struggle all around the year... but anyway.

We do have homes, we could sit through summer there, but youth, so to say, doesn't let us kill time this way. And neither do parents. Sons that are losing morale and yielding to sleep are pushed outside by fathers, daughters, sitting in web chats and writing prose-filled homepages, are scolded by mothers. That's why the youth, forced to live the life of street beggars, has no choice but to get in groups and aimlessly wander around the city. For that meaningless reason I got acquainted with Tsuranui and Kirisu.

-- Oh? You're also free, senpai?

-- You could say. I was supposed to help you until mid-summer, now I have no plans at all. Maybe I'll go look for a part-time job.

-- Lucky! Then I'll buy one day of yours!

With that said, a generous advance payment of ten thousand yen slapped into my hand.

I hesitated for a bit, but approved the profitability of that offer at ten in the morning. You could say my talents awakened early.

And so, by Tsuranui's plan, I came to school as a participant of slackers' party.

-- Cool! Cicadas are cool! You're singing in a choir! Hey, where were you until now? Underground?

What are they, zombies? How can you wake up so early and already rave about so much?

Tsuranui is sitting under the same tree and cheering up cicadas.

-- He-ey, Ishizue-senpai, I'd like some water. Not tap water, mineral water. Maybe you could go fetch some, as a senior?

Kirisu Yaichiro, laying around in the same shadow, lazily waved his hand.

-- ...

A natural nightmare.

The sight of us three is sickening.

How did these guys, until just recently filled with bright plans for summer, turned into such potato bags? Oh cruel fate. Three slackers have nothing to do after infiltrating the stadium, and now they're watching clouds forming in the sky.

Busy days are over.

Our plans, adults' projects, everything went blank.

The battle of geniuses, without ever happening, vanished like smoke in C prefecture.

-- By the way. Isn't today the fourth round of "Coal"?

-- Yeah. Ace of Komagiri and pitcher of higher school Iguruma, Yumia on stand-in. They wouldn't mess it up. They would surely win the area tourney.

-- Mhm. Yeah, the only negative point for "Coal" was our homerun... frustrating. Damn. I would also like to watch the battle of our schools' first geniuses.

-- Don't fool around. Like slugger, Gondo from Kotokuin is just as good. He's stupidly good at trick shots, and he inconspicuously got the highest percentage of strikes, right? Even if not so many homeruns...

-- Yeah, Gondo-kun has a strong left arm. Though he isn't good with Iguruma's shooting. If only he had arms and legs like Kirisu, he'd take it...

-- Ha. All these boringly-good batters. Oh-oh-oh, a golden homerun from home, golden return to pitcher from home, golden run from strike-out to base from home, golden deadball from home, all this love to extreme batters. Ah, and Kirisu-san's arms and legs are too long, he's like a monkey. Even though I only just noticed.

Tsuranui drops down from "sitting" position into "laying" position. She should see herself at least a little bit more like a girl.

-- Ah-ha-ha. Sorry, but I already noticed long ago... that you don't have any respect, woman.

Kirisu has been in that pose for a while already, listening to Tsuranui's chatter that always has a word too many. He blushes, but ignores it.

-- ...

How barbaric. But being the only one to remain sitting doesn't feel right, so I also lay down on the ground.

A familiar scent of earth.

Under the shadowy tree there is no grass at all, just plain ground. Here and there, I sit around resting for almost three years now. Thoughtlessly watching the sky.

The boring atmosphere on stadium brings drowsiness, but chest tightens about something that did not happen. Summer is too long and too hot to simply exist. Until yesterday, heat was a friend. To us, living the springtime of our lives, midsummer sky was like yells of approval from tribunes.

And now, the approval is not heard. The stadium is empty, because the curtain of our story has dropped. Credits rolled by, some viewers got bored, some clapped, some were touched, but all of them left.

The only thing left here is a small, forgotten scene.

A cinema projector, and the crackle of empty reels.

-- And so, nothing to do now...

-- Mhm, indeed...

Stretching our arms, we lazily look to the sky.

Noise, created by cicadas, echoes and drills the ears.

-- Hey. Let's play baseball.

No objections.

"Well, it was coming to something like that," - with a wry smile, Kirisu brought equipment from club.

Kirisu as a pitcher.

Me - a batter... is what I don't want to do, so I'm a catcher.

And as a batter, the promising newbie, Tsuranui Mihaya.

Tsuranui, evidently happy to hold a bat, with a shining smile directs her bat at Kirisu.

-- Heh. Just so you slackers know, Shikura has a third genius! C'mon, old fool! Today will be my star time, you're going to bow to me and treat me to sweets or something!

"Come, come" - scampish junior waves her bat.

Over one hundred and eighty centimeters tall Kirisu's long limbs, a white ball swing, almost threatening to cut in two.

-- One, two!!

A yell, or a roar.

A beautiful pitch, too much for a batter girl.

The ball flies up, like a jet stream.

"O-oh!" - three slackers look to the sky.

... Such a long, heavy summer.

A dream of a watery heaven is now lost.

And so, here's the story about times of youth, when incredible heat was up in the air, but none inside.



## 1\Slugger. (Top)

Skull fracture.

It was decided in an instant. The back of the target's head was smashed by a 140 kilo demonic missile.

The whole body was heated up not by the taboo of murder, but the ecstasy of victory. The illusion of "I" being burned out by the sun. The sight of the batter's brains, splattered all over the asphalt, awakened an old layer of his consciousness.

The beginning. I didn't remember why was I so stubborn over such a small thing.

Mother said I was always inseparable from the ball since birth, but I have neither memory of this nor reason to believe it.

Actually, we didn't have the money to buy balls or gloves, and mother's upbringing didn't teach her to enjoy baseball.

Our home was really poor. I understood that from the get-go. Mother tried hard, but in the school the difference became only greater. Even in junior school, where they gave everyone identical textbooks to hide it, they couldn't conceal the gap... Actually, the good-natured kids could both respect poverty and make fun of it at once.

Luckily, we had many similar kids at my school. Rich and poor, top and bottom worked together and kept the balance. The attacks spread thin, and I - what great luck - didn't look funny when attacked, even got respect.

Except the lack of attacks brought lack of support.

For a long time I didn't know what "friend" is.

I didn't suffer from that. Didn't have time to. I had difficulty enough just living at home.

How can I grieve that my home is poorer than others? Though we were poor, we weren't at the brink. Extreme poverty takes away your childhood. And you can't go and complain to mother about it. On the contrary, I thought I should do something, but at my 6 years I couldn't really do a thing. How come I, in an environment without any money to spare for baseball, became interested in it?

...Now I think the reason for something should be small. No need for deep meaning or childhood traumas. Like this, laughing, normal, healthy neighbours' kids gather like ants to a sugar lump.

I just grabbed a ball for no reason and started playing with it - simple as that.

On the square between the houses in Noju we played baseball every day.

Red sunset. Closed space without adults. A game of a ball, a pitcher, a batter and a catcher.

"Hey. Wait long, Sinker?"

Every time I was waiting for the other two, and every time they were late.

I was short and poorly built.

But all three of us were lacking in something. We said: "A baseball player must eat well!" - and were happily lost in thought, and then laughed and added "no way for us to, though".

We joined our meager knowledge, pretended to train and kept playing till sunset.

...And somehow this became unnatural.

Sometimes we went to watch the youth league matches. Empty rows. We were told to come play the next day and noisily went home. An early culmination of life. We believed that tomorrow will be sunny, that now everything would be all right. Before a year passed these bright, pure times ended.

The difference in ability. Widening gap in skills. Dear friends, so nice before, but now glaring with envy .

Someone said that continuing to improve beyond the top was kinda boring. But then baseball was everything for me, and I couldn't bring myself to slow down for others to catchh up.

I had the anxiety of getting left behind too, you know. So why did my team tell me only "not to show off"?

I didn't have the right to lose,  
and I didn't have the right to blunder.

That's why... I wished for this.

The red pancake of sun. A training ground for us three only. Some man with a kind face talked to us, among other things making something like an offer to grant our wishes

"I wanted to hit a golden home run!"

"Then I want to be an unbeatable pitcher!"

A devilish smile under the hat.

The golden time ended.

Because after that baseball was no longer pure for me.

...Now there's nothing to remember. People dream about everything in the world, it seems, but the two dreams I had were enough for me.

One of them pretty much came from nowhere and disappeared back in there forever.

The brains on asphalt.

Amidst the stench of the fresh victim's blood he came to his senses. Apparently the horrible memory was only played back once.

Midnight. The first one, picked as a test, was a fake, useless in combat.

Body, fattened to the limit. Mind, relaxed to the limit. Skills, weakened to the limit.

The only things all right were the bat and the shoes, but the man accompanying them was merely a ruin holding on to the glory of the past.

He didn't feel the tinge of conscience or an unpleasant aftertaste from smashing the head of a man pleading for mercy. Rather, the ended life returned his sound judgement.

Weeding out the parasites is but a trifle.

They are needed for plants to develop, but in human terms they're disgusting, so death. This cleansing is different. The stimulus here is rage. He threw the weapon due to simple wrath.

"What a mess", - the dry lips utter in self-deprecation.

He takes the ball out of the skull.

The cow leather burned off, and the innards, hairs and threads can be seen. He decides that with this kind of damage the ball will serve him a couple times more and deeply sighs.

Not of exhaustion.

He just breathes air out to the cold.

White smoke. Clutching his shaking body, he finds the dead man's golden device and takes it.

Even on an empty national roadway there are convenience shops. The body will be found soon. Not that he minds, but the fuss over the first one will make later actions harder. Picking up the ball, he leaves into the darkness, shaking from the cold.

Suffering from cold on a tropical night.

The city's lights illuminated the "box" on the road, where the mangled body was left, still clutching the bat.

As usual, this year had a monstrously hot summer, making everything melt in the heat.

The temperature rose to 38 Celsius, and the weather forecast hid behind orange smiles for the entire coming week. In the overheated city on the brink of melting, naturally, the stream of busy people dried up as well.

Year 2004, the 6th of August, prefecture S, Shikura town.

During this month, when Ishizue Arika left the Origa clinic, youth crimes flourished in Shikura.

The youngster gang, the one that attacked Ishizue Arika, selling drugs. Its central member, Hisaori Shinya, who committed suicide. Mistakenly accused of his murder, disappeared A-syndrome carrier, Hisaori Makina. The tension between the residents of the industrial district Noju who were protesting against the court system. The rate of crimes committed by A-syndrome carriers has risen since last year. The road presentations by teenagers and youths has grown in size. Perhaps due to its delay a murder incident occurred.

Even if one were to simply count, there were too many problems.

Well, nothing you can do about it, and the passers-by habitually make mental notes of these things and continue looking at them without much concern. People's minds, like the city streets, are dry and boring.

- Huh? Arishima-kun, you're going home already?

Here is one of the polygon's angles.

Next to the playground before the station there is a tiny patch of common property. The fenced basketball court is filled by people in the blinding light of a multitude of lamps.

This park was created a few years ago. At nights this green court, abandoned under the sunlight, is filled with clamour, like a festival; laughs, cheers and jeers are heard all over the place.

- Come on, it's only 10 o'clock! Let's go on, till they turn the lights off! You can do that today after all, since you're an opponent.

- Sorry, but I really can't. They lock up early and at a set time where I live now. If I don't return before midnight, I won't have a place to sleep.

Arishima Shogo gloomily answers the light-headed, but friendly girl.

Shogo is a freelancer, barely nineteen years old. Height 183 cm, weight 95 kg. Naturally tough body, but not without some fat, and the man should be called "big" rather than "tall".

This doesn't mean he's a glutton, though. The excess fat is there on purpose. You can often see this build in sportsmen - the muscles within are more important than the relief without.

- Whyyy?! There are more people in the park than usual. You're popular, aren't you, Arishima-kun? Why don't you show off before the newbies? One more time, please!

The girl considers Shogo a valuable financial support. Terrible, sure, she doesn't even try to hide it, but Shogo is still glad he's being relied upon.

Shogo has a good natural build, is gloomy and seemingly harsh, but inside he's kind and hates fighting. His peers already gave up trying to change his character, but they do acknowledge him as the soul of the party, and he is liked.

Essentially Arishima Shogo is from the same young group that gathers in this park.

Leaving school and going freelance, he is now enjoying his freedom. He's being told what a loser he is and how he is rotting, but let such gossip be discussed among bored idlers. He always pays the bills he acquires while having fun, so bring in the wine - this is Arishima Shogo's creed.

Thus, from his viewpoint, the girl before him, the youths in the park, they're all of his flock. Some may be black sheep, but whatchagonnado.

"Hey, guys. Sitting in the same spot takes energy too. Let's do something new. We have the energy to spare anyway. Something that's quick but fun. And, well... The most important thing, that is, filling our wallets".

This was the game proposed by the ringleader, something like an older brother for the gang.

Fun and profit. That's a proper game. Recently too many people chase only after money, and there are more black sheep among both players and spectators.

But the meaning of the game stays the same. This ring always attracts those like Shogo. An old-fashioned minded player like him values the game, the path to victory, far above profit.

- Nah, I'm done today. And the crowd is distracting.

- Are you serious?! How are we gonna have the next match then?! I don't wanna bet when I can lose...

The girl angrily grabs Arishima Shogo's hand.

If he doesn't go to the next match, the chances are pretty much equal. Looks like the girl is dissatisfied with the very chance of loss.

- I'm telling you, I can't. Let go. Tomorrow I'll come early and participate with regard to the opponent, okay? Better watch the game itself, Nanami-chan. It's fun if you pay attention.

- Uu. You're an ice shard, Arishima. This isn't funny, where am I gonna get money for tomorrow?.. And anyway, who cares about the stupid ball without the bets? I don't get what's so fun. What am I, a kid like you lot, to watch this?

- Yeah, that's that. It's an adult game now, baseball.

He grips her hand. Too strong, his rough fingers dig into her slender hand.

- Ouch, stop, it hurts!

- Sorry again. But still. It's a bad idea to talk here like this. The guys here are all baseball nuts. Anyone hears this, and you might find yourself staying in the karaoke box for a week.

The girl rapidly pales. She is still a third year at a high school, but evidently she has heard about it.

It's one of the urban tales. That if you badmouth baseball, you get taken to a karaoke box no one knows where and taught a harsh lesson.

- That's it. Well, see ya tomorrow.

Arishima Shogo didn't want to scare the girl. Saying goodbye with a carefree, soothing voice, he fixed the container with his stuff on his shoulders and left the park.

Going away from the station through a prospect with rows of shops, he went into a rarely lit residential district.

Eleventh hour. He didn't meet any person or car along the sloped road to the second block of Shikura hill.

Shikura hill, where the old-fashioned residents of this half-backwater live. At 10 o'clock there are two municipal buses per hour, so the respectable people and students are already home.

Most importantly, no one dares go out to the street on such a night.

The residential district is enveloped in silence.

The road is far too wide given the number of cars that use it. The street lights on both sides provide more light than necessary. It's a white light, like a night store's. A straight road slightly upwards - perfect for a duel.

Arishima Shogo is quietly walking, his bat in a bag on his shoulder.

Whatever he told the girl, he himself did want to play. No. The closing of doors was just an excuse, and he'd play every day if he could. SVS exists to be a refuge for those like Shogo. Arishima Shogo was so different now that the old he, stuck in the lazy flow of days, made himself tremble.

It's called "living a complete life". He started jogging again, learned to support his health according to sports' canons, and his mental state was slowly returning to the peak. Just recently there were cheap drugs going around, but it didn't interest Shogo in the least. Because if it really racked the brain, they would've got wind of it before others.

And he skipped today's game not to let the veterans who were entering the war tomorrow know of himself.

Today in the qualification round for the local summer games, the Kotokuin academy completely unexpectedly suffered a defeat. Just like the year before, it's a summer of crushed plans.

It wasn't simply a lost game, though. A lost baseball match is a tragedy. They watched the youth they devoted to the game, the time they spent on it crumble away into nothingness.

After tasting this pain fully you can't just run away. Actually, some team members, wishing for the continuation of the summer game, went all the way to the neighbouring city, Shikura, and watched the "game", which they were interested in for a long time, but couldn't play themselves.

"...Refusing to take part in it will be like a fire in a drought. The boys from that prestige school have no principles either. But yeah, our "Koala mater" is boring too. The 4 best and nothing more."

This SVS will be special. Apparently, near the summer school tournament the game grew in size, and the bets rose tenfold. Even the prestige school's pride - not playing with hoodlums - was blown away by the interest of it.

To topple these newcomers Shogo avoided random matches where he could be seen.

His opponent is a formal member with a numbered cell. As a man who was there since the beginning, he had to stay among the best three, or he wouldn't be able to face his elders.

"Still, at least we need to coordinate. Hmm, where can we get a good batter pitcher..."

The night air sticks to the skin. Sweat is flowing even from simply walking, but Arishima Shogo thinks not about this, but about the game he left behind.

The voices of the guys, uncoordinated, but excited, is still ringing in his ears. That park hidden between the tall buildings and the lighting they created for the game.

Apparently this is because it's too bright.

With his complete lifestyle, as his mind was healing his danger sense was decaying.

One other thing. He wasn't ready to pay attention to that rumour going around for a few days.

Now the dream lost along with the summer takes away his dislike of tropical nights, his negative feelings.

Once he said he'll pay his bills.

And now the bill is presented.

"Hey. You a batter?"

Like a hot wobbly mirage, a ghost. He appeared under a lamp three meters ahead.

The bill's name is Sinker. That's the nickname earned by this maniac killer after countless games.

"..."

Arishima Shogo was speechless because the emerged shadow really was a ghost.

Summer means scary stories. Whatever appeared under the willow, uh, streetlight, its appearance and posture were far too strange.

He smells of sweat and dirt. His shirt and trousers have cuts all over them. His left hand is stretched out, but his right is hidden in a long sleeve. You can't even see what's inside. Add to this the hood, dropping a deep shadow on the face. In this tropical night he is incredibly weird.

"So. You're an SVS batter, right?"

A hoarse, muffled voice.

You can't tell for sure since the face is hidden, but seems to be a man. The muffled voice sounds like an old man's, but the body points at around Shogo's age.

But the most interesting thing for Shogo, more so than the weirdness of the person, was the left hand, stretched out as though to show off. It isn't like his own body, left untrained



for four months and having reverted to an ordinary man's level. The man's hand was the trained hand of a sportsman. You could guess the rest of his physique by it.

The only thing that's in a bad shape is his clothes.

"Hood" is a player. A high-class one. In the army many times he saw the human body being trained only for the hit and only for the throw, the "chosen style" body like the one Hood had.

"Why the silence, Arishima Shogo? I'm not mistaken. Yeah, you're rusty, but your leg movements and back are going back to a batter's... You're tough in your own way. Though you were garbage, you restored yourself in these few months.

Hood let out a laugh mixed with coughing.

White steam left his mouth.

Is it even possible? His body was shaking. Being in this sauna heat, wrapped in a hoodie, and still practically screaming "I'm cold!"

"Who are you?.."

Deep night. It's like running into a hobo with a knife on the way to the night store. Too late to feel danger, but there's still time. There is some distance, three meters. Arishima Shogo will simply turn and run full speed.

"Wait. I'm here for a match. Let's play first, or it'll get boring. Anyway, you start running, and the only thing left is to kill you. Pointless and no fun. Isn't that so, batter? You die anyway, so play with me first and kick the bucket later."

There are no emotions in Hood's voice. No, there's no way to express them in the first place.

The hoarse voice is either calm, or excited, or happy. A wave of emotion that can't be expressed to others. Or maybe not. Maybe his voice is born of rage.

Shogo remembers another recent rumour.

A few days ago a member of the game was found dead. The road where it happened was devoid of people, just like this place.

The cause of death was a hit on the back of the head. His skull was smashed by an object sized like a baseball. Apparently, he lived for a few hours after that, but no one came, and he died, being found in the morning by some guy.

...Yeah. A game member being killed by an object like a baseball.

That's more than enough to spark rumours.

Maybe the big stakes summoned a demon who inhabited SVS this season? A slit-mouthed woman, nah, wrong era. Or a Red Cloak. To win the finals, the monster appears before batters in secret and plays a game with them, where the bet is your life.

If you decline, it kills you. If you strike out, it kills you.

Only one way to survive. To hit that pitcher's ball by SVS rules...

"You really are the one from the rumours, huh?"

Moving closer, Arishima Shogo studies the monster before him. For whatever reason his voice is steady.

A real monster or a fake one, whether the rumours are true or not - he doesn't care. Because there is no value in fear. Shogo's self as a batter frees him from its restraints.

"Rumours?.."

"Yeah. There were some about a maniac pitcher recently. That he's possessed, that he's crazy, that he'll kill you for three strikes, that he'll eat an onlooker's bones, stuff like that. Well, that's bullshit. So you're him?"

"I guess. Signed a pact with the devil, that's true. It's probably about me."

"I see", - Shogo puts his stuff down.

Taking a wooden bat out of its case, he points it at Hood.

"So, if I do hit, I can just walk away?"

The fear is gone.

Analyzing the enemy's abilities is an essential skill for batters. Furthermore, the mind of Arishima Shogo with a bat in hand is that of a warrior lusting for battle. It's only natural, since that's what batters train for years.

"Huh. Didn't expect that. I thought the second one will hesitate... Say, you really do accept?"

"Sure. If you're a killer, I won't go down that easy, and like hell you're getting a strikeout. Yeah, do you have a cell?"

Hood shows a silver cellphone. It's a sign of formal membership for pitchers. Arishima Shogo, a batter, has a golden cell.

That's their game. One base game, SVS - a contest for 18 cell phones. After a duel the winner takes the loser's phone. The one who lost the phone is disqualified, and when either the pitchers or the batters lose all their phones, the match ends.

The victory belongs to the team with more phones. The one who acquires the most phones gets the best player prize.

An official match happens once a month.

It's an individual contest with a taste of a battle royale.

That's what the young townsfolk arranged, a player's paradise.

The bunch in the park playing a similar game are something like the second echelon, and players who have shown themselves there are invited to the official tournament.

Arishima Shogo is gold-3. Hood's cell is silver-A (ace). Hard to believe, but this killer openly took part in the SVS gatherings and got his cell.

Either no one knew he's an A-syndrome carrier, or his deal with the devil happened after registering. Such details didn't concern Shogo, though. Perhaps because he lived far away from social conventions. His distaste towards force solutions and crimes simply got blunt.

In a way Arishima Shogo himself is an outlaw possessed by the demon of SVS.

"Fine. Opponent accepted."

Shogo is certain of victory.

Hood is 170 cm tall. With this height he can throw the ball at 110-120 km/h at most. Because of his height he probably relies on trick balls, but SVS rules allow a simple touch, and Shogo will be able to protect the base. One "maniac pitcher" is too little to fear. He'll simply knock the ball out.

And if Hood doesn't keep his word and attacks, he'll simply beat him up. The difference in their build says its word. Shogo has no reason to lose a fight, and anyway, he has a bat, a great weapon.

Memories of a batter who was already killed are troubling, but seeing as the opponent is a maniac, one can think up any number of counters. Arishima Shogo isn't a weakling, he's a trained sportsman. He's sure of himself, and the opponent's weapon is a ball he's used to. There'll be no fear.

"Usual rules. Sorry, but the light is in your favor, so I'll walk back 10 meters. How many balls you got? No catcher or nets here. No running after the ball."

Takes the glove out of the container, puts it on.

Takes the bat with both hands, moves his shoulders in a circle.

Like a conditioned reflex. This ritual lets him concentrate and prepare his body.

A murderous pitcher. It's unknown how much of this to believe, but in this situation Arishima Shogo, a batter specialist, is, though one detached from society, still a commendable master.

"Will do. Wow, I can't even catch my breath, Arishima.

"Huh?"

Hood laughs happily.

Now it isn't that unemotional voice. Now it's full of gratitude for the indescribable delight he's feeling. Arishima Shogo's, the well-liked batter's pride and arrogance. This arrogant readiness makes Hood happy - that's how it should be!

Steamy breath and shivering body.

The lips visible under the hood are rustling dryly, and there's this vertical streak, an ugly scar from a cut.

"?.."

This scar touched Shogo's memory, but hasn't made him remember anything.

Like a moth attracted to light, he carelessly stood in his last box.

The worry peaked when they took position.

A batter box outlined by white.

There's no pitcher's mound. No plate either.

And only upon setting foot on this cheap field had Arishima Shogo felt his hairs standing on ends.

The feeling of electric current in the back of his head.

The air isn't heated up by the summer sun.

The fanatical, unmistakable and horrifying killing intent emitted by the man nineteen meters ahead.

Finally appearing in Arishima Shogo after thoughtlessly putting foot on the executioner's stage, his uncertainty, however...

Was completely beaten out of him by an utterly different kind of attack a second later.

They call fast serves "smoke balls" in baseball.

The slang began with an analogy. That the ball can't be seen, like smoke. It's correct. Arishima Shogo might not be able to take on fast balls, but he can trace their movements. But on this night, for the first time in his life he understood that a ball can go past him unnoticed.

"Ah... Eh?"

His shoulders got stiff with tension.

He should've been preparing for the next throw, catching the rhythm, but Arishima Shogo turned into stone.

It's impossible to concentrate on the movements of the pitcher a few dozen meters away.

No, the more he tries, the more he loses his breath. His eyes go dark. The center of his head is purged by something unknown.

The pitcher who stood on the mound even without the plate.

The grip on the ball is visible, even without a glove.

The pose is not for a wind-up, when the whole body is used to give energy to the throw, but to move from the "hand near belt" position to a side throw.

A typical side throw from the right.

With his build the ball will go up to 120 km/h. Additional distance will give another ten compared to throwing from above, but it's still only 130. Not enough to not see the ball.

The classic theory says "watch the ball well", but it's just a hint to new batters. If you train your eyes and technique, you can attune to the first serve right away. For example, there was a genius batter in Shikura last year, a guy who took even the hardest balls on the first try.

That genius slugger is "super-high class", and he's a long way from Arishima Shogo, but he's a batter of the same sort, "eye and attunement". He doesn't track the situation. His style is to hit on the very first serve.

Pitcher's takeback is in 19 meters. Left leg raised, right serving as the axle for spinning. He gauged the opponent's real strength just by this position. His eye is not worse than that slugger's.

This is what made him the third best batter during the army, his true strength and the source of his overconfidence - his experience took only a fraction of a second to show itself.

Abandon hope. You won't take a single ball of this pitcher's.

"What..."

No time-outs. The moment he stood in the batter's box there was no escape.

That was a beautiful movement.

A swing, a strong step ahead with his left.

A straight line towards the batter, outlined by the thigh and the foot, sharp as an arrow.

A forward turn executed not with legs, but with pelvis.

The left foot hits the ground not with the toe or the heel, but with the whole sole.

The movement releases the stored strength.

The body, opened sideways, twists into a spiral.

The solid fundament of feet and pelvis births a stream of power. From the ankle to the hip. From the hip to the shoulder. From the abdomen to the wrist, the energy passes and accelerates further, to the fingers.

Like a man sling.

The pitcher's right hand releases a white ball.

The shot happens within 0.46 seconds. The ball's speed is about 140 km/h. Such a fast side throw can be seen only from a pro. But the problem isn't the crazy speed. The trajectory changes midway without any loss of speed.

The first attack came from the side.

The ball released by the pitcher was wild. It looked like a huge miss to the right, the dead zone for him, being left-handed. But the ball went behind his right shoulder, disappeared and then curved and returned into the strike zone. It looked like a ">" sign from above.

Impossible? Doesn't even begin to describe it.

The serve type, apparently, is a "joker", but the curve resembling a boomerang would be absurd to call even a "screwball".

The ball changes its trajectory after the throw due to air friction and the way it interacted with the air. Opposing currents and friction create the various changes in the ball's behaviour. But. A change of ninety degrees is way beyond a human's capabilities. And this means...

"You're actually a good batter, in your own way."

The hooded monster takes another ball out of his pocket.

The right hand, hidden in the long sleeve, wriggles like a living being.

Arishima Shogo did not know. He heard that possession was a mental disorder, deviation from common sense. Not knowing about real possessed, he couldn't have known that the changes affect the body as well.

"You're only half good at everything. The training, the spirit and the moves are so normal it makes me want to sleep. Seriously... Boring. Scum."

So. The pitcher wasn't throwing trick balls or screw balls. They were true, real demonic balls.

"Wait... What do you mean?"

Now Arishima Shogo's voice was trembling.

His consciousness was clouded.

That was nothing but the instinctive fear foreseeing the end.

Hit or die. I think there was a rule like this?..

"Wait... Wait, dammit!"

The hooded monster gathered himself up.

The final serve. A throw more similar to a nightmare.

Feeling dizzy, he adjusts his batting to the pitcher's form. Like Hood said, Arishima Shogo was a good batter.

His bat didn't even touch the screwball going at 140 km/h, but batting capable of hitting a ball flying from a dead zone to a dead zone, is rewarded with cups.

"Dammit, what's going on?!"

His mind was on the verge of crashing.

The unprecedented screwball. One with a higher speed than the first ball, at that. The first ball that he couldn't even notice. And yeah, he wasn't afraid of the crazy deadball, being certain that now he could see even this killer's ball.

But this ball is different. He won't see it. Thinking over this screwball, he won't notice as he dies. The rubber ball going at over 140 km/h will hit his head. He doesn't even want to think about it. This game has no helmets. What stupidity. After all, the one who said this sport won't be accepted by normal people, was Shogo himself.

"W... what the hell, this is nonsense, this doesn't make any sense!!"

His body was instantly soaked with sweat.

Over the long years of crazy training Arishima Shogo acquired resistance to heat. His sudden sweat wasn't related to the tropical night. It was a scream of chilly fear.

"Huh... Tch, what an ugly sight."

Shogo realized that the whisper was about him, but didn't have the spirit to retort. An overwhelming difference in power. The pitcher's insult, thrown from the heart, didn't even give the batter an opportunity to get angry.

But the reality was far more tragic.

Hood's devilish abilities weren't directed against Shogo. It's just a kind of screwball. It's just a demonic ball with which he laughed at the absurdity of his own irreversibly twisted serve.

An ugly sight.

His own ball wasn't that unsightly.

The owner of the demonic ball unhurriedly takes out his third ball.

There are no timeouts in SVS. You can't leave the box from the beginning to the end. As soon as you leave, the rules declare the batter's loss. And what then? Probably the same. As soon as Shogo runs this demonic ball will crash through his head's defenceless rear. Aah, so the dead batter probably ran in the middle of the match...

"Ah!.. No, but, but it's useless anyway!"

No leaving. Must hit. Arishima Shogo's mind is almost out, but the batter's mentality honed over a decade corrects his grip on the bat.

Hit it. Simply hit it. You saw the speed, the serve types, the forms of the pitcher. Just hit. You don't need the ball to fly, and a hit is entirely possible!..

"Heh, you're good. Like a wall on your right side, Arishima."

The owner of the devilish ball, the devilish abilities is not a pitcher anymore. His right hand is wriggling. Slowly, as though snow is coming off it, the white ball is becoming red.

"Ah, what?.."

When did the pitcher get hurt? Or is it a compensation for such inhuman throws? Blood is running along the pitcher's right hand.

...Some machinations with the ball before the serve are illegal. Smoothing it with a needle file - shineball. Spitting on it for lubrication - speedball. Also various balls used to remove the spin given by the fingers, with a different degree of trajectory change and the like.

All of these are cheating feints used to deceive the batter's eyes, taboos adhered to even by those only after money. But... Is blood against the rules?

Actually, a blood-covered ball will stick to the fingers. Like batting is centered on passing strength to certain muscles, pitching doesn't allow one to skip a stage in the system, from



the heels to the fingertips. Vague worry, momentary disorientation, loss of form ruin the fine motorics, lead to wild balls. The feeling in the fingertips is the most important thing.

That's why it's certain. A normal human in such a state wouldn't even have managed to throw straight.

"Ah... Ah!"

That's why we can stop. This isn't a time-out. The pitcher is directly violating the rules - almost says Arishima Shogo, but when the words reached his throat, his thoughts disappeared.

An injured right hand. A bloody ball. A few memories related to this acute killing intent. An old memory surfaces. Ah yes, this is...

"All right, the third. If you don't hit it - the end!"

...The pitcher's set-up.

There won't be a time-out. Only to hit. Now do everything to hit. Arishima Shogo breathes in tact.

Hood's serve form is understood. The timing matches. The only thing left is to make the ball's trajectory collide with the bat's.

"A-ah..."

But, this won't happen.

Hood's form is different. His hand is even lower than his side throw. His form hugs the ground. Its difficulty, the strain on the abdominal muscles make it incredibly rare, chosen by few.

A low serve. Yes. This one was saved for the finale, understood Arishima Shogo a second ago. He saw this serve, looking more like acrobatics, many times.

The lowest exit of the ball. Thrown from below, it climbs towards the batter's throat and...

"K... ha!!!"

...suddenly dives before his nose.

The bat, mercilessly missing, and the demonic ball, going away like lightning.

A kind of screwball - sinker. One of the side pitcher's trump cards, a screwball moving out of the batter's sight. This ball has another specific quality. If you throw it via low serve, it will follow a specific trajectory of rising and diving. And all this at the speed of a hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. You can't take it with human reactions.

"Ah..."

Doing a full swing and still standing, Arishima Shogo fainted.

Three serves. No "funny" balls, no trimming into the out zone. Now the end from the rumours... But it's strange. Hood isn't moving. Doesn't take out a fourth ball. If he was going to kill with the third, it'd be a deadball, and the batter would've been dead by now. But that moment is lost, it seems. Then the rumour was a lie, Arishima Shogo decides, feels relief, and at that moment...

"Eh?.."

Hears fireworks behind his back.

A part bloody, part white ball rushes through the darkness.

Crack.

And in the end he... heard his skull being crushed.

## 2/Antract

August came, but the temperature showed no signs of decreasing.

The heat peaks at about the second half of July and keeps on till early August, but it seems like summer's really gonna last this time, Kirisu Yaichiro thought while looking at the sky.

Monday, the ninth of August.

It's noon. This hellish sky makes you want to melt away just to end the torment. In the parking lot of a somewhat popular family restaurant there was an unsanctioned gathering of people. A whole 8 of them. To the people in the restaurant they all seem like a single gang, but these youths knew they were divided among themselves into friend and foe. This wasn't your typical bunch of friends low on money heading for a bar.

To be exact, there are five friends and three foes.

Behind the youths with the advantage of numbers Kirisu Yaichiro drowsily watched the sky.

"Nah, Kirisu-san, just be there with us. It's impolite to ask for more. Just for insurance, to be a witness, you know? It's safe. And anyway, it's them stirring up trouble. We're calm and reasonable. You can understand my situation, you're quick to catch on..."

Thus spurred, he came, and five minutes ago the negotiations began. The ugly hassle quickly grew angrier, and the three strangers went to the most direct of negotiation methods.

At the sight of this the five young guys decided to stop wasting words as well, rolled up their sleeves, and the leader politely requested Kirisu-san's aid.

"Damn, that's playing dirty!"

And they were entirely correct. Even Kirisu, an outsider, could see this was not right.

The three young people had cash they earned by the sweat of their brow, and those Kirisu was hiding behind stole it, juggling sweet lies. "Dude, this is totally gonna work out!" - and they were lured in, giving away the fruit of half the summer's worth of part-time jobs, while the scammers took the money and threw it left and right. Whether there was any flow of cash or not is not important, but these people, having spent the cash completely, went and apologised with smiles on their faces - sorry, didn't work out. This was the reason for today's gathering. Of course, the fivw weren't gonna return anything. And naturally, where there's unpaid debts there's friction.

This side is wrong. But that side are fools. Kirisu thought those were almost as bad as these.

And now, as always, his one-sided negotiations began. Frankly, it's just suppression by force. Such fighting jobs were Kirisu Yaichiro's main activities at the moment.

The three strangers seem tall and sturdy, but they don't compare to Kirisu. Height over a hundred and eighty. Flexible arms and legs, like whips. The fists, used to hitting people, strike like stones. Add to this the weight of a hundred kilos. If you don't train every day and have fights as your job, you've no chance.

And now he was hitting their faces, their stomachs, bending them in half. Before two minutes passed their hearts were broken too. Having shown diligence in his work, Kirisu raised his face towards the heavens yet again - to spit.

"Oh, thanks! Sorry, Kirisu-san, but they really were tiring us out. However many times you repeat, they just don't get it, what a damn bother. Ah, wanna eat? Our treat."

"Like hell I'm eating your junk. Hey, you got a license? No? Then gimme your cell. Now. What's with the wait, you want me to hit you again?"

Having extracted the cellphone from the guy still clutching his chest, Kirisu turned his back to everyone.

"Well, bye. And you bunch, who got a taste of my fists. Don't eat today. It'll come back."

"Wow, so cool! I don't wanna get on his bad side. Ah yeah, why'd you need the phone? Shady dealings? Wow, he's a real gangster!"

"Hell yeah. Don't wanna get into a harsh talk around a corner later, you get me? Takes effort to appease the higher-ups."

Not even waving to the puzzled youngsters, Kirisu Yaichiro left the lot.

The job was disgusting, but good for waking up.

Now an even more disgusting conversation awaited Kirisu. The small fry's scuffles looked like tranquillizers next to it.

Yasakadai is a crowded district even for Shikura.

Within walking distance of station were two high schools and a university, and it was always busy before the station. Additionally, there was a new highway to the capital built last year, and the in flow of people to Yasakadai was at the growth's peak.

The big tracts are full of life, and the office district is more and more bustling. The old companies and constantly erected skyscrapers are scrambled like a puzzle. Five-story buildings, twenty-story constructions. And their rivalry is overlooked by the forty-story grand-hotel built near the road ring.

The district of life, youth and barely hidden sin.

Having graduated from high school last year, Kirisu Yaichiro chose to dwell in this district because he liked this chaos of the city that doesn't sleep.

Kirisu's parents already left Shikura. The money chase was over, and his father chose the date for returning back to their hometown to match his graduation, but Kirisu decided to stay here. The good parents believed in their son and let him live alone.

After the school Kirisu Yaichiro didn't seek further education or a job. From the side he looked like a typical half-assed freelancer, and many lamented his wasting of the abilities and time granted by youth.

It's reasonable. But on a side invisible to respectable people Kirisu's lone rise was delightful to other... adults.

Kirisu's "abilities", obviously, were his physical stats. A height well over 180, a greatly developed body. An adult face, he doesn't look nineteen at all. Hair dye, fashion and things like that are not to his taste, but as soon as he looks funny at someone, they shiver. Additionally, not stopping at his bravery and fighting prowess, the youngsters who haven't adjusted to society well look up to him enviously.

The tales of his lawless life circulating since school.

Like a gang leader out of some manga.

Actually Kirisu Yaichiro started poking his nose into such fights since last autumn, and in less than six months he became the face of all the Yasakadai's hoodlums. Now he's an advisor for youths who have nowhere to go. Sometimes it's a juvenile criminal on the run, sometimes a runaway girl, there were all types. And an eternity ago he was a biker gang leader.

Went bankrupt, so to say.

And this is what Kirisu Yaichiro was half a year after school, in the august of 2004.

The meeting point was a cafe with the somewhat strange undersign "family restaurant".

It's noon, and clients are few.

Windows closed by curtains and dim lights. The salon's dusk was a perfect place for secret conversations.

The one Kirisu was waiting for wanted to talk in an armored private room but Kirisu stubbornly refused. Yeah, he didn't like the extra eyes, but he didn't want no witnesses to be there either. Such was the man he was meeting.

A corner near the counter. At a table in the corner sat a displeased man in a black suit. There were a few dishes before him, but he obviously didn't touch them. It's clearly Kirisu who is going to pay the bill. This manner of the "big shot", like saying "Yeah, I'm a

respectable man and made an order, but I refuse to eat in this hole", was probably a small pass at him.

The man is about forty, and, while not at Kirisu's level, he has rather broad shoulders. Cleanly shaven head and small round eyes, like a bird's, give away a stranger to decency. The sight of his suit alone made Kirisu feel the generation gap, but this is the obligatory uniform. For them both brute force suppressing others just by being there is a necessity.

"Good day to you, Nishino-san."

"Hello. Easy, sit down, Yaichi."

Nishino Harusumi was from the bottom of the Shoda family, a big criminal organisation based in S prefecture. As he himself said, he's Kirisu Yaichiro's senior.

Nishino is a young successor in the seventh generation of the Shoda family's seventh branch, the one that ruled Shikura and watched the drugs in Yasakadai.

Their name reflecting the meaning, they were a power group, a commercial organisation dealing in brute force. It's thought that "mafiosi, bandits" fits them better, but, oddly, the "force group" term was used legally in the laws. The country acknowledged their brute force, and, actually, they had their uses. This man, Nishino Harusumi, liked brute force led by a sound mind. He didn't stoop down to intimidation and public executions, but he didn't allow slacking above a certain level. Poison in small doses is a medicine. Lawfulness without dosages can cure itself to death, so one who knows poison should watch it... seemed to be his view.

You can't root violence out. So keep watch all you want, the problem is actually controlling it. He was doing the same thing as Kirisu. The difference was the scale - prefecture-wide, state-wide.

"It's good that you're busy. That's right, so long as you buzz, you're still alive... So, do you know why I called you, Yaichi?"

Nishino's words seemed well-meaning, but his eyes weren't smiling. "Senior" sounds good, but this man didn't like Yaichiro. For Nishino talking like an equal to some whelp who's not even twenty was disgusting. Having spent almost twenty years on the sidelines and having become the successor at last, Nishino couldn't praise Kirisu's talent without envy.

"Yes. The transfer for this month is complete. Please check."

The fee is long since paid, on the last week. But he couldn't just say "I think so". As a senior, Nishino couldn't let himself be seen too much. The fault will be all his. Whatever happens, you can't fail in front of your superiors. That's their style.

"Whoa, nice. It's become easier when you began gathering boys yourself. Yeah, great job. It was a pain to get the lazy bastards to go gather every month... Yeah, that's a fact. You're pretty good, sharp."

"Glad to be of assistance. What's the other reason?"

"Ah yeah. The chief told to reward you. Been a year since you began shepherding the boys. Like, treat him to something, use the chance!"

Nishino loudly laughed. but his eyes still did not smile.

The seventh branch noticing Kirisu is a story from last year. Helping school buddies, giving them advice and getting into fights, he suddenly found himself the leader of a small gang. Initially they picked up youths with nowhere else to go. Kirisu was a nuisance to the seventh branch, so he was captured and it almost came to teaching him the hard way, but the head of the seventh branch took such a liking to him that he improbably survived. There was a huge fuss - "work for me", "live at my house", "be my son-in-law". Yeah, they even tried to give him a marriage certificate. Of course, he refused, saying he didn't understand what was going on.

But the young successor and leader of the seventh branch wasn't as taken in. The spanner in the works suddenly became a new family member by the head's own seal, he couldn't even teach the arrogant prick a lesson, and his place as a successor took a hit. Therefore Nishino Harusumi took him under his wing as a temporary measure.

However, Nishino and Kirisu met even before moving on to the present relationship.

"Oh, thank you. I'm grateful for the words alone, please pass on my thanks."

"Got it. The chief is happy to talk about you, and it's easier for me too... Oh yeah. The director's son has a wedding next week. I'd like to send him a present, but it's too sudden. Be a good boy, prepare a million."

"Before next week?.."

"Before tomorrow. In cash."

A million yen. This is twice the last week's tax. He can gather 500 thousand a month, but Kirisu has to work his ass off for that; it isn't easy money.

"I'm sorry. I just collected the money. Getting a million is somewhat..."

"Are you an idiot? Like I care about your problems."

Nishino's stare bore into Kirisu letting him know that the talk is over.

Such are the juniors' days. Kirisu is all pros for Nishino and Nishino is all cons for Kirisu. The system is that should something happen to Kirisu he'll help, protect; but, of course, he'll be the one coming for the money. Kirisu Yaichiro for Nishino Harusumi is an eyesore, but also a reliable wallet.

And still, remembered Kirisu, the one who was this man's senior was a man many steps higher.

"Uh huh. And also, hmm, what's with those guys we put down last month?"

"All done. The ringleader killed himself, so there won't be new shipments. In a month there'll be nothing left."

"Good. But you know, Yaichi. The boss is saying this suicide is too handy. You get me?"

"Come on. We really have nothing to do with that. Anyway, you know better than me. You have a man in the police after all."

"Hah. Just kidding. You're so neat I decided to scare you a bit."

Of course it's no joke. Nishino'll be in trouble if his junior is too stupid. Or if he's too smart.

Until last month there was a cheap tranquillizer going around in Shikura. Now drug control isn't the seventh branch's main business, but that still was an invasion on their territory. To save their influence they had to join in. In that situation Kirisu Yaichiro was the one to end that teenager gang. A smartass of the same age.

"I won't do anything dangerous. And if there's trouble, I'll ask for your advice."

"You think like a winner. Heh. All right, here's some. So, Yaichi. You smell of burning."

Smell of burning. Meaning the police are close to catching you.

"..."

Nishino's fast eagle eyes quickly examined Kirisu's face colour. Not to reveal the junior's weakness. Nishino didn't care about Kirisu's reputation in the family. But he can't be caught by the police. Or it'll be like a mine exploding under the shovel you're digging with.

"Heh... Playing dumb. Oh well. Watch your step, Yaichi. There's a lot mixed under your feet."

"Understood. Thank you for the advice."

"Uh-huh. If you have nowhere to go, lay low. I'll at least help."

"Hahaha... Nah. With brother Nishino I'll lay so low I'll never get up again."

"Hush. Maybe I'd like to, but the chief will bury me alive. Watch out, you hear me? If you see trouble, run while you can."

In the end Nishino Harusumi showed himself a proper senior and stood up. Usually he was accompanied by a few henchmen, but he came to the meeting alone. This man didn't really match Kirisu, but at least he thought like a proper senior.

"But you know, Yaichi? They do say that a junior's audacity is a senior's profit, do what you want. But while still young, keep away from blood. Then again, your spectacular dealings recently are very good. Yeah, great. I didn't think it was possible. Most importantly, keep order in the casino."

"Uh huh... So, continue in the same vein? We can stop with the dirt and drubbing?"



"Yeah. All's smooth, no need to work your fingers to the bone for the senior. But, Yaichi, be right. If they break the bounds, press. Don't spare the offenders. If you gave a promise, don't forget it, is what I'm saying."

Be right. A saying of Nishino's.

A force group not touching respectable people. A mafia proud of not growling at those who respect it. To look at it the other way, they're people whose sign is a bloody punishment to those who dared disrespect even once.

"Uh huh. But I'm not gonna become a mafiosi."

"The family's got nothing to do with it. I'm saying "be smart"."

The bald man wearing sunglasses didn't really persuade Kirisu Yaichiro.

"Ah. By the way, brother Nishino. Don't you have any spare debtors, by chance?"

"What's that? Well, I'll pass it on, speak."

"Nothing much, there's just this guy who fell for a stupid scam. I wondered if there's someone like this, but with a scary mug, we can use to take money off even dumber whelps."

"Got it. Hmm, what, you gonna get money off that?"

"No. I just want to be right, like you said. The sight of a sufferer going to sleep in tears gives me bad dreams."

Parting with Nishino, Kirisu went away from the station, towards the offices.

There's too much expected from him again, but at least the unpleasant part is over. Now he only needs to outlive this quiet melancholy. He was in no mood to have fun with girls and so decided to wait it off in the usual secret spot.

For the sake of context let's clarify that Nishino Harusumi had pretty bad sight.

'Yaichi. You smell of burning.'

"Damn baldie, — Kirisu thought, annoyed, — Before being that smug at least get a haircut." He didn't need Nishino's help to know his territory was being investigated. When Nishino looked at Kirisu inquisitively, he sighed inwardly and made an honest face. The info was late. Rather than put on airs and treat him like a debtor, he should've given something useful...

"Sorry, can I have your attention? Let me pray for your happiness."

"..."

No luck. Some strange barkers are bothering him. "I'm in a hurry", — said Kirisu and turned into an office district alley.

There was an old shopping arcade. Since the JR trains were launched shops grew all over the station, the customers here became rarer, and now it was a real ghost town.

An arcade titled "Fureai-doori", the Touching street, open to rain streams and now faceless. The shops lined up on it, the windows hidden by metal curtains.

Like a scene from a western. It only lacks the tumbleweed in the wind. After walking down it for a few minutes Kirisu came near a small cinema. The building was getting old, but that only helped the great atmosphere. A façade resembling a Western mansion. A narrow entrance, only able to handle two or three people in a row, behind which, deep in the hall, Kirisu saw a spiral staircase.

It isn't a cinema so much as a "cinematograph". The remnant of an era when films were the peak of the entertainment industry. Dreams were gifted to all who entered, the reality forgotten; a poor and beautiful time.

"Hey, grandpa. Can I come in?"

On the window there was an old man light-heartedly rowing a boat. Putting a thousand yen note into the window, Kirisu passed the old door. Making a spin up the spiral staircase, he opened the doors leading to the hall on the second floor. Sometimes there are oddity lovers like him, but mainly the place is his. Today, as usual, he was the only customer.

"Pfft, french romance again! Why does grandpa like it so much..."

He positioned his large body in the armchair. The sofa, not tended to, is all dusty.

A scene and less than fifty places.

A tapping projector.

The sound of the ripped speaker and the laughable silver curtain covered in tea-coloured stains.

Nothing changed since Kirisu's childhood.

"..."

Barely breathing, filling the abyss of nostalgia, he leaned on the armchair's back.

...Every day is interesting.

Kirisu Yaichiro loved his new life with all of his heart.

A tumbleweed man whom the yakuza life fitted from the very beginning. The according entertainment and the according thrill. If you have a bro you can mess around and laugh with you've got nothing to complain about. Even if you are to die in a gutter ten years later: "Well, it happens", — this antisocial person seriously thought that.

The thought of sacrificing the present for the future didn't come up for Kirisu Yaichiro. Not "didn't ever come to mind", but "didn't come up". Even if he felt responsibility, he did on the level of feeling the need to make some children. Like, I'll fulfil the duty of reproduction, just leave me alone - this is Kirisu Yaichiro's creed.

"But yeah. Seems boring... Seriously, how long can you watch this, it's boring!"

A foreign film without subtitles.

A fragmentarily understandable plot.

The kind lovers are trapped in the villain's seductions, but prevail - a typical love story. "How can you watch this without yawning?" - Kirisu wondered? He was absorbing not the film, but the cinematographic theatre. Childhood. At times two good friends came here. Since then the old man has gone senile, and you could watch films for free, just sneaking past him.

"Dumbass. Why are you falling for such an... obvious trick?" - he thoughtlessly berated the main character on the screen.

The villain is singing: "For the most important thing you have I'll grant your greatest wish."

"Obvious con!" - Kirisu clicks his tongue.

If you exchange the most important thing for you for any wish, however great, nothing changes in the end.

Childhood. The "adult" who appeared on that red court tried to seduce him with this phrase. Even as a small kid he saw the catch in the phrase. And shook his head - "I won't fall for this".

But. In the end Kirisu was satisfied. Thus it was a contract without chance of losing for the man without anything important.

"..."

Watching the boring film, he slowly fell to the snares of Morpheus.

A dark cinema.

Unintelligible foreign speech.

His hearing is hit by a loud noise, and a traffic accident happens on the screen. The hood wrinkles. The bolts are bending. A wheel flies off. The heroine runs to her beloved. A mafiosi's head flies off. Red blood draws a track on the highway.

And this sound - splotch!

Made him remember the feeling in his hands when crushing a human skull for yet another time.

"..."

Kirisu's sleepiness was gone. Fighting the nausea, he assured himself that it was going to pass soon.

The lovers hug. The film goes by the final titres, and the speakers emit applause as the curtain lowers, rustling. The end.

"Too old. The cinemas with lowering curtains aren't the thing nowadays, grandpa."

Perhaps this, too, will be a classic.

Long ago, when Kirisu was still a kid, his friend tried to raise the curtain. Perhaps he wanted to see what happens next. That story had a continuation, and if you raise the curtain, perhaps, the story will keep on? The friend thought that, for sure.

Kirisu didn't. He knew the curtain has nothing to do with the film, and he felt no regret towards the film. He was one of those who could understand - what's over, is over. This is why he kept making scandals and cutting off paths in high school. And in the end he couldn't keep deceiving himself and left baseball, but he didn't get any special traumas.

He regrets, but he isn't tied to the past.

Like this film.

The show time is over, and that's it.

"Yeah. Actually, it's the curtains already. A decent viewer gets up and leaves."

Coming to a really refreshing conclusion - "what's said is done" - Kirisu left the hall.

The short break in the cinema did its job. With an enlightened face and fleeting steps Kirisu was returning to the office district.

"Can I? Pray for your happiness..."

The suspicious barker kept on. In this heat the woman, wearing a permanent smile, was preaching revelations to the passers-by.

Kirisu, filled with stubbornness, wondered whether she didn't have anything better to do, and...

"Wait. What was that?"

He froze in place, as though he saw a ghost. Kirisu Yaichiro's sight was fixed on some toffish guy. Looking closely, it was an owner of a specific, mysterious silhouette, and still, however odd that is, a dandy.

By the way, it's the ninth of August, 2004.

No need to say anything; the one-handed man carelessly walking the street was Ishizue Arika, just released from clinic.

### 3/S. VS.S-1

(04.08)

"Arika-chan, it's not good for you to appear here now! The previous Arika-chan caused so much trouble, we're still neck-deep in it. Well of course, she was young, brimming with energy. I just feel like she's gonna rob me any moment now, you know?" — and so on.

I left the fun Origa clinic, returned to this world with a light heart and was met by summer, a turbulent tide of domestic issues and this precious tirade by my neighbour, Niijima-chan.

"Oh? You really think she'll do that?"

"Yes! It was common with her here. Well, her apartment is on the fourth floor, right? So, if something happens, no one can come help. And no one really wants to anyway."

As usual, this man wearing thick make-up and a bahama, Niijima-chan, is courtesy itself. I really wish he'd blabber what he really thinks for once. Well, in this place, where no effort is spared to avoid disturbing the neighbours, I'm at least thankful for the verbal support.

Shikura city has plenty of establishments tasked with the welfare of the possessed... A-syndrome carriers. This is the thirteenth of them. Initially a multi-story housing for the poor, from this year on it's aimed at people who, like me, were released from the Origa clinic.

A six-story ferro-concrete structure stretched upwards. No balconies, and all passages are internal. You could say it's purposely made so that those within and without have no way to know what's happening on the other side. Like a large prison.

As Niijima-chan said, Ishizue Arika's room is the last in the row on the fourth floor. If you're attacked, you can't just jump out of the window. Well, the windows are barred just against that, but still.

"Arika-chan, are you listening? Do you have anywhere to live? If not, you can stay over at my place."

Of course, Niijima-chan has no ulterior motives. People like him are gentlemen through and through. So they categorize all heteros of their sex as just "friends". Oh, maybe that's not gentlemanship, but ladyship or something...

"Hmm. Well, I can still live at my old home. Thankfully, it's going to stand there till September, so I'll sleep here or there as my mood directs."

It's an uncomfortable talk, but an attack while I'm sleeping is bad. I'm already connected to A-syndrome carriers as it is. Make too much noise or simply get into trouble, and Mato-san will be the first to find out.

"Okay then. Oh yeah, you got a job yet? The previous Arika-chan was good at that, but this one is having trouble, right?"

It's a shame to disappoint this caring guy again, but I have made my choice yesterday. With good terms, too. Well, in many a sense you can't see this job from the side.

Year after year Shikura is modernizing around the railway station, but go two or three kilometers away from it, and you'll see nothing but fields and mountains. The airport's stripes and the highway do make the sight more lively, but look past the curtain, and you'll see nothing more than a backwater town of the S prefecture. The only reason they could build the airport in the first place was because there's a lot of land and no one on it.

This plain, definitely not a lone island but a sea of dirt, is covered by forests, and one of them is my new workplace.

Wilderness no man visits.

An anti-fire reservoir with water, just as abandoned.

This may sound like an anecdote, but it turns out there's a cellar decorated with antiques under this. Truly, a secret house which would shine on any auction. Normal people don't visit such places, of course. A closed world, completely cut off from bustle, having renounced the outside world. These were the private lands of the Karyou family which lived near the Shikura hill.

However, everyday scores of messengers from the outer world visit this place. For whatever reason there's a municipal bus stop near the forest, which, like an interstellar train, stands before the forest for a while and then rides off back into the town.

The rusty stop has a heavily faded sign: "Torinonori".

Going deeper into the forest, I walk through it for several minutes. Suddenly the view becomes wider, and a clearing with the reservoir appears. A lone lamp outside. This space looks like someone just scooped the forest out with a spoon. A huge cubic cement building.

Today I'm here for the second time, but the feeling of reality is still nowhere to be found.

I don't know how many more times I'm going to come here, but I'll probably never get used to this landscape.

The summer sun above evaporates all the smell from the grass. It makes me dizzy, but I stretch my hand out to the reservoir door.

Behind the door...

There's a flight of stairs going underground in the inky darkness.

Here is that which I call a closed world — a nebula with no light. Just from seeing this darkness you begin feeling like monsters from horror movies are there, crawling towards you unseen.

This gives me chills. I flinch, but step on the stairs and close the door, too afraid to look behind me and check.

The light outside is almost gone. There's only the echo of my steps in the darkness. Navigating the stone corridor by the touch, I find the doorknob.

"Hello. Welcome, Ishizue-san."

...I cover my eyes to avoid the overly sterile sight.

The sky is replaced by a chamber of water.

The reservoir's bottom is this world's ceiling. The fiery sun's light passes through the glass opening.

The merciless heat of 36 degrees Celsius, purified by over ten meters of blue water, becomes a beautiful glow lighting the underground room.

In the centre of the room is a luxurious bed with a canopy, on which something anthropomorphic is lying on its side.

Looks about fourteen.

The silk of long black hair, facial features, deeply drawn, but attractive to a forgiving onlooker. An unknown country's blood was the cause of these transparent eyes resembling silver.

Possessing generally perfect features... a disabled youth.

He was the master of the room and my current employer.

All of his limbs are prosthetic. This is the one who promised to find the right one for Ishizue Arika, the youth named Karyou Kaie.

There's a demon living in the forest.

I heard these rumours later, when I was assigned to those possessed who were still at large and active.

So at the moment Karyou Kaie was to Ishizue Arika no more than a mysterious, careless employer wasting his life who gave him an easy job and promised him a rare prosthesis.



The only son of a wealthy man lost his limbs in an accident and now lives a serene life away from people. What else could I think?

...Caring for an immobilized child.

It's a sinecure. Even with one hand I'll manage this much.

The only condition is not to ask about the employer's past or present.

I'm moved to tears. What a kind soul must one be to hire a newly released Origa inmate? It almost sounds like he's looking for death.

And a prosthesis collector, to boot.

I feel like a punctual ferry that, for whatever reason, is being welcomed by rolling out a red carpet and staging a parade. Apparently, the reason is that Karyou Kaie himself needs prosthetics. Even with his creepy collection of various artificial limbs his speech is perfectly normal. What's with his place, and, anyway, how did he manage before? — these questions don't matter before such privileges.

Thus Ishizue Arika got involved with that which no one should.

With the underground room's demon. With a friend you can't stop without plunging a knife into his defenceless heart, one who may have been the source of many an evil.

In other words, karyou Kaie was the perfect employer.

Straightforward, always with a friendly smile, behaves so much like a beautiful girl that I often lament his not being one — I would've fallen in love instantly. It was unsettling that at times he sounded strangely mature, mocking, but that's part of his zest. After the daily meal I write down in my beloved notebook: "Karyou-san. To a long acquaintance". This isn't exaggerated, but rather too pure an opinion. You meet such a perfect employer only once.

"Ishizue-san, you write down so much in that notebook. Is it a habit?"

"No, it's more of a necessary thing. At night I forget the day's events. Can't remember a thing. So if I need to keep some memory, I have to write it down, or it'll be gone."

Karyou-san's pupils turn into dots.

"I say... Is it like anterograde memory loss? When you only have short-term memories."

"No, I remember everything while it's still day. A memory loss... amnesia, right? When you can't even remember your own name, much less other things. It's not that bad for me, and it affects only the time after the symptoms manifested — no, not that for sure... I simply forget what happened during the day at sunset. It's like the day resets. So the important things, those connected to the future, I write down. Then it's mostly fine. And in the evening I simply read and memorize properly, so don't worry."

"And this happens every day? Many such things restore themselves in a short while."

True, they say that many anterograde amnesia cases come to pass within 24 hours. Anterograde amnesia is a brain function related to awareness. Usually it happens when the blood flow in the temple zone of the brain, where the primary hearing zone and some other things are located, decreases. There's little harm to the brain itself, so it resumes working after restoring the flow. My case, when every day at a set moment you lose the memory of the time before it, isn't a case of anterograde amnesia.

"Well, it's not as bad as you think. If you know what to do with this, it's fine. You'll see that tomorrow... Still, it's a rare syndrome, so it's normal to be impressed."

"Heh. Well, now I am interested in what's going to happen tomorrow... but the amazing thing is not your syndrome but your attitude. ...Ah, I see. So the fact that you can't recall the day before isn't that bad for you personally, right?"

The black-haired beauty began giggling.

"?.."

This time my sight darkened. What's with him? Was there anything to giggle this weirdly about?

"Uh huh. Okay, Arika-san, I'll give you this prosthesis for a while."

Karyou-san took his black left arm off with his right and held it out to me.

A prosthesis imitating the upper part of an arm from shoulder to elbow.

Usually when you lose an arm beginning with a joint it's called "amputated", and when it's lost beginning from the middle of a bone, as if the bone broke off, it's called "cutting off". The difference is whether the part was severed from the body completely or simply took damage.

In my case the arm was cut off, and the prosthesis was made for such situations.

My first impression was a statue of a woman.

Not a single joint, the rear is obviously made of alabaster. While pretty, I wasn't expecting anything of it — just a decoration to restore my "proper look".

"Take it. You can try it right here."

The black-haired boss smiled.

How to put it... Even knowing his gender, this beauty was too tempting to write off the possibility of falling for it regardless — and now this beauty is looking up at me with an expectant look.

Yeah, they do compare some smiles to flowers. But there was a smile in the world before which flowers paled.

"..."

Frowning, I take the suspicious prosthesis.

Its end is pitch black. There isn't even a bracing. Well, there are two straps on the upper part — apparently you put it next to your shoulder and strap it on, like a medical brace.

"I'm sorry, Karyou-san... Do I have to pretend I have an arm attached or something?"

Karyou-san ignores my quip with a smile. Like, come on, do it already.

Fine... Say what I will, my arm doesn't have a fixation for prosthetics either. Actually it's better that this one is made like a detail to tack on a figurine.

A year and a half ago I lost my left arm. In the darkness, awaking from the noise, I saw my sister climbing on my bed and licking herself clean — unusual circumstances indeed. My missing arm, as though it always was like this, suddenly wasn't there. Usually, if an arm is gnawed off, the nerves report insane pain from the tearing muscles and breaking bones. Blood flows freely, and death is near. But the cut was perfectly closed. Smoothly. As though welded shut.

This cut that didn't even leave a scar and the statue not caring about its role as a prosthesis were, it could be said, in a fateful harmony...

"Ah..."

...and at the moment of the precise connection, as though they were made for each other, I'm pierced by fear. I feel an indescribable chill go down my spine.

"Eh... ah, gh, mm..."

My vision goes dark. My head is wrapped in light. I feel horror, as though huge black fingers are stroking my entire body...

"Hm, feels so good you can't even stand? Then you can use that sofa there. Yeah... I did suspect they'd match, but I didn't think it'd be so pleasant. What a trip... Really, Ishizue-san, you're so strange."

An ecstatic voice... A strange smile — that of a snake before a frog, of a spider grasping its prey.

The devil hides in the most beautiful things. A normal human would feel such a creature, but, sadly, I lost my danger sense along with the arm. This is the biggest after-effect of the loss of my left arm; since that night a year and a half ago I lost the ability to "feel danger" from dangerous creatures and situations. In Origa it was "psychological damage", but now it's an incurable syndrome.

So yeah, the boy before me wasn't human — but it's not like he had glowing red eyes or something; he wasn't an ubermensch like Maruko-chan, happily taking houses apart with her bare hands; it's not scary enough to run away, and I sink into the sofa.

"Incredible... There can't be such a comfortable place in the world!"

Maybe I'm drunk on the black poison of the prosthesis.

Letting the slowed-down remark out, I give up and close my eyes.

Thus the sheep gather at lightspeed. My consciousness limply falls into the sofa.

"Huh?.. Hey, hey, what's with you? You're too defenceless! Okay, it's fun to be drunk, but I want someone to talk to!"

Slightly fluttering his long hair, Karyou-san tries to get out of the bed. Alas, he can't do anything alone, and the pretty creature sadly writhes on the antique bed.

"No, no, it's too much! Damn it, stay conscious, Ishizue-san! Wake up, pleeease! I do feel uneasy saying this, but still, I'm against sleeping at work!.."

It seems Karyou-san really is a philanthropist. Seeing his long-awaited conversation partner falling into slumber, he looks seriously down and nervous. But I can't resist the Maries coming from all over the country with their sheepies.

Such is the day after making the contract for two hundred thousand yen a month with the demon of the underground room. Acquiring the experience of the otherworldly prosthesis matching my left arm, I fall into calm sleep amidst the poppy fields.

When I opened my eyes, the state of the underground room was very different.

It was dark above, and the sky was very deep. The planets seem so distant from here. Only the Moon lights the European room outside the river of Time.

"Ah... khm."

And in this quiet and a bit exalted space I thoughtlessly made a sound. My hair stood on ends. I, having forgotten danger, was kicked out of sleep by the sixth sense screaming: "It's dangerous here!"

Straining my eyes, I discerned the movements of a huge fish in the darkness of the ceiling.

And under the sofa a black dog, snuffling, was dragging on someone's trouser-leg.

And, to finish me off, — my employer, intently watching me from the bed with a canopy.

"Ah, uhh. Umm, good morning!"

I hastily tried to wave my hand, but didn't manage.

Because it was too unpleasant. In the room's darkness Karyou-san's eyes looked like glittering gems, halves of his irises akin to moons cut off by the sea horizon, and the left eye was saying "You", while the right — "are fired", so menacing was the stare.

Actually, why am I here?

How come this pretty face is contorted with anger? I tried to think and seemingly came to the right conclusion.

"Uhh... I'm not sleeping. Totally not, for sure."

"Boo. What's wrong with your upbringing, Ishizue-san?"

Spot on! No mistake, I really fell asleep during the first day!

"I have no excuse. Yes, I'm truly sorry, but can I please know what happened here? Ah, did I explain my syndrome?"

"Yes, you did. You forget the events of the day. By the way, Ishizue-san decided to take a nap around 13 o'clock. Now it's 21 o'clock, and you can see what state I was in all this time", — Karyou-san maliciously smiles. The fear pervading me head to toe is finally gone with that.

"I'm truly sorry... I'll do everything within and without my power so that this doesn't happen tomorrow..."

"Fine, fine. I'm sure this is going to happen often. If you react this emotionally every time, I'll be the one to apologize soon. He's my witness, I think I'll put up with this trait of yours, Ishizue-san."

"He?"

I lower my gaze. There's a black dog near my feet. Apparently it is that "he". And stop slobbering my trousers, will you?

"S-so I'm not fired?.."

"No. I'll simply change my policy. In half a day I understood what kind of a person you are."

He paused.

"Yeah... Playing a comedy routine before the likes of you is simply tiring. It's like pampering a chained dog, pointless. Now I'll be merciless and relentless. Consider it a collar on your neck, Ishizue-san."

With the last "san" his eyes sparkled. The raised corner of his mouth was a dog trainer's smile, thinking about how to train a dog.

"..."

I thoughtlessly flip through my notebook, where things like "Karyou-san, good" are written.  
Oh ho. The day me, you're insane.

**(05.08)**

Long story short, this is how my new life began.

I'll settle down in №13, sell my old house next month and work in the forest. Personally I dislike wandering the streets, but to live on I'll have to throw my pride away and get out of this district. Locking themselves in an underground room and enjoying life is a pastime only for the wealthy.

With no relation to my personal issues, Nijima-chan was right. Shikura city I left a year and a half ago was reeking of trouble.

Either due to the passage of time or because there was stuff more interesting than sleep, the number of youngsters wandering the night streets noticeably rose, and their behaviour was less restrained. During school I was afraid of wandering the night, but now this festival of life seemed to have become official. If there's no fights, why restrain the kids? It was probably like that.

"Oh, Arika-sempai?"

In the convenience store I saw a familiar face.

"Wow, cool clothes! What, you're in a band? You made a band? You don't look like that kind of a perWHAT?! What the hell, where's your arm? How?! Why?! Dude, you're a treasure of Sakurazaka, you can't just go and lose an arm!"

This was a big man. Of course, as a recently-graduated bum, he carried vegetable juice and the like in his basket.

"You know what. It's my phrase, Shimashou. You weren't like this either. And don't be so loud, we're not at a lesson."

Meaning the trouble we're giving the other customers, I rein the large junior in.

"Ah, sorry. Y-yeah, this kinda thing doesn't happen without good reason. Apologies. I'm still a kid, even though I've graduated already."

The junior earnestly apologizes. It must be an athlete's temper that makes him nervous around seniors. We've been in touch for over a year and a half, but still...

"Yeah, you don't develop at all."

I finish my purchases before he does.

"Ah, wait, sempai, stop!"

He shouts while shoving money to the cashier.

I sigh. More trouble again... Oh well. At least the face reflected in the window is smiling good-naturedly.

Before that I was heading for the Ishizue house on the Shikura hill, and my buddy had missed the last train. Must have been fate.

"You can use any room on the first floor. Ah, I forgot, can you cook?"

"I can make curry. Well, and stuff like onigiri."

"Uh. You're like that old man, the manager."

Due to a sad, deeply rooted habit we, naturally, decided he'll stay over at my place without any hidden motives.

"Dude, I haven't seen you lately. Did you go somewhere?"

"I was in a hospital for almost a year. And I still don't really understand what was I doing there. And you, Shimashou? What did "Koalas" manage to achieve? It was sad to lose the regional qualification finals last year..."

"Ugh, don't ask. This year it wasn't even the finals... aah, they smashed us so bad, I still have bad dreams."

"Smashed? With such a team? You even transferred because ours couldn't beat "Koalas"."

"Uh huh. I was never beaten that easily. I thought "Koalas" were the best last year, too. Ah dammit, why did it turn out like this? If only that Kazumi's brains worked a little bit better!"

Koalagaoka is one of Shikura high schools competing with the first of them nicknamed KouraKou. Both hotly support baseball, and those in the know say KouraKou attacks and Koala defends.

"Uh huh... Shimashou, which batter pitcher was the last? Did you get to the fourth one?"

"Nah, we stopped at three, just as you said. Actually we had a candidate for the fourth, but long-ranged hits aren't for me after all."

"Dumbass. Did you really need to transfer to Koala to understand that?.. Damn. With you we'd have a perfect batter set. However good you are as a fourth, you can't win at baseball alone."

"Ha ha ha. The people from other schools were now openly judged against. It was especially bad at the warm-up the second year spring. No one plays fair with the high schools. I watched the "Koala" — KouraKou match myself. It's just wrong to do things this way."



"Of course. They were undercut so hard Shikura's old baseball guard went to protest that. Thanks to them we could have a decent match during summer. Well, the moments when the runner didn't start."

A nostalgic dialogue. In the end we spent the whole night talking. From the Ishizue house, covered in various stories, laughter was heard. I understood the neighbours were frowning and couldn't sleep. They probably were spitting stories about the mass murderer having returned home, but let them leave him in peace at least for today. The man has only gained freedom. If you don't give him even that little happiness, he won't want to live.

"Duuude, thank you so much!"

The night that took us three years back in time ended. Both of us sleepy, I was going to turn the lights off and sleep when I heard these monotone words without a hint of gratitude.

"Huh? What for?"

"Come on. I left KouraKou when the trainer couldn't stand me, it's a fact! With his damn theory — stay straight, smaller steps, wider shoulders, hit more laconically, so annoying."

"Ah. Yeah, our trainer was like that. What of it?"

"Well, you said to me then — batting is not a style, it's a dynamic, and there's no point changing moves native to me. When I said that at "Koalas", I was accepted at once."

He's polite. Such chatter gives no support. The only thing that helped him was his willpower.

"It's just that you're talented... I've never seen you bat since, though. What can I say?"

"Ah. By the way, dude, do you know about SVS?"

"Nah, first time. What's that, some batting centre? I can go with you if you want."

"Really?! Hooray, then even tomorrow's fine... Aah... nah, forget it. Sorry."

I'll be sneaky. Understood... I'm a respected batter. Ishizue Arika he admired can't hold a bat any more. He didn't grasp that at once.

"By the way. About that trainer, did you know he left that second year spring?"

"Oh, this sack of crap?! The one who said he's in this till death and who proolly couldn't die anyway, that one?!"

"Well, it was like this. After the spring screening there was a muting. So for the summer he decided to go to the child league and became a spartan there. Like, I'll become a demon. For that I'll throw the unnecessary things away, and, well, cursed at a first year kid, threatened to beat him up, this bastard."

"Damn, this one could... Wait, what for?"

"Ah. When our manager heard that phrase, he just nodded and said, like, that's how you do it! He was impressed. Waltzed up, took a bat aaand hit the trainer's backside with a fullswing. He was like "What the hell are you doing?!" And the manager was like "Well, I thought a trainer for them is the least necessary of all."

"Cool! Manager is cool!"

Shimashou roars with laughter, clutching his belly.

It's lucky he took it as an anecdote. When we stood near, we paled and definitely weren't thinking of laughing.

**(09.08)**

Before the thirteenth was the "Marion" cafe.

It was an unpopular spot, but the menu was large and the food tasted good, so it was a pretty good place. The quiet of a restaurant on the verge of bankruptcy, where the peak of customer numbers reaches about ten, has to be mentioned, too.

Near the window of that same "Marion", where a respectable burgher wouldn't poke his nose, a stunning beauty was sitting at the best table.

She looked twenty-five to thirty. A half-blood's face, height about 170 cm, perfect model forms. Grand eyebrows, as though drawn with a thin paintbrush, and a calm stare to match; slanted almond-like eyes looked with a softness natural to the woman.

The accessories stood out enough to attract attention, but not to overshadow, and if you looked closely, you'd see the dangerous bulge of a holster under the armpit. The waist-length hair was erotically gathered in a ponytail around the nape of the neck.

"So, Shozai. You are seriously going to look after that kid?"

This embodiment of the word "beauty", our Mato-san, made an order inconceivable in the morning - gentleman loin steak for both - and swiftly set down the plates.

Perfect manners not suitable for this cafe. At the same time sitting in front of her and watching the perfect, beautiful, swift, bandit-like movements of her fork and knife took my own appetite away.

"Are you against it, Mato-san?"

"Of course. Obviously, if you get involved with him, you'll either die or get killed. Honestly, you amaze me. Did your survival instincts atrophy even further after Origa?.. Damn. Stop doing that thing with your hand under the table. At that rate you'll make it limp soon."

"..."

It's like that. A visit every four days. One of the conditions of my release from Origa was the appointment of a supervisor to Ishizue Arika personally to judge his "social rehabilitation", just as big a pain as always.

Touma Mato.

In the clinic she wears a white lab coat, like a doctor, but in the outer world she is dressed in a brand suit, as suits a careerist, creating an irresistible beauty.

But her true face is one of a working woman trusted with government authority, reminding one of an older sister. She's a big official from a state department specially arriving in S prefecture to investigate the A syndrome.

As Dr. Dolittle blurted out to me, she used to work in the security services, but a much bigger mystery was her title of a gang inspector. Since she only got an inspector's badge upon arriving here, she definitely must be a careerist.

"Come on. Aren't you going to eat?"

Oblivious of my conflicting feelings, Mato-san looks the untouched sausage on a bone over. This glutton doesn't like to leave leftovers and finishes every meal, just like a proper lady.

"If you won't, I will... Damn. Wasn't enough. Should have taken 200 grams."

Without waiting for an answer Mato-san steals my breakfast along with the plate(!). She is educated, for sure, but what's with this result?

"Well, you know... I have no idea what you're angry about, but it was you who introduced Kaie to me, Mato-san! As a man understanding the importance of social protection I can't just abandon him. That'd be inhumane."

"Hey. Are you saying that seriously?"

"No, I'm sorry, I just want the prosthesis. But, Mato-san. What's with this prosthesis of his? There's no phantom pain, and it moves just like I want it to."

"Oho. I knew it can move, but no phantom pain, you say?"

Stopping her fingers looming over the sausage in excitement, she ordered me to explain in more detail.

"Well, I wore it only twice and can't really give much detail, but that phenomenon when the missing left arm hurts wasn't there at all."

Ishizue Arika's left arm was lost a year and a half ago. There's no threat to his life, he can manage without the arm and doesn't really care, but the very fact of armlessness tends to unnerve people.

A life with prosthetic limbs affects not only the usual routine, but the psyche as well. If you have a prosthesis, the people around stop pitying you. This prosthesis has all pros and no cons, but for whatever reason I can't force myself to wear it.

It's an odd thing. Without prosthetics the stump doesn't bother me at all, but as soon as I put one on, the missing arm starts hurting.

Lost limbs, it could be said, are diametrically opposite to phantom pains, which cause incredible suffering.

Most phantom pains are described by medicine as neural reactions, but some are without cause, brought about by psychological stress. My pain seems to be of that category. In short this means it's even worse than normal phantom pain.

"What about work? How well can that arm move?"

"The same as a real one. There are no devices like voltmeters to detect nerve impulses at all. But it's so neat, it's scary... Come to think of it, he's an acquaintance of yours, Mato-san. What is it, some result of possessed research?"

"Sadly, there are no results to that research. It didn't come to practical use. The people in Origa expected much from your sister, but lately nothing good has happened. They say they almost can't handle her, not even kill."

Huh. I'll let the last, brutal, phrase slide; the topic of the day is "possession".

It isn't some occult thingy, but an informal name for a virulent disease which began spreading about twenty years ago.

Formally it's called the "Agonist syndrome". The term generally means a brain tumour leading to "a disorder of vegetative regulation accompanied by an intensive maniacal-depressive syndrome".

Indeed, the early stage of A-syndrome resembles a mental disorder. An expansion or contraction of "ego". Friction with other people, a tendency towards individualism. Brain activity gone crazy that you can't handle alone.

The cornered emotional chemistry causes an anomalous secretion of a neurotransmitter that is a toxic agonist and puts great stress on the brain receptors.

Receptors are a formant of neural tissue that sets the direction of bodily activity. To resolve the constant stress of the toxin the receptors activate new bodily controllers.

If you feel pain you get a painless body.

If you want to return to an animal you unlock animal potential.

These changes are very individual, but they generally are outside human bounds.

Change as a result of the physical body's actions aimed at stopping the psyche from falling apart. This metamorphosis is hard to describe as something other than a "demonic possession". Thus the nickname "possessed".

The reason for the anomalous secretion is called the affected organ.

And the "ability to solve the problem" born by the agitated receptors is called the neoformation.

The Origa clinic is a special health centre created for those with A-syndrome. The patients, looked after by caring overseers like Mato-san, go to Origa and have no contact with society until they're cured.

The clinic was akin to a prison, but since this year - apparently due to a clash with human rights groups - it had to open the doors for a few patients to keep face.

Under the assumption that us two could attempt to reintegrate into the society, I, Ishizue Arika, and Hisaori Makina were allowed to leave. I wasn't a syndrome patient, though. Just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. My possessed relative in D building, that sister of mine, implicated me.

"Well, enough about that for now. So, Mato-san, you don't know anything about these prosthetics?"

"No. I don't want to bother with something that complicated. That kid and your sister are of the same flock. They're not A-syndrome carriers. But, how to put it..."

So they're not possessed.

'They're demons themselves', - Mato-san almost says something uncharacteristic of her. I don't want to think of this either so I don't press her on this.

"But Kaie still dislikes possessed. The notebook says he forbade talks about them."

"Yeah... He can't tolerate fakes. But the affected organs and neoformations are valuable food sources to him. Shozai. Did you notice that kid's always hungry?"

"..."

Hm... By the way, yes, I think I heard Kaie's stomach rumble even right after dinner?..

"So that's what it is. Well, yeah. In evening, before leaving, I often hear his stomach growl. I ask him whether he's hungry, and he gets shy and asks not to pay attention... Understood, so he's just always hungry..."

A mistake on my part. I thought that since he's small he won't need much food. From now on I'll make the portions bigger.

"..."

I raise my eyes and see the impenetrable visage and a sausage on a bone in Mato-san's hand.

"Actually I was serious just now. What, you like Karyou Kaie so much?"

"Uhh... I don't really know. Kaie himself is not troublesome, decent... Oh, wait, actually he has a rotten character. I feel his soul is similar to yours, Mato-san. Without the money and that prosthesis I wouldn't come anywhere near him. But waiting on him isn't a bother. Well, for example, when there's nothing to talk about, we just sit down and relax... it's not that bad if you're used to it..."

"By the way, you call him strangely. During the last call you were calling him "Kaie-san"."

"Ah? Well, that's what Kaie wanted."

"Explain how it came to that", - orders Mato-san with an icy stare. After the 1.5 year-long training my spine reacts involuntarily. In the end the body has reign over a human, not mind.

"Well... Well, it happened last evening."

"By the way, Ishizue-san, "Kaie-san" sounds unpleasant. You can just say the name without honorifics."

Lying on his side in the bed, my employer made an angelic smile. I don't really remember, but I must've done a good job yesterday.

"Yeah, that's easier, too. Okay, I'll do that starting tomorrow."

I'll admit, it felt wrong to me as well to add "san" - he was younger than me, after all - so that's just great. And if I simply call him "Kaie", the doubt whether he's really not a girl should go away. There's a little time before 19 o'clock, when my workday ended, so I lie down on the sofa and loiter.

The underground room was wrapped in a vaguely uneasy silence, but this was insignificant when compared to the comfort of this sofa.

"Hey, isn't it normal to say something like "Then you can call me by the name as well"?"

A surprisingly downcast voice.

"Really?"

"Well, yes."

"Hmm", - the talk ends.

Then the uneasy silence ended.

Moving a little out of the canopy's shadow, the black-haired employer mumbled, which was a rarity:

"Arika... won't you say this to me?.."

"So, it was like this."

'..."

Mato-san's glare is painful. I wonder what physical law made the uneasy silence move over to this table.

"So? Did you say that?"

"Nah, he began calling me without honorifics anyway, so why bother?"

After that I began calling Kaie "Kaie", and he changed "Ishizue-san" to "Arika".

"What a harmonious couple you two are."

"Om!" - Mato-san ate half the sausage at once.

"Well, it seems pretty normal to me."

"Really harmonious."

Nom. The second go ended the sausage's life in this mortal world.

Mato-san grabbed the second one and discontentedly made it disappear as well. This isn't an uneasy silence any more. This is a terror zone.

"W-wha-what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just figured you can't do anything any more. If you don't even feel danger in his dungeon, you really haven't got long to live. Oh well, the less bothers, the better."

"Oh, come on! I do know that room is dangerous and Kaie is simply a pay check. If things get hot I'll readily run to you for help."

"Why me?"

"Well, who introduced me to Kaie? At least take responsibility for your own ideas."

"Nah, you put your head in the tiger's mouth, Shozai, so you answer. Not my business. If there's anything, it's a sense of duty. I did introduce you, after all."

It seems the chatter lightened her mood - Mato-san's expression became less gloomy. I didn't think she had a sense of duty, though.

"Eh, what's that mean?"

"Well, we did have breakfast together once. At the very least I'll be the one to perform the autopsy."

The duty turned out to presume my untimely end.

"Okay... I'll watch my step carefully while working. That enough?"

"Uh huh. Well, it's dangerous to you to simply live. Don't forget that."

She rose after finishing the last sausage.

The busy Mato-san is heading to work, but I have a day off today.

"By the way, Mato-san. Doesn't your stomach hurt?"

Evil Tomato or not, you can't just up and annihilate that many bones at once.



"Huh? Nah, that's nothing. It's merely the eighth. Me not able to work due to overeating? Not gonna happen."

'Okay, bye', - and Touma Mato leaves, pedantically paying only for herself.

Even if it's a tradition of Touma family to consume everything that's been prepared, she's still an exception among them.

Only upon leaving "Marion" did I feel the strong dizziness.

Afternoon of the Monday when I was free from caring after Karyou Kaie. For the second week straight, even though it's August already, the merciless sun, never letting the temperature fall below 37 degrees, quickly made any wish for action dry up.

It's so hot that even breathing seems dangerous.

We're too dependent on civilization. The moment you don't have an air conditioner available despair comes all over you, as though you fell off a cliff.

Well, this is one of the summer's charms. With the massive, dangerous UV radiation coming from above the heat may not matter that much. If you adopt this pattern of thought, this furnace even seems romantic in a way. It's a luxury to be able to bathe in light so bright you can't open your eyes. The idea of getting over psychological pains and trouble is about learning to value them. Sounds like something a certain kind doctor from Origa would say.

Therefore I trudged towards Yasakadai, 2 stations from here.

Noon of a workday, an empty train.

No one shot sideways glances at a white-haired one-handed guy. The city going by outside the window is the same as a year and a half ago, and, surprisingly, that calmed me down.

"Indeed, nothing changed at all..."

A year and a half ago I used this route every day to go to school and back. The Yasakadai station was just as crowded and filthy, fitting the inelegant student district.

Matrons with shopping bags, youths with too much free time. Taxis waiting on the ring. Sleepy dispensers of free tissues, a field of fliers scattered all over the road.

If I were living my usual life I'd indulge in this nostalgia, but, alas, only the district was the same. The situation changed radically.

It isn't as comfortable as the train was. While simply moving towards the office district I already felt the difference in temperature between myself and others.

Essentially...

"Please, please! Plea... Hey, are you a student? Please..."

...it's kinda unpleasant to suddenly become transparent to everyone...

"Please let me pray for your ha... Oh."

...turning away as though you've just only noticed, too, you know...

"I tell you, next Friday at sunrise! Sleep? You should definitely get some, even though we depart..."

"Hey. Isn't this hard on ya?.."

... and you shouldn't really do this, thank you.

"Isn't this hard on ya?"

I stop upon hearing the whisper.

An unceremonious voice. I turn around - who could that be? - and there... maybe someone I know, maybe not. I don't really want to remember. Looks dangerous.

"So? Isn't this hard on ya? Bullshit. How can you just stroll around like this without a care in the world?"

He started talking even more unceremoniously, but his outfit looked so nonsensical I found myself at a loss.

The guy was wearing a hoodie, for whatever reason putting the hood on his head in this heat. The left arm is naked while the right is wrapped in a long, warm sleeve. He was lower than my eye level, but the challenging voice and stare were directed at me from under the hood.

"Do I know you?"

Ishizue Arika loses his day memories, so this phrase became stock for him.

"Hmm... It's our first meeting face to face, but I know you well. Don't you remember me?"

The voice seems to have become a bit sadder. However, it sounds like he has a cold - it wheezes and it's hard to hear.

"Sorry, I have memory issues. But it's still our first meeting, right?"

The hood nods.

'I know you well.' As though cold, he hugs his right hand with his left.

"Odd... I'm not berating you, but why does everyone speak to me so familiarly from the start?" \*NOTE: our favourite hoodie uses familiar pronouns.\*

"You're a celebrity, duh. Probably everyone from our generation knows ya."

The hooded guy doesn't mean bad. I have no idea what he's talking about, but it seems so to me.

"Well, whatever. So what do you want?"

"Fight me. I see you aren't rusty."

A stare like an arrow. It makes me forget about the sun for a moment.

His voice rings with clear killing intent. A real one I've seen in Origa so many times, a tragic plea - "I need nothing else, just let me kill him".

"No. Sorry, but, uh..."

The only reason I stayed calm after that is my lost ability to sense danger.

"Pleeease. Fight me. I need you, or else I..."

The lethal aura of the hooded boy was sincere, grasping at straws.

Sorry to disappoint, but I really can't fulfil your hopes.

"Well, you see, the issue isn't even my rusty skill."

I show him my left hand. Maybe he couldn't see from under the hood or just didn't notice - anyway, having got a good look at the armless Ishizue Arika, he froze.

"Eh? What?.."

Wait a minute. Then his first question was...

"Wow... But that's betrayal. Aren't you the same? Impossible. We should be the same - state and mind."

He grinds his teeth.

The hooded guy watched me with a completely disgusting killing intent.

"Damn... I'm sad now, sempai. I thought I could at least team up with you", - he spits out in disappointment and turns away.

An unsteady walk.

The man in the hooded jacket is shadowed by the summer heat. He's like a druggie.

Thinking of writing the encounter down, I reach for my notebook, but decide against it; whatever. I didn't meet his expectations anyway. Without incredible luck and coincidence we won't meet again.

And now for something completely different, I'm attacked by a strange impression of university.

Compared to the city, the rejection is smaller, but I'm filled with an atmosphere of "it seems pretty normal". The term "life on campus" sticks in the current me's throat, letting me feel a clean, spotless future.

I'm supposed to be on an academic vacation, and in my current condition day lectures are just sad, like trying to draw a sand picture on the shore. If I really want to get an education, I'll have to visit evening courses.

"Well, what's the chance?"

For the time being I decided not to. Having seen enough, I cross the vast territory.

The fresh-looking greenery takes the summer's sun assault. Sometimes students among whom I, too, was a year and a half ago, pass by. I stomp down the red brick road, speeding up a bit. And suddenly.

"Uooooooooo?!!"

A completely out-of-place shout comes from afar.

I recognize the voice and turn around. There's no one nearby, but in a hundred meters there's a cooperative mess room where I used to eat as a student. So. The students near its window, eating fish with rice (haven't seen that in a while), suddenly jumped up and began shouting.

"..."

I saw nothing, nothing at all; I hurry towards the main entrance.

Behind me - stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp! - scattering the plants, a girl is running.

"Stooooop! Man resembling Arika-sempai, stop this very moment!"

It's about three o'clock. I'll return to the Arika house before dusk if I move right now. There's no more freeloaders, so now I can live in the new apartment like a decent person. Yeah, sounds good.

"And stop ignoring meeee! I know it's you, sempai! This man, so nice at the first glance but actually cold like a snake - definitely Arika-sempai!"

Whoosh! - she drifts on the grass dynamically and stands in my path. The well-mannered girl with a short haircut, wearing shorts.

"I don't understand. Why are you in my university, huh? There's an all-girls college near the industrial zone. You were going to apply there. Did you botch it, dumbass?"

"Pff, grrr!.. But still, I feel more at ease hearing this rudeness. And to save face I'll say I successfully applied where I wanted to, but since you ask why am I not in my university..."

"Yeah, I did ask."

"Yes. So, you advertised this set with fish and rice so much, it's kinda my main food now..."

'What's with this karma?' - my old acquaintance and former junior tilts her head.

The alien from planet Cloudcuckooland, Tsuranui Mihaya, came into contact.

I talked with Tsuranui until ten o'clock and then left for the thirteenth where I've been met by a Niijima-chan with a tense face.

"Arika-chan. You have... guests."

This was the only thing Niijima-chan, who waited for me on the third floor's stairs flight, said before returning to his room. To warn but not to help - her, damn, his motto. I want one like this myself.

On the first floor I go through the entire corridor towards Ishizue Arika's room in my most normal gait.

I decide to quickly leave if there's someone with a knife at the door. I open the lock. If the weapon is scarier and more modern than a knife, well, tough luck.

I turn the doorknob. Go into the lobby. Without taking my shoes off I pass the kitchen and head for the hall.

Here, among scattered boxes with my stuff, the perpetrator of the breaking and entering himself is standing.

Not believing my eyes - why is there such a training maniac? - I look closely. This gorilla with a dumbbell in each hand was busily working on its shoulder belt.

"Oh. Hi, Arika-sempai, I was just passing by."

Not feeling any guilt, the man raises a paw in greeting.

A rough face covered in a stubble since school. It seems today's horoscope predicted meeting old friends for me today.

I haven't seen this school junior for a year and a half. Having looked older than me, a third year, in his second, Kirisu Yaichiro became the just the obvious bandit I expected him to.

"Long time no see? How did you get here?"

"How, opened the door and entered. Not my place to say that, having broken into here and all, but sempai, the locks here aren't worth crap. You'd better change yours."

"Eh, fans of breaking and entering into such places are a rarity. But yeah, the safety measures here are laughable. They say the doorman couldn't care less about his job."

'Okay, sit down', - I tap a box. We both sit down on carton boxes filled with stuff and greet each other again - yo!

"So, what're you doing here? Are you, by any chance, a neighbour who got the wrong room?"

"Good, your tongue is as sharp as ever. Nah, I'm here to talk. Things are kinda hard. But it's nothing to do with you, Ishizue-sempai."

Slowly Kirisu comes around to the reason of his visit.

He says there was a drug dealer in Shikura with no respect for the profession's laws until last month. And this guy was selling wares cheap, not thinking about profits, so he got a rep among the fallen youths and made a small ring with several dealers. People who since long ago valued the trading rules didn't take to that well. The spanners are thrown away - and the young group was suppressed and everything.

Now it's calm and peaceful, but thing is, the charismatic seller called himself Ishizue Arika.

"Wait. What's with this complete namesake?"

If we looked the same, too, it's be very bad. They say a third copycat is too much, so I hope there's none beside the one I know.

"Uh... Well, he was false, right?"

"Of course. I didn't see him myself, but when he was described to me I said he wasn't Ishizue Arika from the start. So it's assumed this is a legend, don't worry. You wouldn't dabble in this stuff anyway, right?"

"Absolutely true, my good Kirisu."

Great. A reliable and understanding best friend. Though there's a little too much of him.

"It's clear from the way you talk that you were among the suppressors. Did you come to finish the deed?"

"Yeah. I understood Ishizue-sempai is unrelated, but others don't know you that well. Let's just say that formally I came to eliminate the reason of the fuss. Be thankful it's me - if it was some hothead you'd be lynched on the spot."

Gods abandon, gods save.

Ishizue Arika whose stock has fallen drastically without his knowledge had a reliable aide, again without his knowledge.

"Thanks for that. But, Kirisu..."

I wanted to ask: "Are you involved with the yakuza?" - but didn't.

He's had dangerous connections since school, and, character aside, he was an incredibly talented fighter. As the trainer often berated him, screw the character, if you don't invest your whole soul, you aren't needed in the club.

Oh well. He likes it, and if he's successful, who am I to complain?

"Nah, forget it. I spent too much time with a person covered in minus-ions, relaxed a bit too much. ...So the story is over? Is that Ishizue person in heaven or simply disappeared?"

"Uh huh. In heaven... Well, not quite, but the impostor case is solved. He'll have your name no longer, Ishizue-sempai. There's some friction, but it'll be over soon."

If it's solved, there's no need to dig further.

And anyway, I'm always uneasy.

"Hey, Kirisu, doesn't that "sempai" bother you too? We aren't in school any more."

Well, the alien is an exception. With her perfect goodness and my personality it's better if the faceless "sempai" stays.

"Suddenly!.. Sempai, are you really one of those who always says such things aloud?"

"Nah, it's just that a similar thing happened recently. I understood that it's not necessary for friends to add "san" or "sempai". If it's a bother, you shouldn't."

"It's fine, fine. Okay, from now on you're just Arika."

He's lighthearted like that.

The breadth of his soul, washing the three-year residue in a second, suddenly reminded me of my childhood.

...I think it happened shortly after I met Kirisu for the first time.

For some days the baseball club kept inviting me. I accepted, and a third-year veteran was taken off the batter list. Amazed by the fact he was deposed by some nosy second-year newcomer, he left the club of his own will. Watching the tearful sempai walking away towards the sunset, Kirisu, then a first-year, didn't understand and said: "I don't get it. To leave 'cause of such a small thing?" Dumbstruck, he clutched his head, as he really couldn't wrap it around the idea.

Due to his beautiful character Kirisu didn't understand that pain. Human weakness. The resentment towards being outdone by a junior, the little time he had to be a school student, his various troubles. This hooligan didn't encounter such things.

Hearing Kirisu mutter that, I answered no less complacently:

"You want him to share?"

Something incomprehensible. Something you don't have - this was why this impudent first-year seemed to envy him.

"Screw that. It's prolly gonna cost a lot."

"Cost a lot? You don't even what you're talking about, and you're already being that rude."

"Well, yeah, I don't, but..."

Sadly watching the leaving sempai for a while...

"But I think it isn't cheap."

Kirisu Yaichiro answered as though this was the most natural thing in the world.

Later I became friends with Kirisu and stayed in the baseball club. I was going to leave after the summer league, but stayed for the entire summer, never mind the spring.

It was a long time ago. The summer was way hotter than now. This story is about nothing. Just youth.

"An off-topic question - Arika, do you know of SVS?"

Thus my thoughts, caught in the rare event of recalling good memories, were yanked back into reality.

"SVS... That ancient arcade?"

"That was MVS. But yeah, the idea is taken from there, you have good senses. Even if you returned just recently, I think you saw it a couple of times. When people gather on well-lit roads or in parks? Did you notice such things?"

I did think the city became more crowded at night. And that there's a lot of teens in the park near the station.

"I think I know what you're talking about. So that was SVS?"

"Yeah. A simple game with one box, with bets, is becoming normal now. Simply put, it's simplified baseball."

SVS. A one-on-one game following baseball rules. A baseball team consists of nine people, but here it's simply batter versus pitcher.

The idea is a fair duel in one inning. Three strikes mark the pitcher's victory, a successful hit gives it to the batter.



The winner is decided in two to six minutes. It's a really simple "sports game".

'Hit - batter wins, out - pitcher wins' only sounds simple to those who never played baseball. A lot of people are gonna gather to watch the show and kill time.

"And the era progression turns backwards yet again. It's like a barring centre with a human pitcher, right?"

"Yeah. This was invented by baseball dropouts to take steam off. The youngsters toyed with the game for three years, not working, not studying, with nothing else to waste energy on. And now it's been noticed and caught on. Some loafers started making bets, and no one noticed as the game became serious. Now it's even split into official and unofficial. In the park they play the unofficial one every day, simply for the bets."

"..."

The former baseball club members looked for a refuge. And this was born, apparently, of the wish to easily enjoy baseball even after graduating.

Where there's light there's darkness. After three years there's only a few sportsmen at the top. In their shadow even those who left in time won't abandon their love of baseball.

"Heh. So the informal one is just a totalizer. What's the formal one then? How is it organized? Are there no bets?"

"Nah, same betting matches. But there's a prize fund for the players. First nine pitchers and batters are chosen. They must be popular in informal or have good scores. The point of SVS is that they play "king of the hill". The moment the pitcher gets three strikes or the batter hits their opponents are participating no longer."

Hmm... A battle royale hiding under the guise of baseball? A duel system. No strategies, no teamwork, a primitive game of ball. The small details are insignificant, if you stay until the end you win.

Pitiful. Low-class kid games, but, hmm...

"Yo. You probably thought that's interesting, right, Arika?"

Kirisu happily smiles. It seems he likes the game called SVS himself.

"Well, yeah, I can see this appealing to the masses if the organizer spreads the word. But are these matches fixed in time? And place?"

"Nah, the players decide themselves. 'Cause there are fans of fast balls, weird balls, left-handed, right-handed, and there's people who can't stand each other. And those who you're highly unlikely to win against. The opposite is true as well. So they call each other, arrange the meetings, summon the referees and spectators, have the match..."

"Or hide until the opponent they don't want to meet is gone?"

"Yup. Half of official SVS is this information warfare, and standing in the box, on the mound, the challenge itself is the other half. Eighteen players get special cellphones from the organizer. They use these to communicate. So if you lose a duel you have to give your cell to the winner. When the last pitcher or batter is out, SVS ends."

"Got it. And the collected phones? If you win as a team, are cells like points?"

"Spot on. The winning team gets the prizes, and the player who got the most phones gets an additional reward. Actually, it's more like the greatest reward among the players now. After all, you become notorious when you win the 'best player' prize."

What, you get to be a ringleader among the kids or something?

When the game becomes popular, naturally, star players attract attention. Both of innocent fans and sycophants. Understood. With a twist, but it's still a typical pro ring.

"But who managed to spread such a game? You won't get it up without being a good speaker. You need respect from the guys, an understanding of the finer points of baseball, and, most importantly, an organizer's skill, can't do without that? Hm, Kirisu? Who, when and where started this thingy?"

"Goddamn it, it's so hot today again. Isn't there a conditioner here?"

"Fine, whatever. Then, who are the arbiters? Are there professional referees?"

"There are, actually, but of course, not every time. Sometimes the players just meet randomly and begin at once. In this case the referee is the players' honour and conscience. And spectators, of course. Lately a ton of online expert galleries sprang up, and the old bickering about the strike zone ended."

"Brutal... What about catchers?"

"They pick them on the spot. They often double as referees. If there's no one, they just throw and pick up after the match. The etiquette has batters always carry a bat and the pitchers have at least six balls on themselves."

"What about the batter box and pitcher's mound?"

"They usually just keep the formal distance, and that's that. The box and the plate's location are dependent on the circumstances. Sometimes they're not there at all. On an agreement they can increase the distance, too. Plus when some factors are different it's more intriguing to the audience."

"Yeah", - Kirisu goes on, - "to be honest, it's hard to make a proper mound on the spot, and marking the position takes a lot of time as it is. It's a gamble anyway, so who'd want to waste time? Well, of course, in official matches they at least make a proper mound."

"What about deadballs?.."

"Well, if a beanball is hit, the pitcher loses. If the batter dodges, you can count it either way, according to the situation."

"And interference? Without a referee you can't even take a time-out."

"Well, it's decided according to the baseball in the players' souls... Usually after the first serve there are no time-outs. After all, this is played by honest players. On the other hand, when the match is on, you aren't allowed to leave the box or mound whatever happens. If you do, don't whine if you get beaten up."

"Goddamn spartans... And how is a hit decided on?"

"Generally, since it's one on one, so long as the ball goes outside the infield, you win. Fly is an out, going into the ground is a foul. Special rules are dependent on the situation. It's played indoors too, after all. In the unofficals the pitcher wins if the ball flies by without bouncing off. Ah, by the way, the bats are wooden. Metal ones are forbidden since the ball bounces off too well. It's a handicap for good batters."

"Well, I don't think it's possible, but what if a pitcher catches a proper hit?"

"Out, of course. Some players specialize in this. They're like monkeys."

"..."

I understand the idea now.

There probably are more detailed rules, but why are they that clear? And the phrase about the chosen eighteen is supposed to egg both players and fans on.

"Cool, right? We were polishing it for half a year. This month, just in time for the summer junior league, the games got awesome. Take this, player Arika."

I'm being given a gold-coloured phone.

The terribly tasteless gilt has '4', the number of death, engraved on it.

"What's this?"

"A batter's cell. I told you about these. It's a gift. Tomorrow we'll visit the place, and you're gonna play in my place."

"Huuuh?"

My jaw hangs open.

He's a favourite?

"Why? Do I look like a baseball maniac?"

"No, but whatever. The rumours about the false Ishizue Arika are going around. I want you to perform and thus end the story."

"This is what is wrong with this! Why me? I've nothing to do with these dealers and SVSes of yours."

"Stop being so boring. The idea is that Ishizue Arika talked it out with Kirisu Yaichiro. As proof he's going to play in SVS. So if you lose in public, even those who don't know about the whole impostor thing will see that Ishizue Arika's team lost and was disbanded. It's cool! There'll be less morons who're still mad about the whole drugs thing and want revenge."

"..."

Well... yeah. He's right.

"Are you an idiot? How am I supposed to bat? I don't have an arm, for chrissakes!"

"I know. No one says to show them all. Just put on a prosthesis or something, get a figurehead."

If I come out to lose, I don't even have to swing the bat?

"Fine, fine.... Get me a bat and glove. I haven't got them."

"That's a surprise. You used to treasure them, right?"

Yup. But a certain serial killer pulverized by Touma Mato, saying: 'As you can see, your future was knocked out', - carried a bat-shaped object into her room. She's mocking me. The doctors in Origa are spoiling her, so they probably gifted her this bit of material evidence.

"So, tomorrow, 8 PM, before the station. Don't be late. You'll find a prosthesis, right?"

"I'll have to... Well, I'll explain the situation and obtain permission to carry it outside somehow."

"Then it's settled. It's good that we agreed on this so fast."

Standing up, he leaves for the corridor. What's he thinking about, leaving his dumbbells like that?

"Listen. I'm sure the answer'll be 'no', but still," - Kirisu says with his back to me. - "You really can't show them all? Lately the prostheses are pretty high-tech, right?"

I really can't.

A precise prosthesis capable of withstanding batting, when speeds of 140 km/h are reached instantly, and capable of creating a 140 kilo hit, is beyond the current medical technology. Even if there is one, it'd be some demonic thing.

**(10.08)**

The green hillside is curving upwards.

There's a fragrant smell of dirt and grass.

On my both sides, as far as eye can see, the wild nature lit by the midsummer sun is waving in the wind.

Amid this scenery a municipal bus is riding towards a forest stop.

It's the day after meeting Kirisu — Tuesday, the tenth of August.

In this bus, booked for a week, I'm riding in the company by a broad-shouldered man with a pale face.

Seems to be over forty, of an average build, but very skinny.

He's wearing a business suit of such quality that even I, not knowing the differences between brands, thought: "He must be comfortable and cool in this..." The colour of the face wasn't that good, but he had well-bred features, reminding me of a British lord. Such people don't normally use municipal transport at 10 AM.

He looked tired. Shoulders powerlessly slumped, eyes empty, he resembled a withered plant. He's probably going either home or to some restaurant to eat. However, the forest is the end station. No one lives around here. The fields and forests are abundant, but I don't think this is a good picnic zone.

"..."

I feel a bad premonition. Even I, not aware of dangers, can easily understand: "I'm going to see something bad."

In the end, the gentleman gets off at Torinonori.

I took care to leave after he did, but he didn't notice my presence at all anyway. I follow him into the forest. The mouse-grey suit is five meters before me.

"Damn. This earl grey is really going to the reservoir."

It's easy to understand even without a feeling of danger.

It's likely an important guest to Karyou-san. It's not good to bother them, so I stop.

The gentleman opens the reservoir door and disappears underground.

Hiding behind an old tree, I keep watch. Half an hour passes.

Nothing changes. The gentleman doesn't come out. The sun is getting hotter. Sweat drops unpleasantly roll down my forehead... Yes. On the topic of unpleasant things, that face of

his. Those excited eyes when he saw the underground corridor. These beads showing a frozen mind. Nasty eyes, like a bird's.

"I have to go. He said he'll cut my salary if I'm late."

This is work... I have to get the prosthesis before the evening. I can't run away. I saw nothing. I really was just half an hour late, I saw nothing. Convincing myself, I open the door.

I walk through the impenetrable darkness. In a few steps there's a door. I can't hear any voices behind it.

I pass through the darkness towards the sea floor. A cubic European room. Square walls and heavy doors. I only ever opened the south one, the entrance.

The bed in the middle I'm used to by now, where Karyou Kaie greets the visitor with his normal smile.

"Good morning, Arika. You're late."

"..."

There are no changes in the room. The dungeon is as usual. I don't see the black dog or the fish. Kaie has his four limbs equipped even without me.

Thus everything is unbearably anomalous.

"Hmm. Did anyone come here before me?"

"Yeah, there was one just now. Was all like, I'm possessed, save me."

He smiles happily. It's a malicious smile, resembling a crescent moon.

Oh... I, thick-skinned as I am, can't look into his eyes out of fear?

"U-understood. Where is he?"

"I don't know. If you can't see him, he's probably not here any more, right?"

"Right?" — the black-haired beauty asks for my agreement... If you look closely, his face looks better than usual, he's full of life, his mouth bursting with vitality.

"So... that's how it is. So he isn't in this room."

Hiding the shaking in my knees, I somehow crawl to the sofa.

"Hard to say. He isn't in this world any more, but he may still be in the room."

The black right hand, reminding me of a crane, passes over his abdomen, covered with a blue pyjama. His finger stops over his stomach. I'm creeped out.

"You mean..."

I have goosebumps all over me. Wh-wh-wh-wh-what is this? Am I a victim under a snake's gaze? Why is there such a horrible chill going through my veins?!

"So. Why were you late today, Arika?"

My throat contracts with a whimper. But I'm not ashamed at all. The pressure is such that even if I did manage not to do this it still wouldn't end well.

"Well, actually... My relatives had a misfortune happen to grandmother, and I..."

I suddenly use an excuse of the kind employed when you really don't want to go to work. It doesn't matter how many grannies or grandpas the relatives have got. The important thing is to have my conscience allow tricks like "Even if it makes a dozen people miserable, I'm still on a vacation". A natural thought genocide... Anyway, I use such an argument, and my employer looks at me ascant with a calm eye.

"Oho, well, whatever. This granny really cared for her nephew. Such a timely death. A real selfless rescue. Of both me and Arika."

"Rescue? What do you mean?"

"Well... If you saw, I'd have to... as well."

The blue silhouette licks its lips. Ugh, it looks like a vixen of a wife. For a moment I almost got excited, forgetting about fear... Perhaps that's how spider neuromuscular poison works.

"Anyway, jokes aside. Get me a drink from the fridge, Arika. My throat is as dry as a desert."

I specifically don't ask why is his throat so dry.

Carried to the fridge on my uncooperative legs, I grab a pack of fruit juice.

"It's a really strange quality — normally unlucky, but when a critical moment comes, getting out unscathed. Aah, maybe that's what they call "cruel fate"."

Evidently liking his own joke, the master sitting on the bed hides his smile.

There's no need to ask what's so lucky.

Since the fate of a random murder witness would be tragic, hiding outside for half an hour was a wise decision... I have enough self-confidence to believe I'll live through every day even though I'm walking on the edge of the abyss, but when there's a tiger's maw snapping before my very eyes it's kinda unnerving.

The sun sets, and my workday comes to an end.

I ask for the prosthesis, and Kaie lets me have it for a single day.

"I wanted you to only use it when there's a clear goal, and get used to it little by little. But today, since I'm in a good mood, I'll allow this. Use it carefully, not for dangerous things."

What did he want to say? Probably for me not to break the prosthesis, but to cross the line myself anyway.

I check my notes just in case. They say Mato-san had a point telling me 'to get something for self-defence before the next time'. In a small font. Careless handwriting screaming about hurry, as though the boss is constantly watching me. I likely scribbled this in the toilet.

"I don't really want to ponder about what happened during the day, but..."

It seems I can take it no longer. I was turning away, forgetting everything about the day, for far too long. It's time to seriously think about my relationship with this young master.

"Wow, what's this? What a brutal prosthesis."

Shikura station, east entrance.

Kirisu came on time, at 8, and made a face upon seeing me.

I can understand him. No one wears long sleeves in the summer without a strong personal creed. I don't have one. So my left hand sticks out of a thin half-sleeve, attracting attention to the grim prosthesis, black like tar.

"Hmm. I knew people would be bothered, but for you to turn away... Should I put my left hand in a long sleeve?"

"Nah, no need. Forget it, this may work out, they'll think it's a tattoo."

Kirisu tosses a bat case at me. Almost having reached out with my prosthesis, I quickly catch it with my right.

At this time the park before the Shikura station becomes a Mecca for SVS.

A small crowd is making noise as about forty people are closely watching a duel fought with balls. Either there weren't enough good spots or they just wanted to feel the atmosphere, but at some distance from the battlefield, on the benches and roads, another forty are wandering. The bright lights over the field finishes the picture that resembles a peaceful night least of all.

"Aren't there any patrols?"

"They did visit a few times early on. But there's a permission to use the park, and the patrol officers are just humble workers. If they spend whole days on dragging hundreds of boys to the station they'll fall apart."



Also they seem to gather in other places too. Well, if they don't foresee any happenings, the police don't roll up their sleeves.

"There's not a lot today, though. The game of the phone owners was announced just an hour ago. Usually the games are announced half a day in advance, and huge crowds gather."

So that's it. Today the match is regulated, and too huge a crowd would be a bother. So only those who are here for the money and adrenaline, the slouches and fans, are here.

There's a game going on.

Both batter and pitcher look about 18.

They seem to be either studying each other or trying to measure the flight time based on the distance. It's funny to watch. A scuffle between the first batter and pitcher always brings joy to a baseball lover's heart.

The gallery feels this as well. No, they're gathering in a circle near the special spot, on the sides behind the batter, probably exactly because they understand.

Seems to be a popular player — there are only girls at the special spot, horse, damn, pitcher tickets in their hands. Apparently that fans are betting is irrelevant.

The right-handed pitcher prepares for a high ball. There are no running throws in SVS, and wind-up is the norm, but he didn't use it.

Understanding that this is the last fight, the pitcher almost breaks the usual timing. His hand with the index and middle fingers raised in a victory gesture grips the ball. The fingers make the serve form obvious. A fork. The screwball, spinning tens of times per second, suddenly loses speed before the batter and falls. It's said that the pitcher wins if he hits, but most of the field is marked with crosses as an out zone. A bound outside of the field is an out. The point of the serve is not to get a strike-out through batter missing, but to make the bat send the ball into an out zone.

However, the spinning wasn't fast enough. The fork probably wasn't the pitcher's strong point. The ball didn't dive enough to fool the batter's eye and disappeared between the short-stop and third base with a nice ring.

Sad cries were heard from the special spot. Seems the pitcher was the girls' favourite.

"Let's go. It's show time soon."

Kirisu drags me to the field.

The former spectators are gathered near the orange flagpole.

Among them is a professional-looking bookmaker with batter tickets in hand.

"What a shame! That's why pretty pitcher boys are not to be trusted... Anyway, how can you do a fork you don't know at such an important moment, dude... uhh, mm, sempai?"

I want to pretend I saw nothing, but it's too late.

The clothing lets the teenagers know the difference in wallet size — it's casual wear, simple at the first glance, but expensive. The high-born mannerisms of a bookmaker, standing out but pointing their place to persistent boys... Of course, the girl excited by the bets was Tsuranui Mihaya-san.

"Mm... So, there's too much I want to say at once..."

Tsuranui sulkily eyes me and Kirisu. She evidently didn't want exactly us to show up.

"Shush. We have serious business here. Nothing to do with gambling idiots."

"I'm serious too. Kirisu-san, you called your friend you haven't seen for a year an idiot. Did your chicken head get even older? You're like a century-old marasmatic."

"Agh! Well, you don't change at all, that's for sure... If not for these people, I'd kick you. Be proud, Tsuranui, you're the first dumb woman I've raised my hand at."

Giggling, with happy smiles they drill each other with their stares. They said in the school Kirisu and Tsuranui were under a curse of lifelong mutual vilification. It's still in full power, but it seems these two haven't seen each other since school.

"Well, I'm going, Kirisu."

"Oh! Okay, do you remember what we talked about? Show them!"

The brown-haired pitcher is already tired of waiting for the opponent.

He enthusiastically came to the official gathering, and that he was going to face not Kirisu, but some replacement newbie, and that Kirisu himself was chatting with a girl in the gallery, was definitely angering him.

"Eeeh? Sempai, are you going?!"

"Uh huh. So, I'm gonna go make it an out."

"What's this!.."

Tsuranui's eyes began shining.

She probably figured out that Kirisu and I have a cunning plan even though she knew nothing. She instantly made a beeline to buy a ton of batter tickets. And I went to the next batter circle, bat in right hand.

Tsuranui made a dead loop to the special spot, returned:

"Sempai, I don't know what's your plan, but do it! Make them halt their breaths... do him in!"

She showered me with support with an expectant face.

I won't ponder about a couple of places in her speech, though...

Standing in the circle with a straight back, I move my left hand to the bat. "Ooh!" — that's Kirisu and Tsuranui. Surprised — so prosthetics are already that good!

Swinging around a little for the public, I go to the batter box. The brown-haired pitcher knew from my swings that I'm not an enemy and changed his scowl to a smirk.

And the game began.

It was over quickly, in three balls.

The brownie was a typical right-handed high-baller. What is a high ball? You raise your hand and throw, as most pitchers do. It's strengths are fast balls and vertical screwballs. It's also known as the base position.

He didn't use any special tricks, just served fast balls well. Getting into officials meant his speed was incredible, easily 130 km/h. His maximum is probably 140. Due to this confidence of his he did two strikes in a row without probing the enemy.

Third serve. With no wind-up he makes a step forward, smirking. His axle leg isn't trembling — a testament to the accumulated training. The abdomen, body's axle is unshaking, the loin, key to the serve, has it's muscles developed as well.

Uh huh. Really, not bad.

The raised foot steps forward. The body, opened to the side, unwinds like a spring. The power is born in the ankles and reaches the fingertips. The human's muscle, all his physical abilities are concentrated in the seven-centimetre ball.

Great. A movement perfectly similar to the first and second serve. A pitch without hesitation. A straight into the lower part of the dead zone, full of confidence and power. The ball's course is perfect. It's said that if you do this right, it's simply impossible to hit.

"....., ..."

A step in tact with the ball's departure, an effortless transit of the centre of mass into take-back.

Wait a minute. Indeed, a speedball arriving in half a second is a pitcher's bread and butter, but you're not a batting centre machine, so if your unchanging simple throw is hit, you have nothing to complain about...

"Mh... Oop."

And yeah. You can manage to aim somewhat on the third try.

Thoomm! — the bat soundly rang.

And so the duel was settled.

The stunned brownie, hit into the line-drive.

Kirisu whistles, impressed.

"Ooh!" — the gallery rages.

"Awesome!... What a sharp hit, sempai!" — scattering the batter tickets that haven't played out, the one who gets the last laugh mysteriously exclaims.

"It's always like this! At the last moment Arika-sempai betrays any expectations!"

We changed location to a bar nearby.

We decided to celebrate in the "Star and cloud" dining bar.

"Sorry, sorry. The opponent was too green, my hands moved on their own, anyway, third time lucky... In any case, he was conditioning my reflex himself... Oh, miss, some moreulun! Oh yeah, and that cold Italian pasta with pork, does it have tomatoes in it? No? Then I'll have one... So, Tsuranui, it was just an accident, I totally didn't want to ruin you."

"Liar. But this Kirisu-san over here wagered for the batter's victory!"

"Oh, really, Kirisu?"

"Hm? Aah, well, yeah, like, my position obliged. Since you came to bat instead of me, I bet on you, think of it as an apology."

"Uh huh... Well, no one lost anything, so let's leave it at this?"

There are some strange things, but Tsuranui's presence makes an interrogation impossible.

"I did looose! Here's a victim of a big looooss! I demand consolaaatiooon. In money equivalent. ...Listen, I seriously bet all of my monthly allowance... on this..."

She gets sad in the middle of the phrase and sulks. Although she got into this herself, I'm partially responsible. Or maybe not.

"Kirisu. Can you advise her some place to work on the side?"

"Nah. This woman never worked since school. If you throw her out into society, there'll be something like a fire. Though she does keep the balance."

"Well sorry, they just don't let me work, groom me. Fiiine, boo-boo, I'll just get some in advance. Better than asking hoodlums like Kirisu-san."

This advance is already well over ten years ahead, or so the unconfirmed urban legend says. Either Tsuranui is shameless or her parents spoil her. Probably both, yeah.

"And you, Arika-sempai? Part-time job? If not, I can find one."

"I'm sick of being your tutor! And yeah, I do have a job."

"Oh-ho!"

Damn... Just remembering the hellish house arrest in Tsuranui's house made me blurt out something I shouldn't have.

"Who? Where? In Shikura? How much? Do you have Saturdays off?"

"..."

And now it's way worse — Tsuranui is interested in my job. She won't let me go until she knows everything.

"Halfway from Shikura to the airport, where the fields are, you know? I'm a caretaker there. Questions?"

"Ooh, a caretaker. Uh huh. So that's it. You were looking for such a humane job... Is it a woman?"

'Like hell', — I almost let out, but wait, what's it really? I shut up. Here I am, unable to assure myself that my boss is a man, and anyway, it's doubtful he's a human.

"Oh-ho-ho!.."

Tsuranui's eyes shine. It's the second case of them emitting light today. Is she a monster?

"You'll introduce me no matter what. Well, fine. Sempai, you managed to swing a bat. The former form, though, is gone."

"Yeah! I was stunned too. You said you wouldn't be able to yesterday."

They gaze at not-my left arm. I can't tell them what it really is so I decide to confuse them. I don't know anything about it myself, after all.

"This doesn't matter, but Kirisu, tell me, how did "Koalas" fail so hard this year? I think they were, like, ten points ahead at the preliminaries."

I heard something like that in the corner of my ear last week and direct the conversation flow towards this.

As far as I know, the KouraKou's baseball club's team was the strongest last year, as was the one from Koalagaoka. The latter even built a new building for the club, that's how powerful they were. But...

"Oh. Arika, didn't you see the last year's match?"

"The TV is hotly contested in the clinic, I couldn't get one to watch. Though I didn't really want to. So what happened?"

"I dunno what's going on in their school. Only thing is, their starter changed."

"The ace left the mound, what's more, he did so suddenly, on the day of the match. Then a second-year took the spot, but her serves were easily hit."

"Second year means first year for me, right? Oh, Sekura Yumiya, right?"

"Yup, right, that Sekura candy. She wasn't a bad pitcher, actually. But when she was taken out of the reserve and put right at the start, naturally, she didn't have the spirit."

I and Kirisu snort.

They say it's as though Koalagaoka's club was cursed from that point on, and this year they only managed to stay in the top four.

And our alma mater, KouraKou, calmed down and, as it was before, returned to the pastorally-unhurried baseball play. The team, led by a single genius leader, came to its logical conclusion.

"..."

Upon mentioning the alma mater everyone sank into memories.

After a short pause Tsuranui softly, as though to herself, said:

"I don't know yet... Why did you abandon baseball, sempai?"

"Well, I didn't as such. I just couldn't any more. Actually I never got an occasion after graduating."

"Yes, but still. Haven't you considered going pro?"

"Come on. Our team was of a different sort. Say, Kirisu? Did you play baseball aiming to become a pro?"

"Nah, no."

Kirisu shakes his head.

Both I and Kirisu loved baseball, but didn't have such a wish. Kirisu thought especially consistently, which often got him into conflicts with our spartan trainer.

'The most important thing in sports is whether the fight was proper. I don't get how can they calculate victories or losses even before that.'

This was after the exhausting training in the school. Kirisu slightly discontentedly muttered that.

Just knowing how to play baseball was enough for us. The victories and losses came after that. I think it was after those words by Kirisu Yaichiro that Ishizue Arika took up the bat.

"So the baseball was only during school? You too, Kirisu-san?"

Probably. It's hard to play after that. And anyway, it's not only baseball we had to give up. A ton of other interesting things, too."

"Perhaps. But still — it was fun, wasn't it?"

Tsuranui is right, as usual. Even discoloured a bit, those days weren't in vain.

Kirisu, the one who said there's a ton of fun things, didn't take up baseball in school because there was nothing else. He wasn't a genius or a pro, but he deeply loved baseball, so he abandoned other things and bet his youth on it.

"But, you know... In short, the dream ended."

Backing off while saving face — one of Kirisu Yaichiro's strong sides.

He's truly an untroubled, making one wonder where did he get this detachedness at his age, nineteen-years old old man.

We see Tsuranui to the industrial zone and turn back towards the station.

I'm going to the dorm, and Kirisu still has things to do. We don't talk. Somehow Tsuranui's question struck us.

"Say, Kirisu..."

"What's it, Ishizue-sempai? I don't want to chat about various nonsense."

"You have a good intuition, but damn, abandon that sempai... I just wanted to ask you too. Did you leave baseball easily?"

"..."

Last year I was in the Origa clinic. I didn't see how did it end for the friend who said his dream was over.

"I left it. The dumbass is right, it was awesome in the club. I wasn't going for pro and had no talent, but still, I thought it'd be great to keep on like this... But, well, I was different. I

knew how to play baseball and realized it was only while we were in school... And barely managed to hide it."

"Aah. But now there's SVS, right?"

"Well, yeah. But actually I decided not to participate. It happens, at times I suddenly find myself in the reserve, but someone always plays in mt stead. I haven't been in the box since the third year's summer."

Baseball was only for school to him?

Almost clinical pragmatism.

"Is there any reason? As a former club member, do you make bets?"

"That's not it... To be honest, to me baseball ended in the autumn of the second year. I kept on until the third's summer, now that I think of it, only because of my stupidity."

Nothing to say after such words.

Suddenly I realized we were already near "Marion". We stop near the 13th's entrance.

"Ah. But you're different. Since you hit today, you're now an official member. I'll handle closing the case, and you enjoy the game. The golden four is a king's mark. If you're challenged, you can't back off. To be able to play anywhere, keep the bat on you."

"Tch. You reminded me. But are you sure you want to give it to me?"

"There's a ton of these things around. And anyway, I said I didn't need one. There are three pitchers this season. The ace is hiding, but he'll come out in time... Yeah. If you're gonna bat anyway, then come on, win, Slugger."

Bye! — with that Kirisu Yaichiro leaves.

I closely inspect the bat case entrusted to me. The bat was pretty battered and well maintained for an unneeded one.

The first week of August ended without any accidents, the second is also peacefully half over. But the situation, scorning the false calm, slowly develops somewhere far from me. As usual, the suffering night bugs are whirling around behind the mosquito net, portending the best, and in this environment Ishizue Arika always felt great.



## 5\S.VS.S-2

(13.08)

"Good mooorning."

The ending of August's second week, ten o'clock.

As usual, I came to the underground room for my job, and was met by a mysterious creature fully wrapped in colourful ribbons.

How do I put it... a minute after I came in my impression was that a bomb went off in here. On the black-and-white panels of the floor lied a bundle sixty centimetres long.

"Oh, here you are at last. Well, put the prosthetic on, Arika. It's been waiting for you since last night."

Here's the ecstatic stare and enthusiastic waving of non-existent arms - put it on, put it on! - of the black silhouette on the bed. The black dog is under the sofa, and the shadow of the fish is gracefully swimming on the ceiling.

Happens every day, however many times I come. The room's atmosphere, so gloomy upon opening the door, turned into God knows what.

"..."

Anyway, I put on the prosthesis, which wraps up my morning work. Then I just respond to Kaie's random whims, and when sun sets, I take the limb off and go back home. Yeah, this is my labour...

"Stop just standing there, open it, come on, here. You'll be surprised, Arika. I'd nearly ran out of threads to pull out in my clothes by the time they delivered it yesterday evening!"

Kaie is nearly jumping out of his pants, like a kid going to an amusement park. It's an almost endearing sight, but I give my head a shake and get it together.

"I'm having a bad feeling. It isn't something like a severed head, is it?"

I carefully unwrap it.

"What. What the hell... What is this?!"

Staring like an idiot, I can't believe my own eyes.

Is this a miracle? The wrapping contained a Lost Technology of a calibre you wouldn't find anywhere in the world!..

"What are you doing?"

And now, an hour later, a bit past eleven, Touma Mato entered the room without knocking and pinned us, who had been going crazy on the bed, down like cattle with a cold, deeply disappointed stare and voice.

"Guh, M-M-Mato-san? For crying out loud, I know you always come in silently, but couldn't you pick a better moment! And also knock!" - I let out in a strange voice.

Strange because Mato-san awes me with her cool appearance and thorny stare.

Wearing a jacket, back stiff like a ramrod... nah, more like chest puffed out and looking down in a domineering posture, radiating a pressing, blinding elitism. Just this vision could make an ordinary person prostrate themselves.

The dog and the fish were apparently scared of Mato-san - there was nothing under the sofa or above the ceiling now. The summer sun became about forty percent darker in our aquarium.

"Oh. Hey, good morning, Mato-san. Long time no see. Hmm? Oh, you gained weight again! Your waist's a bit wider than before. Come on, you. You're no longer young, put more thought into what you eat."

"..."

And thus, completely oblivious of Mato-san's aura, our super-boss neutralizes her with his usual smile. Such a thing can't be pulled off without preparation.

"Uh huh, morning. Now you, Karyou, don't change at all. The usual bland interior and look. And this idiot - well, at least he listens to what I say... So. What are you doing here? Look at you, all fired up."

"It's this. Don't you know?"

'This', - Kaie demonstrates the Lost Technology taking shape on the bed.

This guy just fended off Mato-san in a foul mood with a smile, not just ignoring, but plainly not noticing it. Damn, I kinda want to hide behind him...

"Uh... what's this? A plastic model... of a baseball field?"

"Oh, did you hear that Arika? Out-of-the-box thinking must have some limits!.. I can't believe it. Come on, Mato-san. Anyone born in the seventies must know about tabletop baseball."

Assistant inspector Touma stays silent and frowns even more.

The underground was an alien world before, but now it's escalated to a new level and became not just substantial, but super-substantial. I need to level up soon too.

"Uh, hm, Kaie-san... You really shouldn't anger Mato-san..."

"Perhaps. Look at her, looming there, being distracting. Mato-san, want to sit down? Ah, the sofa's for Arika, please don't sit there... Mhm. All right, now I'm attacking. The six-time winner Karyou Divas change the pitcher!"

The tension was such that the fans' cheers could almost be heard.

Mato-san silently closes the door and, determining that the only place to sit besides the sofa would be the floor, after a little hesitation sits down on the sofa. Did I imagine it?.. Didn't Mato-san make a puppy face just now: 'Won't he get mad?..'

"Come on, Arika, get it together! Remember, I said I'll give you a raise if you win. Like this you aren't going to turn it around before the game ends!"

"True. To improve my dietary conditions I must destroy a newbie who doesn't even know the rules of baseball. Kaie, fresh pitchers are until the sixth disappearing demonic ball, try not to make a mistake."

Mato-san relaxed on the sofa, supported her chin with a hand and threw the other over the sofa's back... I realized that I'm going to be shot if I keep staring at her, moved my eyes away from Nee-san and returned to the game.

So. We have tabletop baseball.

Purchased by Kaie through unknown, but probably shady means, a deluxe tabletop baseball set - the latest essenceless spin-off at a time when tabletop baseball's cultural layer is almost destroyed.

Only the name is left of tabletop baseball: one throws a shiny ball as pitcher, one knocks on it as batter. One-on-one, a childish giglet, playing at playing baseball, and to compete with the increasing popularity of video games it's partly digital.

The positions of field players who catch the ball after the batter's swing can be changed freely, the batter's swing strength is also different for each player. Also, the game has data on seven teams, and each has its features. What a load of nonsense.

Kaie's choice is a team with a brilliant pitcher and a focus on defence, and mine has a "charismatic" batter on the bench who you let in for one inning - and a home run is guaranteed, kind of like a one-shot cannon.

"Hmm. You aren't going to swap? You have to get at least a single point back."

"You don't understand. Why would I start with the slugger? His purpose as clean-up is to go fourth. Baseball isn't so primitive that to win the pitcher needs to just get a strikeout and the batter only needs to hit. You have to slowly move the pawns, like this."

The batter hits the ball with a clink.

"Hmm", - Kaie purses his lips, unsatisfied.

He believes that home runs and strikeouts are the main weapons of attack and defence. For one, he's mistaken in thinking that serves come out of nowhere and just pointlessly increase the counter, going haywire. Serves distinguish between an inner and outer angle, but in the end they try to get the ball into the strike zone. Hit as much as you want... So far I've been losing to raise the stakes to real ones.

"The pain, the miss have their own purpose. Even if you get a good trajectory, if the batter isn't off balance, he'll hit the ball. Ball is a tactic to distract the batter's attention and foresight from the real throw and not an intentional throw outside of the strike zone to "miss"... Well, of course, sometimes it's just control problems."

Zing, zing. A number of foul tip hits.

The score shows two strikes, three balls. A strike means an out, a ball means a trip to the next base, full-count.

"..."

Karyou's pitcher serves with a serene look.

The shining ball slides straight into the strike zone... however, most balls in the tabletop game are strikes. At the moment when you can swing the bat and get a hit, the ball disappeared into the ground with a knock.

Thirty years ago, in the golden seventies...

An epochal discovery happened in tabletop baseball. The metallic ball which previously flew straight acquired an ability echoing a fork ball - the disappearing demonic ball came to be.

A crude trick, a button throws the served ball under the field, and the batting team has no way of hitting it, makes an empty swing and gets a strike - an incredibly unfair function. However, the ball doesn't get to the catcher, making it a ball, and if you don't swing, the batter wins.

"Whoop, ball. The batter goes to base. Hee-hee-hee, you're so simple, Kaie-kun."

"Arika, you meanie!.. Even if it's simple, you could at least swing out of decency... Wait, a disappearing demonic ball is a ball? What, doesn't the fork ball go into the strike zone?"

"Wow, you really know nothing about baseball... Yes, fork leaves the strike course into the ball course, but this doesn't mean it's necessarily a ball. I told you, pitching's basis is to throw the batter off. Screw ball or straight ball - just the name is not enough."

A fast, invisible to the naked eye, ball is a myth, of course. But the only trump is captured early on.

Any batting and pitching are no more than "movements available to the body". They mirror each other. A ball thrown by a human will be returned with a corresponding swing by a human. Screwballs are necessary to throw this general focus off.

"Heh... Then other screwballs pretty much still go into the strike zone."

"Of course. Generally speaking, even a straight pitch is still a screw ball. Because the balls fall down. Backspin results in air friction, the pressure below the ball increases. The ball is given a spin that's inverse to its movement direction, a lifting force is generated. This lifting force creates a distortion through a ball's spin, and other screwballs move it in other directions. You know how there are seams in the balls - not this piece of metal but real ones? Because of them the ball can't be called a sphere. Using small ledges, the pitcher wages war against air resistance."

While I'm sharing my erudition, the match is progressing. It's the eighth circle, Ishizue Stray Dogs' score is rising.

"Hmm... But there are also different screwballs, right? Curved ones, straight ones. Or sidewise and vertical screwballs, what about them?"

"A simple sidewise is not a screw ball. I already said that the ball falls down. No one can escape that rule... Curved screwballs have a high degree of freedom, but they go to the side, dropping strongly. Straight ones - assuming right-handed pitcher and batter - land to the bottom of the inner angle. The upper is uncomfortable to pitch, and thus it's a favourite technique of side pitchers... Sliders, on the other hand, slide from straight to the left. Its speed is also close to the straight, so it's a one-use duel pitch. It's for a side pitcher, too."

"Side and side... I heard that the upper is the way of the kings. So, do the upper pitchers have fast serves? Are there any forms for straight balls?"

"Uh huh. Upper pitchers are more noticeable in baseball. This "fork" you've overused so much is their trademark move. Also, there's SFF, cutter."

"Cutter? Sounds kind of unlike baseball... Does it cut upon hit?"

"..."

I'm choking back a laugh. What an, mhm, amusing comparison.

"No one cuts anything. It's called a cutter because the pitch looks like a cut, but the full name is 'cut fast ball'. It's also been called 'sleight' for laughs, since it's a straight-like slider."

'Curved' balls have a lot of looks and forms, but they all are pitched via moving the elbow, wrist and fingers. The elbow and wrist suffer high tension, so screwballers easily hurt their elbows.

"Wow, so much stuff. I thought there were only turning and falling balls. But if the pitcher has such freedom of action, doesn't he have an advantage? The batter can only defend."

"If he's up against only the appearance of the pitch, yes. But the pitcher is human. The serve's form and grip make the pitch clear before it's thrown. Everyone has their own grip, but there are common features, so, discounting the trajectory, you can't hide the pitch's appearance... If you look from the pitcher's side, a curve and straight have fingers kinda

twist. So, for the slider and cutter the fingers sort of cut. So, what else... Ah yeah, the demonic ball."

"What? The demonic ball really exists?"

"It does. Generally knuckle balls are called that. It's served while suppressing the spin, and it bobs left and right mid-flight. Twice a second, by the way! Other screwballs give three times a second, so you can compare the air friction. Of course, the ball's speed falls, but even the pitcher can't predict where this 'hard-to-hit' bastard is going to end up. The faster ones are the slider, straight and... aah. I forgot to mention something important."

The side pitcher's trump.

A serve that can't be done by an upper pitcher which gives two vertical turns.

"I mentioned the demonic knuckle ball, when you grip the ball with your knuckles, right? It has an erratic course and is hard to hit, but easy to see. A trump, like in this tabletop baseball. Not a ball you can lose sight of. Baseball also has a screw ball called the disappearing demonic ball."

...Back at school I remember seeing a certain pitcher's serves countless times. A low serve, clinging to the ground. A magic ball, like a flying fish, released practically from the height of a pitcher's mound.

"It's the sinker... literally a sinking ball. It initially rises for a moment, spinning like a straight ball, and then falls under the batter's hands, and if you serve it well, it really goes out of sight."

A knock came from the sofa. Mato-san, who was previously sitting in an uncomfortable silence, suddenly rose a bit.

"Ooh, so there's even such a ball. But Sinker sure sounds familiar, doesn't it? Like a monster's name." - Kaie's eyes light up. - "Interesting."

As a man who has just devoted an hour to baseball, I can't hide my happiness at such a reaction.

"Not at all, Kaie-san, the name 'sinker' does not reveal the whole substance! They say, a left-hander can make a sinker screw!"

"Ooh!.. W-wow, 'cutter', 'screw', everything sounds so cool! And the batter! Doesn't the batter have some 'guillotine' or a tricky 'screw'?"

"Well, hm... Sorry, there are no special tricks to go into textbooks. Everyone thinks up their own names for forms, but they don't sound like karate moves. The pitchers have it good. Imagine, they get names like "Master Screw" or "The Cutter"! They're ubermenschen, I'm awed myself."

Forgetting about the game, I and Kaie chat with burning eyes.

Well, it may well be that Kaie has an image of a 3 meter tall pitcher who is drowning the batter in balls while evilly laughing in his mind, but I'm glad he's having fun.

"..."

So, we're sitting around, having regressed to childhood, and the thirty years old nee-san here is studying us with a cold stare.

"Hm, Mato-san, are you with us? There's not a lot of space here, you probably won't want to join, but you know, it's fun in its own way."

"To hell. This is not my thing. Just tell me when you're done."

What's 'this'? It's just a game, press a button - throw, press another - bat.

"That's not it, Arika. Mato-san doesn't like the designer house. She's always, always breaking everything."

'It's hilarious, I laugh so hard', - the black-haired youth smiles slightly. Touma Mato, not replying, unwillingly moved her eyes away from the bed.

"By the way, Arika, how do you know so much about baseball? You've been talking like never before. Are you a hardcore baseball fan?"

"Hmm..."

Damn. He's right, I forgot myself and babbled.

"Well, not quite a fan, just, uh, it accumulated bit by bit..."

"He used to be in a baseball club. In high school until the summer of third year he participated as replacement batter. Although he combined it with other activities."

A sudden blow from an unexpected place. Touma Mato leaned forward and said something I'd have liked to forget forever.

"Oh. So you were in a club, Arika. But combining... sounds as though you were slacking or something... And you still got by? High school baseball isn't just child's play, right?"

"Yeah, not child's play. But if you work hard you can get the role of the replacement batter in even a short time. The amount of practice does not equal strength, after all."

Not that I dislike my sports past, but I didn't manage to get everything out of my youth. Because of time, among other things.

"Wrong. Practice equals strength, dumbass. You are going nowhere if you don't push yourself during the growth period. Efficient training? Ha! Put a head on your shoulders first... Listen, Shozai. People like you, who don't know themselves, must precisely, mercilessly, to the point of vomiting, not easing up even when half-dead, conquer their body and soul with willpower, kick themselves tens of thousands of times - that's the most efficient training. If the head can't learn, let the body do so."

"Ghuh."

"Uh."

The two weaklings on the bed squeaked in unison.

I should probably thank my fortune. Were she the trainer at KouraKou, I and Kirisu would certainly have died right at the baseball field.

"Mato-san, this is called 'recycling'. If you break, what then? The body will learn - this is a theory of willpower gone too far."

"I'm just mentioning facts... Oh. I thought this was the general understanding among all sportsmen. But you're a nonsense sportsman that built himself without a foundation, huh?.. You know what, Shozai? To refine the technique of moving you need repetition. Do the same thing, oscillate like a pendulum, and the CNS and the periphery will memorize the commands. You'll find short cuts, connect the bridges to allow easier coursing along them. The nervous system will build itself due to the repetition, increase efficiency, and you'll be able to unconsciously do the right movements faster than you can think... In school sport an instructor is enough to understand bodily techniques as knowledge. A sportsman doesn't memorize with his head but hammers the technique into his nerves. 'Learns with his body' means literally makes the physical body learn."

"U-understood... But, Mato-san, the result will be not a sportsman, but Pavlov's d..."

"What? Any objections?"

"No, nothing at all. So that's it. When a professional specializes in a certain technique, he goes through Spartan training. So anyone can train to death to acquire reflexes..."

Scary. Mato-san probably has underlings trained to become a living shield at a gesture.

"Nope. Sadly, not anyone can. The nervous system's development is apparent at about 10 years of age, and if by that point the basic technique of movements is not learnt, individuality starts sprouting. Repetition is effective, but the truly effective period passes too quickly. So if you want to become a specialist, you have to remake your nervous system through repetition before you're ten. In other words, a sportsman succeeds without much effort, you can easily call him nonsense, don't you think?"

'You do, right?' - she looks at me dangerously. She seems to single me out for attack lately for some reason.

"Stop, so then there's all the less need to drag yourself through this! The nauseating repetition ends at age ten, right?"

"You keep slithering back to rest and sloth. After ten years you just change the focus of training. The order seems reversed, but after getting the technique down you have to work on developing muscle strength. Unlike the growth of the nervous system, general development accelerates after reaching puberty and onwards. Strength is usually trained



during that period. It's obvious that between middle school and college the body grows faster than nerves."

Hm, that's true. So, a sportsman builds his fundamentals until ten years.

Let us digress a bit - the nervous system, general development and sexual growth are the most pronounced from ten to twenty years of age, that is, during the period of pubescence. The trauma gained during that period is hard to get rid of precisely for that reason. If you let it get serious, domestic abuse, domestic killing, domestic gluttony and such will begin, so you have to watch it. Well, you can't prevent it by just monitoring, though.

The heated duel ended at nine innings. Since the eighth one Ishizue Stray Dogs turned the losing situation around, then Karyou Divas couldn't even the score, and mocking crosses decorated the scoreboard.

"Phew, my throat's parched. Arika, make me a drink. The mixer's in the kitchen."

'Got it!' - I happily answer and enter the kitchen near the bathroom. The unexpected raise makes my heart race, but I return, but I return to reality with a cold thought - what am I doing, swindling a kid like that.

"So why the visit, Mato-san?"

Meanwhile Kaie - apparently happy to have had fun for an hour even despite losing - calmly addresses Mato-san while lying on his back.

"I only come here for one thing. To ask you to exorcise a demon."

Leaning forward on the sofa, crossing fingers with a serious look, Touma Mato said a strange phrase.

Exorcising a demon. You don't hear that often, but the words themselves are not that strange.

The strange thing is that this is Touma Mato, an expert on the possessed. They - the carriers of the A syndrome - can't be cured. After a year and a half in the Origa clinic, this was my own conclusion rather than anything dropped by Touma Mato.

"What's this? Is it a formal verified request for aid?"

"No. Basically, it's my personal, uneasy request. I want to remove the traces of a criminal."

"..."

My hand freezes over a half-peeled apple. What? Isn't Mato-san a faithful dog of the law?!

"What, a family thing?"

"Uh huh. Grandfather asked me to relay this, so I'm here. Did you hear that a maniac killer has been working in Shikura's suburbs?"

"Yes. But in a form that said something about four corpses. So, the criminal is the possessed in question?"

"Very likely. Let's call him youth A. This youth A participates in a so-called SVS - street performance on open highways... what's wrong, Shozai, why are you squeaking? Find a worm in the apple?"

"Excuse me? It's impossible, I monitor the food, and all the worm-ridden ones are long sold away. Mato-san, go on."

"Ah, right. Youth A's family asked grandfather to find their offspring and return him home before the story is out... So, A stopped showing up at home even before the road kills began. The relatives nearly reported the runaway when they heard about the maniac, but suddenly understood."

"..."

I don't know what to think about parents who, upon hearing of a maniac, realize: 'Oh, that's our son!' - but, apparently, there were enough points of resemblance to make the conclusion.

This doesn't concern me. I blend the chopped apple and natural water into a hellish mix and, like a high-class waiter, bring it to my employer.

"Here's your drink, Kaie. So, Mato-san, goodbye. I see it's important, so I'll be going."

"Come ooon. You'll forget it anyway, so stay a bit, Arika."

"Yeah, Shozai, don't shuffle around. Who knows what places you'll go to from here... By the way. You do know what SVS is, right?"

She glares at me. I should have at least muffled the recent squeak with an apple. As soon as Mato-san said 'SVS', the fear of not knowing what'll happen to me if they find out squeezed an involuntary 'ah' out of me.

"Yeah, I do. SVS is something like easy baseball."

"Uh-huh, the documents say something like this. The maniac is a pitcher in the game, he waits until one of the participating batters is alone, challenges him to a showdown and kills him in the end. The police don't yet know who he is, and there aren't enough witnesses. The handle is Sinker. Every time he starts with a strike-out and then kills... Man, some people have the strangest hobbies."

'Not straight', - Mato-san spits out. She's one of those who don't waste bullets, and the idea of first capturing a thought then striking it doesn't occur to her.

"Hmm, strange hobbies? But everyone has at least one personality trait they don't tell others about."

'Right, Mato-san?' - Kaie makes the scariest pass in the world. Could you please not say such things while I'm in Mato-san's range?

Well, he's right though.

"Interesting question. If we're talking about Mato-san's hidden trait, it's probably her sadism?"

"What?" - Tomato-chan is surprised. - "Don't badmouth others like that. I'm not hiding it."

Then you should, okay?

"Anyway. With his appearance SVS became a game on the brink of death. Official, right? Sinker's focused on the nine official batters, and the surviving batters sleep badly at night... So, Shozai? What else are you hiding?"

"Well, it's not like I'm trying to hide it... It's just that I myself kinda entered the official without noticing..."

"!.."

"..."

These stares hurt. These faces in perfect agreement over their surrender to Ishizue Arika's unlucky star. These eyes full of resigned understanding - again he's neck deep in something he's not related to at all.

"Okay, let's leave this wretch alone. Mato-san, what do Sinker... youth A's parents want to do with him?"

"The request was to isolate him before we do and, if there's anything unusual about his body, cure it. Also, if the infection's source is found out, to remove it... That parental love. He can't become possessed by himself, someone infected him, so they should answer..."

From Mato-san's viewpoint, naturally it's about parental love. But A syndrome isn't transmitted from person to person. You can't just be near a possessed and then become possessed yourself.

Whatever... But these two clearly mean to 'cure' him.

"Uuh, Mato-san. Is possession curable now?"

"No. So, Karyou? Decide yet?"

"If he's fake, I'm always ready, but I can't go to him myself. Maybe you can bring him here, Mato-san?"

"I can't. I know where he is, but there are people there. If I go, it'll be a major headache later. It's preferable that the exorcist come and perform the procedure on the spot."

"Uh huh. Then, my representative will go. Right, Arika?"

'Pleeeeeease', - in a serene and yet begging voice.

"Oh yeah, be useful for a change. You hear everything, Shozai?"

'Please', - in a rough and faintly menacing voice.

"Whoa, I didn't understand anything! Not a single word in your chat leads to me somehow being involved!"

"Don't worry. It's enough for you to meet him while wearing the prosthesis. If the talk doesn't work out, just do nothing and return. Mato-san, how grateful will they be?"

"Hmm? Ah, well, about this much."

Mato-san calmly takes a check out of her pocket.

It'd have been better for me not to see it... The sum moved the sudden role of representative, the danger of parleying with the murderous maniac youth A and such to the background.

"Well, I don't need it, but let's split it evenly, Arika. Mato-san, bring it when we're finished?"

"Of course. Don't you show it to anyone but me."

Uh, phew... It'd be better if he didn't say "we're finished", but I do need money.

"And also, Arika, if it goes well, I might just believe in you and give you the prosthesis into constant use. You won't have to ask for it every time and come back to return it. If you can function as my errand man... as an experiment, this left arm is yours", - the black silhouette smiled with unbelievable tenderness.

Enough money for three years of life and the black prosthesis I need so much. ...Ah, I'm so going to regret this. I clearly see this movie cliché of impending death, but I just cannot resist such a temptation.

I receive the prosthesis from Kaie and bravely put it on.

"Good luck. This is your first step, so try not to screw up and take it easy."

Thus instructed by my employer, I leave the underground room.

Near the reservoir lit by the summer sun is Touma Mato who left a moment before.

When I agreed to be a representative, I was given a run-down of the job. I know where youth A is hiding and also where he lives. My job is just to contact him and give him the message 'your parents want you to come home'. I'm uneasy, but if that's all, I'll just do it and get my cut.

"Shozai. About baseball. So, are there really no pitches that turn sideways?"

Mato-san started talking, strangely, not about the job.

"No. People often say things like 'sideways' or 'at a right angle', but however you spin the ball, you can't make it move like that."

"All right. And one that can change direction once and later a second time, but in a completely different direction?"

"This isn't even a newbie's question, Mato-san... This nonsense is leaving a bad taste in my mouth, but - so does that Sinker of yours throw pitches like that?"

This isn't baseball pitching any longer.

It is literally a serve possessed by a demon.

"Uh-huh. The ball went past the retreating batter, swerved at a right angle twice and cracked his skull open. Looking from above, the trajectory is like an isosceles triangle. Any thoughts?"

"Too idiotic... Any other nonsense features?"

"Mhm... The case isn't in my hands yet, I don't know for certain. but the balls stuck in victims' bodies are apparently singed, and you can see the insides."

The ball turned due to rotational speed high enough to singe it? Come on, that can't be. Anyway, even if you assume that some unknown grip can make the ball turn at an angle, this doesn't mean it can do so twice. After the pitch the ball changes spin direction and changes from a vertical to a horizontal? This is called telekinesis in SF.

The possessed' bodies change. But there are no ridiculous abilities like moving something separate from the body. There are various 'psychics' who can mess with others' sight... barely fits, true, but when there are others watching, this is even less likely.

"Well, for now the stage is a room. He probably won't suddenly start throwing balls around. By the way, Mato-san... SVS is a problem now, right? So why isn't the police arresting them?"

"We'd like to but, to everyone's annoyance, they aren't breaking any laws. They're careful and don't even interfere with traffic."

Well, of course. Especially that of night patrols.

"Hmm... Wait, what if you don't stop it but beat them at their own game? Listen, Shozai, can't I enter as a pitcher? Train my hand, and..."

"No, you can't. In the first place, you use the wrong kind of projectile."

Batted away at the speed of light.

'Mhm', - Mato-san regretfully went silent. Sometimes she says such cute things.

"Ah, but generally in this game batters hopelessly dominate, so perhaps murderous serves a la Mato-san might be handy. They say there are too few pitchers."

"Why would the batters dominate?"

"Batters carry weapons. In a pinch a bat is a great help. Seriously though, batting is easier than pitching. And there's training. Batters develop easier, so there's more of them."

I say goodbye and go to the bus stop.

Maybe I should've caught a ride on Mato-san's Mercedes AMG SL55, but I'm not in the mood to.

"Well, I'll call when I'm done talking, so you wait nearby. Mato-san, you keep going God knows where even when at work. Please stop it - I call you, and you're somewhere in Oz or such."

"Shaddap. I'm not brave enough to venture places like this alone. Here, take this with you. Just in case. Don't hesitate. I'll present it as self-defence."

Touma Mato took a huge scary-looking knife and handed it to me - here!

"..."

Thanks for the moral support, but this reminded me once again that her job is about handling such things.

"Damn, I'm too early..."

Although I said that, since I don't have a danger sense there is no sweat or goosebumps. I look at my golden cell to check the time. Noon precisely. The date is a hot sunny Friday, 13th.

A few minutes away from the Yasakadai station. I arrived at my target - a ten-story building.

From afar it's an unremarkable office building.

Close by you can see a hotel-style hall taking up the entire first floor.

But really the building is taken by the now commonplace karaoke rooms. The whole building is an artificial paradise created with the sole idea of karaoke. It's a miraculous

alternate world with capacity for eight hundred people, each of whom can hold a mike. What is this but a song incarnate?

Youth A should be hiding at this building's fourth floor. Room №20. He's been taking the furthest and largest room for three weeks now.

At the entrance everyone is welcome: young and old, men and women. I'll repeat myself: it's a human-made heaven descended to Earth. If you're saying 'But today is a workday!' you and your prim truth have no place here.

Quickly, looking natural, I go past the entrance hall attracting customers with sparkling voices and atmosphere.

Welcome. Are you alone? No, no, I'm meeting a friend. Have a good day. Yes, thanks.

There are two elevators in this place. I enter and press eight straight away. Once the doors close I press four. I was worried that it wouldn't work, but the lift helpfully lit the 4 button. Despite being a secret hideout for runaway youths, the place is rather poorly guarded.

It's nice that the setup is clever, though. It's still true that if the owner who is uncomfortable with the law installed a password or a key card lock on the button, trying to converse with one of these secret base lovers would have been twice as hard and four times as painful.

After just a few second I leave the elevator on the fourth floor. The lighting is darker than on the other floors, I can barely hear a radio.

The corridor is narrow and long, spiralling out from the elevator. Some sort of one-track road. Imagine a racetrack where the finish is next to the start, but there's a wall between them. It's like a circle to the end of a human's life, which is making me nauseous.

The entrance with the elevator is right at the centre of the south wall, and the passage goes west, hits a wall and turns north, hits a wall again and goes east, again and breaks south, and finally goes west again and stops at the last room. To reach room 20 I'll have to go all the way.

On the floor there's a red carpet, the wallpapers are all black. It's so uncomfortable that a normal person won't dare enter. A truly gloomy corridor, like in a haunted house, is swimming past me.

I know that a murderous maniac is lurking in the depth, but this discomfort is pretty small for Shikura. Ishizue Arika doesn't have a danger detector, and anyway, if I was afraid of this, I'd only have seen Kaie's underground room in nightmares about me seeing nightmares.

I turn the first corner.

The left wall has a line-up of windows covered with sun-proof paper, the right - of karaoke room doors. Very quiet. I go past the seventh door.

I turn the second corner.

Behind it, with a face like a pancake, there was the horrific murderer.

Crack.

"Whoa, careful!.."

I exclaim while backing away.

I get no breaks. The horrific murderer bit was a bit of a hyperbole, but it was a horrible hoodlum Disney Winnie the Pooh, and he jumped on me with clenched fists without wasting words!

Collecting myself and making an innocent face of a bystander having turned a corner, I decide that the three-strike combo was amazing.

And that Winnie the Pooh was Kirisu Yaichiro.

"Hey, why'd you dodge?!"

First he attacks me, and now he's the the offended one.

Apparently the bear super move was his mainstay. The target, having just turned a corner, gets a few to the face, is neutralized and finished off with a gut punch - perhaps several, until their untimely departure.

But due to the target's delirious behaviour the strikes were wasted.

"Whatever! Well, I didn't really get it myself, but whatever! Because you've had enough swinging during the day!"

I started shouting in the same tone as Kirisu... to be more precise, my reason ran off somewhere.

It was like a dump truck flying out from behind the corner, and in moments of life and death humans unconsciously dodge.

And so we, without even thinking of variants like 'what do you want here' or 'oh hey, an acquaintance, let's talk', menaced each other.

Kirisu, unconsciously adopting a boxer's stance, and I, using the 'right hand forward stop let's talk' style.

"..."

"..."



For a few seconds we study each other. Kirisu sullenly raises his arms.

"Huh. Turns out you can use this style", - says I. Cheers for pacifism. Smarts are good for something after all.

"Like hell I can... It's just that seeing such an arrogant wimp gives the opponent a boldness boost, is all. Don't do that again."

With these words Kirisu loses his last will to fight. I don't think he's one of those who won't punch a face they know, and his surrender without a fight is worrying me.

"This isn't like you. Are you really Kirisu?"

"Well, damn, I might accidentally kill you, you know."

"I wouldn't want to be killed, even on purpose... So what, has this grown into a habit over a year and a half?"

"The scary one is you for seriously raising topics like this. If I didn't stop, you would've gone along with it. And we'd go to the limit. Hell knows who'd screw up first, but anyway it wouldn't be worth it. So we stopped. And I did my duty anyway."

Apparently Kirisu wants to say that since he failed in his staple attack, he now isn't in the mood to either give or take. This lifestyle has to be learnt.

"So? You visiting the guest in the far room?"

"Yeah, his family asked. Like, convince him to go back, we're not angry. I'd love to relay it and go home, but orders are to talk face-to-face... So. I won't ask why you're here, so maybe let me through?

"Phew... Okay, I got it, go-go-go. I'm out of here. Do whatever you want."

Passing me the baton, Kirisu evaporates.

I hear an elevator's 'ding' in the distance.

Why attack me, a visitor, - I do have an idea, but since Kirisu silently left, it seems like he's washed his hands of this. The task is 4/5 complete. Now just to talk.

'Yaaay', - I, relieved, turn the third co...

"Ah..."

My hand isn't fast enough.

My crown is hit by a white weapon moving at a hundred and forty kilometres per hour.

At the end of the corridor is a figure of a left-handed side pitcher.

The 'submarine' form, when the hand, barely off the ground, releases the ball along a stretched curve.

But, unlike a screw ball, the ball didn't dive but hit me straight in the skull.

This time I didn't talk my way out or dodged cunningly, but just lost consciousness on the red carpet.

(↓)

The pain of rebirth can't be described.

It is an experience outside of human consciousness, a truth that must not be in it. You can't comprehend it with a sound mind. The beastly howl, the pain breaking the brain apart, make me open my eyes. This is a metaphor, of course. The brain doesn't feel pain. It just recounts the damage to the body and transforms it.

The pain mainly radiated from my left arm.

The right hemisphere in control of the left arm is creaking.

The paradoxical pain 'nowhere' makes the human consciousness scream.

Lives. Lives. Lives.

That which has died lives.

Pain is a sign of existence, and this unfreedom gives me a nauseating high.

The ambiguity of the flesh gives me an illusion of omnipotence.

God is not, therefore this omnipotence is.

Devil is, therefore it's so pathetic and impotent.

The original births the fake, the fake creates the original, the original consumes the fake.

The Devil was melting my brain.

'Nothing' let my brain overwrite the rules of reality.

At the moment of rebirth...

I saw the scream of the newborn - a clump of black hatred.

(↑)

Pain shot through the area between my stump and my head like a red-hot poker, and I came to. This is a metaphor, of course. I was awakened by a pain without a wound.

I'm lying on my back on the red carpet.

An existential pain in my left hand which has become melting crust of the Earth.

It's a fact, of course. The prosthesis gripping my left arm, flowing like a liquid, has stretched itself forward for dozens of meters. At the end something formless, dog-like, is taking great pleasure in gnawing at something limbs-and-torso-like - the biting maw is spraying small dirty pieces of foam, that which will in a few seconds become very tasty dog food is crying, losing consciousness.

Aah... The doglike is eating the humanlike.

"!.."

The humanlike's head is swinging back and forth, it's screaming. The head is hitting the floor, bouncing off, and again - bam, bam, smash, crack. It's going to break its head even before it becomes tasty food.

The humanlike is desperately trying to shake the doglike off, but its left hand is not there any longer, and the body is, to my disinterested eyes, already looking like a thoroughly mixed porridge.

The problem is that the doglike is stretched to over here, on my left arm.

"Whoa... Hey, stop."

A few seconds, and the dog's dinner will be over.

Only such a thing could eat this, but leftovers are also accumulating here. The hard-to-digest pieces are invading my body through the arm.

"Whoa, stop, doggie, shoo!"

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Our doggie is so playful. Doesn't listen at all.

"Leave it, the head, don't eat the head, die, it'll die!"

The doglike doesn't leave it.

The mysterious prosthesis has become a mysterious monster and is going haywire.

This sight hasn't actually made me nervous.

'So that's what it was', - somewhere in the depths of my consciousness something knows what's happening. Just to think, it fit me. 'My hand was just such a thing', - I realize.

"No, mutt, really, stop, it must..."

Taste bad in every sense of the word, you shouldn't eat stuff like that.

"Oh, right, the knife..."

I measure two stumps along my left arm and press Mato-san's knife into the spot.

That's it. The temporary sense of omnipotence is cut off. The understanding of the prosthesis' construction fades. The black lava is dragged into the doglike and instantly disappears. The humanlike stopped needing a TV mosaic and returned to being unharmed.

"Gh..."

And I'm being sick in an unsightly manner. I just stabbed a prosthesis, but my missing sensations drenched my brain in the pain of amputation.

"Ugh... ooooh..."

The pain in the left arm that shouldn't be and something disgusting that's writhing in my chest made me sweat all over.

As though worried about the master's representative or something, the black dog went over to me and poked me with its nose, sniffing. Correction: it isn't worried. Apparently it's just checking out a tasty smell. By the way, I think Kaie's dog didn't have eyes.

"Hey, doggie, you..."

I raise my head.

Not a sign of life. On the floor is only Karyou Kaie's prosthesis I tore off.

The guy who slammed a hard ball into another's head was the very youth A I had to persuade.

Sekura Yumiya. Koalagaoka High, third year, this year's baseball ace.

There are two patrol cars and an ambulance before the karaoke building.

The orderlies are dragging Sekura Yumiya who's still conscious but unresponsive. The police, with the goal of investigation and settling of the situation, will stay in the building for some time.

"Good job. Settled it pretty much according to the request. Well, halfway."

Mato-san, under the merciless heat of the blue summer sky, was drinking evian.

We're currently on the roof of a large parking lot belonging to a hypermarket near the karaoke building.

After the occurrence... Slowed by the pain in my left arm and the uncomfortable sight around me, I quickly cleaned up my bile, made sure youth A was breathing and called Mato-san. She ordered me to wait for her policemen on the hypermarket's roof in half an hour and arrived herself an hour later.

Also, Mato-san is sitting on the Mercedes' hood while I'm holding down the brake with my foot. The black prosthesis is on the cement before me just as before.

"What happened to Sekura Yumiya? I only checked whether he was breathing. Thought I shouldn't check his pulse."

"He'll live. The arm is ruined, of course but well, they get into presses the same way. He won't be able to use it, but it doesn't have features unusual for humans. A normal severely wounded human being."

"Uh huh. I only saw it for a second, but his left arm was stretching."

"Oh. But he had no consequences of such. I tell you, everything according to the request. The affected organ was amputated. His life is not threatened. Well, whether he can live on as Sekura Yumiya is a different matter."

"..."

In the Origa clinic there were practically no amputations of affected organs and growths.

For each patient their own, new experimental procedures and tests. Even if a complete theory was created, there'd be no technical capacity and equipment for it.

You can't save patients on the last stage, for who amputation equals death. It's funny - their only salvation was to abandon the procedures and end their life in the ward. There were a lot of attempts to operate on the 'light'... patients of the B building... but soon after they stopped reacting to occurrences in the outside world. Vegetable people. Most have a dysfunctional brain.

An incredibly rare exception was a woman who returned to normal after the exorcism and closed herself in her shell under the weight of her sins. No one can remember her right away.

"Don't worry, Shozai. It's better to regress to childhood because of folk treatments than to end up in Origa. There's no reason he won't rehabilitate."

"I'm not worried. I'm going to forget anyway."

Yes. I don't see youth A, possessed murderous maniac, Sekura Yumiya, becoming a vegetable as my fault; I'm not that kind. Far more I wanted to ask:

"Mato-san, you knew?"

I look at the prosthesis lying on the ground.

It cured the A syndrome. Literally chased the demon out of the possessed. This metamorphic black prosthesis.

"Well, yeah... I know one thing - that kid is not human. And several times I saw these prostheses turn into weird stuff. It must be eating them."

"Yes. What you said in 'Marion' wasn't a figure of speech."

True. A prosthesis that is moving because of an unknown technology isn't what I should have recoiled from.

'There is a demon in the nearby forest who kills the possessed.'

I heard such rumors, but I didn't hear about the possessed being eaten. Now I can't smile and say that Karyou Kaie is a mysterious but philanthropic employer.

There are about five hours until my reset. If I do and think nothing, my life will go back to its usual course starting tomorrow... Oh well.

"By the way, Shozai. Wasn't anyone besides Sekura Yumiya there? Something's just bugging me. An A syndrome carrier with a developed growth can't just sit tight like that."

"So, like someone who helped him hide?"

"Moron, that's obvious. Even if Sekura Yumiya was a bit disoriented, he couldn't hide alone. Fine, I'll be easy on them, you can talk if you want. Consider it a present for being useful. I'll spare you and won't interrogate you further."

"What?!"

A magnificent Mato-san has descended from the heavens! Did she celebrate summer by going for a swim in a pool or a spring?!

"Teenager crimes are just not my job. My hands are full with watching over you alone."

"That's the way! Mato-san being kind without a reason is not Mato-san! Phew, that's a weight off my mind."

"You love babbling, don't you. I was asking about Sekura Yumiya and his condition as an A syndrome carrier. If he stayed sane with the growth, perhaps he had a specialist with him?"

"Oh, so that's what you're on about. Well yes, without a specialized medic they usually become aggressive in a week or so... Hmm, by the way, about this. Can I make an unproven statement, attending doctor Touma?"

"Yes. You have my permission. I don't know what you're on about, but a fool doesn't know of intuition."

"What-ever, I can live just fine with only five senses. So my senses tell me that Sekura Yumiya's behaviour was somehow unlike that of Origa's patients. Instead of 'cornered' he was, like, 'cornering'... not a victim complex, but megalomania, yeah, something like that."

"Ooh", - Mato-san starts pondering. Mato-san decided to take my feat and experience of one and a half years of communicating with A syndrome carriers in the Origa clinic as a sort of proof for Ishizue Arika's superficial impression.

"You mean that from your standpoint he didn't look that sick?"

The criterion of sickness as seen by Ishizue Arika clearly is a big deal to Touma Mato. Her speech becomes serious, like when she's wearing a lab coat.

"Yes, pretty much. He wasn't that... well, nervous. If such a small deal causes growths, there are going to be more possessed. Oh, what if the number of A syndrome carriers is growing year by year?"

"No. There are just a few formations that cause the Agonist syndrome. Their number isn't increasing. We are, of course, a ridiculous people who you can never be sure what to expect from, but this is set in stone."

"Can't be, they're already counted? And how many A syndrome carriers are there?"

We could isolate them even before the growths. For example, our domestic thing. Before it gives everyone trouble, just bind it, arms and feet, with titanium cord!

"I'd love to, but we only know the numbers. What will each A syndrome carrier end up as is impossible to know before it actually shows... Sterilisation of the provocative agent was completed in 1990. Even though about two hundred thousand people were infected, only a few can actually develop the syndrome. Their numbers were counted too. The top count of those who can develop the syndrome is about five thousand. Maybe less."

A maximum of five thousand people...

By the way, at the moment about four thousand A syndrome carriers have been found. Out of them around three thousand died. Including those dead and harmlessly shut away in Origa, this stage is probably already over.

"Well, possession is a disease, after all. So, the first generation can give birth to the second, and anyway, the agent can multiply too, right?"

"I told you, no. Not for A syndrome. To calculate the power of such an agent there are three factors. Longevity - how long can it live without a human host; infectiousness - how quickly will the effect manifest after infection; and, finally, reproducibility - how much can the agent's elements reproduce and increase contagiousness. The Origa research results show that the bodies believed to be the cause of A syndrome fatally lose reproducibility. The longevity of their hiding in the environment and infectiousness of their effect on human bodies are stronger than in any known agent, but the reproducibility is in the CDC categories - below C."

The possessed can't multiply by themselves.

If there are more confirmed syndrome carriers than last year, it means that some unbelievable carriers who don't fit the statistical category have appeared in the count. When Mato-san asked whether there was a specialist she meant just that.

However, Mato-san. You speak as though A syndrome is not a natural disease.

"Well, fine. So the idea is that the possessed can't increase their number, and it's hard to find them, but watching over them is possible? Oh, are the statistics divided by prefectures?"

"Yeah, and most are in prefecture C. This was one of the reasons the prefecture's border has been like this since 1990. We have announced that A syndrome is not contagious, but we haven't yet made a public statement that there'll be no more possessed... Well, there were probably other reasons, but they clung to this one. This is probably the only benefit A syndrome has brought to the country."

As a result presently the only roads to other prefectures are a few highways and a rail road. Rumours say no possessed have ever crossed the prefecture borders under their own power... Hard to believe, but one of the theories says there are minefields around. What's this country coming to.

So.

The world has many things that are not to be known.

Such as the peace in Tsuranui's head, or the reason for Sinker's possession, or the secret of Mato-san's frankly inhuman psychological and physical strength, - if such questions sneak into your head, let them sneak right through and out of it for your own good.



The identity of Karyou Kaie is one of these as well. I should make it the first of them. When in mystery novels a good citizen realizes who the killer is, he's killed despite not being on the killer's list so that he isn't in the way. Thus, the great detective's wits are tangled by the sudden corpse, start giving errors and making hyperspace logic leaps. And the man, unlucky enough to die, interferes with others even in death, which is not good.

Therefore I'm forgetting this occasion.

I won't write it down, make a stone face and end it with reporting youth A - Sekura Yumiya's - fate.

Or I was going to end it that way, but...

Upon returning straight to the underground, I threw the prosthesis to my grinning employer on the bed and angrily glared at him.

"What does this mean? This thing has almost led to the worst-case scenario."

"Oh, you're so kind, Arika. The worst-case scenario happened without it: he's alive."

The beautiful silhouette shakes its head in disappointment.

Extraction is just a word, this is a clean-up. Or a control shot. Kaie didn't think of saving youth A or helping those in trouble for a moment... No, well, he accepted the job instantly and obviously didn't care what kind of a situation youth A was in.

"You're in a bad mood, Arika. If you have questions, I'll gladly answer them."

Ugh, the devil's temptation, but bear it, Arika! You can't ask what he is or what his prosthesis is. If I find out, I'll pay for it with my life. I'll try to delay it as much (and if) I can.

So I had to dispel my wrath with a borderline question.

"Only one question. You sent me to kill youth A? Is killing possessed natural?"

"Hmm, I don't even know. I don't wish him well, but I probably don't really want to kill him either... You, Arika, probably wouldn't want to kill your food either."

Kaie seriously pondered and ended up giving this out. With a face of an innocent, pure girl.

"Uh-huh, right. It's not about killing or not killing, but just not forgiving. They're fake, perverted. If such things stroll around, there'll be real trouble."

Not a single emotion towards the possessed human. He's just enjoying a human's shattered future like a fairytale. Like a candy...The possessed eaten by this prosthesis will be rolled around on the tongue, tasted and eventually digested.

"I understand... And here I thought you had a surprisingly philanthropic personality."

The black-haired demon gives me a puzzled and serious look.

"You have an amusing misconception. Sadly, you're overestimating me, Arika. I have never tried to help other people since birth."

The confusing thing is his love for humans. But there are different forms of love. Liking it doesn't mean adoring it.

Something that feels nothing towards a human but can't hold back its happiness upon seeing people.

A monster knowing of human tragedies and happily smiling at them.

I finally understood. This little bastard's true form is an unmistakable, true demon.

"..."

However, he wasn't trying to deceive me. I first found out that he's a monster of that sort back on that moonlit evening.

"Fine, I understand. So I'm going. Please allow me to leave early today."

He freezes. Karyou Kaie looks at me with a completely stupefied face. Even his back is tensely stretched.

"Arika, you will keep working for me?.."

"Yeah, of course. I won't find such a sinecure anywhere else. But not today. Tomorrow it'll be fine, so let me go for now."

"Uh huh. Are you taking this?" - about the prosthesis.

"Not today. I'll be wanting it when I forget."

"Well, see you tomorrow", - I leave the underground.

I want to say: 'Like hell I'm using that!' - but I can't, which is troubling... I realize that I'm walking into a minefield. But damn it all, it feels so awesome to wear it.

Recording the events of the day into the notebook before I forget, I'm waiting for the sunset that'll dispel the gloominess of my heart.

Was it that hard to stay silent? Why did I interrogate Kaie? Why did my cross irritation turn into an unsatisfied muddle upon hearing the answer?

Turning this river of emotions into words seemed to me like it would make everything even worse, so I went to the cinema to kill some time.

The large cinema in the hypermarket near the station takes money for each film, so it's a no go. The old good cinema still surviving in Yasakadai, where you could sit until closing time with just one ticket, gave me eight unhurried hours. When I was extracted to the street along with the closing up, the time was already past ten o'clock PM.

I walk to Shikura instead of taking the train. The speed is only four kilometres per hour, but it's still a stretch.

Along the way I enter a fast food restaurant and grab some junk food for dinner, which is also supper.

Chewing potatoes that can't even be called food once they get cold, I walk through the night city.

The streets branching out to the sides are dark, but safe. It's past ten PM, and there are generally few people, but the lights of the passing cars scare the criminals away about once every five minutes.

Halfway between Yasakadai and Shikura I heard a metallic thump familiar to my ears. Answering its call, I turn away from the side walk and see a gathering of guys who look about twenty. It's the unofficial SVS Kirisu mentioned.

Behind an office building, in a corner far away from the highways is a construction site.

Behind the pitcher the wall of the ten-story building serves as a net. Even in case of a good hit the ball won't end up on the road or in someone's house. There are six people who are really interested and about ten random bystanders.

Not feeling a warm love for SVS, but appreciating the idea of killing some time, I stopped to watch from a distance.

I sit down and put the bag down on a convenient stack of blocks. I see some others also watching the match from afar.

And so. Gnawing into the already cold fried potatoes, entertaining myself with the gamble...

"What a helpless guy, eh! Wreck him, I know you can, what's with the slow ball!"

I met the eyes of a very loud man who was cheering right beside me.

"Uh..."

Simply put, he wasn't in a good mood.

First of all, in this awful heat he was wearing a long black coat. Under the collar he was clearly naked. And his feet were in tight black leather pants. Doesn't he feel the heat... nah, I can see he does, and anyway, take that crap off, I silently protested. And his waist-length discoloured hair. Just looking at him made me feel about two degrees hotter.

Not lagging behind the awful clothes, his appearance... stood out. Deep non-Japanese facial features (handsome guy), eyes hidden behind sunglasses (isn't it a bit dark in

there?), thick knife scars on the back of his palm and elsewhere (ouch); generally, an epic-looking guy.

Either a popular band gathered for a live performance or he's a magazine model. A man not fit for a construction site is nevertheless squatting around and shouting nonsense, thus losing the last impressiveness of his appearance.

Naturally, since I was studying him, our stares met.

Like this.

"..."

"..."

The hairy man in the black coat deftly moves over right next to me without leaving the squatting position. Are you a crab? Are you a freaking crab? Meanwhile, the bright and fun match between the boys is going on. Thus far the pitcher successfully defeated three batters.

"What's this? Was this a strike?"

He spoke to me.

"Yeah. Though it's nearly in the dead zone."

"But he totally missed. Return such a pitch, and it'll roll along the infield."

"This isn't that kind of game. And anyway, strictly speaking, these are all balls."

"Oh, really?"

"Well yeah, this little umpire made the strike zone a bit large, I suppose."

The strike zone goes from the batter's knees up to the middle of the distance between waist and shoulders... that is, about until the batter's elbow... vertically and as wide as the 'home'.

This umpire clearly declares every ball that looks like it touched the 'home' as a strike. Even in the officials the small details are settled by the umpire, and here the batter's at fault too for not noticing the judge's habit.

"Oh. The next batter is keeping a great form. Maybe this way the strike zone will become narrower?"

"Same thing, since the strike zone is determined by the batter's build. Even if they huddle up, all the worse for them."

"Heh, manga is no help, right? So strongly leaning forward won't do anything? And this batter is..."

"Just a moron, yes. Asking to be struck out. And please move away from me."

I wave him off. But the caped man, absorbed in our short dialogue, stretched his already grin-prone mouth to the shape of a three-day-old moon.

"You're a fun guy. You live around here? Lucky you, alone? Attend college? No? Even better, oh yeah, dye your hair? Oh, natural - scary already. Why no arm? You have a good body, though. Sportsman? ...Hey, stop ignoooring me so obviously, don't you have any pity? It's fate, let's be frieeends!"

Again God knows what is sticking to me.

"What an uptight gentleman, I see. What's your name, boy? Oh, or are you older?"

"I don't know how you have to look to think I'm older than you. And I have a habit of not talking to random strangers."

"Oh, is it that case where if I want to learn the name and so on? Ah, it's been so long since I last talked to such proper people. I am Hinomori Shusei. So, can you at least give me your name now?"

"Hinomori?.."

A familiar name, or maybe not.

Anyway, since he introduced himself, I follow suit.

"Ohoh. Written Shozai, read Arika, for real! You have a young name, boy!.. Hm? Wait, it's still a bit strange. So it's like this... Eeh, can you really do it like this, I don't get it, the stupid guy I am. Oh well, it's your problem anyway, probably!"

"..."

A troublesome man, but it's rare to hear the expression 'young name'. It's probably because 'Shusei' is an old one. Maybe there's something bright about the modern manner of bolting other readings to names.

"So, boy. You seem to know a ton about baseball, so I'll ask, a few years ago in this city were there an awesome pitcher and batter? It was said these two could kill a man."

"Yeah, there were. Two players, known as geniuses. What of it?"

"It's just interesting when stuff like that is being said. Like, what the, how do you kill a man with baseball? What, did the pitcher love pitching dead balls and batter - hitting them?"

"This is more like a game without rules than a match between geniuses by this point... They never faced each other, though. I'm told that the pitcher threw with the desire to kill the batter, and the batter made pitchers feel like they'll be killed if they throw a weak pitch."

This story is already two years old. There were two players in Shikura who were envied by normal school ball players - they were real geniuses.

One of them, the batter, was KouraKou's fourth batter.

The pitcher was already feared as an opponent, but after a certain point in time batters started saying they never want to face him again with tears in their eyes. There was also some weird story about them feeling something important tear upon hitting the ball.

"They're not around any longer, though. But what are a killer pitcher and batter even about anyway? Baseball isn't that kind of ga... hey, what the hell are you eating?"

"Hmm? What's wrong, mate?" - the handsome dumbass raises a retarded face while stuffing it with a teriyaki burger. When did he manage to get close and loot my bag? He's just sitting and joylessly chewing away at my dinner, also supper.

"This is mine! Are you a beggar?!"

"Boooo. You weren't eating it, so I figured I coooould. But this is a bad idea, Arika-kun. Eat this stuff, and your abilities will drop. Try not to go too hard on the junk food."

"I'll manage. I've decided to stay an omnivore till death."

"Hmm? Junk food and being an omnivore are different things. Omnivorousness means no qualms. But fine, okay, here."

'A gift!' - the handsome dumbass shouted and returned the half-eaten burger.

"No thanks. Finish it."

"Boooo. Let's split iiit!"

"No! I dislike splitting. It's yours, just go away, please."

"Oh, those principles of yours! Or your creed? Whatever, same thing. Hmm, a childhood trauma?"

He consumes the second half of the teriyaki burger.

Hinomori Shusei-san is elegant and delicate at first sight, but in fact, if you look closely, he looks a bit like a fighter.

The hand holding the burger is big and appears to be carved out of stone, as though due to lengthy training. The hand of a real combat swordsman is constantly wounded by the hilt and swells out of balance with the body - his hand and fingers looked exactly like that.

The voracity with which he ate the burger in seconds, the sawlike row of irregular shark teeth, pretty trained way of... wait, didn't I just describe something definitely inhuman?!

"Whoa, don't glaaaare at me. Let's be frieeends. C'mon. Don't you think we have similar dispositions? Let's be siiiiimilar. Gimme more food."

"..."

No, probably not... Totally not. This man is just a cretin. Definitely.

"I gotta go now. You can have the leftovers, just do me a favour, don't follow me around, okay?"

"Booo... Oh well, time to go is time to go. I have only just returned myself and am in a bit of a pinch. Old friends have all moved, and I have nowhere to go. Returning home after ten years sucks."

Apparently Mr. Hinomori is a local.

Ten years ago would be 1995. If we assume that he started living independently at about twenty, he must around thirty now?

"I'm just walking around the city looking for a certain person. Maybe you know them. Their name is Gichiri-gichiri... no, Gatsuri-Gatsuri, not that either... a name like a sound effect. Ah, Tsukiri-Tsukiri, something like that. Well, I thought you're the guy, but apparently not. Ishizue-arika isn't like a sound effect."

The black cape stands up. Whoa, he's huge... I looked upwards at him. Not quite Kirisu as far as shoulders go, but he looms like an evil spirit of the night.

"Well, maybe we'll see each other. Careful at night, boy. This city does have a few too many murderers."

He waves his hand and leaves. With his back to me his silhouette looks pretty heroic. If you ignore the junk food bag he's carrying.

I don't go towards Ishizues' home on the Shikura hill but towards Ishizue's home in the multi-story building. I've tarried too much, and it's almost midnight.

I put my body, well-walked on this summer night, in the shower and drop on the bed as last strength leaves me.

It's been a long day. Even in this hot bath-like air I fall asleep.

Closing my eyes, I clear my mind, and once again hear the voice of the man I just met. Although he was noisy, he did sometimes throw out some really uncomfortable phrases. It'd be better to meet him during the day.

"But... a genius pitcher killing people, hmm..."

I didn't start doing baseball of my own will, but if I think about it, most of my high school memories are about training on the field.

A nostalgic, sparkling youthful time... Whether it really was that sparkly is a good question, of course. I tried not to think of such things back then. It was my rule back then - not to take interest in the affairs of the day.

But still the field game called 'baseball' was dear to me in its own way. And wasn't I watching SVS and doing the job I did during the day, if the notebook is to be believed, because it was connected to the game so dear to my heart?

"Who knows. Maybe the situation just threw me into it, that happens to me sometimes."

Interrupting my sleepy calm, I reread yesterday's notes.

In them is information about the murderous maniac nicknamed Sinker and the features of youth A - Sekura Yumiya... possessed, left-handed, side pitcher, arm stretches... such reminders, and in the end a note on Karyou Kaie.

There was something long-winded and heavy written about Kaie, but apparently I noticed a problem in the process and poured ink on the three pages, then laconically summed up: 'Bastard. A real demon. Don't fall for sweet talk, he'll eat you whole. What to do?'

"That's a problem... Why am I taking notes so sloppily?"

The last revelation was too fuzzy, what do I do about it?

Anyway, the maniac pitcher spoiling the SVS game was worked over by Mato-san. Or maybe even arrested. The notes say he was sheltered by Kirisu, which I should ask him about when I have time.

The SVS player killer Sinker's stage exit was a bit unceremonious.

"Hmm?"

The notes don't fit, I scratch the back of my head. Wait a moment. But the nickname 'Sinker' clearly doesn't fit?



**(14.08)**

The next day, 10:27 AM.

I was tiredly sitting on the black sofa in the Shikura Police Station's waiting room.

Early in the morning Mato-san kicked me out of bed, and for two hours straight I was being questioned.

The point of the inquiry is simple. A new attack by the maniac happened between midnight and 2 o'clock AM. The maniac Sinker, apparently caught yesterday, committed a sixth crime, and everyone wanted information.

"I don't know anything. Yes, non-involvement has limits, but the world is too strict..."

Youth A - Sekura Yumiya - is guilty in his own way, but he's unconnected to Sinker's case. His arrest yesterday was pointless. Besides, the conclusion was made based on the blood traces on the victims' bodies that Sinker was very likely infected with the A syndrome, and Ishizue Arika, recently released from Origa, was deemed the person most likely to be involved, so here I am.

"I'm depressed... What, am I going to be here every time an A syndrome carrier does something?"

"Hey, you're done too? Way to start the day."

A familiar person plops down next to me.

A man involved in another sense... a man knowledgeable about SVS, Kirisu Yaichiro, ended up here too.

We were both assaulted by questions for two hours straight, but even though we were released, it's always important to just sit around in the station. Let their conditioning's coolness pay for being dragged out so early in the morning.

"Did you hear, Kirisu? This night Sinker put Gondo-kun down."

"Really? Gondo was that guy from Kotoquin?"

"Yeah. They said he was almost a pro already, but he got a ball to the elbow and curled up. Too bad. To him the elbow was probably as dear as life itself..."

Well, yeah. That's why his life wasn't taken.

Anyway, a broken elbow means Gondo-kun is pretty much dead already. Which means Sinker's goal stayed the same.

"Do you know about Sinker's screwballs? They say his pitches turn twice."

"Looks like it. A human can't return something like that", - Kirisu drops. There isn't the usual calm in his voice.

"Hmm. Maybe you've seen them yourself?"

"Kinda. You know how there are security cameras in the Yasakadai shopping district? It was on the tapes. The quality's awful, you can barely see them, but yeah, scary."

'Scary' is apparently meant from a baseball player's viewpoint. Nearly a right angle, and two swerves to boot - you see something like that, and you're not getting away with just soiled pants.

"By the way. Kirisu, you knew that Sekura Yumiya is not the maniac."

"Yup. Sekura is left-handed. A screwballer won't get the name Sinker."

"Right. So, any idea who the real Sinker is?"

"Why do you ask? And yesterday too - you doing wet work now?"

"It's just my job. Although it was quite the coincidence. I was asked by Sekura Yumiya's parents yesterday. Like, it looks like our son's sick, please cure him before the police find out. But the one who can't leave home, so I represented him."

"Stop. Possession is curable?!"

Suddenly he grabbed my shoulders with bloodshot eyes.

Damn. I didn't think about what I was saying. This is clearly the conditioning's fault. Dangers of the age. The freshness of a cool breeze. But oh well, the notes didn't say 'Secret', and Kaie-kun won't mind.

"W-well, I don't even know what to think. I didn't cure it, and anyway, calm down, Kirisu-kun."

"I can't... You're saying that Sekura stopped being possessed. Then what did you do after I left?!"

"What... I don't know myself."

Kirisu doesn't back down.

It's a problem... I can't remember something I don't remember, so I can't properly answer him.

"All right, let's do it like this... Listen, Kirisu. Do you really want to know?"

'Of course', - answers the fearless hero of ancient times.

If so, I guess I have no choice.

I'm getting a feeling I'm dragging my best friend to Hell after myself, but let a serious person who knows their stuff dissuade him.

On that day the underground's air was foggy.

Either the water in the reservoir got dirty or something else, but the summer sunlight coming in from outside became of a wintry, lead-ashen colour.

"..."

Kirisu Yaichiro entered the underground room and, I felt with my skin, completely lost consciousness for a few seconds. It's not a syncope. There are just views in this world which make one's thoughts utterly stop.

Everyone reacts differently: drunk on the beauty, horrified of the grotesque. Kirisu's first impression was of horror.

The room's owner knew I'd bring a guest.

I thought he'd refuse but he asked to describe how it happened right away.

'Wow, you'll bring a person to talk to yourself! You are handy sometimes, Arika.'

A rather pleasing review of me. Let's just not talk about 'a person to talk to' sounding like 'new prey'.

The introduction was short.

Kaie formally introduced himself to Kirisu, who didn't even say his name.

To be exact, he couldn't even open his mouth. I understood him and so subbed for him: "This is Kirisu Yaichiro".

Kirisu was tensely stuck. Almost frozen, As a result the conversation didn't progress a single millimetre. The silhouette on the bed, not minding Kirisu's mood, quietly and serenely, as usual, said:

"Yes. Kirisu-san, you could heal one possessed."

An impossibly ugly beginning of a conversation.

"..."

The frozen article thaws.

Unable to ignore Kaie's words, Kirisu finally became a human again.

"It's not about that... I heard that you could cure possessed and so specially..."

"Specially for this went to this deserted forest, yes? Well, I'm glad. But 'curing the possessed' is a bit wrong. Sorry, but you're mistaking the idea."

Kirisu threw me a reproaching stare. 'Arika, you were too lazy to write your memories down yesterday'.

...So that's it. Kirisu's mistake stemmed from issues in my passing of the information.

"But I do deal with the possessed; there's no mistake there. I'll ask again. You have possessed you know, right, Kirisu-san?"

"Weeell... It's not yet clear whether or not they are. It's just... I know that the real possessed are not the same as the popular opinion ones."

Kirisu sheltered Sekura Yumiya. He saw his hideous right arm with his own eyes.

"All right. So you know a really possessed person. How much did they change? Did they resemble a human?"

"I don't know any inhuman-looking possessed and don't want to. I only saw Sekura. His left hand was swollen, as though due to poison."

"My condolences. But in return he became a nearly lethal pitcher."

"Right... Sekura's balls couldn't kill, though. But it came to that. Do all possessed change like that?"

"Yes. Abilities they dearly desire but can't obtain. Changes compensating for the overwhelming lack of strength and ability. Such is the will of the possessed. But it's a non-reversible self-destruction, there's no way back."

"..."

Kirisu wrinkles his face painfully.

An unpleasant answer.

He heavily drops the question he doesn't want to know the answer to.

"So, if a pitcher retires... having broken elbow and fingers, unable to even pitch a ball; can he come back? As good as before the fractures."

"Yes. Possession makes that possible."

Of course, the returning something will be in better form, but their body won't be the same as before. Those called possessed are sick with a heavy form of A syndrome. Instead of restoring their old capabilities their body and soul will suffer.

"So. I'll ask again. Can you cure possession?"

"Of course. If you mean returning the body to a sound state. But I can't return them as a human. Curing the mind is a job for decent people, after all. Well, although..."

No people who have achieved such a miracle exist.

"Really, you say such funny and cute things. Curing possession is a dream... Those who speak of it are not really sound themselves, but to believe it... Right, Nii-chan?"

"..."

Kirisu grinds his teeth and turns around on his heel. Wordlessly showing that coming here was a mistake, he leaves. The sun has climbed to the zenith, the underground room has changed, and the sunlight is summery again. The shadow on the bed follows Kirisu with a meaningful stare...

"Wow. This guy has killed dozens of others with a bat already, Arika."

...and gives another incredibly brutal review.

"You know what... Of course, you're angry at a guest who doesn't even introduce themselves. I, his friend, think that's improper myself. But it's even worse to treat him as a killer. And anyway, Sinker, that one [probably Mato-san - TL], - is this a killers' paradise or something?"

"I understand. This is an allegory. Sinker and Kirisu-san are opposites. Kirisu-san's possessed in a more human way. It's completely different from a maniac possessed by a fake. Ah, but Kirisu-san knows Sinker, right? Do you know who Sinker is?"

"Well, yeah... I brought Kirisu here with that in mind. I figured that if Kirisu knows him, I must've met him somewhere too. And when Kirisu was asking, I remembered. If you include the retired ones, there was a pitcher ready to kill."

No need to even become possessed.

Two years ago. A second year in the Koalagaoka High baseball club.

Retired last year because of a trauma during the regional qualifications, having left the sport later, depreciated genius pitcher.

"Iguruma Kazumi... A player with such a past that when he got hurt, several instructors regretted losing a talented player, but most players sighed with relief."

"Oh, I know the one. Once one of Shikura's genius sportsmen? Iguruma in Koalagaoka and in KouraKou... Uh, what was his name? Do you remember, Arika?"

"Actually, he was just here."

"What?"

"Well, the hoodlum who just stood right here. Forty five percent pitch return rate. The unrivalled fourth of KouraKou, Slugger, Kirisu Yaichiro."

- DDD<sub>1</sub> -





2.

S.VS.S-2

isconnection

isorder

## 6/Slugger. (bottom)

"Cool. Maybe he can live with me for a while?"

So Kirisu Yaichiro's grandfather, a baseball player himself before the war, said, looking at the six years old boy.

It's definitely here that the chance showed itself. Regardless of the tight family budget, his parents bought Yaichiro a bat and patted his head, sating that if he seriously loves baseball he should seriously practice it.

Mom and dad were unhurried people without any impressive talents, but one could be proud of them.

Apparently he never was praised, and thus he didn't listen to advice from the side and never devoted himself to baseball.

Childhood years. Disappointing the grandfather, he lived as he pleased, never coming close to baseball.

Although he did play amateur baseball with his classmates in elementary school, he didn't prepare to these meetings. The bat seemed to him a treasure, and he walked around with it, not to do sports, but to satisfy the childish thirst for adventure.

Kirisu Yaichiro first came in contact with actual baseball two years later. In the second grade autumn he seriously took up the bat and swung it everyday after meeting one of his future friends. Once he was heading to Nozu to find a new place to play and suddenly noticed a boy a year younger than himself who was throwing a ball at a wall.

The small, scrawny boy was throwing his ball over and over for a long, long time.

He began when the sky wasn't yet red and kept on until it was almost below the horizon.

The boy was concentrated, but not passionate.

A throw, another throw, each one strong but disinterested. He was disgusted. Constrained by no one, he kept on throwing the ball, sighing in the end: "Shouldn't have begun", — and went home. Yaichiro watched this for a few days and then distractedly spoke to him.

"Can I join you? Well, if I'm a batter, it'll be baseball."

Why did he speak to the boy? Something pushed him, but he couldn't remember what exactly... Well, he probably won't ever remember by now. The reason was a pretty insignificant conclusion, but one you couldn't just shrug off.



"Who are you?"

The boy looked at the older one carrying a bat with doubt, but was too tired to even chase him away and thus agreed.

From that day baseball began for Kirisu Yaichiro.

The boy was called Iguruma Kazumi. A first-year from another school, well-known in Nozu, has no father.

"What, Yaichi? Started baseball even though you didn't like it?"

Father, happy about the son's passion, tactfully softly supported his decision so as not to embarrass him.

At that time grandfather already parted with the idea of adopting Yaichiro, but mother was captivated by the attractiveness of the idea and had some hopes for his talent. She proposed him to enter the Junior league, 'since you took up baseball', but he didn't agree — wasn't interested. He didn't know the kids there, and the adults' mugs were too cocky. After all, for him baseball was a special game, one where close friends compete.

"Hi, Iguruma. I have a new ball."

They met in the industrial district of Nozu, in the park-yard of an uninhabited building.

Their playing the game of baseball, beginning from a small thing, became a regular activity in less than a week. Were Kazumi's serves out of the ordinary? Was Kirisu's batting out of the ordinary? Not even aware of baseball's small rules, they simply played "throw the ball — hit the ball", refining their techniques day after day and raising the difficulty accordingly.

If they had a spectator, they wouldn't believe these were elementary schoolers. Not only because of their technique: their concentration was not that of a child. These were two fully serious, uncompromising duellists.

"Grandad says that it's not baseball without a catcher. And that batter must play against a pitcher and a catcher. And that leaving a pitcher alone won't do."

Their overly tense game became almost funny. To play properly they needed a catcher. Kirisu didn't want that inwardly, but, contrary to his expectations, Kazumi was happy with the idea of a third friend.

"Okay. If you brought him, Kirisu, I trust him. Anyway, I botch often. I need to free up my head, or I'm never going to beat you."

A pitcher needs a smart catcher.

Glad that his friend with a hard character trusts him, Kirisu discarded the petty alertness and began looking for a catcher comrade. A friend from the "on the grass" baseball came up. He loved baseball, but his parents couldn't let him into the Junior league, and he took interest in Kirisu and Iguruma's game.

"Well, yeah, and everyone loving baseball went to the Junior. You'll be batting, right? I forgot when was the last time the ball reached me. If you will, I'll be happy to join."

The third boy was the perfect middle between Kirisu and Kazumi. By skill, character and family circumstances. They say that a trio reaches natural balance. And thus they — only a pitcher, catcher and batter — played a non-pretentious game called baseball until Kirisu entered fifth grade.

When in team play a single player stands out, the team's overall strength goes up rapidly.

The movements of an outstanding sportsman are closely examined. Some may casually compete with him; some trust him unconditionally and hope that while he's with the team, there won't be any problems.

The growth of a team which has a clear hope is outstanding. It's probably because the members, not hesitating or worrying, merge in a single entity physically and mentally.

This is called 'reaching after the talent'.

Each of the three boys in the park of the district full of comfortable corners was an outstanding sportsman in his own way. Being born with a fit body. A willpower raised by the environment. A purely childish belief in others' genius.

They had the necessary minimum to overcome the technical part, and in the closed world without adults they toiled with all they had. Gathering bits of their non-knowledge, they studied techniques as they could and tested them on each other.

"The hip-joi-nt is important for a baseball player. With a strong base you throw well and swing well... But how do you train it?"

During the period not blessed with many trainers Kirisu Yaichiro reached great sport achievements, and the tips he carefully gathered weren't even facts but something like "gut sense". Luckily, small children learn from such personal experience better than from logic and complicated medical theories.

"You need to train not the visible body, but the inner... umm, axle. Grandad said that both pitcher and batter are like a wound spring, and when the rotation support isn't holding up, the rotation itself is wrong. And, umm, you have to develop these, umm, den muscles..."

They only learned from grandfather how to develop the abdomen, the body's axle.

At that time, it's said, if you don't learn the forms of serving and batting under a trainer, you'll never fix them afterwards. But their training was directed not by trainers, but by the freedom of movement naturally present in the body.

With one step forward and a spring-like spin you throw a ball reaching a hundred kilometres per hour.

Within less than a second you swing the appendage — the arm and the bat accelerating to a hundred kilometres per hour.

All these are movements natural to living creatures who performed them since the era of hunters 'to survive'. Nothing special. If you're human, your movements can be repeated by a million of others.

Roughly speaking, batting and pitching attempt to direct the movements to the natural bending of the arm according to the rotation of the shoulder and hips. So you make your body memorize the forms, natural, as seen from the side, after which you discard the excess meat you didn't even know about and create individual movements suiting you best — that's how you train technique... They didn't need that at the time.

The base form is researched individually. Even without studying the 'common methods of pitching and batting' born from the lessons of the past the psyche and eyes striving towards the most fitting form are enough to raise the skills of pitching and batting without any trainers.

They studied such individual techniques, and that was all. After all, this baseball was only for them three. There was no need to memorize 'strategies' aimed at the whole team's victory.

"I'll try throwing a side. The speed may vary depending on the size, but the spin only depends on training."

Iguruma Kazumi felt the limits of an upper throw and had to switch to a side one.

If in baseball where only individual techniques are sharpened someone is different in power, there'll be no game.

The pitcher not suitable for the batter any more was training towards that. So as not to leave the friends who rescued him behind. Not only did he master the side throw, he even took up the trump card, the lower throw.

Until the very end Kirisu Yaichiro hadn't realized that this was not only obsession with the ball's magic, but also the fear of losing friends.

...Alas.

The anxiety and teeth-gritting of his friends was clouded by the joy in being able to hit previously impossible screwballs.

Kirisu Yaichiro had many buddies, acquaintances, but only two of those he could call friends.

In his case it could only be called 'coincidence'. He had fun in the atmosphere of his classmates, but the baseball in the park was so incredibly interesting that he only came to his senses when he could only call two people his friends.

On the other hand, Iguruma Kazumi was lonely because his surroundings played a cruel one on him.

This gave him a reason to hide a grudge. But the bastards weren't someone precise, it was the entire society, and neither Kazumi nor Kirisu could overcome this problem... no one probably could.

Iguruma Kazumi didn't have a father. His parents divorced before Kazumi was even born. His mother was an average woman without an academic profile who couldn't find a job — and wasn't used to working anyway. The conditions were strained since his birth, and Kazumi couldn't even imagine something was amiss.

And still he didn't want to have his revenge on the society, since his mother was desperately raising her son in her own way. She couldn't work like normal people did, but she gave her all to any job, even the ugliest one. Struggling to defend her son against problems, she tired times quicker, knew no happiness, and seeing her hurried ageing, Kazumi had no right to envy the world.

But there were only enemies around.

The society won't give a hand to the weak. Not only won't — it has no qualms with attacking those breaking its rules. The mother and son were considered not only weak, undeserving of compassion, but "pitiful wretches" fit for attacking.

Kazumi was despised by the elder neighbours, and the kids laughed, imitating their parents. Even if he could make friends with kids who didn't care, sooner or later their parents forbade them to see Kazumi. Even the obligatory education, singing praise to equality, after the constant non-payment for the cafeteria and education gave up on treating the boy as a student. After all, the teaching staff had no need to defend the kid of a parent not living by the rules, and no adult was on his side.

Kazumi's homeroom teacher, a clean freak, didn't tolerate a single stain in her class, and decided that if the dirt couldn't be removed it had to be used effectively at least.

Such a comfortable target. The homeroom teacher officially made a weak person the scapegoat, a target to vent irritation on.

There wasn't a roll call without attacking Kazumi in the form of small punishments for yesterday's behaviour upon returning home.

"Sensei, Kazumi-kun was playing outside the school again!"

Both other students and the teacher knew he was helping with his mother's work, but...

"Iguruma, come forward. What do you have to say? Aren't you ashamed?"

At the moment when he almost blurted out the real reason he was slapped.

Barely heard, muffled laughter. For kids it's a show to dispel the lesson's boredom. The teacher looked at her hand, obviously wanting to wash it that very instant, and sent him to his seat through clenched teeth.

"Sensei, Kazumi isn't ashamed, you're too kind to him!"

"One who doesn't listen won't hear. Leaving him alone, \*\*\*-san, that's enough."

An echo through the class — a heartfelt happy giggle. People condemning oppression strive to oppress. Kazumi's homeroom teacher, as a woman with a strong sense of righteousness, wasn't being malicious. To her and other adults the weak already look like criminals. The elementary school was a great purgatory for Iguruma Kazumi.

The meaning of those who Iguruma Kazumi acquired as friends even they didn't realize.

...Kirisu Yaichiro managed to notice it when their playing the game of baseball was coming to an end. In the events of the empty and near-empty days he realized his foolishness and his friends' problems.

In the end of the week, after the game, Kirisu invited Kazumi to his home and shared many a dinner with him. Dining with a friend made Kirisu happy, and Kazumi was glad that Kirisu's mother diligently arranged small feasts for them as well.

In the school Kazumi couldn't even eat normally, and he was awkward accepting Kirisu's dinners, but at the same time he was happy.

However, there was a small misunderstanding here.

For Iguruma Kazumi this was something like yet another event — 'feed the strangers' kid well'... With care developed through survival he realized that he had to 'try to look good'. Kazumi thought of the dinner prepared for him, the guest, at the end of each week as a special treat. He was glad, but at the same time he felt guilty for that hospitality.

That's why he held back at this lavish table.

Precisely due to the specialness of the event Kazumi restrained himself before that special thing.

And at that day — not the weekend, but a random workday — Kirisu invited Kazumi over. Mother was surprised at the unexpected guest and smiled at him. 'Sorry, but we only have usual food, nothing special'. After a few moments... looking at the empty table, Iguruma Kazumi understood at last.

This dinner similar to a party. Usual family food that, he thought, would be simpler without guests.

And with that he realized that normal kids ate exactly that.

"Aah... I see. So this is normal."

Without surprise, without sadness. He simply quietly accepted this reality. Just for the first time in years the poverty of his home, which he tried hard not to think about, covered his eyes with dew.

Kirisu saw that.

A face like a Noh mask. The face of a kid who saw warm happiness and knew despair was etched into Kirisu's memory forever. His home wasn't rich either, but never again could he say his family was poor.

This would stain the one main character he respected.

Kirisu Yaichiro, whatever he looked like to others, considered himself a normal human.

He believed he won't become the main hero of a 'story'. Born in a normal family, living a normal life, and going to live on that way until the end. He won't ever become a hero.

He doesn't have his own strength. The body he was born in isn't his own strength. He didn't find in himself, a human, the inhuman power sufficient to fight plights.

Kirisu Yaichiro understood that vaguely and saw in Iguruma Kazumi an unreal power, saw a main character in him and revered him.

Painfully so.

"Hey! How are you, Sinker?"

Since the time Iguruma Kazumi switched to side throws Kirisu began calling him Sinker. With all the respect and friendliness towards a hero and friend walking the path he would never choose himself.

Baseball with them three was becoming, as it's called in chess, a stalemate.

They met thousands of times in duels. The awkwardness of steps heading for the mound, the discomfort in the right shoulder while standing in the square. Only by these trifles could one notice their mood that day. The battle score goes toe to toe. No, by the nature's endowment Kirisu Yaichiro has an advantage, but the pitcher and catcher united their efforts to counter him, and the scales were balanced once again.

But Kazumi's deciding ball is something else entirely.

A lower throw, and the demonic ball rushes almost to the lower boundary of the dead zone.

The ball sent by a right arm almost scraping the ground slides up, where, obeying the spin it was given, it 'sinks' right before the batter's position in the lower part of the dead zone.

Then, from the batter's box, it's as though the ball makes a ninety degrees turn and falls; this is Kazumi's winning ball, the 'sinker'. When the ball reaches the upper point of the trajectory, even Kirisu was sluggish with his grounder.

Their score isn't set. Kirisu won points-wise, but the trick of this ball still was a mystery.

"listen, can we join? What baseball can there be with 3 people, right?"

When you play baseball for over 3 years there's bound to be rumours.

Somehow the baseball lovers heard of this game of three, and it slowly started growing.

Both Kirisu and Kazumi were gaining friends. While under the guise of baseball, it was still joy to Kazumi. No one was bullying him. The boy who up until now was attacked just for existing gained the right to be in a big group for the first time in his life.

"What Junior are you in, guys?"

Afterwards a manager from the Junior league joined. The courteous man, upon learning the three belonged nowhere, hotly advised them to join.

...Like many other sports, baseball was a betting game. This is why it isn't widespread in poor countries.

The entrance fee, monthly pay for education, uniform and design. Completely outside a child's capabilities, and you can't ask your parents... Kirisu could, but for the others it was an unreachable dream.

"Okay. If you're with us, we have more than enough money. Maybe you need something else?"

The radiant dream suddenly approached and motioned them to follow.

The entire year after was a golden time for Kirisu.

More than the activities in Junior league, more than the progress gained from the new knowledge he enjoyed the fact that now all three could play baseball with everyone.

"Kirisu, you're going to junior high next year, right? Then we'll probably end up in different teams."

Real baseball with new comrades. The chick of battles before the spectators' eyes and the same feeling of nervousness as the pitcher's coming to the front.

Everyone gulped with difficulty when the batter in the last, ninth inning turned the score on its head.

On the pitcher's mound and the batter's box all kinds of stares meet. This is a feeling of unity. Friends and foes, though split into the camps of 'us' and 'them', synchronized on the movements of a single ball; he loved that moment with all of his heart.

Kazumi did too. And thus said:



"Listen, just don't laugh your ass off, okay? I will be such a pitcher that no one but you will ever hit me. And you too become such a batter as not to miss anyone's ball but mine. And let's some beautiful day..."

"Let's some beautiful day settle our score on the big scene", — he said.

Scratching his cheek, as though talking about an impossible dream.

The same naive childish dream was always nurtured by Kirisu as well. Since the time the two of them started pretending to play baseball he wanted to show a lot of people how Iguruma Kazumi throws his ball. The Junior league is a decent support. Every time Kazumi was acknowledged as a good pitcher he felt glad for him as much as he would be for himself.

...Therefore fame and ovations are secondary. Kirisu Yaichiro didn't want to be acclaimed as a genius, even accidentally.

"Thank you, Kirisu. It's all thanks to you."

Half a year passed in the Junior league.

Kazumi wholeheartedly thanked Kirisu.

His face exhausted, his shoulders and elbows barely lifting after constant training, his face completely disinterested compared to the park, but he gratefully lowered his head.

"You know, lately mom is smiling. She's happy everyone's praising me..."

It seems she was blaming herself as well that his life was so hard for so long.

Igurumi Kazumi's mother quietly rejoiced in her son's activities.

Kirisu Yaichiro's friend, the most fitting opponent for him, left him behind and decided to consider baseball his only beacon.

'That's why he's a hero', — Kirisu sourly smiled and blessed his friend's journey.

But a corner of his mind went in deep thought.

What would be, if then... on that day when Kazumi opened his heart at the dinner, he cared a little bit more about himself? What would be if he managed not to run his dear friend into a corner?

The ways of the inseparable trio slowly separated.

Or perhaps it's that Kirisu approached baseball matches inordinarily.

The sportsman with a talent greater than everyone else's feels the victory's charm the least. This lifestyle was bright for those who had no natural talent. It made them feel the gap one can't cross just by work.

Therefore it's like this.

"Having fun, kids?"

They fell to the temptation of the suspicious adult with a soft smile.

The man who has suddenly woven himself out of the sunset twilight.

They got into the Junior league, gained a big team, but even after that their daily activity went on. They couldn't devote as much time to it, but they still had matches, checking their form, pointing out their weaknesses, clapping each other's hands, laughing. Kirisu went into the sixth grade, and next year he'll go to junior high, and there won't be time for him to come here.

An Eden with the prospect of being expelled.

No — it already was a remnant of paradise losing the last of its shimmer.

In their paradise there was a smiling stranger.

"This gentleman here is playing the devil... What do you think? You seem like good boys, so the gentleman shall grant you one wish each. But in exchange for something important to you."

His speech showed one thing: a screw was loose in his head.

Kirisu got ready to chase the 'gentleman' out, but his younger friends, it seems, didn't feel any danger in these words.

"Do you like baseball?"

"Of course I do. There are no people my age who don't love it. No matter what you say, our generation didn't have enough fun in its time."

The timbre was manly but soft. Unlike with Kirisu, adults never talked to Kazumi, and the sole fact that the 'gentleman' spoke to him as an equal already gave him joy. Perhaps that he grew without a father played a role here too.

In the end they accepted the 'gentleman's' offer.

The devil smiled and asked them for their wishes.

"I want to hit home runs on every innings!"

"Then I want to be an unhittable pitcher!"

Kirisu answered noting.

He wasn't so childish as to play along with this nonsense; at the time he didn't have wishes great enough to give up the important things he already had.

But the others answered at once.

Their jealousy towards the talented friends, their nervousness since loss became unacceptable to them, innocently broke out of their lips.

"These are good wishes. Well, as promised..."

Softly smiling, the 'gentleman' took their hands.

Big, dry hands through the touch of which his pulse could be felt.

The 'gentleman' slowly let them go. No changes, and the kids disgruntledly reproached him, while Kirisu sighed at ease — it's just as he thought...

"No, there are changes. Now, if his ball is hit even once, he'll die. And if he doesn't hit a home run once, he won't survive either."

The devil laughed, his mouth maliciously curved like a crescent moon.

The twilight is deepening.

The red air is sticky, like blood. This definitely not funny, ridiculous curse took root in their hearts.

"Well, the gentleman is a devil, after all. The gentleman can't grant wishes any other way. But look, kids: a man's dream and life must be the same. If you compromise, think of them independently of each other, the happiness becomes empty."

The devil smiled: "Stay alive!.." Life. There's the simplest and most important joy.

"You hit, you die. You don't hit, you die. How lucky — that which you guys love the most became your very life.

In other words, the loser doesn't have the right to live."

The stranger disappeared along with the sun.

Like he was never there in the first place — disappeared, leaving Kirisu and his friends' sight. What a crazy bum. They laughed — fooled by a silly adult! — and went their ways.

Everyone wanted to forget that smiling face as soon as possible.

The curse happened to the two friends the next day.

Next day. The classes were over, and in baseball 'on the grass' their third comrade didn't manage to hit a home run. Of course, there was nothing abnormal about that. The friends, having forgotten yesterday's encounter, returned to the familiar park, practised as a trio and said their goodbyes.

"Guys, listen. A misfortune has occurred."

The other day. The manager's voice was drowned in the noise of the train running along the river.

The catcher is nowhere to be seen. The one who loved baseball as much as they did, the friend who didn't rest a single day, wasn't there... Last night he died at home. Not just him — the entire family suffered his fate. Seems like a breaking and entering killer, but the perpetrator is unknown. The neighbours heard a quarrel, and a rumour went around — domestic violence, perhaps?

"That's because he broke the contract..."

It's not that Kazumi bought it, he didn't even believe after his friend's disappearance.

It's just that a small anxiety rose in him.

If he's hit he dies. Just a groundless suggestion, but actually this was Iguruma Kazumi's own decision as well.

If his self-awareness, the essence of his being is that he's an excellent pitcher, then at the moment he becomes a mediocre pitcher he'll return to dust he came out of... He understood that very thought was leading to destruction. Kazumi did have doubts about his path as a pitcher, but he had no way back.

He couldn't betray the expectations of his mother and those around him. He was accepted as a society member with the condition of being a pitcher. If he stops being a pitcher, he'll become like he was before, weak, the only thing left to him being enduring.

"If I'm hit, I die... My life is in that ball. So, a hit ball means..."

There are no unbeatable throws.

There wasn't an adult who taught Kazumi this basic of basics; after all, in his mind, originally that of a loner, a pitcher could play baseball alone. As a result he became even more lonely, a reclusive sportsman, and...

"So, you want to kill me?"

His false curse turned into reality.

A thirst for killing born of self-defence. Iguruma Kazumi, standing on the hill, really is ready to kill. A throw for him means none other than a duel to the death, each and every one of them.

Kazumi, determined and talented. stimulated by fear and vengefulness, is refining his right arm.

He made outstanding screwballs his base technique, and his pitching was closer to a relief than to a starter. Now Iguruma Kazumi became a pitcher who went out to the mound at the seventh inning and didn't allow a single hit after that, one who could boast a truly diabolic, record score.

The compensation for that was that he was a loner even in a team. No one opens up to the man ready to kill even during team training.

"Well, whatever. My baseball was like this anyway. Let the talentless scum bunch together. I need no one."

Even his best friend's warnings didn't reach the target.

The mountain of corpses was rising.

Iguruma Kazumi became a king in the desert.

Kirisu didn't know how to stop that perversion. What could he say, he who hadn't noticed his friend's nervousness for many years? He who hadn't noticed the disgusting image of the friend that was forming behind his back in the team...

Reflecting on it calmly, the teammates probably weren't happy to have them. Newbies warmly accepted by the manager. In less than half a year he was chosen as the starter — a junior who cheekily passed the senior pitchers while giggling.

Kazumi initially stood out in the team.

It's just that Kirisu hadn't noticed.

"Hey, Kirisu, you remember that time I blurted some idiocy?.. If you do, let's forget it..."

The first one, any person would hold their breath before such as him. This isn't as interesting and fun as before.

Kazumi must hate the batter enough to want to shoot him, and Kirisu, thinking of him, can't light-heartedly take up the bat like before. This wasn't their personal duel repeated a thousand of times.

It became apparent how naturally they didn't get along.

One who was lost from the very beginning and one who was satisfied all his life can't understand each other.

As months, years went past, their roads divided further still.

They will never reach an understanding.

Baseball beloved by Kirisu isn't the same as baseball needed by Iguruma Kazumi.

That's the whole story.

Young Kirisu was upset, thinking that such a man should have been born with a ton of genius, and once muttered aloud about the unfairness of the world.

Thus Kirisu Yaichiro's childhood ended.

Since junior high he went wherever his heart directed, freely enjoying baseball.

Iguruma Kazumi earned the nickname 'Sinker master' and earned big success as the first screwballer in the prefecture.

Six years later the two of them had another chance to meet. On the third year of high school Kirisu Yaichiro accepted the last, decisive battle of the summer...

Kirisu Yaichiro earned a name as the prefecture's first slugger, beginning since the first year of high school.

In the general high school №1 of Shikura city which he entered there was a baseball club with an above average potential. There was an informal, but genius batter, and the manager thirsted for his team's victory as well. Accident after accident, and baseball, stuck at the level of entertainment, became whole to him again.

In the first year they only accomplished building the team foundation. The battles began next year. Kirisu Yaichiro became a second-grader, the team began cooperating, a fourth batter rose, and finally qualification rounds were visible ahead.

The team was developing under the banner of the genius batter, Kirisu Yaichiro.

But — that same second year he developed an odd habit.

For unknown reasons he became sick every time he hit a home run. Seriously sick: he vomited up to three times in a single match, and often lost consciousness.

Teammates and and manager asked whether he had any guesses at least, but he didn't answer, and even the school's director was worried about his problem. The teachers pleaded the best student, whom they strangely trusted, for attention, but he...

"Treat him against his will? I don't know... If he himself wants to vomit, let him do so."

...answered quite coldly.

And now Kirisu Yaichiro is suffering, but his abilities as a batter don't fade in the least, and the legendary slugger's fame rings round the prefecture.

However, baseball isn't so simple that you could just win through a single slugger, and Shikura N°1 loses the first game in the spring qualifications and the summer regionals' 'top four'.

Next, 2003.

The last summer for Kirisu Yaichiro.

This year they, indignant, had they way blocked by the rival school, Koalagaoka. Both schools won a game in succession, and the last one, delayed by a few days, was hailed as the battle against fate in the public. Yes. Shikura N°1 had their super batter — well, Koalagaoka has its own genius. Not only the ace third year pitcher is supporting Koalagaoka. A relief pitcher for him, second year Iguruma Kazumi, entered Shikura city's sports arena once more.

The day before their match. In the home of Kirisu, who intentionally avoided meeting, a phone call rang from his former friend.

"...Please, hit whatever happens."

He came straight to the point.

A terribly tired voice, nothing left of what it used to be.

"Baseball is torture to me. But it used to be fun, too. I don't remember that now, though."

That's why he wants release?

With this he hung up, and the egoistic wish was transmitted.

In the match Kirisu Yaichiro got two home runs from the starter, quickly dragging the ace off his pedestal, for which he paid with his consciousness. He opened his eyes only after Shikura N°1's loss.

The chance to dispel the curse was lost forever.



After that Kirisu Yaichiro declined many flattering job offers and left baseball. Snapping that he wasn't such a hero as to go pro. No one could know what a war was going on in the depths of his soul.

Meanwhile another year passed.

The ace third-year graduated, and Koalagaoka with its new ace, Iguruma Kazumi, loses the summer regional qualifications. In the decisive day the ace Iguruma Kazumi excused himself with a trauma and left the mound. The young second-year captain, Sekura Yumiya, performed as a replacement but, alas, lost.

Four months later. Iguruma Kazumi is expelled from the Koalagaoka high school by his own request. No one looked for the runaway genius, nor worried about his leave, and not a person knows what sort of a life he led afterwards.

**(15.08)**

Having finished the long story about the past, Slugger quietly swore; the tale turned out pretty stupid.

A room with abandoned hints at a relocation. Sitting in Arika's apartment among cardboard boxes crammed full of stuff, Kirisu Yaichiro finished talking about his youth in a relatively normal tone.

"So you were acquaintances."

"Only as kids. Then we haven't seen each other at all. Always the way with childhood friends, right?"

"I suppose. But man, try imagining this story in high school. The reporters would've gone wild."

Two geniuses of the same epoch. "Genius" is merely an estimate by fans, a convenient praise.

But there are monsters that are practically sincerely acknowledged by millions. They're especially apparent in the world of sports. After all, the records are broken in a strictly defined game. "Senses", "flashy moves" and other metaphysical estimates are all empty words. Only outstanding records are a true measure; mathematics doesn't accept a subjective onlooker and enslaves them.

From this viewpoint, Kirisu and Iguruma Kazumi were players crowned with the name "genius" without any pretense.

Those two are friends that have been rivals since childhood. Their story is so natural that for us simple people it's not merely an educational fable but something deeper, reaching for your very soul.

"So I never told anyone. Nobody needs some old tale. Take you - if I tried digging in your past you'd tell me to buzz off."

"Hmm... Well, yeah, come to think about it. But something's wrong. Usually this stuff comes up right away. What about records in the Junior League? Didn't the old team get advertised? Like a special article on you. Or some old interview."

"Yeah. Back during that... my prime everyone bragged that they play with me.

"Aah... Honestly bowed before the clearly unreachable and had the blackest of feelings towards a genius that's just beyond their limits?.. Probably the standard reaction."

Even this was a way of inconveniencing Kirisu... My imagination paints a lot of pictures, but it's better not to think of the solitude Iguruma Kazumi had to feel at the top. And Kirisu didn't tell me this for that reason.

"But 'get hit and die' is... like playing Russian roulette with every pitch! Six years in a row. No slacking. That's one scary fairytale."

Iguruma Kazumi. Even for a pure relief pitcher zero returns is a godly gift. Apparently he went to the mound somewhere around the seventh inning, so now it's clear why Koalagaoka hadn't given the opponent a single point in the second half while Iguruma was around. Back then I thought they were awesome, too, but to get no returns instead of just not losing... If he'd come out straight away it'd be a perfect win.

Career, appearance, biography - everything unknown. However, the maniac serial killer is simply called 'Sinkers'.

Of course. There's no name more fitting for Iguruma Kazumi.

"But during his third year of high school he damaged his elbow and left. Overworked it?"

"Who knows... Anyway, his pitching style didn't look ahead. Despite anyone's effort, the trauma could be traced clearly. We trained alone, after all. The trainer instructs to get an effect, but first and foremost he teaches you how to last the longest. However, Iguruma didn't like trainers. He said that this slow learning should be left to those who have a reserve. That he didn't need it."

This was probably the unconscious rebellion of one born socially weak. A life without being sure about tomorrow. Nothing to lose - and that's why he was heading towards destruction with such zeal. The baseball of Iguruma Kazumi, who didn't need teachers, was dangerous to himself.

And in the end

His right hand lost to everything.

"So he's taking his revenge through the A syndrome... by becoming possessed? I'm 99% sure, but how do we confirm it?"

"Confirm? Are you for re... oh, right, that was during the day. Whatever, forget it."

"What?"

Kirisu waves his hand as though swatting at a mosquito.

Hmm... I don't want to think about that, but did I personally meet the maniac? What if - and only if - I keep stumbling into various psychos all the time? Scary.

"Whatever, I'll find it in the notebook. Hey, Kirisu. What do you want to do about Sinker? It's clear that a possessed can't be cured. So you want to catch him and drag him to the police station or just to make him into an urban legend?"

"Nah. If the police catch him, let them. He's messing my entire SVS up, but he's gone on such a spree that the police should go all out now. I don't care what happens to a freak that keeps destroying all the pitchers for mindless fun."

"Uh huh. Well, as a connoisseur of unique events, I think that's for the best. But I don't think he's killing 'just for fun'."

"You should. That he dies if he gets hit is only in his own head. But you can't force your rules on the batter."

"Well, yeah, but is 'if I die when I get hit, then you die when you don't hit' a logical reason to kill batters? Sinker's actions mostly lack thought, but there is something like a creed. To capture the goal; to take nothing but the life. The wallets are there, and he doesn't play around with corpses, right? So Sinker has some goal besides the killing. Perhaps revenge or a longing, or maybe a strong attachment, I don't know, but still."

By Mato-san's decree I don't make contact with A syndrome carriers if I don't have a reason. They're in ruins, but there's a reason they fell apart. They have some root, a reason to do things their exact way.

"Revenge or an attachment, you say..."

Kirisu frowned, apparently finding an echo of something he knew himself in my words. I understood that he hadn't said everything yet.

"Listen. I don't really want to say it..." - or get involved at all, perhaps. - "But maybe you can at least give him a friendly warning?"

"No. I already said, there's nothing connecting us."

"Then why the hell did you drag me into it?" - I want to retort, but don't. Kirisu's trying to stop Sinker but doesn't want to meet him in person. Because when they meet, a duel will most likely start.

"You aren't connected, and you won't fight him. Oh, yeah, you can't be a batter at all, right?"

"Uh huh. I left baseball and don't have a death wish, thank you. And anyway, a human can't hit that ball."

"Right. So that's the main issue."

A lethal game where the loser dies.

Sinker's demonic ball is undoubtedly real, so there's no reason to put yourself in harm's way... No. Kirisu is afraid to death that it won't be a duel at all.

If he doesn't hit, he won't save. Should he find a countermeasure, the game will end in a death anyway.

A cruel rule. This game is unfair to Kirisu from the start.

"All right, whether we take part in Sinker's games is another matter. Just an example: if you are the batter, what will you do?"

"Nothing, that's what... I won't manage against a second-degree sinker... Well, logically, any screwball in the strike zone can be caught. But a swing is a world in a second. See the screwball's type, make the correction, and if there's a trajectory change after the throw you can't react already."

He says scary things with a pretty calm face.

That's why other batters said about Kirisu Yaichiro that it's just not fair.

The important thing is that the ball enters the strike zone - the zone where the swing can be - and this guy will accurately hit any screw ball. Extraordinary static eye measurement and reaction speed, explosive force of white muscle tissues and pinpoint concentration go into technique... The type of the screw ball is clear, but Kirisu Yaichiro has never felt a normal batter's heavy realization that the bat won't hit the ball.

If you can determine the screwball's type, the ball gets returned just as imagined. This is the normal thinking of this genius slugger.

"If it changes a second time, this isn't baseball any more. You can track the first change, but the second... you won't react. The second change is when I already gauged the type and trajectory. Screw balls changing when I already reacted don't fit the previous batting response."

"Got it. So you either have to hit the second change or not come out at all. But Sinker's balls really turn at an angle, you know? Even if they only turned once, you still can't follow them, right?"

"Not if you see the pitcher for the first time... Dude. How many times do you think I played with Iguruma? Against him - let him do right turns or whatever - the odds are even. I'll be able to adjust my return after the first pitch."

That so... Not just baseball, but any sport sharpens your intuition in a battle.

The pitcher and batter are edge cases of that; without synchronization the batter will neither return the pitch nor even hit the ball. The pitcher and batter are the most

synchronized pair. And these two have done it thousands of times since their childhood competitions.

Kirisu knows Sinker's every habit.

Even though Sinker's possession leaves him well beyond the limits of many batters, to Kirisu Yaichiro he's the easiest opponent in the world.

Conclusion: the problem lies with the second dimension. That's also the reason why Kirisu Yaichiro apparently left baseball.

"We seem to have come to an unpleasant topic. It's like parallel lines, what the hell."

I give up and rise from my box.

An outsider shouldn't be asking why he left.

A guy who has never known failure broke his bat without any outside influence. Like a bird in the sky throwing away its unique wings. I can't understand this bitterness, and it's sinful to try and learn it.

However, yeah.

"But you helped Sekura Yumiya. Why?"

I must ask as a buddy.

"Work. I took the money and hid him. That's my job right now."

"I see. Heh, you got smarter over the year and a half. You memorize things so well!"

Though the bit about living as an adult got stuck in his mind. Noticing the irony, Kirisu clicked his tongue in annoyance and stood up.

"Enough about this. Forget about SVS, okay? Just leave Sinker to the police."

"Well, bye!" - said his back, and Kirisu went on straight to the next room. There he dropped onto the only bed.

"Eh?.."

What, wasn't he getting fed up and leaving?

"Well, you see, the karaoke where I used to sleep is now swamped with cops, so I have nowhere to live. You have your family home, so lend me this apartment, okay?"

Freeloader. Not waiting for my reply, he went straight to dream land.

"Well, I don't mind... Why are you so fat."

Hmm. Apparently that he dropped everything due to a mental trauma was just me overthinking things.

**(sink)**

Right hand hurts. Yesterday at night the seventh player was mercilessly finished off.

It was cold. As though in a snowstorm, it shook under the summer sun.

Awakening is always the same. Goosebumps as thick as arrows and the rasping throat tear sleep away.

Upon awakening it barely resembles a human. The reasoning, the consciousness themselves are frozen. It shambles along the dirty construction site, shaking like a ghost, pours water from the sink on the washing platform on its head and is finally itself again.

The dirty mirror reflects a hooded killer maniac.

It feels its face and counts the downed targets.

The first was something like a warm-up. Killed to test own abilities.

The second was on the list. Low priority but since he was right there the sequence could be rearranged. Is this summer especially cold? After the execution it seemed to become much colder.

The third wasn't essential. Just played around too much. Wasted too much blood, strained the elbow. It stayed broken the entire day after the match.

The fourth was found as was becoming a habit and quickly removed. To return home at least a day earlier, he destroyed him while playing around. But why did he do that - he sometimes mysteriously forgot.

There was a fifth,

a sixth - suddenly the various noises were gone. The elbow was taking a while to heal. When it hurt before, it was only after matches. Now each pitch hurts, the old wound opens. Not a problem. It broke, but for now it stayed in line and served. Yes. For now it stayed in line.

The seventh. Noticed that it was over when saw splattering brains. The important match over, counted the balls - four left - and finally remembered that day.

"Ah... Aah..."

Deeply inhaled, exhaled.

What's the deal with this summer? So little oxygen it was impossible to breathe. Skin-racking cold. The city is silent, as though dead, on the tea table was a long-haired doll with a noose on its neck, one of those that call the rain if you hang them on the window.

Shakes head, holding back nausea. A cold summer, fine. For it summer has been cold for a long time. Hard to breathe, fine too. Summer is just once a year. If it wasn't that hot, where's the charm?

But the silence is unbearable. It liked noise. Senseless bustling, cacophony. Most of all it loved the furious roar of the tribunes: the waves swept over its entire body.

Now nothing could be heard. When the match begins it gets colder. And more painful. But strangely, with each match the outside world's sounds faded more and more.

"Aah..."

Everything only brings suffering, can't remember what all this is for. Right arm twitched, the wrath made it move. When the first one was found, the skull seemed like a crematorium, filled with rage. It was easy to surrender to bone-melting heat. The former hot-headedness came back. But it's not even fun to pitch any more. The ears hear nothing. 'Where's that merciless summer when I wanted to close those eyes?' - the figure in the mirror extends an arm and mocks.

Because it's nowhere.

Maybe there never was one!

"Ah..."

There are no fun memories. They disappeared beforehand. Only base-hurt. The only reward was pain. Having stubbornly endured it for six years, - he - is standing here today.

With this conclusion the consciousness awakened at last.

The cold froze the mind. Yeah, yeah, nothing is fun. Only matches are. It's only fun on the job, the lips under the hood twitch. But - what about the fifth? Was it fun?

The fifth...

The fifth was an unpredictable opponent. Didn't intend to force a match on him. That batter knew nothing after all. But he was bored, and the batter he met was a superb opponent. He sincerely didn't want to fight the guy. But in the end he had to kill. Now his baseball, even unwilling, became such that if he started a game, he had to kill in the end.

"Ri... ght... Faster... Ne... xt..."

...Something's broken, destroyed. Both mentally and physically.



But he doesn't know what's destroyed.

Why? Because his sanity returns only during fights. And even then this cold summer has him at the point of freezing.

The maniac - Sinker - reaches towards a silver cellphone. A glowing dot picks the eighth victim. The GPS built-in only for the game's aces shows the place.

## (16.08)

According to the report, the maniac's victims numbered seven.

The investigation HQ had isolated Sekura Yumiya as the suspect, but the other day the sixth and seventh victims received lethal injuries, and the investigation's vector became a wide sector.

Assistant inspector Touma Mato became head of the investigation HQ, and the decision was made to consider the case an A-syndrome related incident.

The police haven't yet determined the identity of the maniac serial killer Sinker, but with the creation of an investigation HQ it was just a matter of time. The police will certainly learn about Iguruma Kazumi.

To be precise - a day later the identity is determined, a day more to prepare the raid. Finally, another day for the devilishly relentless and rapid development of the capture scenario.

Though with quite a bit of subjectivity, the operation was entrusted to Touma Mato, and the success three days later became another fact in her string of victories.

"And then it came to me. Only the fourth wasn't an official batter in SVS! It was a reverence. That's really suspicious. So I looked into it and found a pretty solid link. Honestly, it's just wrong when everything fits so well."

Under the shining rays of the sun a detailed report is being given by Tsuranui Mihaya.

"Uh, Arika, I should've said 'revelation' instead of 'reverence', right?.."

Perhaps not wanting to traumatize the blissful girl, Karyou Kaie lowered his voice to a whisper.

"If we correct her every time, sun will set, so don't fall for it. With this one it's smoothly or not at all."

As for me, due to the sofa's occupation I'd taken out the pipe chair and, sitting down near the bedhead, was listening to Tsuranui's message.

"The fourth was called Shinohara, by the way. He was a member of 'Koala's' baseball club in high school. So, I found out that more than half of the other victims are also 'Koalas'. You could say that all SVS members have baseball experience, but aren't there a few too many of you, dear koalas?"

"True. And anyway, the fact the current baseball ace, Sekura, signed up for SVS, is suspicious in itself. If Koya and others found out, they'd forbid entering to all second years."

"That's right! They say that it's just small fry this year, but even the club captain gambling is nonsense. So I talked to former 'Koalas'... They say Sekura-kun doesn't care for baseball any more. Only fools play for real, you can take it easy during the summer, and so on. Ha-ha-ha... Did that prodigal son croak from the curse or what?"

"The heavens punished him enough, leave him alone, please. Again, in Sekura Yumiya's case they were joking. Without a facade like that he wouldn't last."

"Oh? Why do you know such things, sempai?"

"Because he became possessed. If he didn't care about baseball he wouldn't be backed into a corner enough to warp his arm."

Most likely, Sekura Yumiya's spirit was loyal to baseball. His potential just couldn't reach the ideal.

After all, the previous ace, Komagiri, came after the strike-outer 'Doctor K' Iguruma. The weight of expectations on all sides isn't an easy or medium one. A talent forged by Junior and Senior is just another ordinary man before an unimaginable genius. Sekura Yumiya ran from it all and hid his head in SVS.

The world of high school baseball, like other sports, was rather harsh. Every player in the team trained as much as or more than you. Effort applied, talents available and other natural things are also in your opponent's grasp. As a result thousands of people in clubs compete in one prefecture, lose and drop out.

Among them only those who put talent, effort and luck together - the chosen ones - win. Sekura Yumiya believed he was one of those. But he cleverly realized this was self-delusion, and diligently searched for an escape route.

He won't win in the world of high school baseball. Won't be crowned as an ace. If so - where could be in the epicenter, as before?

"Pfft. So the prodigal son Sekura couldn't win in high school baseball and went on to SVS?"

"What, isn't that how it goes? He is a prodigal son, no? He had a lot of money, why would he get seriously involved with the betting?"

"Aah."

Money already tired him long ago. The thing that made Sekura most happy was others' envy.

"Uuu... I want to understand him even less... Maybe he is cursed after all? For example, going bald..."

"You're pretty strict to Sekura-kun, Tsuranui. Is it related to most victims being Koalagaoka players?"

"It is. Hmm, can I say something unpleasant?"

She hesitated, picking words. Probably to suit Kaie.

"Please. I'm used to it, don't worry. You're so kind, Mihaya-san."

And Kaie, quiet as a thieving cat as gallant as a princess, smiled at her.

Tsuranui, not used to praise, blushed and froze.

"Th-thank you so much!.. A-a-au, that's nononotwhatiwantedtosay, s-s-sempai, Karyou-san is so great! Oh no, that shine! He's too bright for me! No, so good, I'm melting!"

Oh you, remnant of a pagan world.

"Wait, if Karyou's visage makes one melt, does that make him a saint?.. Well, whatever, go on, Tsuranui."

"Oh! A-ah yes, hold on. Karyou-san, it's not nice to muddle the waters like that!.. Keep in mind, it's not for sure, but... Last year there was a case of aggression in Koalagaoka's baseball club. The school hushed it up, apparently, but something like a lynching happened in the club room, and the captain Iguruma Kazumi was held responsible. He was expelled.

"Remember how Iguruma Kazumi left the mound at last year's qualifications finals? It happened then."

"I heard he broke his elbow. Held responsible, you say? Sounds as though he was doing the lynching."

"Wh, whoa, sempai, your look is scary! Uuu, that's why I didn't want to say it, but now... Uh, yeah, it's as you said. They say that Iguruma-san was the one lynched by the second and third years in the club headed by Sekura Yumiya. They said he wasn't fit for the baseball club, piled up on him, and the elbow was like... But the school judged Iguruma-san to be the instigator... or not, but some time later, Iguruma-san came to Sekura Yumiya's class during a lesson and tried attacking him, but the teacher held him back... And - presented as leaving of his own accord..."

Tsuranui's story was incomplete in places. She glossed over some events I and Kaie wouldn't like hearing about.

"That's the story... What do you think, sempai?"

"Nothing to think about. Tsuranui, just give me the report."

"Huh?! N-no-oooo, sempai, n-no ha-and!"

The girl defends the papers' virginity from me, I confiscate them.

"Ah, I want to look too. Arika, get over here."

The demon, sensing a kitten's smell, reaches out.

I sit down on the bed and leaf through the materials.

Mmm, what cute, round letters with a refined touch.

The collective aggression towards Iguruma Kazumi presumably occurred the day before last year's qualifications.

The materials weren't formally acceptable, and since the incident is presumed not to have happened, only so many small details could be found.

It's stated that Iguruma Kazumi damaged the elbow and fingers on his right arm.

The reason for punishment was personal feelings.

That Iguruma Kazumi played baseball alone.

That he didn't rely on the team at all.

And... This reason is considered the one that delayed their actions the most... that Iguruma Kazumi's family was unhappy. To an onlooker their standard of living seemed glaringly low, his clothes and own mother - dirty, which served as a reason.

In fact, Iguruma's family situation was strained. His education bills were waived as a promising baseball player, but his well-being still was far below an average high schooler's.

Besides, his mother didn't have a permanent workplace, gathering empty cans and bottles day after day, delivering them for recycling and thus earning a bit.

Her activity area in that sphere was very wide. Center station, up to two or even three city blocks away was where she kept walking, gathering trash, otherwise she didn't get enough money. She wore her feet down, gathering cans with splashing liquid, stomping on them, gathering them into bags, bringing them to collection points. A job available to anyone, but hard and painful. She did only that, receiving one or two paper notes a day.

...Iguruma Kazumi's mother silently kept at the job that may look like gathering trash from the side.

Married and divorced young, she didn't have an education, her looks reflected her hardships, and her essence wasn't that good either. She couldn't find a job even if she wanted to, and for her such labor was hard but necessary.

However, others didn't bother looking into the story.

Neighbors and students probably thought the look of her gathering cans and bottles funny. A second year in high school, in baseball club, the second ace right after Iguruma Kazumi - how did he take an upperclassman with such a mother standing above him?

'He's a beggar, so why is he here with me?'

Being a second year in high school - only this year and the next one left in school - Sekura Yumiya was still a kid at heart. Those don't feel pity towards weaker ones. They turn to

violence not due to petty jealousy, but to correct unsightliness and bring justice, so they couldn't endure an upperclassman below themselves being an ace.

Pedigree, talent, school's support. Sekura Yumiya had it all, and Iguruma Kazumi to him was just something that 'could be removed at will'.

Thus - the day before regional qualification finals. Iguruma Kazumi suffers the aggression of eight club mates, from every year, and retires from the tournament with a trauma. Sekura Yumiya gets his coveted ace's throne a whole year earlier... This wish resulted in them being destroyed at the match, but there's no need to say whether that made Iguruma feel better.

Four months after the incident was hushed up by the school personnel, during December chills, Iguruma Kazumi burst into the instigator, Sekura Yumiya's, class, but the attempt was stopped by teachers who felt something was wrong, and the tragedy was barely avoided. Iguruma was strictly reprimanded. The teachers didn't enough value in a failed pitcher to justify him, and he 'was expelled of own accord'.

Nobody's seen him since then. There were rumors that he was seen among homeless people near the road, but no one said anything for sure.

The report was easy to follow.

Rumors of those years told by alumni. Irresponsibility of the school personnel, the December aggression towards Iguruma Kazumi. This alone is enough to imagine what happened.

If there's an unclear and unnatural moment, it'd be the void between August and December... Why did he wait for four months - the materials in the report don't even give a clue.

"I see. So Sinker kills those people who lynched Iguruma-san..."

The names of Sinker's victims match those of people who were in the baseball club then.

Including Sekura Yumiya, who's detained by the police, two are left. So, Gondou-kun, the fifth, who had no relation to Koalagaoka, just was in the wrong place at the wrong time. This forces the question whether that was mindless bloodshed. Can one who was oppressed by people feel goodwill towards another? Turns out, Iguruma Kazumi doesn't really care whether he's up against those who destroyed his life or just random people.

"Hey, Tsuranui. Does Kirisu know this?"

"I think so. He was the one who told me where Iguruma-san lived, after all."

"Tch," - I clicked my tongue.

So that's why he's been circling around. He knew second-hand both who Sinker was and what his motives were. He dragged me into SVS so that I'd beat Sinker. Kirisu knows what Iguruma Kazumi is capable of. Apparently he thinks Ishizue Arika can sink him! Thanks so much for the trust... well, it is a bit flattering, but we have an unforeseen complication.

Yes. The maniac isn't Iguruma Kazumi, he turned into the possessed, Sinker.

The ball sent by Sinker amazed Kirisu who was watching a camera's recording. A demonic ball that turns twice. 'Even I, having seen a lot, can't do anything about that', - he calmly assessed.

"And now you wash your hands?.. This is what happens when that moron uses his brain for a change."

"Good job!" - I return the report to Tsuranui.

I was busy with a different matter and asked her to investigate Iguruma, and the girl exceeded my wildest expectations.

"Thanks, well done. Sorry you had to waste the whole day doing nothing."

"I-it's fi-ine, just say thanks! Because I'm... a reliable woman."

Tsuranui grinned and bent her waist like a secretary in a movie. It suits her somewhat, but sadly, she lacks glasses and chest size.

"You see, Arika? That man is a bit unlike a possessed."

Kaie, glancing through the report over my shoulder, said his strange piece.

"Why? His broken elbow fixed itself, right? Two-stage sinker, right? One hundred fifty km/h screwball, right? A complete monster, no?"

"It's not that. Not the nature of the transformation but the reason. The starting point. His motives are too obvious, and the important thing - he's not weak enough to become possessed. After all, he came for revenge even before breaking."

"Hmm..."

True, that's not right.

Most reasons for possession are fear of an 'undefined enemy'. Pressure from the side you can't perceive. Some general impressions you acknowledge you can't deal with.

A human whose soul was broken by such a thing and who's mulling over the idea of changing the situation in his head births the state called possession.

But that's not Iguruma Kazumi. Kirisu's words confirm it - he's not that easy to break. Even accounting for the shock from the elbow breaking, he may have failed, but he tried avenging himself on Sekura Yumiya. This guy's psyche is solid. His head is not made so that everything crashes due to breaking an elbow.

"Well, yes. It's probably strange to think of revenge as the stimulus. Either he kills because a challenge was made or he challenges in order to kill. If it's revenge then it's the second, but then there's no reason to play. Just drop the pretense and murder them all. There must be a reason we wouldn't even think about... See, Arika? While that reason is there, he won't stop."

Kaie means that even after clearing the revenge list, Iguruma Kazumi will keep pitching the ball.

But why?

It's all too clear. If not revenge then passion. The possessed called Sinker has a reason far more important than revenge on those who took baseball from him, and that's why he stubbornly keeps pitching.

"Probably not because he likes it. To Iguruma Kazumi baseball hasn't brought happiness for a long time now."

He said: 'Please, return it no matter what'. And confessed: 'It used to be fun, though I don't remember already'.

So there's one reason left. Iguruma Kazumi is still stuck in that red park. Playing baseball alone, he waits for the one he has to fight until someone loses.

"Kazumi-san's waiting for Kirisu-san," - Tsuranui softly whispers without showing restraint. In such moments the birds in her head sing in unison. - "This overgrown moron. Why doesn't he go return it already."

Sadly, Tsuranui is right as always.

As a pitcher, he wants to fight the prefecture's best slugger. If that's Sinker's motive, then the nightly death matches won't end, and, as usual with such matters, three days later an arrest and the hell called Mato-san await him.

"What?.. Arika, are you on the possessed, Iguruma Kazumi's, side?"

The demon on the bed smiles strangely.

"Ha-ha. Honestly, this story pisses me off. I don't really care whether he lives or dies."

I'm not joking or lying. There's no room for sympathy.

A creature that kills not for self-preservation, but for the mental reason 'must kill to live', doesn't deserve an ounce of pity.



If not for certain reasons, I'd even leave Iguruma out of the diary and forget him altogether, but...

"That's great. By the way, Arika. You realize that your job's not over yet?"

Yes-yes, that's the reason.

The goal is reflected in the notebook. How did I agree, I don't know, but it's obvious that nothing is over, and over the next three days I have to do everything in my power.

Well, I want the money too, and no one will kill me if I don't succeed. I'm considering doing everything in my power rather sloooooowly, though...

"What's bugging me, Tsuranui, is this. Why are you here?"

Tsuranui and Kaie exchanged puzzled glances.

"Well, sempai. I was heading over to give you the report, and then I see you, going to your job. And well, I gave in to temptation and it so happened I kind of tailed you."

The fresh-made stalker clearly thinks I'll fall for this. Should I take her to the police...

"Mhm. You said nothing, and I thought she came with you, like Kirisu-san. And Mihaya-san isn't recoiling from me. Aah, and here I was thinking you told her already..."

'You didn't, huh??' - my employer asks with his eyes.

Well, if Kaie's okay with it, I am too. Tsuranui was thinking too hard about my superior, and they'd meet anyway sooner or later. I should be happy that such turbulent times are starting, really.

"So? What do you think?"

"Mmm. On one hand, I'm relieved that it's a man, but on the other, if you really think about it, it's not quite like some strange feeling is not forming... You can't tell right away, but this guy's a bit creepy, boss?"

Just how hare-brained are you, hey?

"Go earn it," - Kaie said with a smile and made me leave the underground.

He gave me the left arm: "Arika likes to get in trouble! So take this just in case". With mixed feelings, after considering what's ahead of me I decided to borrow it. I do have to go investigate, and if word spreads that a one-handed guy is snooping around, I'm done for. This time Mato-san will definitely execute her coveted plan of executing me by placement in a punching bag, so I'll want to lay low.

Tsuranui, not having had enough, followed me; but before the Shikura station I shook her off and took a municipal bus.

The end point is near the industrial district, Nozu. This is a place that, even in Shikura, stands out like an island on the mainland that only locals approach.

Nozu consists of an industrial zone stretching three kilometers wide and sleeping quarters - the workers' living area; nothing to attract outsiders.

The sleeping quarters house a market for food and domestic needs, and few families shop anywhere else. The same goes for us living outside Nozu, and not being workers, we have nothing to do with it. It's like a separate town within Shikura. There's an open communal establishment consisting of three thousand apartments in which eight thousand people live as though not in this world; well, in a material sense they're in it all right. You can get to it by bus in half an hour, like me, and recently a subway station 'Nozu Industrial District' has opened. This zone is called an island on the mainland because it doesn't even have a way station.

My personal opinion is that rather than 'an island on the mainland' the term 'fortress on the hill' would be more appropriate. After all, the Nozu industrial zone is on an elevation, the surroundings can be seen well, and it somewhat resembles a warship thrown onto the ground and left to rust.

I ride the empty bus like a baron and leave at the 'West Industrial Zone' stop.

Instantly the merciless summer sunlight envelops me.

"Ugh. Oh, ohh, braaaains," - I wailed mindlessly.

A heat of over thirty degrees knocks any desire to do things out of you.

The road is unhurried and steady. Or not, being sloped upwards. Along the roadside are the communal establishment's buildings resembling giant dominoes. The sky is high and blue, and trees planted to erode mental hygiene are united in already digging into the city blocks.

At first glance it looks like a curious resort town. But a normal observer will soon notice the lack of people, the light aftertaste of horror-esque ruin, and as a dessert, sometimes local gossips give you curious and suspicious looks, as though standing guard over the intruder from their windows.

"Yeah, this is the stuff that goes into urban legends... Here's the house where a patrolman was lynched... oh, nice, there's a gossip there too."

According to the local map installed near the road, this western entrance - in terms of mountain paths - is about the second stage of the ascent.

The patrolman lynching case is a sort of urban legend that happened in July. Residents of a neighboring block complained to the patrolman on duty that 'there were weird people in that building', and the officer charged in there with a newbie's vigor and a battle cry. He went on to disappear and be found a week later, thrown into a trash box like garbage, by a garbage truck driver. The police began an investigation with their honor at stake, but there

were no solid leads. There was no trouble connected to the residents, so the case came to a dead end.

This building is 才-13. Either the map's old or something else, but there are not more than a dozen buildings under the 才 category... Our auspicious house was given a fittingly lucky number, but that's fine, easy to remember.

"Fine. I'm not wandering the district."

Luckily, my business lies not in the living quarters but in the neighboring factory. I wanted to see that park Kirisu and co. had such tender feelings towards, but after looking at the map I gave up.

I walk down the three-lane road. No passenger cars in sight, just large trucks passing by once every ten minutes. Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I leave the alien world of Nozu's illusory multi-story buildings for the land of normal people.

If you leave the hillside and go into the city, you'll find a perfectly healthy industrial belt. When you lift your eyes to the sky, Nozu would seem like a proper city if not for those high-rise buildings.

I begin what I came here for, - a search for objects.

Closed factories, territories easy to get into, buildings under construction... be great to find a shop... well, I'm looking around. My preliminary analysis suggested four places that fit the bill. While inspecting them all I also paid a visit to Iguruma Kazumi's house.

Iguruma Kazumi's house is in Nozu's suburbs.

Near the canal dug as a waste water reservoir there was a lone one-story apartment house in all the glory of the twenties.

"Excuse meee, is anyone hooome?"

I open the sliding door with no doorbell... well, there's nothing to ring with. At once a woman's voice replied, not from the house, but the garden:

"Oh, guests? Young ones are a rare sight indeed!"

The lively, cheerful voice confuses me.

"Hello. I would like to talk to you about Iguruma Kazumi-kun."

"Oh. Well, let's... Oh, you have a bat? You play baseball too, young man?"

She readily starts talking.

Looks like walking around with a holstered bat was a good idea. The potentially uncomfortable questions didn't come up, and my prepared lines were surprisingly unnecessary.

Anyway, after nearly two hours of talking the events of the four-month void cleared up. Putting the facts down in my notebook, I said goodbye and left.

"Still so early, huh," - I checked the clock on my golden phone and became dejected.

An hour before sunset. Personally, I wanted the sun to set right this instant.

With the sun down, the temperature dropped four degrees to thirty. Life became much easier. Besides, I've cheerfully forgotten all the bad things and am going to search for the object in a good mood. When I finally found the right site it was past 10 PM.

As usual, I take a walk back. Combining saving pocket change and light training. The human body is valuable, if I don't develop my one-handed carcass right, it'll pretend to be air in the critical moment, and then it's over.

Back from Nozu, along untrodden paths.

Unfamiliar views of the city float by; but even here young baseball players can be seen. About twenty, raising a busy but amusing noise. Correctly fencing the empty road with poles, so as not to bother the neighbors, they cheerfully and tensely organize betting matches. Hard to tell whether they're decent guys or shady ones.

"Well... that's the point of the game, though."

My sentimentality is inappropriate, but I have to confess, I even grinned.

To those concerned this is entertainment good for wasting time, but to onlookers it's just a laughable farce. And now - the man who had always wanted to be a member is only connected to it as a farce.

The graduates go all out, as though drunk on summer's last days, and the guy who created the whole thing turns away so as not to see it.

The past of two genius sportsmen.

Kirisu Yaichiro threw his away, and Iguruma Kazumi's was taken by those around him. Though differently, their summer ended, finita, curtains.

The one who threw it away left the scene entirely, the one who lost it became a phantom that now kills batters on the streets.

"Nothing changed, huh."

And if during the summer two years ago Kirisu played against Iguruma Kazumi... no, if he at least didn't abandon baseball, it wouldn't have come to this.

I can't blame him. Because we're not that flexible. You can't put back what was broken, can't find a new passion: too sickening.

Besides it's almost impossible to believe, accept that the thing you loved so much can be replaced so easily.

"Ah yes... You can't find a replacement. Only find something similar. But that's fine! No point breaking your back finding something exactly the same."

The man who was called a genius, by completely throwing away his love for baseball, protects it with the same gesture. He scrupulously kept the irreplaceably irrecoverable as properly irrecoverable.

He doesn't want to grasp the lost in tears, thus lowering its value. If he kept holding on, then both baseball and he, led by its spirit back in the day, would devalue. Thus - decisively, saying 'yeah, it happens like that', he turned away. With the regretless phrase he salutes the shine he lost.

"Iguruma is the opposite. Of course they never hit it off."

This moment overlapped due to some mistake.

Sportsmen who don't value victory above all.

A genius batter who said: 'It's enough for baseball to be fun'.

That was why everyone decided he didn't have enough talent to be a professional. Kirisu swings his bat not for himself but for baseball. This sincerity must have looked like suffering to those without it.

Tearing my gaze away from the entrancing game, I walk again.

There are no trains along the way to Shikura. Not a road parallel to the highway, to grant some safety at night, either.

I was walking on the four-lane state road, and before me rose a crossing going up and down.

Being on foot, I naturally go down, by the bridge support.

Under the crossing it's gloomy and empty. Just a single long road under the bridge. Over my head engines and wheels echoed, but down here was lonely, like a different world.

An elongated, empty car parking.

Bluish light and a narrow but straight, easy to see stretch of asphalt.

And then an echo of an electric bell's scream.

My left hand is pierced by a sharp pain.

Taking out the golden phone, I look ahead of me.

Exactly eighteen meters ahead, under a streetlight is the figure of a monster in a hoodie. I jerk the phone open and take the call.

"This you, batter?"

A rasping voice sounds through the speaker.

Puzzled at my own relaxation, I noted that this was how opponents were picked.

"Sinker..."

I stop and put the case down.

Emitting clouds of steam, an unknown hooded youth appeared before the ninth.

This was how Ishizue Arika was caught by the hooded killer.

Inhuman breathing can be heard from the golden cellphone.

Summer is a time of horrors. Not quite a ghost under a sakura tree near the gate, but a phantom under the bluish light - is standing so that it's nearly falling, measuring me with concentrated eyes. His look is past the line where pity begins.

"So... will you bat?"

A voice close to white noise.

A near-death plea spiced with a terminal stage of hatred.

The 'merciless maniac' who killed eight sportsmen already is not like I pictured him at all.

This is Sinker?

Limbs shaking from the cold.

I should probably be afraid.

His eyes are watching me pathetically.

Back in the day batters felt like his targets and wanted to run.

Now it's painfully inverted. He's not the one begged for mercy but the one wanting help. With a voice of not a conqueror, but a hospital patient the killer Sinker repeats:

"Please... You are a batter, right?.."

'Fight me'.

Like a drug addict, looping, needing nothing else.

A momentous flash - if I run full speed now, I can get away, - but two seconds later - nah. Sinker's right hand, covered by a long sleeve, has been holding the ball for a while now.

...Don't be fooled by this voice crying from the heat. He can't be pitied. Phantoms have been dragging people to hell while pleading for help since ancient times. This is just an undead looking for its kin. No running. If you see a ghost, fight back, there's no other way.

I grip the bat. How's my left arm doing? No need to check. The black prosthesis has been burning up since Sinker appeared.

"Damn... What a great coincidence."

In the end, I didn't learn everything about how Iguruma Kazumi came to be this way, and wasn't quite willing to fight, if not for the prosthetic. Now my blood is unexpectedly boiling. The black arm is giving Ishizue Arika courage. Uh huh, you want killing - you'll have it. How does this left arm activate anyway?..

"Or maybe it's a pretty crappy one."

Taking the bat into both hands, I raise it straight up with a wide gesture.

I move it back over my shoulder, relaxing the shoulder belt.

My body's ready. The psyche's trembling a bit, but how else do you play to the death?

"Fine, killing it is. Let's do it, possessed."

I respond to the phantom's white noise with a beautiful gesture.

Sinker curved the mouth under the hood into a smile, closed the phone and raised his left arm - the sleeve flapped like a wing.

No starting signals.

A very rough but smooth pitching swing.

A side shoot ball threatening to dig into my ribcage. A spinning ball impossible for an average sportsman at one hundred and thirty kilometers per hour.

...I hear a brisk sound. The ball I returned goes nowhere near what I thought. Catching on the bat, it didn't fall onto the game territory but went off the road and disappeared under the crossing. A foul ball, it's called. A strike until two strikes, and then not counted as an incomplete hit.

"Wh...what?"

The pitcher's face eighteen meters away clearly twisted in amazement.

The first serve ended in a draw with some losses. The score is one strike. My bad, of course. I was a bit too slow getting myself into the proper condition. This is not the square, just asphalt. With a better positioning of my back foot I can match the speed to the ball.

With the same astonished look the killer maniac pitches another ball. Another shoot ball. And again compassion timidly visits me. Same pitch twice in a row... How senseless. What, were his previous opponents so bad they were cool with not hitting such relaxed throws?

The bat rings weakly.

A foul ball, a bit easier to see this time, bounces off onto the asphalt.

"For crying out loud. Stop patronizing me, or I'll send the next right into your face."

The score is two strikes. But I already have the timing down. If he does a shoot ball again, the game's over.

"What are you surprised at? Don't you know there were two geniuses on Shikura's hill?.. Well, all the talk about me was for naught. Until that meddling Kirisu showed up, the genius Shikura batter's title was mine, you know?"

I spun the bat and relaxed my shoulders.

Demanding a third throw from the pitcher stunned by the ball being touched twice.

"Hey, pitcher. If you don't throw next for real, you'll die, right?"

"H... Hhh!.."

Light returns to Sinker's eyes.

The third ball was a slider, not in the strike zone. I let it by, naturally. The fourth. Feinted a shoot ball into the outer angle and sent it into the inner one. Coursing along the edge of the strike zone. A foul ball, can't be helped. Fifth. Foul, too. Sixth was tense, but foul. Seventh, foul as well.

"Tch..."

So the overconfident one was me. I'm starting to notice - with Sinker's every pitch his speed and spin quality rise. This is not the only pressure. An unnatural cold makes me forget the summer heat. The piercing glare contains hatred concentrated on killing the target. Nausea... Like a cloud of locusts, splashes of a disgusting feeling.



The score is two strikes, two balls.

It's already the seventh pitch.

My forehead is sweating. The opponent is raising gears, my nerves heat up as well.

Batting is working together with the pitcher. Concentrating on their smallest movement, with each one's start you do your own.

Batting is not fighting the pitcher. It's adjusting to him. Being one with his thoughts, breath, movements. After that you put the bat and the ball together. Unavoidably. Now Ishizue Arika grasped the thrower's state as his own, and...

"A... ha, ha!.. Good, you're finally awake!.. You're good if you try!.."

...felt the killing intent of Sinker, who the excitement woke up.

The images matched.

The weakened state is no more.

Alive eyes. An overbearing pose. On his lips - the smile of a winner who destroyed many a batter.

Karyou Kaie asked why Sinker grabbed baseball so hard. It's clear. To him pitching is like breathing. Like how he would die if he didn't breathe, to this killer baseball was nothing other than an indispensable symbol of life.

An A syndrome carrier's perverted obsession. This demon is the incarnation of the deep delusion that he can't simply live. This is not what Sekura Yumiya had, it's true possession.

"Oh, by the way..."

I speak calmly on purpose, but now I, too, am going down the same road his other victims did.

There's no steam coming out from under the hood. Does his mind return as the match heats up?.. The maniac standing some distance before me is no longer a pitcher Ishizue Arika can cross swords with.

It's true. I still can hit the ball with my bat. I think I'll predict the next ball, but not the one after that. Of course, this is assuming he sticks to his usual screwballs.

The legendary double sinker. I won't even have time to react to a demonic ball with two degrees of spin.

"Uh huh... So that's why I was thinking you were familiar, you're Ishizue-sempai!"

The killer that didn't even know who he was playing with finally realized.

"Do we know each other?.."

I don't have the energy to spare on banter, but the reaction was automatic.

"Huh? What's with you? Even I remember you, though it was a while ago... Aah, yeah, I got it. You did say... Damn, that's nasty. You must have had a hard time, too."

Sinker angrily spits. Apparently he can't bear looking at my handicap.

"But see how you became in the end? Then it was unthinkable, but now... I'm happy for you, Ishizue-sempai. Shikura's treasure wasn't a fake. Yeah, if both your hands were alive, we'd end it on the second ball. You won't explain or justify yourself?"

True. If both my hands were a before, I wouldn't lag behind the ball.

But even if I said that, nothing would change.

"Be that way. Oh well, you better prepare yourself for the next throw, yeah?.. Nice look! I'm already uncomfortable, sempai. You're my sempai in all senses and an example to follow, after all, and I might've admired you if it was different... But honestly, it'd look unlike respect and like something weird."

He grabs the eighth ball.

...Blood is dripping from his right arm.

Either he got hurt, or the wound was there from the beginning and just opened up. Anyway, Sinker's arm, as though protesting against the rough handling, is making a crackling sound.

"But that's it. Your efforts are over... Honestly, it's good that you participated, sempai. There was anyone for a long time... My head is just spinning and cloudy. But, before something happens to me, I wanted to seriously fight a batter like you."

The killer maniac gets ready to pitch.

Two seconds later the premonition of fail is dampened by the feeling radiating out of my left arm.

My feeling of danger is lost already.

The fear is erased by the prosthesis.

I'm calm.

Because even before his face, before the death penalty that is his throw...

"Really?.. You want to fight a different guy, Iguruma Kazumi."

...I coldly threw out a striking phrase.

The movement stops. The killing intent that was like an arrow stops.

Of course. Iguruma Kazumi can't ignore my half-question. Several seconds of silence. Sinker opened his mouth, then shook his head - 'no', letting go of his regrets for the past. 'No way'. As though persuading himself - 'the other one's no more'.

"That so. Well, yeah, yeah. True. Those who would run from a duel so hard they'd abandon baseball shouldn't be mentioned. That's right, Sinker. He's long done for."

"Not done for..."

The killing intent rekindles itself like a fire.

This is not that dirty rage. It's wrath born from the sight of those you believe in being derided, righteous wrath living in the demonic ball master's right hand.

"He's still the best batter."

And don't I know it?

Whether he's in the mood or not - a hero lives within him regardless. Maybe he's rusty, but one swing - and the noble gold of his armor will shine again. This is the one you, and me too, adore so much we don't even envy him, a genius player.

"That's Slugger..." - the killer maniac said bluntly.

The pitcher is still waiting for the batter.

Denying that he's a traitor and believing in him.

How laughable. I'm going to die laughing even before the pitch. I lost control because of this left hand. I knew it from the start, after all. It's not I that has to return his ball.

"Sorry to distract you, Sinker. But since we're already talking, here's another question. What will you do when everything's over? Keep this up?"

If this goes on, he'll kill all the batters during the summer. If he kills everyone who took Iguruma Kazumi's baseball away, then what? Will he continue playing his baseball as naturally as breathing?

Didn't he think about that?.. Sinker lowers his gaze to the bloody ball in his hand.

"No. I. I, when I finish, will return home... Yes. Mom's there alone. I have to go back and calm her at last. For that... I'll shut them all up and return to baseball."

"Iguruma..."

Words I shouldn't have heard.

This is not my role. This possession must be stopped by a different person. Realizing this, I seriously thought about my job as an exorcist for the first time.

"Return to baseball - so this, now, isn't it?"

"How is this baseball? I'll go back to the mound. For this I'll kill everyone who knows. Shut up those who broke my elbow, who knows I can't manage. Those who realize I'm possessed will all be killed by me."

A crappy creed.

Well yeah, those who have attacked Iguruma Kazumi know he can't be a pitcher anymore. What'll they think, seeing him back?.. Weird. It's impossible to manage with such an elbow. There must be an unfair trick. Either doping or something else. A growth and a new life as a pitcher received from the A syndrome.

Thus - kill. Not as revenge, but to keep playing baseball behind the curtains, he'll kill everyone who knows he couldn't be healed. And this...

"Those who know the truth... and you, who knows I'm Iguruma Kazumi... the same as they."

The demonic ball master raises the bloody eighth ball.

The form is a low throw.

The launched ball showed there was nothing else to talk about and, exploding the air, disappeared from the batter's sight.

Balls don't turn twice.

A spinning screwball changes trajectory while falling. No matter the brilliant hand, no matter the force of the throw, a ball can't fly straight. It always falls. While doing that it can turn left, right, go lower - that's what a screwball is.

It'll go right after turning left?

Will it go up after falling?

That doesn't happen. A low throw gives such a spin that the arc of the arm swinging down there gives a ball upwards momentum, then makes it turn into a given direction when falling. Initially the ball rises not because of spin but because of the arm's swing.

But the ball turned out to be a surprise.

It completely disappeared from my sight. It went away from my left shoulder and further left, spreading bloody flowers, turned right, and at the moment of entering the strike zone swerved right up, aiming at the batter's jaw.

An instant lasting half a second.

Not swinging the bat, barely jerking my head away, I save my life.

So that's how it is... The burning smell in my nose and what happened right in front of it stunned and enlightened me.

"I think you know, but that was intentional, sempai. I respect you and just missed on purpose. Now it's two strikes, three balls. What will we do, Ishizue-sempai? The score's full, there's no going on!"

We'll do what we will.

I got a rough grasp of how his screwball worked.

'So that's it, how cunning!' - praising and berating myself at once, I can't think of a counter.

And anyway, 99% aren't returned by this duel's conditions. You can close your eyes, swing the bat blindly, and if the ball accidentally turns out to be where the bat was... that's on a miracle's level. Who knows about A syndrome carriers, but a normal man can't beat that.

"The last one. You don't hit it - you die, yeah?"

Sinker grabs the ninth ball.

It's pretty much over. If I run at Sinker I won't make it, if I run away I'll get it into the back of my head.

"Hhh!.."

Apparently the hot poison stopped coming out of my left hand, because the world's jerking around and disappearing out of the fear of death. I have no sense of danger, but I do have terror. Under the conditions of an unavoidable death Ishizue Arika finally regains the normal human fear.

The regret is a little late.

Uh huh, I'm reproaching myself, ended up attaching myself to trouble, while Sinker's right hand is bringing the ball to his chest. He begins the setup motion, the movement that starts the throw.

And in this moment, a second away from death...

"Heeey, replacement, replaaaaacement! Gloomy Boy is replaced by Burning Hand of Success, the batter Hinomori Shusei. A round of applause!"

...proudly, like a wall, a man in a black cape appeared. Protecting me, frozen before the figure in a black cloak with a scythe, uh, ball. Flapping his cape as though spreading his wings. A pathetic, but dear to my heart, scene of a hero's arrival.

"You..."

"Yo, boy. This is called a pinch hitter, right?"

Half turning his face towards me, Hinomori Shusei grins slowly. The demonic ball master is watching the sudden obstacle with muzzy eyes.

...Well, it doesn't matter. Reasons are reasons, but doing anything would be a balk, dear Sinker.

"Yo, bro, wanna play? Let's go, big guy here'll play with you! You won't be bored at all. Definitely better than bullying decent, healthy folks from good families, so relax, smile and die!"

The man wearing reflective sunglasses and a cape.

He, earlier introducing himself to Ishizue Arika as Hinomori Shusei, speaks to the killer maniac in a friendly manner.

In his hand is a stick-like bundle. Thinner and longer than a bat. Looks like a long training sword wrapped in a cloth. Apparently he considers it a bat. He pushed Ishizue Arika out into reserve.

"Hey, what are you..."

"It's fine, fine. Arika-sensei, just go hug your shaking knees in a corner somewhere. Oh, and if you don't mind, cheer for me some, I'd be glad... The audience's support excites me strangely. Uh huh, that's nice, it's like, when you're vain and want to shout 'I'm tired of your silence', what kind of fan is that, I might as well go complete puzzles at home when I'm bored. It's better to waste time in a fun way, like, yeah, when you're pressed and you're intoxicated by the battle and the abyss so close to you, say!"

Hinomori Shusei cut the air with a horizontal swing of his long sword. Ishizue Arika went round-eyed, his pupils becoming tiny dots, and retired... Maybe due to the sight of the scary blade, or maybe not wanting to hear this rambling any longer.

"Pinch hitter... do you even know what that is?"

"Of course. You're the rumored maniac killer, right?.. Well. Don't look entirely like one, but half of me just can't pass by, so... I'll steal a little spotlight from the hero. I'm not saving you, so don't feel indebted. If you reeeally want to, think of this as thanks for the junk food."

The long hair and the cape flutter; Hinomori Shusei stands up - sword held with both hands - against Sinker as a batter.

"I don't know what you're planning, but..." - Sinker moved his gaze from Ishizue Arika to the newly arrived monster, took a step backwards. - "Since you challenged me, you're my prey now."

The killer maniac's eyes are wrathful.

Sinker is irritated that his winning pitch that would've decided the match was interrupted and by this man's callous nonchalance. To him this game is a serious battle to the death. Of course someone laughing and spoiling everything dampens the mood, but what angers him the most is still the man's attitude.

The man is wordlessly saying: this might be a death match, but it's still baseball. There's no need to take children's games seriously.

"Three balls... Well, if you're lucky, you'll live. Black cape."

The demonic ball master's killing glare fixed itself on the silently grinning Hinomori Shusei.

A showdown between a killer maniac in a hoodie and a caped monster.

An eerie, deadly atmosphere not fitting the summer night - no, not having the right to exist in a peaceful city.

The noise of passing cars comes from the crossing above, but there's a feeling of a distance far greater than it actually is. Aside from the road, before a vending machine, Ishizue Arika is watching the events unfold, and something's scratching at his soul.

"Wow. Nice, there's a 100 yen machine."

Drinking canned coffee.

However - despite his confident expectations, Hinomori Shusei raised neither a hand nor a foot towards Sinker.

First ball, second ball, both went past him. Acquiring two strikes in as many minutes, he himself made a puzzled - can't hit that - frown.

"What, newbie, only good at running your mouth?" - Sinker mocks. - "At least wave your hand, or it's all a waste."

The caped man, on the other hand, is not tense at all. Although he took up the batter's spot, he didn't move his improvised bat... No, he didn't even feel the need to do so.

"Well, damn. I thought, standing in the square would be really cool..."

He yawns... A screwball at a hundred and forty kilometers per hour. In the situation of an impending strike-out and parting with life he was very bored.

"Hmm. It's a bit dark, hard to see. Honestly, there's no drive this way. Listen, buddy. As a possessed to a possessed - let's up the speed?"

The black cape flutters.

What is that? Hinomori Shusei crouched a bit and jumped high.

"Pfahh?!"

Ishizue Arika's canned coffee sprays.

The height is a full six meters. A somersault deserving a 10-10-10-10 by the judges, too perfect - the man made a ballistic curve high up in the sky.

"Good, good. Now we need a powerful spotlight, right!"

The black cape disappears.

Ishizue Arika, looking from down on the road doesn't see what happens next. Only his imagination is hinting that something's going on.

Brakes scream in protest. The driver must've been scared: at a speed of about seventy a nonhuman suddenly appears in the headlights. Did he have time to hit the handbrake? After the screeching echo the noise went on, like a joke.

...The crossing above us turned to hell.

One after another - secondary collisions. The bridge caught fire. Constant screaming of brakes. Metal grinding and howling. People shouting. A chaotic orchestra. And the reason of the disaster shows up again.

"Not a bad improvisation, huh? All right, go up, young man. It's at least a little more fun there, let's play."

The man smiles, framed by the fire.

Over twenty severe injuries, miraculously no deaths - this is what was written in the materials on the billiard collision on Shikura highway case, which will be considered an accident until he appears again.

His name is Hinomori Shusei.

Two years ago he was being hunted with a large-scale raid over the entire south border of S prefecture, a confirmed culprit of an especially brutal killing spree. Having escaped en route to the Origa clinic and disappearing since then, the possessed called Vampire in rumors.

What did Sinker see in this man standing against a background of fire?



Like a macaque, he climbed the streetlight and jumped to the road. He couldn't do it in one leap like Hinomori Shusei, but he still showed physical ability pretty astounding for a human.

Having climbed to the scene, Sinker took a stand against the possessed framed by fire with a will to kill and an even bigger hostility.

"So that's how you came, boy. As a reward, stay on your side. I'm fine with mine."

In a few minutes the crossing became hell on Earth, but the smashed cars were burning on the left side of the road while the right was unchanged. A car passed on it, admiring the burning debris in the mirror.

...The black cape stood in the middle of this right side. Among not flying bullets, but hunks of metal approaching at seventy kilometers per hour, he was smiling, holding the long sword at ready.

"Hey, young baseballer, this is the last ball. I'm dodging somehow here, so pitch it into the strike zone. Don't worry, it's just a ball game after all. The viewers must have a show, or they'll be mad!"

Hinomori Shusei is not in his right mind.

But Iguruma Kazumi has long burned out his common sense as well.

"A ball game, you say..."

Can't win. Can't beat this man, the possessed right arm screams. No winning means the outcome is clear. If I pitch, he'll return. If he returns, I'll die. As soon as the third ball is in the air, his life is over. But Sinker won't stop. He won't rest easy until he destroys this man deriding baseball with his 'ball game' with this very game.

"Haa!.."

Suppressing the agony of his tendons, he swings his right hand.

The speed and trajectory are lightning-fast.

A demonic ball impossible to hit for a human dances in a zigzag over the road, heading for the target.

The target is not the body but the strike zone.

The maniac killer Sinker is one who crushes batters' hubris. Begin with a strike-out, otherwise the batter's life can't be taken. Even if he's taken by the premonition it'll be returned, this rule's set in stone... And as a result:

"Whoop... nnhaah?!"

Hinomori Shusei simply and elegantly missed Sinker's demonic ball. The swing was terrifying and empty. An unmistakable miss. Elegant and meaningless, this could be displayed as art.

Thus the duel ended, and Sinker's gripping the punishing ball with no hesitation. The target is the back of Black Cape's head. The demonic ball that takes the life of a target that got struck out. Too bad, black-cape-man. If Ishizue Arika was near, he'd probably be shouting 'Wow, you lameass!' at Hinomori Shusei with all his might.

"Oh wow... Huh, yeah, try hitting that. Turns out it's not just some two-stage spinning ball. It changes not only direction, but speed too! I see, I see, so you can control it that way too, huh..."

He has no desire to listen to Hinomori Shusei's excuses. Sinker, as though lining up with a passing car, releases a demonic ball to the side of his target.

"Oh?"

The demonic ball passed Hinomori Shusei, disappeared in the darkness and then, sparking, flew into the defenseless target.

Everything as usual, trajectory's right, not a centimeter's error - an attack crushing the head's back. But...

"Nope, not gonna work."

As with the previous strike out, Hinomori Shusei simply dodged the demonic ball coming out of the dead zone.

"Uh huh. Hard to return, but dodging can be managed."

The caped figure leaves the batter's posture.

Taking the long sword in one hand, it brings a finger of the freed left to its mouth. A long tongue reaches out towards it from the gap between inhumanly jagged teeth.

"Good, good, you won, young man."

The black cape flutters.

Relaxing the hand with the long sword, the vampire finally shed his lively mask...

"But you see... The luck to survive isn't related to that."

...and smiled cruelly, like a wolf playing with its prey.

The black cape flutters in the wind.

The first step is casual.

For some reason Sinker didn't even see it as the beginning of a pounce upon the prey.

"Kh!.."

He'll be swallowed whole. This intuitive conclusion makes Sinker grab the first ball. He kicks the ground at full speed and jumps back. Taking the ball from his parka with his left hand, he passes it to the right, quickly contracting and wounding up at the same time. Grinning with his uneven teeth, Vampire is assaulted by the sure-kill demonic ball as he takes the step.

Worthy of admiration.

Jumping back and ending up on a crashed car's roof, he instantly turns his body sideways on one foot. Looking from above, his side pitch resembles a beautiful perfect circle drawn with a compass. Even after releasing a ball at a hundred and thirty kilometers per hour, he didn't stop turning.

Three revolutions in just two seconds, like a spinning top. With mechanical precision he lets loose no less than three demonic balls. With delays of half a second they went for the target.

From the target's point of view - from the left, right, and near-precisely above. The balls meant to catch Black Cape turned at a right angle after a second's delay, each to its own direction, and went for the target at incredible angles.

Instantly closing three sides off, invisible sniper shots. In the gap between these unavoidable strikes Vampire roared with laughter.

If Sinker's trademark attack is a refinement of human technique, Vampire is on the level of a natural disaster.

Surrounded on three sides, Black Cape went for Sinker. At a speed that only lets a blur be seen, spinning and dancing, turning into a walking tornado, leaving holes in the asphalt. If Sinker's a spinning machine for shooting demonic projectiles, this man is a mad spinning top. With ballet-like movements he avoids the speeding bullets.

How could this be?.. This weren't random dodges. At the moment of the demonic ball's turn the trajectory was spotted and avoided with minimal effort, resulting in this outcome.

Sinker pitches three balls. Each turns twice, resulting in a diffused, non-fixed impression of six attacks in all. The black cape dances madly, avoiding the effortlessly.

None hit. Sinker is taken with, rather than rage that his demonic balls are powerless, a chilling fear. Not right... Something is wrong with this man's speed. Quantifiable criteria like 'faster than', 'slower than', 'cooler than', and 'sharper than' can't measure his speed. It's crystal clear that his speed is on a different level from us. Even if the ball has higher velocity, it's pointless. It won't succeed even if it goes faster still. This is something wrong

for a living creature. 'While this is unclear, this enemy is unbeatable, not possible to run from!' - his whole body screams...

"Ah..."

An overwhelming stench of death. Urged on by terror that this'll come in a second and take his head off in one swing, Sinker remembered something very similar by association.

In fact it's just a stupid story, but the black cloud approaching him was indistinguishable from a firework spinning on the ground.

"And what!.."

Shaking his delusions off, he throws the fourth ball.

The distance between them is already less than four meters. With a pitching movement that took less than a second, not having the chance to spin properly, he can't expect much speed or control.

"...what of it!.."

He pitches a normal fast ball. Aimed straight at the face, it was avoided. However, this ball has a property available only to Sinker. The true essence of the two-stage sinker: a spotted demon forcing the ball to turn at a right angle will crush the target's head for sure this time!..

"Come on, do you think I didn't see it?"

And Vampire easily saw through the trick.

Like a hellish bird, Black Cape flies up. He lands on the hood, holding the scary sword in his left hand at waist level, and the returning, sparking demonic ball clearly coming from a dead zone, flies by due to a small movement of the neck.

"Ah... Ah..."

"But you're pretty smart, young man... Setting your sticky blood on fire in a blink, using it as a jet. Behind, again as ordered, the screwball changes direction and speed. Your growth, youth, isn't some measly elbow. The blood that burns with sparks is Sinker's true ability... Not bad. Turns out there's another madcap besides me who burns this stuff as fuel."

No friendliness. Despite the words' content, Vampire's voice is very cold.

Sinker can't move. The sword in the black cape's hand. No, not a sword, a spear. The scary weapon strongly gripped in the hand is nearly lunging at him now. The fear created by the threat of being pierced by a large-caliber missile makes both legs and head stop working.

"Don't be surprised, my good man. All the magic is gone after you see such a trick once. Even that guy down there noticed!.. Aah... But yes, this is only yours, unique. Can't reproduce that unless you're a godlike pitcher to begin with. Given a baseball's size, two turns are the limit, I suppose? If you do any more, it'll just burn down! But it's inefficient as

hell. If you strain yourself like that, you won't last a week, no?.. Oh well. Whether you take care of yourself or not, you'll meet your ■■■■ here anyway."

The vampire's face comes closer.

It's nearly touching, so as to sink teeth into the neck.

"Ah..."

'I don't want to die. Save me.'

Sinker's eyes shriek with fear.

This is nothing surprising. They're standing face to face. Under the reflective surface of the sunglasses he saw Vampire's eyes.

Eyes with no pupils. Like a demon of mad wrath. Eyes of ice that squeezes the life out of everything that sees them.

"Ah..."

Vampire's left hand rises forward.

The long weapon bites into Sinker's neck.

The thoughts disappearing before the face of death come to a useless conclusion. What a twisted plot. This man's weapon is no sword, no spear. It's the ancient way of eradicating vampires - a huge aspen stake...

The color of flame painting over the night sky promises trouble.

For nearly four minutes I've been watching the unfolding tragedy from down near the coffee machine. However, everything was happening six meters above me, and I could only hear the rich sounds of the catastrophe, but now the carnage has burned out.

I hear a siren far away. If I stay here, I'll be detained for suspicious behavior, and my romance with Mato-san might finally trip a fag of a tender talk in the bullpen. Getting ready to leave, I lower the coffee can into the trashcan, when...

"Huuuh, too bad, too bad. 'Real' ones shouldn't be exchanging pokes, kicks and sparks like that... Oh, you're still here, young man? Your drive to see the show to its end is very gratifying."

A rambling Black Cape jumped down from the crossing.

The wooden sword in his hand... or even a metal pipe... or even something like a metal pipe with a pointy end... anyway, he wraps it in a cloth again and cracks his shoulders. His movements carry the 'work's done, can have fun now' vibe.

"Hmm?.. C'mon, run along, or I'll eat you! Oh, and if they bother you, don't sell me out, yeah? Else you're going to lose time on stuff, be late getting home. If you have to, I recommend praising me. But yeah, as a human it's advisable to be home by one twenty!"

"Sorry, but I won't tell on you even if you ask me to. So how's it gone, did you hit?"

"Believe in me, it was a worthy strike-out."

Black Cape laughs for no reason. A sure sign.

"I don't get it... You caused that up there and got struck out?"

"Well, uh, it's a show, right? There's still a death match in the end, yes? So I had to gracefully lose to the master in the first half. You gotta agree, throwing flowers at the end is the least an adult can do."

The man curves his lips again. This time his smile is accompanied by real thoughts, harmonizing with his intimidating appearance, cruel, worrying.

"Flowers at the end, so Sinker is... you know?.."

'Dead?' - I couldn't get out.

The accident's fire overhead, left arm is hurting more than when I played with Sinker, the siren is already close. All these various components moved my consciousness away from common sense, but I hesitated to say the word of no return.

"Nah, not dead. There's no need. When he was pressed, he had the desire to run written all over his face, so I let him. It's called luring them in? Ah, tch, the other way around. Uh, catch-and-release? Not right either..."

And what is that? Wrecked everything and then just wounded the guy and let him go?..

"Hey, hey, don't make this face, young man. I tell you, let him run. This one is already out. He wants to destroy himself, so let him. Again, he only looks alive, but his body's right half has died already."

Right half of body is already dead. A nuance not related to his arm, one that was there already... Sinker's ruin was clearly not only mental.

"That so... And how long does he have, what do you think?"

"How long? Go higher, young man! Even if he's nearly dead, do you think I wouldn't notice if there was still life in him?"

He laughs joyfully. The man in the black cape laid a friendly hand on my shoulder and bent his mouth in a light smile.

"Listen. That possessed has self-destructed already. There's no life in him. He's long dead. He's like a mechanism that still has fuel and doesn't want to stop. It's sad, but when his fire burns out he'll end up in the trash heap."

He lowers his arm. Hinomori Shusei leaves with light steps.

"Wait. Can I ask another question? Were you just passing by?"

"Mmm? Are you kidding, it never happens that conveniently. I was looking for someone in Shikura too. And I came here because I felt the atmosphere of a fight, thought - oh, fun! - and intruded."

"Uh huh... A fight's atmosphere - isn't that the most convenient answer, Hinomori-san?"

I mean, come on, we aren't in a comic or something.

"Uh huh. I get you. Yeah, I get your reaction. Although I love heroics, this moment is suspicious. But you know, there are people who really feel it, there's no running from that. Anyway, so much trouble, but at least that time it's half hit, half miss."

'Oh well'. - Black Cape says and this time leaves.

Sirens finally flooded the air, police cars were surrounding the site of the crash one after another.

"Oh. Right, I wanted to ask too."

Hinomori Shusei stops without turning.

The man who can kill me instantly despite standing over five meters away with his back to me asked...

"Say, where did you get that prosthetic? I saw a leg, but an arm is a first!"

...in an indifferent voice that couldn't be ignored.

After parting with the totally not strict guy Hinomori Shusei.

Around the crash site now swarming with gapers everything settled down, and the police didn't even start asking for witnesses, letting me return safely.

By the way, I silently ignored the last question. To be honest, Hinomori Shusei saved me, and I'd like to answer him for decency's sake, whether I feel grateful or not, but there's just no answer.

I came to my room in the charitable multi-story building where Kirisu was watching TV with an owner's face.

There was nothing about the car crash just an hour ago. S prefecture's local TV must be staffed by slackers, or maybe the highway was closed off... Probably the latter.

'There were no corpses, young man. I can sleep soundly. Huh? The problem's not with lives? Repairs? Compensations? Dumbass, nowadays the only people without car insurance are those without a driver's license, doc Arika. Relax, the cameras recorded everything, so everyone will be paid. They'll probably ask for new cars too!'

That's what Hinomori-san said. The police are probably already puzzling over the suspicious man in the footage.

"Oh, you're back. You're late, weren't you going to be back by seven?"

"I had stuff to look into, been everywhere. Oh, and Sinker attacked on the way home, so..."

There was no special reaction.

I pass in front of Kirisu and into the bathroom. Wash my face with warm water, get the sweat off. The nerves must have calmed down - the left hand's feedback is very weak. I'm tired of wearing the prosthesis for half a day straight, so I take it off.

Back into the room, where Kirisu's going through the channels boredly.

"You know, I was attacked by Sinker."

"You said it twice... Buzz off, I told you this doesn't concern me."

Deflecting the topic. A predictable reaction. I'm not too happy trying to get him down to the ground. Just doing my duty as informant.

"Yeah, sure. It really doesn't. He'll die on his own, after all. And the police created an investigation HQ, he'll be in jail in a couple of days."

Tomorrow might be a bit too early, but we're talking about Mato-san, to her a self-destructing possessed is of utmost importance. Feels like the right time frame.

"Whoa... Hold on, what do you mean he'll die on his own?"

He took the bait.

"Well, yeah. He's just falling apart. A severe stage of A syndrome... a possessed that can't be cured and just lives like a vegetable - lots of cases like that. The growths are truly a way of granting wishes, but they're too much of a load for normal tissues at the same time. If one uses them too often not 'to survive', their insides rot off leading to death... And Sinker was a bit too hasty in his maniacal activities."

It was a person every two days, after all. If he used that right hand on everyone, then, like Hinomori-san said...



"Well from my viewpoint it isn't so much somatic as psychotic. Many A syndrome patients have mental disorders... The possessed mostly begin mental, but there are those who first manifest the growth and then become mentally ill. Sinker is one of those. A regression to childhood, partial memory loss. Simply put, a memory disorder not apparent even to the victim themselves."

Before the game's start Sinker didn't even know who was before him. No, in that state he probably didn't know who he himself was.

He started the match, grabbed a ball, pitched a few, and only then manifested 'Iguruma Kazumi's' consciousness. The question is how many balls were necessary to awaken it. The young man who apparently used to get his mind right at the game's start reached a state where one or two balls are 'not enough'. It's the end. Like an addict, even after the match... after the batter's death according to the rules, not getting satisfaction, remains a phantom killer who's lost himself, an empty shell.

"Obviously, after that it's over. Iguruma Kazumi becomes a serial killer maniac, true to the nickname, and keeps killing until he is beaten and dies."

He is a real killer, though. A crime for any reason, with any reservation is still a crime. Sinker probably doesn't even care whether the killer in him is true or temporary. Which was he in the end?.. This conclusion can't help him or his victims, just us onlookers.

Still no reaction. Kirisu's clearly dead set.

"Fine, be that way. I won't rub salt in your wound any more. But say, Kirisu. I hear you'll do anything for money?"

'I suppose', - a careless reply follows.

It's good that he doesn't mind.

"Then I need a little thing prepared, what do you say?"

Kirisu's Kirisu, I'm me. Can't nose in others' affairs all the time. I have to work to live my own life.

"Whaaat?.. What-what, three meters in diameter?.."

The strange commission makes Kirisu cringe.

"Will you do it? If yes, just bring it here. I'll pay upon delivery, of course."

So.

My role in this case is over.

The demonic ball master, Sinker. A genius batter who abandoned baseball for no reason. The old promise is unfulfilled - they didn't meet. An event chain that can't be Ishizue Arika's story.

Lowering the curtains is the role of West Block team's ace.

A third person standing around can only irresponsibly inflame the players, jerk around and watch the historical battle.

It's obvious that decisiveness and outcome are the participants' business. However you support the sportsman, in the end you're behind the mosquito net; such is our life.

## **8/Sinker. (bottom)**

Ishizue Arika said that Sinker didn't notice his memory regression himself. It's true, but not exactly. After all, his memory fell apart over half a year ago.

Summer of year 2003.

District qualifications just over, the baseball clubs' activity came to a small break. As usual, Iguruma Kazumi stood on the mound and trained his pitches in solitude.

There's no trace of recent screwballs. The balls didn't even reach the catcher, but he kept trying.

A few weeks passed since he had to forfeit from the finals due to elbow trauma. Classmates who didn't know about the tensions within the club thought he was rehabilitating, but in the eyes of his clubmates, who knew the truth, his actions were nothing but an eyesore.

Perhaps due to Sekura Yumiya's parents' influence, the case was hushed up. The school justified it as black marks in their dossiers posing a threat to the young boys' promising futures.

This story won't be publicised. The victim, Iguruma Kazumi, was pacified by an offer of free education.

The club members who got off too easily felt the fairness of this themselves, but Iguruma himself wasn't interested in the unclear future. Only one thing was important to him - whether his right hand will return to its former glory.

An irreparable bone fraction. Comeback as a pitcher aside, such an injury makes simple living hard. Waving the fact aside, he busied himself with training.

The club members laughed at Iguruma Kazumi's denial.

Day after day Iguruma Kazumi went to the mound, and day after day he kept pitching the ball which now didn't fly more than a few metres.

The sight of an upperclassman playing with a broken arm only made the club members laugh. What a moron, doesn't he know what "surrender" means! - they kept mocking his pathetic pitches.

Whatever happened, however you look at it - Iguruma Kazumi's recovery is impossible. Kazumi knew it the best. Sinker, who made many batters tremble, vanished without a trace. He understood that now he'd lose even to an elementary school student, but still kept on training.

Iguruma Kazumi was possessed in a psychological sense.

A reason to come that far? He had a dream that didn't let him surrender.

Winter, December of the same year.

As usual, Iguruma Kazumi finished the training and cleaning pushed onto him by underclassmen and went home.

The next day he burst into a class where the second year captain of the baseball club, Sekura Yumiya, was studying, and tried to lynch him, but the teacher intercepted him and walked him to a so-called student guidance room.

The school judged Iguruma Kazumi's mental state as 'slightly' excited and sent him to Shikura's police station where it asked for help from the youth education department. The protocol noted the boy's extreme mental disturbance.

Three days later.

After leaving the pen Iguruma Kazumi heard the decision about his being expelled from the school, under which he signed. He didn't come home, but was noticed among people without a set residence. In the youth education department he was put down as a runaway and as such became wanted, but no officers found or apprehended him.

Half a year later, July of 2004.

An entire six months passed, and the summer heat just came into power, when among homeless people a youth resembling Iguruma Kazumi was found.

But that's just a hypothesis. Unconfirmed. The youth's consciousness was unstable, and he was in a state where he couldn't remember his own name.

The aged vagrants worried for him and supported his existence. They asked where he lived, and he answered that he didn't want to remember. Sometimes the youth timidly muttered with a begging look: "Excuse me, I'd like to become a pitcher".

And every time the vagrants looked away. Because the youth's right arm - even they didn't want to look - was bent at an unnatural angle.

The cause was a bum who felt very sorry for him.

"If you love baseball so much, you have to see this", - he said and led him to some young people who were playing a game that was becoming popular recently.

Of course, they couldn't take part. They were only allowed to stay a distance away and watch.

But, apparently, he still felt something.

Since then the youth started lazily watching SVS, and bit by bit rudimentary mental activity came back to him. The game was a showdown between pitchers and batters gathering at their spots in groups.

The pitchers chose an industrial strip in the Shikura hill and Nozu as their base. Many unfinished buildings were spacious inside, like supermarkets, and not too dirty. For various reasons - frozen construction, simply no one being there some days - they stood empty and worked well for pitcher training.

He sneaked into the sites past everyone's stares and dimly watched their practice.

His heart contained awe and nostalgia. And - burning pain.

Emotions are electric pulses. It's unknown what exactly awoke his shattered psyche, what influx of feelings called his darkened consciousness back.

He grips the ball with his now immovable right hand and relaxedly watches the assorted pitchers, squinting at the summer sun. As though sleepily watching a movie in detachment - I can't join 'them'. And once...

...Phew. As though his old memories came back.

A summery noon, just like now.

He, very tiny, gripping a ball, was running along the long uphill road.

Before his eyes is an old loaded cart pulled by a single woman.

A thin woman. On the cart are fittings and bars thrown in by generous town factories. These things can't and shouldn't be dragged by one woman.

Bit by bit the woman was getting tired. The road gradient was almost mountain-like. Asphalt where cars don't ride. At the rise's side is luscious green. At the other side is a view above at houses sticking up like a grove.

...The woman is stubbornly dragging the cart. She'll deliver the load to another factory over the hill and sell it for quite a bit of money.

So unsightly and laughable. This woman didn't have any means of sustenance other than this old-fashioned labour.

Apparently he helped her when he was young. Thinking only of playing, he grumpily stands behind the cart. He wanted to throw it all away and go play, but the woman can't drag the cart alone. He suppresses his displeasure and pushes. The ball still in his hand is a small protest.

But in the end their strength wasn't enough.

The cart stopped in the middle of the hill as though rooted to the spot, and they could do nothing more. Like poverty stuck on the sidewalk. No cars. Can't move it. And even if someone passed by, they would hardly help. He wanted to run away, but the cart was borrowed, and he couldn't even abandon it.

An overly hard, cruel summer.

Among the world shining under the sun they lay like a dirty black stain. He had never felt so miserable.

The blue sky over his head is cold.

The sun's summer rays are scorching his head.

Not knowing how to go on, he cried.

He understands his home is poor. He understands that he has to help the working woman.

But still, this was too much. Wearing worn clothes, they drag various crap, the passerbys laugh. So pathetic and sad, he nearly exploded with anger at his bad luck.

But before that he saw something truly hard.

"Ah..."

That's right!.. - the disappearing consciousness came back.

He was poor. He was abused.

The nonsense he was thinking about at the moment raised his spirits countless times; and now it gave him the strength to rise again.

"Huh. So you're that kid?"

"Uh huh..."

And so he remembered how he used to be.

Before him was a middle-aged man wearing a hat. Pitchers were having fun beyond the window. A completely unknown devil, totally unlike the last, spoke:

"You want to join them?.. Go for it. Last time didn't work out too well. Not that I'm trying to repair the damage, of course..."

That he'd grant his wish in exchange for something important to him.

"But maybe you shouldn't? This time is not like the last, this time is for real. If you get hit - you'll really die. The stakes change. If you get hit, it's the end, and you can't stop the match. If that's fine..."

The devil speaks with a kind smile.

"is it worth it, exchanging your life for this dream?" - he asks.

The right hand, long wizened, gathers strength again.

Again. He'll be able to pitch again - and if so, then who cares who this guy is? And Iguruma Kazumi nodded.

Should he bet everything?.. Of course. Ever since that day devoting his life to it was his dream.

The game began.

The man in a hat made a demon possess him.

For him, with his already damaged body part, forming both it and the growth was pretty quick.

...On the other hand - perhaps as payback for not training for so long, - his right arm and the half of his body joined to it was badly burned. It could be called complications caused by the appendage's revival. As a result he put on a hoodie, covering his body and right hand, and became incognito.

"Only thing left is to handle the preparations. Yeah. You wanted to join these..."

The man spoke to a group of pitchers gathered at a construction site. And he watched from afar.

"So... If you accept him into your group, I'll grant your..."

A theatrical voice.

Some youngsters turned darker, and Sekura Yumiya, sitting on a ruin and watching him with bated breath.

Perhaps the man's voice had something hypnotic about it? The gathered pitchers started nodding in the end... He suddenly tried to remember. Seven years ago. Two boys, nodding in response to the man, - was their friend watching them with the same cold stare?

Pitchers - lightly, playing along with the joke, and Sekura Yumiya, hostile to the hooded youth watching from afar, made a contract with the man.

The weirdness showed itself before an hour passed.

He was probably special. The man said that most people recently infected with A syndrome behave irregularly. Iguruma Kazumi wasn't infected before, but in a way he was possessed by something already. Therefore he transformed in a relatively coherent state.

When the youths started complaining about strong pain caused by the body alterations, suddenly one of them bit a nearby pitcher. Like in a zombie movie.

Immediately two pitchers fell, still clawing, biting, killing each other. The madness spread to the rest who began recreating the scene with individual differences.

Perhaps it'd have been easier to join them, but Sekura Yumiya remained uninvolved. As the first one to awaken from the nightmare. A sound mind is a sin here. Among madness the simplest and easiest way to survive is to embrace even greater madness.

Sekura Yumiya must have been pretty tired, to be possessed by an illusion. Let's be friends! - spluttering blood, the shadows of his former friends attacked him, but Sekura fought them off with tears in his eyes. With the balls flying out of his left hand he cracked four pitchers on the head, went crazy, and when he came to, he was already haphazardly smashing his buddies with a bat.

Echoing applause. Covered in blood, the ace pitcher regains himself.

"Excellent. I thought of helping him, thinning the ranks. But you're pretty suitable yourself. Not at all like before, with miss after miss... Finally the last days of this town are here."

The man praises Sekura Yumiya, while Iguruma Kazumi hears a repeat of a deceit he was so used to.

Get hit - death. Throw the battle - death. Now, possessed by a demon, he knows no way to survive other than victory. Sekura Yumiya howled that this wasn't what he told them and threw himself at the hat-wearing man. Stopping this ruckus, a screwball leaves Iguruma Kazumi's hand at one hundred and forty kilometres per hour.

"W-what are you..."

Sekura Yumiya's voice shakes, he turns around. Before him are a pitcher's eyes coldly staring from under the hood.

"I'm tired of your shit... If you're not gonna pitch, give me your cell and get out of my sight."

Sekura Yumiya knows who this pitcher in a hoodie is. He also knows that the screwball thrown by his right hand just now means his former strength has returned. 'He'll kill me. If



I remain here, he'll kill me for sure', - his intuition said, and Sekura Yumiya fled, covering his strangely warped left arm.

A silver cellphone, thrown down as though with intentions of smashing it. The ace's number is on it, it is the domain of the greatest pitcher. There's no one in this city who fits the title better.

"I'll handle the clean-up. No big deal, just gotta carry them to a nearby factory, and there they can be hidden so no one can find them. You can use all this baseball inventory. It'll be handy for your revenge, eh?"

Revenge? He tilts his head, puzzled.

He isn't fully recovered yet. His name only came back when he grasped the ball as a pitcher.

"Remember: your switch is wrath."

He leaves the construction site. The man's normal, inexpressive voice comes from behind him:

"Even if it's not apparent now, once it surfaces you can't suppress it... You'll remember someday, kid. Your wrath is not directed at someone in particular. It's anger at an unclear, formless society."

Before leaving he asked the man's name.

The reply was a word even more common than the his facial features, a most normal name.

He - Iguruma Kazumi - opened his revenge season a few days later. Still not knowing his own name, he wandered around the town, and once he spotted the youth who broke his elbow back then, - Sinker was born.

In the mad heat of thirty-eight degrees.

On this day, too, he was woken by the piercing cold.

Kill after kill. The phones gathered one by one are scattered among the trees. The burning summer heat and the phone's incessant, echoing, irritating ringing.

...A phone is ringing nearby. He willed his hand to shut it up and realized that never mind moving a hand, he couldn't even breathe properly.

"Ah... ah..."

He gathered his entire body's abilities, struggling just to breathe.

He barely worked a little heat into it.

...Due to the A syndrome's distortion half of his body was burnt. As a result the majority of his skin's respiratory function was lost. The lowering of body temperature - the abnormal cold assailing him - were caused by rejecting the atmosphere.

Recovering his breath with great effort, he checks the right arm's nerves... Can't move it yet. It moans due to cruel treatment. Won't last for one inning like that.

Such irony... It should recover easily after a few weeks of rest, but he can't afford that long. Not 'doesn't want to', but 'can't'.

The cellphone's sickening howl serving as an alarm captured the fading consciousness.

He saw a dream...

Seems like it was an hour ago, but in fact it's a memory about twenty days old. The freshest memory hold something else, something angry. The ninth batter. The interloper in a black cape. Released a step from being killed, he came here and shut down immediately.

"Hhh..."

Irrelevant. This is irrelevant. He levels his breathing.

Presently his body is more important. It's in awful shape. So much that the response the day before, the one he thought couldn't get any worse, now seems like a healthy norm. Fingertips feel frozen. Cold. So cold. The sun is so close. So hot outside the body. But the voices from the tribunes are distant. The mortal world's cruelty is sickening. Just went to sleep for a bit, and now where's that summer?

"Of course. If you don't play regularly, you'll disappear."

...That day the man wearing a hat was telling Sekura Yumiya about the workings, his words are now darting through his head. That the life in them, the possessed, is supported by demons. That if the demon isn't fed, both die, naturally.

Thus - hold on to diligence, vengefulness. Find the power to live. Repeat the deadly game, like a dose of drugs...

"Get hit and die. That's what I'm talking about. As soon as you lose, your heat, your dream will wither."

Yes... His body is now only moved by stubbornness, by anger.

As soon as he loses that heat, he'll stop functioning.

"Hhh... ah, aah!.."

The right arm's nerves connect. The reckless angry desire to keep pitching starts up his engine.

One left. It's fine, there are still people to pitch at. There are still targets, objects of revenge, he pleads with himself.

"Only, one, left..."

But what to do when there's no one left? The disgusting ringtone throws his thoughts off. Can he go on pitching? And as soon as he pitches, they'll know he's possessed, and he'll have to kill to shut mouths. After all, it's clear from the match that he'll kill the opponent. Even if he survives today, what will he do with that arm that may give out tomorrow? Is there any point to pitching?.. Of course. If there's no other way, then he has to keep killing batters. The summer won't end. Not while there's still room and sportsmen. He can't end it here.

"Yes... I will..."

Even if it's hard, he has to always keep pitching.

But what for, actually?

He broke. Misstepped a long time ago.

Can't remember either his own name nor that reason. Only one thing is clear - pitching. While he lives, he'll keep killing with this very arm.

...He reaches out towards the stubbornly screaming phone.

The caller is a batter, golden four.

He seemed to hear the last horn signalling the game's start.

**(18.08)**

Iguruma Kazumi's name came up in the maniac case investigation this morning.

Kirisu Yaichiro procured the item and arranged the delivery to the specified location according to Ishizue Arika's order and was now walking along the fields on Shikura's border.

A time wasted. Dumbly stomping on the field boundaries, the bored Kirisu lowered his gaze:

"Well, now it's a matter of time."

Sinker's arrest.

The destruction of the karmic bond with Iguruma Kazumi.

Perhaps a final curtain, late but still not lowered.

How is it a matter of time?

Not capable of answering confidently, cycling thoughts uselessly, Kirisu heads to the forest in the outskirts.

The place Ishizue Arika once brought him to. Hard to tell by the forest, but the stop is a pointer. He finds the cube in the forest and opens the door. The darkness stretched to the basement gives an illusion that, if you look carefully, you'll see a mountain of corpses. Forcibly suppressing the instinct screaming about the danger to his life, he enters the darkness. He closes the door, now it's completely dark. Like a dimension cut off from the outside world. Ishizue Arika, who can casually come here every day, is abnormal, Kirisu thinks. His friend always presented himself as thick-skinned, but this deep discomfort seems to deny any escape.

However, this mysteriously worrying path is still far more bearable than what's at its end, Kirisu thinks with bated breath. The real chill comes from the room. The underground room swaying in the diffused sunlight and the beautiful humanoid on the bed. Kirisu can't express the feelings awakened in him by this picture with words, but this beauty is so jarring to him that he doesn't know what to compare it to.

"Excuse me..."

He knocks. No reply. No matter what you do, no one will answer, he remembers Ishizue Arika's words.

Steeling himself, he opens the door.

The garden of darkness appears from the darkness.

In blinding contrasts, on the four-poster bed, this lovely something is resting.

Wearing only the arm prosthetics. Something fish-like is swimming in the ocean on the ceiling. The dog Arika mentioned is not there.

"Oh? What's the matter, Kirisu-san?"

The underground room's owner greets Kirisu with a smile.

"Nothing to do with you... Arika told me to wait here. Apparently something about his job."

"Hmm... Aah, so that's it... What a dummy. Why does he only consider others' business seriously?"

A beautiful smile - made him want to turn away.

The underground room's owner sees the thought process of Ishizue Arika, who called Kirisu Yaichiro here, like this:

"'I wash my hands' - fits him perfectly. How can you tend to the beautiful with such a dirty inside... aaah, I can't take it. This... excessive compassion, makes you want to take and crush it, right?"

Kirisu doesn't understand what the owner is talking about.

But he saw a vague resemblance of this silhouette to Ishizue Arika. They look at different things, consider different things good, but the deep-set feelings seem similar.

Kirisu chased the strange fantasy away and sat down on the sofa. Without thinking about manners. Because to Kirisu the silhouette on the bed is a horror he's better off not seeing.

"Hey, man. What's with your left arm?"

He couldn't handle the silence and asked an immaterial question.

Last evening Ishizue Arika was wearing a prosthesis. Then he apparently didn't visit the underground. 'And if so, then what prosthesis is the owner wearing?' - he thought dimly.

"It's just a plug, Sorrow (my right leg) did me a favour. They're just shaped like arms and legs. The actually useful limbs are worn by other people."

Kirisu doesn't understand Karyou Kaie's words. Like Kaie's reading a picture book. The language seems human, but is closer to the noise the brain lets pass by.

There's no meaning in talking here.

He can't endure the silence, but talking is even worse... He shouldn't have come, after all, Kirisu decides and rises from the sofa.

He isn't going to rely on this something, but if the silhouette feels like it, it can save a possessed! He becomes ashamed at his impatience. And anyway, that doesn't concern him any longer! Kirisu turns to leave...

"So it turns out Kirisu-san is the genius Slugger?"

...But is lassoed before he manages to run away.

"What a surprise... Did Arika babble?"

"No. I knew there was such a person already. Arika just named them. As in, that bandit who just stood here. With his usual disapproving stare, and with such pride, it made me a bit uncomfortable."

The lovely shadow smiles spiritedly.

Kirisu was probably spurred by the smile not being an usual inhuman grin, but one familiar to everybody.

"That little... Got uppity, so I'm a bandit now?"

The constant chill dampened, Kirisu replied easily, abusing his friend behind his back.

"What about now? You're not a slugger any longer?"

"Nah. It was long ago. I don't stand in the batter box any more. What about it? My skill as a batter shouldn't concern you."

"Of course not. But something just keeps bugging me, so I decided to ask you something when we meet; may I?"

A question asked yet again... Slugger, once godlike, hears it asked by everyone. Why did he abandon baseball? Kirisu's spirits sunk from having to hear it here as well.

"Say. Why do homeruns make you puke?"

The question hit home, even making Kirisu flinch.

He's watched by clear pearl eyes. He loses his balance and drops back to the sofa. ...No, Karyou Kaie's stare didn't make his consciousness stagger. His very question was Kirisu Yaichiro's sin, one he couldn't turn away from.

"The reasons you two kept and stopped playing are probably disconnected, but they can clear something up. So? Perhaps Kirisu-san's story will give me an idea on how to save Iguruma Kazumi... Or maybe someone who smashed dozens of human heads doesn't have the guts for a simple pure-hearted confession?"

His mind stops. One phrase erases the thoughts of the man who used to be Kirisu Yaichiro.

'Killed dozens of people'. This nonsense only Kirisu knows about is clearly amusing the silhouette.

"You came with this thought, right? You wouldn't get close to this underground place otherwise. Yes, I forgive this impertinence. You can probably feel best just how many people were hurt due to your insensitivity... Come on. Tell me an interesting story!"

Why Iguruma Kazumi keeps pitching the ball.

Why Kirisu Yaichiro abandoned baseball.

"Those two reasons are entirely different, but stem from the same thing. It's all I want to know. I don't care about your sins or your justice."

I just want to hear your story, the demon says.

...He hid the pressure for too long, or maybe he thought that it was fine to reveal anything to that demon.

The charmed man quietly begins confessing the story of his youth's finale.

Kirisu Yaichiro first met Nishino Harusumi in autumn, during his first year in high school.

Kirisu was already seriously involved in baseball, but in another place the environment pinned great hopes on him.

In middle school he, feeling no love for baseball, used to be a delinquent and didn't cut ties with that side after entering high school. To him baseball was the main course, but that didn't mean he took messing around with those people lightly.

Nishino Harusumi was Kirisu Yaichiro the high schooler's 'aniki'. An upperclassman introduced him to Kirisu as a 'sempai of a sempai', but since that day Nishino took note of the boy as a 'useful little brother'. He must have seen the outstanding talent, the inborn star-ness. He didn't like the guy, but certainly could use him. Yakuza's school recruitment.

Kirisu, a member of the baseball club, played with his city friends, but never stepped over the line. Every time Nishino and co. coaxed him to join, he clapped his palms together like a monk: don't bother me while I'm still playing baseball! - and avoided drastic steps.

That balance shifted when Kirisu started his second year.

When he learned about Harusumi's superior at the time, Aoyagi Masashi.

Shouda family's branch, the Nanase group. A wide-profile power group dominating Shikura.

Everyone but the organisation head drank a glass of allegiance to the young boss... essentially the company director, as the young boss, his assistants and all their subordinates made an organization of about four hundred people.

Nishino stood out among the lesser bosses. Ten years ago he already had personal control over all drugs - a weird one. That was because in the beginning of the nineties the group wasn't getting enough income from drugs, and the business was considered the dumps. Not even a freebie, just a job with lots of work and scraps for income. Even to them, hoodlums who had to run around selling underground videotapes, that was a third-rate job. Those were the times when money exchange and real estate were still easy cash.

And Aoyagi was the chief of that then-pariah, Nishino Harusumi, supplied the group with money from financial turnover and was 'a textbook thief'.

Their relations were clearly strained, for obvious reasons. Aoyagi thought that Nishino was a low-grade type who needed scolding, and Nishino Harusumi considered Aoyagi an unjust superior.

Additionally, unluckily for Nishino, the Nanase group, the oaths of which he upheld, was an old-school power group. Profits mattered to it, of course, but observance of 'proper conduct' were even more important. Its creed was that power was above money, and Aoyagi Masashi was its personification.

As times went by, that 'conduct' was declining. The epoch forced considering the modern lifestyle more than devotion to the past if one wanted to advance the group. And so Nishino Harusumi gained power, and his début as Aoyagi's, his former superior's, equal, became a matter of time.

If Nishino was a thief fitting the times, Aoyagi was a thief left behind. The epoch when they met the tide head-on, throwing a mocking challenge at society, ended. Even the 'customs' of power groups were set to shift at a national level, but they kept holding up the old pose. Not even feeling the need to change anything.

...To put it frankly, Aoyagi Masashi was the sort of man that's obsessed with power. His priority was not the enterprise's income but the brute force given by excess of it.

This man keeping the accounts of the criminal financial enterprise didn't become a loan shark for money, but to drive borrowers into a corner. He purposely lent money to people clearly unable to pay it back and then mocked them. His hand ruined lives; many of his victims ended theirs.

Nishino Harusumi was hard as a doornail himself, but compared to Aoyagi Masashi he still was somewhat reasonable.

He understood that the group's organisation would change in a few years, figured out a way to securely extract profits by lowering drug prices as the customer network grew, and intentionally took up a sinecure everyone else underestimated.

Aoyagi, born with a cockerel's soul, was incredibly irritated at this. Since then Nishino with his cunning ways of obtaining pocket change received constant kicks and humiliations. Once their positions began exchanging places, it started getting worse. Nishino was within an inch of death more than a few times. A year later the shift became obvious. But it was



possible that he wouldn't last that long; at that time it was essentially Nishino Harusumi's greatest worry.

However, even as his relations with Nishino worsened, Aoyagi was dotting on his underling, Kirisu Yaichiro. Perhaps a man born for brute force saw a fellow in Kirisu's build and arm muscles.

Aoyagi offered Kirisu to become his follower many times, but he kept stubbornly refusing. Aoyagi might have been a clearly, obviously disgusting person, but apparently he could be attentive to those he acknowledged. He nodded to the words 'let me finish school' like a future superior, walked around the night town with Kirisu, brought him to his job many times. That was probably his disposition. In this workplace, worthy in Aoyagi's eyes, Kirisu once saw a familiar woman.

A woman with thin features and eyes tired of life. 'That's a victim, just to have some fun with', - the future superior informed him happily.

If there is such a thing as a turning point in human life, that was it for Kirisu Yaichiro.

Aoyagi was a lost cause.

This man hit the weak, kicked those lying down, everything about him constantly growled 'no saving', there was no worth in him.

The woman owed money to a financial enterprise under Nanase's influence and returned a dangerous minimum every month. Back then Kirisu was in the second year of high school. Apparently, without anyone's help, with no obligation to anyone, she was returning the debt alone. She had a son. To not distract him, who finally began being accepted by society, she desperately laboured - that was clear.

In fact, even with the dangerous smallness of her monthly payments, she would fully settle the debt in half a year. The group intended to wring out the payback five years later, but the payments were stable, there was nothing to latch onto. The income simply promised a full payback in a year.

But Aoyagi didn't like that. Not that the rate was lower than intended. It was that a weak creature he wanted to suffer for its entire life was boldly going to save itself, and it pissed him off.

Drove him mad, it could be said.

"Whaaat?! What are blabbering about, huh! You're trash, dust, like hell you'll become like everyone!" - he kicked the woman bringing the money, kicked her in the head, grabbed her by the neck. - "You don't have a right to say the word future! What fucking son! What, your whelp got uppity, huh? He's better than me, huh? He's trash that crawled out of a trash can, is he better than me, answer me!"

Her blood and sweat seemed to spur Aoyagi's madness on.

And so he, for a single reason - 'a bad mood' - said that he condemns not her life, but her son's.

...The state Kirisu Yaichiro was in then was indescribable.

His thoughts completely froze in that moment. His brain crumbled from the temples down, and his vision was overlaid by a sparkling white curtain.

"Your whelp won't even be able to hold the ball any longer!.."

The voice of Aoyagi, mad, fired up by his own shouting, echoes in Kirisu Yaichiro's vacated skull.

There was a promise.

There was a promise he hasn't ever forgotten since childhood.

There was a friend whose life went down the drain due to his own oversight. That friend said that the promise should be forgotten, but he still wanted to fulfil it.

Kirisu jumped to conclusions.

Two days later. Ready for anything, Kirisu Yaichiro broke into Aoyagi Masashi's office, where the boss was alone.

All is lost. Loved things, betrayed. But there are things for which it's worth it, that must be held on to, he repeated to himself.

If we speak of miscalculations, there were two.

One - when it was over, Nishino Harusumi arrived.

Another - Kirisu Yaichiro had too good a memory.

What happened to Aoyagi Masashi, how it was taken care of - Kirisu doesn't know. He seemed to still breathe, but Nishino Harusumi took matters into his hands.

Aoyagi was unnecessary to Nishino, too. What if he survives, not good, Nishino laughed, and then he and Kirisu began keeping their joint secret.

Why, on that night in Aoyagi Masashi's office, where he should've been alone, did Nishino show up, why did he cover for Kirisu?.. Whatever mutual agendas, Nishino, whose superior was attacked, couldn't just up and become Kirisu's accomplice. And if he could, wasn't it

because their goals were the same from the outset? A day longer... an hour longer for Kirisu to decide, and perhaps...

Anyway, it's over. At Nishino's order Kirisu focused on baseball since then and until the end of the third year's summer.

But some days later he realized the oddness.

An ordinary training match. As usual, he got into the batter's square, made the usual swing - and couldn't believe his eyes.

What was a ball became a hateful-looking human head, and upon contact with the ball his ear clearly caught that sound.

Crack.

The feeling of smashing a human head.

Brains disgustingly splattering over the cheekbone.

Suddenly Kirisu realizes he just puked in the batter box.

The ball leaves the field in a beautiful arc. Shouts from the tribunes. In the batter box is Aoyagi's shattered head. The voices from the bench shout about a home run. Under the clear, not a cloud, sky, holding a bloody bat is he.

The excessive sinfulness of the act made Kirisu lose consciousness.

...And so every time this vision clings to him at a home run and doesn't let go. A growing mound of corpses. A maniac repeating an imaginary murder with every home run... To him the game called baseball stopped being his pride and interest forever.

A salvation that stained baseball. Kirisu accepted it as a natural result and abandoned his sport life after the third year in school.

He should've stopped it right away, but he had the precious promise. Its execution was already sinful to Kirisu, but he had a partner who was waiting. For him, the friend, he'll keep staining baseball until the end of the summer - such is Kirisu Yaichiro's finale.

Such is the story of a genius slugger who sneakily lowered the curtains.

The confession solemnly ended.

No other person can know Kirisu Yaichiro's soul. Especially Karyou Kaie, devoid of normal emotions. There's only the irrevocable result.

This sportsman didn't run from baseball, he lowered the curtains. Ended the various joys and sorrows, and the master gifted with such shining talent - not because someone scolded him - ended.

"See, to me baseball is just a pleasant thing, there's no reason."

A conviction that seems like arrogance to ones who don't have it.

"Since that day it changed."

Too simple a faith, incomprehensible to those without it.

This is the end of a man who doesn't value wins and losses above all.

Kirisu Yaichiro took up baseball for fun, protected the promise for his own sake and abandoned baseball for his sake as well. That's the whole story. He said enough.

"Yes. And what does Iguruma Kazumi think about this?"

"Only I and Nishino-aniki know about Aoyagi. We'll have to carry this to our graves... Although I blabbed to you, but it's not like you're a normal person. Anyway it's better than telling that arrogant peacock, eh?"

"Rude, and also sharp-tongued!.. Oh well. After such a metaphor I couldn't blab even under torture."

The underground room's owner softly smiles. He must have liked Kirisu's forced comparison.

"So, what now?.. Any ideas?"

Kirisu Yaichiro's traumatic past. The underground room's owner said that if Kirisu tells him the reason he left baseball, he could offer a way to save Iguruma Kazumi.

"Yes. Thank you for your valuable input. I'm not done yet, rather I have a new question. Please don't get it wrong. I'm just interested in what's going on between you two, but not in whether to save or not to save. I'll primitively voice my opinion on what I've heard, and you'll listen attentively."

Yes, Karyou Kaie did say he wasn't going to indulge Kirisu Yaichiro's sins. The underground room's owner is an exotic bird that listens to words and repeats them.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine, say it anyway."

"The let's begin... Say, Kirisu-san. I'd thought he knew why you abandoned baseball. But now I think that can't be. So he has no reason to avoid you, no?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Like I said, about why Iguruma Kazumi is still going on. You made peace with ending the dream, so why can't he, have you never thought of that?"

"Well..."

It's because Iguruma Kazumi leaves room for a duel with Kirisu Yaichiro. They are still bound by the old promise.

"Yes. I thought about that myself while listening to your story. But why doesn't he just come to you? Not knowing your circumstances, Iguruma Kazumi doesn't feel any awkwardness towards you, Kirisu-san. Now he's a pitcher again, and since he understands he can't decide it on the underground arena, he should come challenge you before he burns out, right?"

"Well... because I'm not a player."

"Casuistry. He's a wandering maniac! Not attacking non-sportsmen is unnatural. And if so, he won't reconsider... he has some other reason to keep up the matches. Indeed, perhaps he wants a match with you, but that's just a dim hope, like a dream. Childhood promise? Hardly. It's not that nice... Sinker was born from something dirtier. Actually, you should know what."

Naturally; he knows Iguruma Kazumi's true reason. Well, no point dragging it out any longer, Kirisu decides and turns away.

"Yes. Sinker was born because he still can't forfeit a certain something. But it won't come to be any more... From what I heard Sinker's crimes look like he commits them to forget about it. Loss of reason, substitution of motive. Perhaps avoidance of responsibility. Actually, Arika knows a lot about that stuff. The possessed have their main reason disappear, and they desperately force another one. Pretend they're okay and build a defence based on shaky justifications."

This is common for people. In their case it just stands on the edge of oblivion.

"Everything's fine..."

Kirisu heard a similar phrase.

What did Ishizue Arika say after casually proclaiming he was attacked by Sinker? Partial loss of memory. A memory dysfunction, how convenient for the ill.

"Come on..."

This can't be, Kirisu protests, but he can't will the idea away. No, even if so, then...

It's incredible, but what if Iguruma Kazumi doesn't understand what happened in the winter, in December?

"What the hell!..."

Kirisu's face freezes. He's stupefied by his own assumption's result. Then there's no way out. No salvation. Sinker will keep killing until he dies, will be merely a killer maniac and nothing more.

"It's pointless. There's no meaning to what he does... Can't he stop it? If we explain..."

"You can't explain to a possessed, Kirisu-san. If you want to stop Sinker, you have to play by his rules. Strike-out - and the batter dies. A hit - and the pitcher dies. Wasn't that the agreement?"

The accusatory voice seems to sing.

The sound feels to be too close. Kirisu almost stops noticing whether he's sitting on the sofa.

"Once again I repeat myself: I'm not going to save any possessed. Do it yourself. But if you say that you desire my aid not for you, but for him..."

'No salvation'. The demon stating that so many times is whispering right into his soul.

"It's simple. Just change your perspective. What can you do now, Kirisu-san? If he'll die either way, what kind of death will you grant him, what'll let him disappear without regrets? You wanted to give him this sort of humane salvation, right, Kirisu-san?"

"I... Well..."

Still, like his soul was taken out of him.

This was the problem he was racking his brain over for the last few days...

"Just hit it."

If he could, he'd abandon worthless convictions and stand in the box, it'd be so easy...

"Then he'll die. Either way, he has only a few days left. Let me repeat, you'll not be hitting him. Just return the pitch. That's enough. You won't reach Iguruma Kazumi's reason that way, but it's a splendid finale for the killer, Sinker."

But...

If he can't even 'just return' it.

If he won't even touch the ball, how his spirits will fall...

"I can't... I won't be able to hit it. And anyway, what kind of baseball is it, to the death..."

Kirisu Yaichiro won't give up his life for baseball.

Not 'can't', 'won't'. Baseball played with lives at stake is not the baseball he loved. A betrayal. But speaking of betrayals...

"Exactly, Kirisu-san. You were agonizing over such a simple problem."

The demon giggles in his face.

The unworldly beauty envelops his eyes.

"Hit it mercilessly".

His vision converges into a tunnel, a dot; again he hears a voice, like on that day.

Right. If he listened to Iguruma Kazumi's plea, this wouldn't happen, and, most importantly, he himself \*\*\* it to happen.

"If you think you can't hit it, I can offer my aid. If you give me your elbow and eye..."

The voice is too seductive.

"Curtains must be drawn over his dream".

Right. For this it's okay to once again betray what he loved. Perhaps there's really no second salvation, but if this brings us to the conclusion...

"Right. I... would..."

Kirisu Yaichiro's throat is shaking.

He shuts his eyelids tightly and nearly agrees with the words so naturally thrown out by the demon...

"Don't spout nonsense. This is not like you, you lazy bum. And anyway, what's the point of hitting such a thing?"

...and recovers, hearing the voice of Ishizue Arika, who's finally reached the underground room.

"Come on, move aside. This is not a fake self-proclaimed demon, it's the real deal. Believe him and he'll swallow you whole."

With loud steps Ishizue Arika enters the room. His words let Kirisu find his breath again, and the silhouette on the bed sulks unhappily.

"What's with your bad timing... In these decisive moments you keep saving and getting saved, Arika! People try their best, wanting Kirisu-san's old dream to come true, and you..."

Karyou Kaie spoke incredibly resentfully. The sun on the ceiling was hiding behind a cloud, but the atmosphere of enclosure recently filling the room disappeared like smoke.

"What? Dream? Which one?"

"He's talking about my dotting the i's. It doesn't concern you."

Perhaps wanting to distract attention from his awful behaviour, Kirisu rudely and sharply cuts Ishizue Arika off.

"Heh. Must be one bleak thing you've been discussing here... But well, dreams, dots and other pleasures of life will have to wait; care for some pleasant news?"

Ishizue Arika is still serving as a middleman. Isolate Sekura Yumiya, in case of him being possessed - perform an exorcism. Additionally, have the party at fault to take responsibility. With a strong desire to not involve the law, operating solely through Karyou Kaie's means.

In Ishizue Arika's notebook is written: third party, operate. Exorcising the killer Sinker was necessary for finishing the job.

"You want me to help with that, what, exorcism of yours?"

"Yep. A game to the death, fail to hit - you'll be killed. It'd be a great help if you served as bait."

Kirisu receives an explanation to the sudden circumstances and ponders over what to do, how to react. Get angry, or have his face meet a hand... If it wasn't this guy saying this, he'd already have got punched, but well.

"Recently I asked Mato-san to let me talk to the client. They said: turn the matter over to the police, get this much. Exorcism - that much. What do you think, Kirisu-san? My opinion is that this sum will barely, but still justify risking your life!"

Ishizue Arika first displayed one finger, then spread out all the fingers on both his arm and the prosthetic. To Kirisu money wasn't an issue, but such a sum still made him widen his eyes.

"Ten fingers... And each means a hundred?"

"Of course. We'll split it evenly. Ah, and you don't have to hit. Sinker will get absorbed in the duel, then I'll come up from behind and let the dog take care of the rest", - and patted the black prosthesis.

Ishizue Arika's voice is so careless... well, it's too late, though. At this moment Kirisu finally comprehended his friend's words.

Don't have to hit.

Don't have to hit.

Yes. This guy didn't say 'Hit it' from beginning to end.

So if he doesn't settle things, that's fine.

So a dream is a thing that ends without coming true. Normal people are ready for it, and there's no reason to be embarrassed at regretting that the dream ended fruitlessly.



This is Ishizue Arika's conclusion. That's exactly why Kirisu suffers. Because he's a lucky guy who got a chance to settle it; how envious must he be of his friend?

"Hey, Ishizue-sempai."

"Stop 'sempai'ing me, I tell you. I'm not going to drop all those past quarrels and promises on you. Hmm, I wonder if that's help at all. You do work to live. It's just business, Kirisu. You sheltered Sekura Yumiya for money. You knew he sent Iguruma Kazumi's life downhill, but you took the deal. And now you're gonna, like, reject this one?"

To live means to move forward.

Not to get rid of regrets about the past. Just let go of things holding you back, he says.

"After all, what's more important to you, what was before or what is now?" - he adds in a disappointed tone.

A phrase Nishino Harusumi dropped before leaving comes to mind.

A bog-standard phrase which a mafioso who pretty much couldn't live like one pronounced with dramatic flair.

And - disappointed, going 'you used to be simpler', the most convoluted and weird friend in Kirisu's life, in this world.

"Pfft... I relied on you because I'm in a complete corner. I can't manage this alone. I gave up, like, let it go as it may, and somehow got you involved. In the end, it keeps happening this way."

"Kirisu, not half, seven to three. You know, you're free to think these honest thoughts, but keep them to yourself... So? You accept? No?"

Silently smiles.

Kirisu Yaichiro finally mumbled in a resigned tone of a man who gave up:

"Uh huh, I'll do it properly. You're right, Arika. If someone makes trouble for you, you just gotta put 'em down without pointless talk."

He nodded as a sign of the game's start.

The following is something of a third wheel, but since it got tacked on...

"Perhaps that's enough, gentlemen?.. Although I hate to interrupt your heated discussion. Or don't hate to. Or I should get angry because you touched a nerve... Hmm, what to do, this seems to be the first time such a thing happened, I don't really understand..."

Shaking his head on the bed, Karyou Kaie interrupted.

"Listen. What's with 'hit - don't hit'. You intend to put Kirisu-san, a living human, against him? He's Sinker as it is, there's a handicap, and now the batter hasn't played for years - he'll die after three balls in the best case."

"Well, that's his fault, I'll have to ask you to return his senses. It's enough to last three balls, though. Well, and I just want to quietly sneak from behind for my safety."

"You ruined it."

"Now, now! You can think those thoughts, but keep them to yourself, Ishizue-san."

Contrary to Kirisu staring heavily, Karyou Kaie suddenly cheered up.

"You teamed up, huh... But well, the batting hasn't rusted, maybe it'll be fine, eh, Kirisu?"

"I thought Kirisu-san left baseball."

"Baseball - yeah. He swings the bat to exhaustion every day, it's plain to see. And anyway, who said that you don't swing the bat out of the box?.. Once he started, he won't throw the duel. That's his curious character."

"Heh. You're one to talk. You say it's going to be a strike-out and return a liner; say it doesn't concern you and rush into battle."

"Go on babbling. Since we've decided, let's seize the moment. Let's begin now, Kirisu. No point waiting for the night. We'll end it before the scary lady catches Sinker."

"Well yeah, but... how are you going to call him? You'll have to wait for the night..."

"Here, have it back, Kirisu. Sinker attacked me but was interrupted, so there was no strike-out. I still have a participant's right."

Ishizue Arika holds a golden cellphone out.

The set-up is flawless.

Kirisu Yaichiro, cursing the actions of his friend who notices everything except what'll happen to himself, twisted his lips gratefully.

"Fine... But I have a condition. I'll swing seriously, and you, until the result is clear, keep away."

"Fine. If Sinker gets a strike-out, I get him from behind."

"And one more thing. I won't ask you to save his life, but if Sinker lives after the match, let him come to the police. If you agree to both, I'll play that idiotic baseball for life and death."

"Well, fine. However, the first is clear, but the second... Will Sinker understand?"

"Well, I'm normal, so at least mention that. I'm already going up against a two-stage sinker. This handicap is tiny by comparison."

Ishizue Arika nodded to Kirisu's offer: fine, whatever.

From his viewpoint that condition will be hard to explain, but, as Kirisu said, it's a match between a normal person and a possessed one. Using this as a trump during negotiations might work.

"Damn. To have 'conversation with possessed' skills be handy even here... You never know what amusing talents a person might have."

Ishizue Arika, grateful to the absent Touma Mato... not a bit grateful, of course, just pretty words, turns to Kirisu Yaichiro.

"Okay, Slugger, I'll set up the fairest stage I can for you. Really, it's great that it didn't go to waste."

"Prepare? How?"

'I don't get it', - the widened eyes of Kirisu and Kaie said.

Ishizue Arika looked at them...

"Well, like I said, a special platform designed against double sinkers. Whoops, I didn't say it?"

...with an even more amazed look.

## 9/Sinker VS Slugger.

This summer was hot.

Noon. The air temperature went over 36C, the city became a natural sauna, and mirages appeared above asphalt.

In contrast to this frying pan of a ground the sky is an endless blue, the columns of clouds proclaiming summer's triumph up high.

The eighteenth of August.

The weather is extremely hot, perfect for baseball. An area marked for construction on Nozu's edge became their final playing field.

"You can't beat the two-stage sinker. And even if you can, how do you stop the trajectory's change after the first time?"

This is Ishizue Arika's conclusion on fighting Sinker.

Kirisu knew it already, too. The point is that stopping the second change is impossible.

"Right, no defending against the second swerve. So let's get it at the first one".

After that and five minutes of negotiations Ishizue Arika led Kirisu Yaichiro. Not near the construction site - inside it. Into a very long corridor around the open area, about thirty meters in diameter.

"Are... you for real?"

It's understandable that Kirisu was at a loss for words.

A corridor bent like the letter L. A large three-meter mirror is installed in the corner. It's positioned so that part of the corridor beyond the corner is visible, and the pitcher's mound is there. This is the place Ishizue Arika prepared for the game. The batter and pitcher are separated by a turn, a 'knight-style' baseball.

"As you can see, there's about six meters of corridor between the mound and the corner. Past it and down this corridor are we. There are about ten meters to the batter box. A right turn, yes, but it's still a pretty decent field. This way we automatically cancel out the first turn, you agree?"

If the second change is unblockable, just block the first.

This essentially means limiting the screw ball.

On this field will always have to pitch the screw ball so that the first turn is to the right.

We're not talking about a strike, shoot or bean ball, but about a 'shoot' with a right turn at the correct moment just for the ball to reach the batter box.

Of course, this isn't baseball. The batter must see the pitcher and compete with them - that's baseball. This flaw was overcome by Ishizue Arika with a mirror. 'Left' and 'right' didn't merely swap, even judging the distance is difficult, but apparently the idea is that players get used to it after a few pitches.

The batter and pitcher are weirdly connected by a mirror in order to see each other and battle from beyond the wall.

A nonsensical rhombus only allowed to Sinker, whose weapon is a double turn using blood for a second acceleration.

This is the field for the decisive duel between an ordinary man and a possessed prepared by Ishizue Arika...

"No, no need to hold back. You're not just 'not for real', you're crazy."

But it's interesting! Kirisu Yaichiro swings his bat.

Putting on a glove, straightening his back, he concentrates to make this simple corridor his territory.

The pass is wide enough. The outer wall has large windows with more than enough light to see the ball. This is a ridiculous playfield, but the minimum, bare requirements are met.

The site is empty, with absolutely no one nearby.

The city is far, and there are no distracting noises.

Blamm! - only the echo of metallic strikes from a nearby construction site sometimes reports the happenings outside.

"I'll bring you the strongest, Fourth."

With these words the voice in the speaker reached 'it'.

Doesn't run, doesn't hide. Offered the match himself. Just agree to a few conditions - what a nonsensical diplomacy. If it can pitch, it'll agree to any terms. It doesn't have the mind to judge them in the first place.

Bending its entire body, like a ghost, it goes towards the designated place.

An empty construction site.

An unfinished rectangular building bathed in white sunlight.

A landscape taken from an apocalypse movie, molded from just the tall walls and the sun.

It entered that; and even it froze, stunned, upon seeing the site of the arranged game.

"You're here. You see the mound, right? It's yours, Sinker".

The voice comes from the cellphone.

A mirror in the corner of the L-shaped corridor, reflects the invisible otherwise space beyond the corner.

There is a sportsman, cell in hand, there.

The distance, though not in a straight line, really is a bit over sixteen meters. This seems to be the 'unusual field shape' mentioned by the sportsman on the phone.

"You can reach me well enough, right? Inconvenient? It is for me, too. Because I'll have to adjust to a ball flying down a corridor".

If the pitcher can't send the ball behind the corner, it won't reach the home base.

The batter must react in the 0.3 seconds the ball suddenly appearing from behind the corner takes to reach him. From a realistic viewpoint the game's unwinnable for the pitcher. From a real, though impossible, one it is for the batter.

Seeing this nonsensical game it smiled: interesting!

In a reckless state it felt that such additions are fitting for a game with lives on the line.

"Need some warmup?"

It shakes its head: no.

The side of the plate is treated with resin to avoid slip-ups, and - what do they expect from this match? - over twenty balls are prepared.

"Haa..."

He exhaled, mind still cloudy, smiled. Will the game require that many? - he snickered towards his opponent, and...

...the fog in his mind is completely gone.

"So let's begin, Sinker. As agreed, the strongest, number four, is facing you."

The man with the phone left the corridor after saying that.

Was the second out of the mirror's coverage? - he who earned the name Slugger enters the batter box.

Raising the bat like he's piercing the sky, with a slow motion he lowers it to his left shoulder's level.

The pressure and firmness of the tall figure remind one of a crag.

This pose, unmoving at first glance, is faintly swerving, reading the pitcher's breath, all to return.

He knew the figure well.

Doesn't know the opponent's name, nor his style as a batter, but he's very familiar with the man himself. The memory is at a loss, but his right arm remembers.

Unlike the previous, talkative, man, this batter was silent. 'Nothing to talk about'. The eagle-like stare sees through the pitcher in the mirror.

A stare more telling than any words.

A feeling of elation that heats up the frozed atmosphere.

"Haa..."

A snicker comes out.

The headache is like a white noise.

This opponent is special, the scattered shreds of recognition flutter.

Delight and fear.

The happiness of standing before an exceptional batter and the danger of standing before a hero bringing ruin stimulate Sinker's mind.

"This works... I'll play with you, Slugger!.."

The right arm soars.

Covered in red makeup on white, the first ball is released.

The batter figures out the ball type based on the pitcher's 'form'.

The opposite is also true. The pitcher reads the batter's mind and sends the ball to the spot hardest to hit, on a course deviating from the guess. Both of them, seeing each other in a mirror, were already forced to begin an unconventional battle at that point.

Their figures switched 'right' and 'left' The opponent was behind a corner. Who's it harder for? You could say for the pitcher.

Determining the strike zone is overly hard, and anyway - will it even reach the middle? Depending only on the visage in the mirror, to turn the ball at the corner and then to get through the strike zone.

In normal terms that's way too hard. Just successfully rounding the corner and sending the ball towards the batter is already a miracle. But the pitcher is Sinker. And the first warmup ball was already threatening the batter's breast.

"Hhh!.."

The ball, moving at 130 kph, entering the upper part of the inner corner. The ball appeared, making an arc around the corner, and in miniscule time passed in front of Kirisu's nose.

Not turning away, not moving the bat. You could say the pitcher was just ten meters away. The mirror match gives few chances to the batter.

But.

"Uh huh. Swing the arm like this - just barely a ball..."

Does Sinker realize that it's not that the batter couldn't react to the crazy pitch, but that he didn't feel the need?

The score is one ball.

Seemingly working out the countermeasures to the rule after the first pitch, from the second one onwards Slugger devoted himself to planning a winning combination.

"What was... that..."

Did he let it through on purpose?

Sinker discards the nonsensical thought.

He missed on purpose. To test the physical distance and the batter's abilities. In Sinker's imagination the batter would react and twitch in response to the duel's unfairness.

"Come on. He knows my form?.."

That form was for an 80% output pitch. A preparatory ball to read the batter, referee, the air's humidity. And all that... was figured out by the batter at the form stage, is that it?

The one in the mirror easily shrugged and radically altered his pose. A pose without bending arms, letting the elbows play freely. A batting form openly aiming for the outer angle.

"You little..."

Just on the second ball he's already been challenged. No, he's absorbed in reading each other. This stance. Like a samurai ready to slice. He who brings a ball... Often both pitcher and batter could clearly see the outcome after a few seconds. All the training and



experience result in a simulation of clear difference between the opponents' strength. Not a perfect foreknowledge, but still a very precise prediction of death.

...This was the feeling from the second pitch. A normal pitcher would resign honorably or be left with no choice but to go for the inner angle. A pose that lets even him know that if he falls for the taunt, the ball will be hit. The imagination depicts him losing control, missing and sending it right into the outer angle where in one hit his neck... no, his head is smashed.

"Think too much of yourself..."

Irritation that was silent before. Sinker suppresses the dim nervousness and grabs the second ball.

A corridor with no outside noises. A silent space. A hall that's designed for concentration, cold to him.

No losing control.

He has no reason to be bound by some 'have to make a right angle turn'.

He left the first ball at one stage.

But the second... No mercy to the batter who read his thoughts.

And besides, this stare is driving him mad.

Eyes seeing straight through him, reading his abilities as a pitcher, seem to see something else at the same time. To say something else.

What: "In (...)".

This stare mixes white noise into Sinker's killing intent. 'Those eyes!..'

That 'stop it'.

The white ball becomes spotty.

Turning his right arm crimson, desiring to shake his target this time around, the demonic ball master raises his foot.

After he let the first ball by, the batter silently accepted this playing field's pros and cons.

'Oh well. Even though the second turn seems to be blocked, still...'

Essentially, he lost the option of reading the ball by the pitcher's form. All you can grasp from it is the ball before it round the corner. After the turn the ball becomes a different kind than the one set by the form.

A feeling close to an invisible pitcher swapping in for the first one during the first change.

The batter starts batting after adjusting for the pitcher's movements and not since the moment the ball starts flying. The movements adjust the moment the pitcher raises his foot. At that point it's time to stop reading the ball type, but in this battle this reading is simply immaterial. All that remains is guessing the ball type from tactics in the pitcher's head. The form can tell you the speed, at most.

So, the time for calculating the ball type from the second trajectory change stage on, starting at the moment of the first stage, shortened from the usual 0.5 seconds to 0.3 seconds.

This is a duck hunt.

Have to change the batting from swinging by read to swinging by eye. And in the compressed time of 0.3 seconds, at that. Can't do the impossible. It's in the category of miracles. Kirisu can't do that.

This means...

'Only way left is to force a course myself'.

If the only thing to go by is gut feeling, then the batter's duty is planning everything so that it's correct.

Kirisu abandons the inner angle and changes his grip to an outer-oriented one. A complete switch to the outer angle. A careful pitcher will throw into the inner, and one feeling his victory will accept the challenge.

Sinker... is the latter after all. From the form not seen for so long the second ball speeds out.

The demonic ball makes a right angle turn and goes for the batter at 140 km/h. Kirisu moves his bat to meet it with no hesitation. The read is correct, and the swing speed is good. But he doesn't hit. Because the ball that slipped and fell into the lower part of the outer angle of the strike zone flew up right before the batter.

'So that's what you're like, second stage... That's some distance when you follow it with your eyes'.

One strike, one ball.

Kirisu touches his forehead with hands holding the bat. Like a breaking gesture. The concentration is too quiet. Still six centimetres off?

"Hey, batter..."

The second ball was his complete victory.

Perhaps they wanted to force the inner angle, and the course was limited somehow, but psychological tricks won't work on Sinker.

Usually the two-stage sinker changes direction at ten and fourteen meters, but the corridor necessitated a right turn at seven meters, and then the only thing left is lighting up the blood at some point of approaching the batter.

Thus, one change is left, and there still are no batters who can react to the second stage at this distance.

The pitch just now demonstrated that.

But still.

"What, baiting the outer angle again?.."

A headache.

The stare from the other side of the mirror is not afraid of Sinker in the least. The batter's eyes see through him, causing an awful headache. Must be the cold. The frost must be causing the migraine.

Curbing his irritation, he reaches for the third ball. The white mist of breath. Disregarding the newly-surfaced pain in his right elbow, Sinker prepares a swing, as though skipping stones on water.

Funny, is that confidence natural? With this light anticipation he sends the demonic ball into the outer angle again.

But this time it's a slider. For a left-handed batter it'll fly from the outer angle to the inner; a hellish pitch that's hard to hit from that stance.

'Let's consider it an outer'.

No point foreseeing the ball form.

Kirisu Yaichiro carefully looks at one thing - the only ability Sinker has left.

With such a corridor there can be no pitch forms. The pitcher will just try to go for some part of the strike zone. Only on this he focuses his intuition and insight.

The form of the ball on that side of the mirror.

A strong, perfectly smooth motion of the entire body. But not up to its former beauty. This movement happening within a second from takeback is recorded to his retinas as tens of frames. and the trajectory of the ball turning the corner is analyzed in real time.

The spin suggests a 'shoot' along the outer corner.

But the pitcher's will-form denies that.

A tense will-bat returning within 0.3 seconds.

The ball touched the bat's top, bounced past the batter and disappeared.

A total correction of six centimetres. A natural effect of a completed swing. And, after a throw a normal person wouldn't manage to react to...

"Odd how it's not clear... Changes from out to in are beyond me at the moment..."

Exhaling so as not to let the body heat escape, Kirisu Yaichiro turned towards the batter again.

In high school he said that a batter burned a hundred of training days in one instant. That is true. This Slugger is putting his entire soul into each ball.

As though mimicking the pitcher's curse: get hit and die. Because he'd been evoking the concentration that burns an entire life in one ball for three years straight like it's normal.

"Touch... ed..."

Sinker saw it through the mirror.

His spine shakes.

It's not the frost torturing his body. He was shaking from fierce, burning delirium.

"Hey you... It's just the third ball, right?"

The corners of his mouth twist upwards.

He laughs. An indescribable irritation and confusion, the stare piercing him from beyond the mirror, and the disgusting nausea attacks. What's this? What's with this guy? Is this cheating allowed? In these conditions - and he hit it? Just the third ball. No, only the second 'two-stage sinker'. And with this alone he already reacted? Does such nonsense happen? How illogical. How genius. Irritatingly unreal, a 'feeling of being hit' at an animal level.

"You..."

Monster. Not even two lifetimes would be enough to meet one!..

"Ha... H-h-ha-a-ah! Ah! Ah!"

The storm of emotions makes him tremble.

His body temperature rises.

The migraine grows by an order of magnitude.

Weird. Hearing a dim noise in this silent world, Sinker reaches for the fourth ball.

The score is two strikes, one ball. An overwhelming advantage for the pitcher. But this ball won't be decisive. It was he that underestimated the opponent. This monster was analyzing the third ball, and the rest of the balls will reveal him to the monster completely.

"H... ha-ah..."

Inhales deeply. At the edge of his vision is a box with twenty balls.

The duel really will be long.

As he concluded before, the elbow wouldn't last for a single match, but whatever.

He can't lose, he must pitch and pitch, whatever happens. The demon said that a duel's tension is his life force. That is true. His body is complaining, but its temperature is slowly rising.

...He grips the fourth ball. The hacking pain from his right elbow is crushing his brain's neurons again.

Storing not a drop of happiness, only suffering, in his right elbow, Sinker turned to the batter reflected in the mirror.

...The duel repeats.

The noise increases, making a path for itself.

Sixth ball. Seventh ball. Eighth ball... Tenth already.

'Chipping' every ball flying on the edge of the outer angle, stands the still unbroken, unshakable number four.

The stare in the mirror keeps asking the same thing.

My breathing is coming closer and closer to normal.

I wipe the sweat with my blood-soaked tight arm.

I notice that my feet have been drenched in blood for a while.

The color red refreshes my confused mind.

...A park at sunset.

...A baseball field under the fiery sky.

...A training ground at winter's end.

...Hanging from the ceiling...

Suddenly I saw a string of images that weren't in my memory.

I think the wrath was always in me.

I could only go on playing baseball that was torture to me only because there wasn't long left.

But the more anger, the less pleasure; and I became afraid that I'll sincerely hate this game.

"Fu..."

I inhale with my whole body.

He, too, puts his entire soul into every ball. Only ten serve, but get a bit distracted, and it seems like many more.

An angry stare into the mirror - it sucks that the opponent is the same!

The batter's breathing became a bit off. The fingers gripping the bat show fatigue. I can do it... This ball will force the bat to make an empty swing. But he didn't die. The batter's eyes haven't changed at all since the very first ball.

The ceaseless stare asks more eloquently than any words.

For what.

For what do you keep pitching?

"...ck off!"

The score is full. The ball's trajectory doesn't forgive mistakes.

With each swing the batter barely touches the demonic ball turning from below to the top of the outer angle.

"You hit it again!.."

A feeling as though the batter is pettily mocking him, flaring up his anger.

Apparently realizing that a clean hit was impossible, the batter satisfies himself with simple touches.

He didn't want to hit from the start. Touching with the bat, accumulating the score with foul-chips, waiting for the pitcher's fatigue to build up and force a miss. This is his strategy.

Seriously, fuck off. The demonic balls were meant to deny such simple hits, and this guy doesn't miss a single one, keeps 'cutting'!..

"I'll kill..."

The flaring murderous intent seems to burn his entire body.

Head hurts. Elbow hurts. Somewhere after the sixth ball the elbow couldn't keep up the regeneration. Therefore, few pitches are left. No, the next pitch might cross the line. Yes. Enough already, just have to end at this. A right-angle turn and a 'shoot' past the batter's outer angle. Chip again. Decidedly. Only two millimeters of error, but he's closer to a clean hit than before. I grit my teeth. If it was a normal battleground instead of this corridor he'd have slipped up long ago...

"No. Just the same. Both he and I are in the same conditions..."

Dangerous to give him more balls. Dangerous to get stuck in the outer angle. So, an inner. If you throw an inner into these games on the outer edge, the outcome is clear. But will it be enough? Logically, his eye isn't used to the inner yet. Can do it. Can't. For an inner hit this batter just bends his arms and turns his hips. Even from the current stance he'll make it.

I know. It's his banal method, after all. The hearts of batters who fix the winning pitch on the inner and disliking the outer are shattered. So I can't. I can't pitch into the inner. Because I feel that he'll return it. Ahh, but... how do I know that?

"Who is he?.."

Irritation clouds my eyes. What a cheap mirror. The batter's face seems to be covered in fog, can't see. When you can't see the face, it's not really possible to channel murderous intent.

But - how long it's been! More than wrath, more than killing intent, my heart is strained by the tension. I want to scream aloud, how much easier that'd be, but I endure, hide it. It's too early to throw up a victorious fist, not until I beat this magnificent batter - hmm. Since when did this feeling fade from my memory?

"Fine. If you want to hit an outer shoot so much..."

The thirteenth, devil's dozen.

Sinker bends his feet even further. Changing his stance from side to low, he feels a dissipated sharp pain.

"Ugh... H-hah."

Again something's lacking. From just one, long familiar, change to the center of mass the entire body seems to crack.

"Ghh... ugh, crap, py."

The tendons and muscles gone haywire cause killing pain.

Let them. To hell with the elbow's issues. Delaying the serve counts as stalling. No big deal, I'll get a breath and start. Show him why "sinker" means "one who sinks others".

As though responding to this readiness, the batter's breathing became faster. The piercing stare intensified. Odd: I can't see his face, so why do I feel his stare?

Seems like he's one of those who responds to killing intent with the same. I hate him so much. The target still displays the intent to hit an outer angle pitch and throws the same question at me.

For what.

For what do you.

Keep up this base-hurt?

...The two eye arrows assure me.

That it ending wasn't my fault.

But it ended. The curtain of that dream was irrevocably lowered. Don't crouch under it, there is nothing on the screen anyway.

"Hhhaaah, grrrr!"

I don't want to hear it.

It was so quiet, why do I hear this annoying sound.

...Once in a cinema the lowered curtain was raised.

A wall with nothing on it. Credits having rolled past. The face of an old friend, disappointed and regretful at the same time, and that was...

"What do you..."

Elbow hurts. As though following it, heat rises. I hear white noise. Memory dashed to pieces, one I didn't really want anyway, returns me to myself.

"...know!"

My left leg rises. I step right towards the batter in the mirror, twisting the right half of my body like a fan.

An instant - and...

I'm enveloped by destructive, neuron-burning pain.



...Phew! - and my consciousness suddenly returns.

I'm walking up a long road on a hill.

A heavily loaded cart. Dragged by a lone woman. A memory of an overly evil summer.

...I had to watch this so many times. The cart will stop halfway, refuse to budge, and no one will help us.

Only the cries of cicadas - a chain connecting us and the world of humans. Just this - we weren't allowed to share anything else with society.

Our poor home didn't have wrath. Only miserable existence, grief, that's all. As a child I just wanted to let my feelings run amok, cry that I don't want it to be that way.

But before that my eyes saw something too sad.

The woman was quietly, voicelessly, crying before me.

A useless son. The worthless I. An unfulfillable desire to not let the eight year old child feel the unhappiness of that life. The powerlessness of a mother capable of nothing. All this oppressed the woman, and she didn't even drop a spiteful word.

Not cursing her misfortune, not lashing out on the difference to the outside world.

Just thinking about why her life became so...

Knowing firsthand that no one will help her, the woman threw away the hope on relying on someone else and, as though seeking salvation, quietly broke alone.

To be honest, I thought - oh well, she did it first. If it so happened that I see her like that, I have no time to cry.

And so. So I will... will.

Why do I keep playing baseball, huh? No need to even say it. I don't think anyone will understand. I won't 'borrow' anyone's help, I won't bother anyone. So leave me alone, okay? I'm so tired of you messing with my life just because I'm weak. So tired of those classifyng others only by their wallet. If I don't reach out, you won't either, right? Great. Broke my elbow - I'll consider that a good lesson. I hold no grudge. No time to obsess over that. If I have time to mope, I'll spend it better healing my elbow...

'Wrong, wrong, wrong! Don't you understand that you can't be a pitcher any longer?'

I'm used to laughs. Righteous work shall be rewarded. I know a friend who dragged himself into the ranks of first-class pitchers that way.

'That's peanuts, his mother actually...'

Fed up. Fed up. Fed up. Why do they care so much about things that don't concern them; why would those lucky enough to be able to put their noses into others' business, be envious of others? Doesn't compute. The hunger of the full. You're way too greedy, and -

'Sempai has no friends, right? So we'll have some fun with him'.

...Like that. Since that day I haven't been home for so long.

Yes, every day I was exhausted, but before the corridor to the entrance I changed my mood. I kept quiet about my elbow being broken. It's hopeless now, but someday I'll definitely make it work. So for now I'll keep quiet. With these thoughts I couldn't make her sad even for a few months, opened the front door and shouted 'hello'.

Over the tea table was an unusual decoration.

Like a spinning wind chime.

In the morning, looking at me waving my arm, the woman -

with an apologetic face - spin - spin - spin.

I close the door. Speak to the neighbour. She's a kindly woman with an unfitting deceptively careless voice.

'Oh, the boys are gone? You have friends over so rarely. All with baseball things! Your clubmates?'

It wasn't because of the underclassmen. Those really just came to have fun. They just laughed over the woman's life, bullied her a bit, helpfully informed her of her son's condition in the end, and that's it.

It's clear as day. She was at the limit as it is. So, tired of life, feeling guilty before her son, she went to rest. As though saying, sorry that even your dream is over.

I think it was in December.

The current I doesn't really understand anything.

It doesn't seem to concern me.

"Khh, hahh..."

In that instant.

The devastating pain burning neurons makes Sinker's will come back.

"Khh, grraaa!"

The causeless wrath let the demon into the right arm.

Forcefully supporting the body cracking from bloodthirst.

Wrath. Wrath. Wrath. Formless wrath. A rage not directed at anyone in particular is his stimulus.

This time the screwball at 140 kph will certainly miss the bat.

In the outer angle, rising upwards, the "sinker" dives. A difference in height incomparable to the previous balls grazing the outer angle.

A quiet sound of a 'chip'.

Indeed with the very edge, but - this batter still touched the ball.

"HEY!.. Stop it, Slugger!"

Wrath and gladness dimming the mind!

The two emotions exploded and flew apart.

Epic. This batter is epic. Certainly a slugger. He's definitely of a different make than the mound of murdered small fries. Irritating. So irritating. Why didn't one like that show up before? Didn't do the kindness? Damn. Damn. Damn. Now it's even more irritating, I want to swear. Agh, really, why... couldn't he appear before I became this shameful pitcher? I don't understand. Whatever. Now there are just wrath and joy. Hostility to the batter who touched my best pitch, and infectious delight at his talent.

On the other hand, I'm already a living corpse. That I didn't manage a strike just now is equal to death.

This further confirms - the victory is his...

"Ready..."

Saw it with my own eyes. With this swing the batter hurt his right elbow. Now it's a dead end. The next demonic ball will be a strike-out. I'll hear the sound of the magnificent Slugger's skull being crushed.

"Hhh, aaah..."

The bloody right arm reaches for the now final ball.

"Eh... huh? Damn, what's with you?"

Can't grab the ball. No, not that can't grab it, rather the box with balls is foggy, can't see it.

One more ball. One more ball will settle this, but why can't I see anything? Ah, the sun is in my eyes. Should've worn a cap. The hood doesn't defend against light. Although I couldn't afford a cap when alive.

"Ughhhhhh... there."

Nearly falling into the box himself, he grabs the ball.

Overexpenditure of blood. A decrease in blood pressure accompanied by loss of sight passes by his attention. Now he can't even breathe without straining his entire body. The various bodily functions are off.

It's a dead end - he understood.

And this is plain truth. His ruined mind already doesn't understand who it was that stepped over the limit.

Headache with white noise mixed in.

The arm's meat torn here and there. Now formless right shoulder... The elbow bone is already cracked and will fall apart with the next pitch.

"I know... But I'll manage."

His body's burning.

A high-pitched sound of a strike on metal wakes the dying consciousness.

Crappy? It's always crappy. He endured his entire life for the dream that had to come true.

But for what now?

Unclear. Losing sight and reason, Sinker began setting up for the last ball.

They were screaming speedballs.

Fifth ball. Sixth ball. Seventh ball.

With each time Sinker's pitches gain sharpness and hurt the pitcher himself at the same time.

'Khh, haah...'

To the pitcher he looked like the unshakable number four.

But Kirisu himself was walking on thin ice.

Turning ten meters away from him, at 140 kph, demonic balls barely grazing the strike zone.

Just reacting to that costs not one, but ten years of life.

Forty per cent of attention are directed towards the outer angle, forty - to the baited inner. The other twenty are to catch the balls dangerous due to loss of control.

This pitcher doesn't use the killer ball until strike-out. This is clear, but wild pitches due to loss of control are inevitable. Once his hand will slip, and a wild one will come.

'Tch... Bullshit in my head.'

Those are about running or not.

If it comes for his head, that'll be death at the spot. Dodging the turning speedball at ten meters' distance won't work. The bat entering the swing doesn't matter, the body won't react to orders to move with enough speed.

This is a batter box on the edge of death.

If it's a strike-out, Sinker'll release the killing ball.

If it's a wild ball - there'll be no dodging and death.

Sinker is walking towards the grave with every pitch, but Kirisu's losing chances with each one as well.

End. End faster, madness.

If I could stop them. If I could end those throws right now.

The hidden fear interferes with deep breathing.

...The entire consciousness must be split between sight and other senses, else those balls are uncatchable.

Hearing is especially close to sight, and for those with a brain these senses complement each other. Data from sight and hearing isn't separate, it comes in together. Spatial awareness, logical thinking are heightened. The brain links the left ear and the

consciousness, and the right hemisphere which governs shapes receives information directly.

Kirisu isn't planning to tire Sinker by chipping his balls. All the swings are aimed to hit. He simply misses. The man who never missed a ball if he could see it is trying and failing to catch the seventh pitch already.

...Even if Sinker is anxious, Kirisu is even more so.

The two who aren't allowed a strike-out nor a hit. Both have never had opponents who couldn't be beaten according to imagination before.

'Uh-huh, this, well...'

Scary. Slugger finally understands how tense the batter box is.

I want to end this. End it within the smallest number of pitches.

The mood of hitting it and getting it over with is gone. Let it be a foul ball. He won't bother chipping a ball or a wild ball. He'll let it pass and leave Ishizue Arika to do his thing.

The eighth ball. A bit sharp. A shoot into the outer angle, the judge would've counted it as a strike. Realizing that, he begins swinging the bat at full speed.

Batting uses the body from ankles to wrists, being the longest consecutive movement for the body. A spiral where the links spin one after another. But the full turn doesn't begin with the initial kick. Every movement contributes to the speed. From foot to hip, from hip to back, from back to shoulders. And every time the speed increases, and the bat, at the end of the spiral, instantly accelerates to 140 km/h.

"Kh, you!.."

He misses the hit. Sees these few centimeters but doesn't make it. This is the limit of human reaction... If it's a dangerous or inner one, the consciousness will split, and if he focuses on only the outer trajectories, he'll be barely on time.

But he can't. The radical change of the stance was to bait the ball into the inner angle to begin with. If it gets there, the touch may be incomplete, but he still has to allow for inner ones.

Batting begins with limiting the pitcher's thinking. Taking a neutral stance will make preparation pointless. The match is lost by slightly increasing the opponent's freedom of choice.

The pitcher is holding the next ball.

No time to think. Concentrating his mind, he assesses the pitch form.

And every time...

'Iguruma...'

...this pitcher's rage reaches him through the mirror.

Why did it end up like this? We just wanted to play baseball. I'm not guilty. It's the society that didn't even let him freely play with the ball. The weakling rose up, you felt insulted and tripped him up for fun when you had a free moment...

This is what the pitcher's right shoulder is screaming.

The form coming apart with each pitch. But the liveliness is rising, and the balls are miraculously becoming sharper.

Among this are, despising the batter as a traitor, forever changed eyes of a child.

'I'll try pitching a side ball. The speed might depend on body size, but screwballs only rely on training...'

...Although there's no time for sentiments.

The irrevocably distorted figure keeps overlaying the old friend's image.

Childhood, when it was all different.

The only thing in common is love for baseball.

No... Even this changed.

They looked in the same direction, but saw such different things.

Kirisu most of all, not noticing this difference, cornered his friend more brutally than anyone else.

The ninth ball.

The ball spreading sparks comes in at a very sharp angle, as though berating Kirisu - 'traitor'.

Sinker's suffering right arm. Anyone can see this is the limit. The man is pitching, suppressing unimaginable pain. Iguruma Kazumi has been doing this for six years straight. This king in the desert never saw happiness in baseball for a moment.

His visage was too bright for Kirisu.

The pitcher screams.

You traitor who left baseball so easily.

You're so talented, yet you didn't give baseball your all, you half-ass.

That's true. Of course, Sinker is mad at Kirisu Yaichiro. But if you ask which is right, even now Kirisu will proudly answer:

'Uh huh. But I did I devote my youth to baseball.

I'm not you, though, I wouldn't trade my life for it.'

That's why he didn't go mad.

He couldn't become an unhealthy hero who would throw his life away for things he loves, anyway.

'You know, lately mom's been smiling. She's happy everyone's praising me...'

The tenth ball.

A fastball, cutter, sent from a form that seemed to breathe fire.

Whose fear of death is greater?

The batter's from an empty swing or death in an instant from a wild ball?

The pitcher's from falling after pitching at the limit of human knowledge?

Kirisu's fear is greater...

The incredible wrath of this pitcher suppresses his fear.

...That which already ended. He doesn't even notice that he's been coughing blood for a while, that he covered the entire hill in blood.

'Ghh...'

An unbearable spectacle. But he isn't allowed to avert his eyes.

What he can do now is bring an end to this.

Quickly, end this game, whatever the result. Ready for that, Kirisu can't deal the blow.

The timing is already matched. This pitcher doesn't like inner angle serves. Now that only one ball is left, he has to tie the pitcher's mind to the outer angle at the moment of the ball's release, and the match is decided, that's clear, but Slugger still keeps up the duel.

...Fear makes you think poorly. And so Kirisu is distracted from his own thoughts, and - the thirteenth ball.

Sinker brought the duel to its conclusion first.



Instead of a side - a low, even more straining. Pathetic, like an injured swan's agonized thrashing, but bewitching and fresh movement of the serve.

If the previous straights were screwballs spitting fire, this one is a sinker scattering lightning.

"Kh, ooh!.."

The entire 900 grams of the bat, heavy as life, rise. The atmosphere is exploded by a chip's sound.

"Dhrhh!.."

The reward is dull pain. He only caught up with the height difference incomparable to previous balls because he already saw that ball several times and took in the experience that resulted in a simple grounder. Too crazy a vertical correction. After barely hitting the ball, Kirisu's right elbow is stung by with an ominous pain.

'Did I pull it?.. Shit...'

Did I tear something inside?

Both batting and pitching are precise work, and small errors easily break the body. This is a race of a ball moving at 140 kph and a swing in 0.3 seconds. Shoulders, elbows, fingertips receive an instant load of hundreds of kilograms.

'Missed. So I touched it, and only one swing is left...'

And the situation with the inner angle is desperate. Judging by the elbow pain, a swing with bent arms is bound to fail. But it's hard to believe he'll hit such an outer angle pitch again.

Therefore - defeat.

The next ball will kill Kirisu Yaichiro.

'Is this the end?.. Come on, this duel won't end like this...'

Slugger turns to the pitcher to end the duel differently... But the pitcher in the mirror was worse off than Kirisu.

Finds the ball by touch.

Without even catching his breath he does the setup.

'Idiot, like that you'll...'

Throw a deadball.

The scales of defeat instantly swung back.

A complete wild ball. Even turning at a right angle after the corner, without a second trick it'll fly right between the batter's legs. And that's a victory. It's clear from the pitcher's condition that the ball can be dodged.

Kirisu just has to jump back and let it past.

The score will be four balls. By the rule of base taking the victory is batter's.

And this ball flying in an ugly trajectory was deliberately hit by the batter.

The ball flies into a wall. An unnecessary foul ball.

Seeing this, he finally realized in amazement. His regret over what didn't happen. Whose dream this match was.

'Hey, Kirisu, you remember how I blurted that nonsense back then?.. If you do, let's forget about it..'

'Aah... right.'

...Even afraid of death, he continued the match - that's what this means.

Thinking about it, how fun it was back then!

A dream of a lost summer. A promise he broke himself.

Thundering all over Shikura, granting the embarrassing title of genius, his one-on-one duel with Iguruma Kazumi.

It happened just now. Of course it's fun. How easily it can be ended. 'I want more!' - he couldn't help thinking.

'But yeah. If I realized this, it's time to end it..'

And at the same time he was sad precisely because this was fun. This fantastic dream that bothered him for so long now has no one to watch it.

From a far - a sound of a hit on metal.

Bamm, bamm. A practically empty construction site. This high metallic sound is far inferior to fans' cries. And then - a naive and thoughtless commentary.

"Baseball is about whether or not the duel was good, right? Victory, loss, I wouldn't..."

...Disgusting. What a cruel excuse.

An egoistical genius' cruel desire.

A sincere dream of one not gifted.

Lived in decline, abandoned baseball and a simpleton even deep down - Kirisu exactly.

Igurumi Kazumi's dream wasn't a foolish one, but a man can be proud of it.

That's the whole story. The one most possessed by baseball was not Sinker, but he himself.

'...I'll be a pitcher who no one but you can hit. And you too become a batter who doesn't miss any balls but mine. And then one day let's...'

This cruel story will be no more.

He realized it all. Those gifted and deprived from the start can't understand each other. Parallel lines don't cross.

But... they saw the same thing. Wanted to reach the same goal. It's just that when they picked their targets, it didn't come to be. At the very outset - when they innocently played ball, for some reason Kirisu Yaichiro couldn't accept that his dream was long fulfilled. Why?

'Uh huh. You probably wanted to be number one with me. But honestly, I was dreaming of more.'

But Kirisu betrayed. Kirisu betrayed earlier. He slipped first. Not in the second year of high school. At the very moment when he pitied his friend's feelings, various chaotic factors shook his bat, made his friend sink. Who knows how much that hurt that friend.

...Maybe he'll make it on time now, at least?

A play with no spectators.

There is something left on the silver screen where the film is not projected.

Grabbing the bat with both hands, he straightens his arms out.

After a breath deep enough to let all the air out of his lungs Slugger returns into the batter box.

Sixteen meters away there is a maniac killer on the mound. However, Kirisu refers to him not like that, but with an old nickname.

"Yo... Sorry it took so long, Sinker."

Nostalgia. The sign of the game's start that hadn't left his lips for ten years.

He isn't worried about the inner angle.

The duel will be decided in one ball. Right into the outer angle - aiming at Iguruma Kazumi's trump card, the sinker, Slugger bets his life on the last batter box.

He woke from the wave of sound assaulting his ears.

His consciousness and eyes are filled with white mist.

Who is he, what is he doing? Why does he pitch? Can't remember.

Like a ghost. That which is called Sinker became a simple machine that rather clumsily reached for the ball.

The duel isn't decided yet.

The batter is in a stance. Clearly, he can't return home without killing this batter, the obsession said, and it alone started his breathing. And then...

"Sorry it took so long, Sinker."

The first thing he heard in the silent world were the words of a friend he was most awed by in childhood.

...He remembered the reason.

High mountains of clouds. Cicadas' chirrs sending chills down the spine. The powerlessly crying woman.

That summer he saw something completely unbearable.

He saw inescapable grief quietly tearing her heart apart.

So he swore he'd become her salvation.

His poverty doesn't matter. His fun doesn't matter. He found something far more important, he understood what had to be done.

"Right, I..."

Endured everything for this.

He kept polishing his unseemly pitching trajectory.

The reason for the wish to become a professional baseball player. Because he loves her. Because he wanted to run from the poverty problems. Because he wanted to look people in the eye... No. That wasn't why he grabbed the baseball. Only because of what he saw that day. Only for the woman whose life was bitter, devoid of meaning.

He wanted to give her pride in being born...

...He finally remembered. This dream isn't Iguruma Kazumi's dream. It's a dream about his mother whose fate he wanted to change.

But his mother is no more.

The sole reason that made him swear to keep pitching.

A child's resolve to protect, even being exiled from Eden.

However...

"Right... this dream is already over."

His life without salvation, the curtains of which fell eight months ago, in December.

His consciousness comes back.

His vision clears itself from the fog.

His ears are assaulted by a metallic sound.

...Having trouble simply breathing, completely exhausted - his own body.

"Well, yeah... Full score."

Hit it mercilessly.

Once, long ago, he was ready to break and spoke to an old acquaintance. Because everything was bad. Just once he tries to escape his oath.

But there were fun times, too.

That's it. He probably didn't abandon it exactly because there were fun things, too. With a boy whose name he can't remember no matter how much he tries, he played until sunset so many times.

Whose memory is this?

"Aah..."

I hear a sound.

It's very bad here.

Like a hot frying pan.

In the water-coloured hell I now stand alone.

...Memories flood in.

I hear ringing metallic noises.

I hear distant, small, echo-like shouts of fans.

So - I have to pitch.

Can I do it?

Of course I can. Winter is over already. The summer is so hot it's hard to breathe. Burning my lungs. The baseball field is foggy... My heart is pounding. This maddening summer returned into my right arm once again.

In the mirror stands a lone batter.

Who is this batter?

Can't remember. But I have to pitch. For someone called Sinker, to fulfill an old promise, I'll pitch a fitting ball.

I wipe the hampering blood on my clothes with my right arm.

The near-broken arm is swaying in the wind.

The best screwball in my life.

And now... In the end he heard a sound signifying the finale.

A white ball is flying.

Not letting it be stained with blood, I throw it to the batter reflected in the mirror.

The wall meant for the demon waits ahead. Any ball will bounce away in a corridor turning at a right angle.

The ball that shouldn't turn. The last shot that shouldn't reach the goal... It's magnificent. Tracing a curve, like a rising swan, the greatest screwball manages the turn.

It won't turn at an angle any more.

And it's not fast enough to get there instantly.

That's precisely why my eyes are so covered in fog.

It's not what torments those possessed by a demon. A demon has its seed and its trick. This is just human genius. Performing miracles far beyond others was the role of gods since ages ago.

So, this ball is not demonic at all.

Only here, on a field without spectators, burns the heat of this summer when the promise is fulfilled.

Two strikes, three balls.

The last ball slides and falls into the outer angle; the batter raises his right foot a little, makes a swing matched to his breathing...

### **X/Present (2004, summer)**

This was how my summer plans reverted to tabula rasa.

They resembled it to begin with, and when the terror of the crossings, serial killer's case came to a close at the last moment, boring commonness returned, as it should be.

The rumors about a maniac killer, Sinker, stayed mere rumors and disappeared. The police isolated Iguruma Kazumi without publicity; and in the end everything was filed as crimes caused by an addiction to a drug that was popular in June.

And so the case of the A disorder carrier's grotesque deeds was revealed and published in a later event.

"Huh, what a great jump. When you do it this perfectly, it's not so refreshing any more, no chills over the skin, don't you think?"

Half-turning, I ask the pair behind my back, who offer no reaction.

August is in its second half, there seems to be no end to the overheated days, we are on the Shikura High №1's sports grounds. When I moved and was unpacking my stuff, I found a key to the back gate and decided that, since I'd have to deliver it back anyway, I'd bring Kirisu and Tsuranui to air them out. It's past noon.

Kirisu didn't even crawl into the tree's shadow and sat down right under the sunny skin-burning microwave, crossing his feet.

Tsuranui is having fun splashing water on the deserted, well-stomped field.

"Hmm... It's so pastoral around here after our graduation, huh. I hope they're not going to close the baseball club next year, right?"

"Eh, who knows. I heard they want to split the team. Well, times change. Looks like baseball isn't as appreciated any longer."

"Aah, it's so scary to live..."

Bleak news that make me want to just drop flat on the ground. But I kinda grew out of that and didn't start rolling around. Such is the life after twenty.

"So, Kirisu, you're really going to move in with me?"

"Hmm? Nah, if it bothers you, I'll look somewhere else. But what, you gonna to be a miser about an empty room? Cheap, too. And convenient if something like that happens again."

'Something like that' is about Sinker.

I seem to have done my job smoothly, but the other side of the deal was unhappy with me saving the client and handing him over to the police, and so my payment was limited to the minimal sum.

Of course, it was still quite a big sum, but Kaie-san did only offer me half, and...

"What? Sinker was shushed by Kirisu-san, correct? And you, Arika, did nooothing at all, so I'll give you nooothing at all. Oh, and here's a special bonus for tabletop baseball. Shouldn't you at least buy a bat for the future? Or else what are you going to do when an unknown killer attacks?"

This was how my demonic employer shamelessly toyed with me. He should stop being a miser with his money. 'I'm rich because I'm a skinflint' is about small fries. His level is completely different, so he could at least give me a spoonful of the sea.

"Why so glum? Don't you forget what happened during the day?"

"The contents of my wallet don't reset, though. I haven't even received the initial payment yet, by the way."

"Don't have money - ask for more work. That pipsqueak did say there's a ton of jobs if you're willing."



"Drop it.. Like hell I'll tangle with possessed again."

Exactly. Yesterday's greatest moral was: don't get involved with exorcism.

...Luckily, Sinker's exorcism happened during the day and wasn't left in my memory. But what happened in the evening... I visited his house, and Iguruma Kazumi's neighbour told me things about his family that are hard to forget. Even the short notes in the notebook aren't too pleasant.

Yes... It's hard seeing things like that. I especially don't want to get involved with people like Iguruma. They must have something wrong in their heads if they merge their life's meaning and way together.

"Pfft... Arika, look. Tsuranui got bored of playing with water, so she's now kicking at the club door, the idiot. I think there are three minutes until she makes a hole in the center."

"Oh, youth! I wish she'd share the secret of her perpetual motion engine, seriously. It's thirty eight degrees, come on! Earthlings can't function at this temperature."

I mutter hopefully under my nose: might she perhaps be Shikura's strongest?

We shut up. I thought he'd giggle.

Contrary to Kirisu's prediction, in about a minute Tsuranui successfully opened the baseball club's door. Apparently she noticed it wasn't locked.

"By the way... It was you that forced that brown-haired guy to pitch in the same trajectory three times, right?"

"Hmm, so you noticed?"

"When it was already over. Normal people don't do it like that. It's obvious, you overmuscled dumbass."

"That's mean of you. I did learn to play tricks, even if it's hard to tell by my looks."

Even more surprising. When a man considers himself a villain, he's a lifelong good soul. The world is just divided into true villains, evil good people and good good people.

"Oh, she's out... daaamn, what a moron. Loves gossip, eh?"

Tsuranui borrowed a ball from the club and started playing ball with the wall. Like a pitcher.

And purposely something like side pitches, come on, don't salt the wound, will you?

For a few minutes we watch the girl.

"Aah, so that's how it is. Pitching can be done by one person", - Kirisu suddenly mutters in a powerless voice.

"Uh huh... What of it?"

"Nah, it's nothing. When I was a little boy, yeah. I already forgot why I offered to play together. Well, yeah. There weren't any other solitary games."

A distracted tone of voice.

At this the dialogue ends, and we observe Tsuranui's adorable pitching forms.

I take my words back. She wasn't pouring salt, she was being a great person.

"There's nothing to do at all."

"Uh huh..."

A somehow familiar summer noon.

Kirisu's sitting with legs crossed, I keep standing, and we watch the mountains of clouds...

"All right, so. Let's play baseball!"

I don't manage an answer to the sudden idea.

Kirisu lazily, theatrically stretches his arms.

"What's wrong, Arika? Why not, don't we have nothing to do? And that moron is impatient, too."

Well, yeah. Like that. That's what they've been leading up to. I smile wryly.

"If it's decided, then let's begin right away. Heeey, we're starting baseball, Tsuranui!" - I shout.

Tsuranui jumps up: finally! - and darts right into the club. Kirisu slowly stands up.

...At this moment I saw his unfitting expression out of a corner of my eye.

With such a face people look into the distance, saying goodbye to a train leaving forever, in short, it's not fitting.

"Let's go, Kirisu."

I'll pretend I didn't notice. As usual, he haughtily nods his old-looking face.

It's great that it's daytime now. This sadness, too, I'll be able to forget by night. And the feeling of happiness that resembles cheering too early, and out-of-place sadness have no meaning to me... And things that should definitely be remembered become memories only for the present.

"Sempaaaai! Faster, today we'll definitely defeat this gorilla! And why are you living at his place, anyway? Spite? It's spite, right, sempai? Hey, I don't like you, if you come to me again, you can fight my brothers, the amount of which is somehow lacking!"

Tsuranui swings the bat and gloves and sends them flying to Kirisu.

At this I stop opening old wounds. The ramblings about water-colored memories are over. Baseball with only three begins - fun, without any pain.

Of course - who entered the batter box doesn't need to be said.

**/ S.VS.S.end**

The game of Sinker vs. Slugger is over.

A distant echo of construction sounds passed over the empty site.

The mirror left in the corridor is shattered.

The batter collapsed, either from the aftermath of a careful swing, or from the highest degree of nervous tension. Just lost consciousness, nothing life-threatening.

The pitcher fell where he stood in the corridor. In his case the consciousness is there, but his life force is being lost at a high speed, and there is no guarantee of survival. To express

it differently, it's not being lost; that which inhabits his right arm is draining his strength. Apparently it tries to give its existence a higher priority than the carrier organism's vital functions. This parasite is a true parent killer, but I accept that - a demon will be a demon.

So. Since my turning to the pitcher's side and waiting for the match to end twenty minutes have passed.

Seems short, yet long, and waiting this time out was accompanied by a dreadful tiredness.

I loudly walk down the corridor. The mirror is broken, I don't see myself in it. That's normal, of course. Constantly seeing yourself is tiring. I'm especially glad now.

"It's you..."

He reacted to the sound of footsteps, lying on the floor. Directed his fading sight into the corridor.

Maybe it's already evening, or maybe the windows were closed. The pass behind him was awfully dark.

"Now, now, don't lose yourself, Iguruma. If you go to sleep, you won't wake up, like in a horror movie. You have to get it together, have to go to the police and gallantly surrender to the law."

He doesn't reply. Doesn't have the strength or a reason to. The completely exhausted body already considers death the easier way.

"This wasn't the deal. If you lose, you surrender. That's the rule."

"Not worth it. I..."

"Definitely worth. I don't want you to just up and disappear, either. Say... well, Arishima Shougo was my buddy, an underclassman. You have to answer for him as best you can."

The darkness moves.

The footsteps come closer.

He dimly looks at the presence of something horrifying nearby.

"And those you avenged yourself on had their stories, too. You don't have to know them, but you should at least be aware that they exist."

Because you're not an eternal child.

The materialized hatred opens its grotesquely misshapen, huge maw.

What is hatred born of?

Here are those two, opposite each other, who knew for a long time.

Waves of emotions seethe in the corridor. It's too far for its splashes.

This is not directed at him, lying in the middle of the corridor. It's that feeling when you're feeling so much you can't describe exactly what it is.

Joy and wrath.

Sadness and anger.

This is the beginning - a small human, undefined, immaterial, sending electric signal incompatible with anything. He watched it dully, with dysfunctional sight.

"Thought so... It must be hard."

"What?.."

The footsteps stop. Shame... Completely, absolutely, one hundred percent incomprehensible muttering.

"What did you think so about?"

"I'm afraid of seeing you."

"Why are you afraid?"

"Because... you're the craziest."

I audibly take offense and throw the prosthetic off. Like someone opened the shutters - the corridor is painted by sun's white rays.

"Well, bon appetit, dogmeat. Don't eat everything, or there'll be trouble. Up to here, your favorite. I'll take it out now, hold on."

Missing left arm. Phantom sensations make a fruit-like tumor appear from his right arm. The black dog smells it loudly and enthusiastically consumes it.

The severing is not when the demon is inside the body, it's after extracting it to the outside. It not an exorcism rite that overwhelms and purges the demonic entity - this one takes it by force, an 'extorcism'. Nothing was solved. My disgusting role.

And this is the first extorcism.

Finally brought to an end, now missing from my memory, the first task.

**/ S.VS.S.cut**





3.

/FOMALHAUT.



disconnection.

isorder

2



Unstoppability is a sign of speed in its own right.

Not comparable to an animal, far beyond them.

Hunters with fundamentally different capabilities can't be measured against yourself.

Most importantly, our only advantage is lost.

Excessive meaninglessness. Endless multiformity. Unstable weak-willedness. We run away, scattering all sorts of disordered thoughts.

Inborn abilities are an insult to willpower?

So let acquired, insane willpower eradicate them.

No point in using time efficiently.

The very thought kills your chances of success.

You will achieve nothing by getting ahead.

You'll just get pushed from behind and fall back down.

The goal was a chicken race.

An unending escape into death's grasp.

Always accelerating, not slacking for an instant.

With all your honed abilities meet the endlessly growing beast, answer a strike with a return blow.

...You're boiling your isothermic blood.

You who mock immortality; burning speed - Fomalhaut.

-----/FOMALHAUT.

1/

A short time previously (November 2004).

Hinomori Shusei, written "autumn's guardian sun shines", is a rebuilt man.

He doesn't have a name yet.

Long ashen hair. Black cape that catches an observer's eye. Mirror-lens sunglasses that hide his eyes. A sharp object in his hand, a beastly facial expression, a grin saying "come any closer and you die". Despite this distinctive appearance he still doesn't have a nickname; anyone could tell he's possessed, but a name has yet to stick.

"What the?.. Why are you still alive?!"

"Mhm..."

Shusei casually hems in response to the scream of a youth, 15 to 20 years old, who's completely coated in blood.

Quite a bit before that, in a bustling business and shopping district, past 9 PM. Hinomori Shusei bumped shoulders with a passerby, agreed to a fight before he knew it, took him to an alley no law-abiding citizen would venture near and, pondering on what to eat for dinner and such in the meantime, has just finished making the boy into Swiss cheese.

"You'd died two years ago!"

"Hmm, mhm."

To Hinomori Shusei the pathetic boy throwing around these bold statements was a perfect stranger.

The guy tries to flee, but as soon as he moves, the pipe in Hinomori Shusei's hand casually pierces his hip.

In martial arts they say "sen no sen"<sup>1</sup>, and this is exactly it. With these skills he could easily be an assistant instructor in a town kendo school in better times.

"No, thinking about it, three years - back then you, off the skyscraper's roof... No, nonono! Actually, four..."

"..."

He wanted to say "Just pick one already". Perhaps he got tired of the youth's overly stereotypical phrases? Hinomori Shusei clicked his tongue in irritation, extracted the pipe from the guy's hip and enviously said:

"Not bad. You keep in character well, dude", - and stabbed it into his left shoulder.

A scream spilled from the boy's lips. It was the center of a populous district. "What, what's happening?" - a crowd of onlookers gathered immediately, but the man threw an "It's nothing" to them over his shoulder. The youth was in Hinomori Shusei's shadow, and the crowd, seeing nothing, made a logical assessment of the suspicious man in a black cape and dispersed.

"Hmm, it's kinda too easy these days. Not like the nineties: scream in town, and a crowd of bodybuilder college students would run over right away. Indifference weakens people, although in some respects it makes 'em stronger, you agree?"

"Y... you..."

"Oh yeah, about why I'm alive. I was waiting for the question, actually! There can't be a lead without a catchphrase, after all! Especially an evil one! All right, you ready? This time I've thought things through and have confidence. ...Yeah. For I am invincible. So long as this hungering blood runs in my veins, I shall be reborn time and again..."

"..."

"Uh, umm, didn't you like it?.. Well, okay, I know it's kinda weak... Mmm, like, it's kinda like transforming after a pointless phrase. I mean, a deal-breaker if you're planning to go into the monstrous killer business. Man, I wish someone gave me a decent name..."

"..."

The boy's eye flashes red.

'Black coat's distracted, can't miss the chance' - and, quite literally painting the entire eyeball red, the youth commands the man before him:

"Look me in the eeeeeeye!"

"Hmm?"

A fiber a tenth of a millimeter thick is woven.

The nerves created and launched by the boy's eye pierce Hinomori Shusei's eyes.

The sunglasses are useless. The unseen thread creeps along the surface like a vine, twists and launches straight towards the eyeball.

"Bound him!.. Now, go!.."

The sight fades in both his eyes. After invading the sight, the nerve maliciously falsifies the image, burns a picture into memory, fixing it over a part of the field of vision.

This is why the possessed boy is nicknamed "Wall-eye". Using his power, he easily performed small robberies. Mostly stealing money from convenience stores. Each time he invaded the nervous system of a person who met his gaze while within 15 centimeters of him and burnt a permanent, indestructible image into 30% of their sight.

He hadn't stolen more than two million yen total, but this hooliganry had cost eight people their sight already.

Wall-eye's victims couldn't bear the horrifying images and gouged their own eyes out, but he burnt them in down to the very brain, and not even blindness got rid of them.

As a result, the victims suffered mental damage, became empty shells, even committed suicide.

Not very inventive, but you can't call it anything but satanic. A visual drug that stays in your head until you die once applied.

However...

"Whoa, what kinda porn is this?! Hey now, you're far too depraved for a teen! Grow up a bit before showing people these snuff scenes! Come on, you're just a kid! Seriously, that's just not right. Oh well, can't look a gift horse in the mouth, guess I'll commit this to memory! I'll keep it in mind, the thing is to not let it into your conscious thought. It's like cable TV!"

"Wha... Whaaaaaat?"

The youth's eyes open wide.

What did he just say? He's paying it no mind? An unrelated image worming its way into his consciousness is nothing to him? This is abnormal. If this man had deflected the "wall-eye" through some possessed ability, that's understandable. But for him to receive it and not care - that's just impossible.

"Hey, are you crazy? You took it, now drop and thrash around! I'm going to be sick just looking at you!"

"Huuuh? Don't be so rude, I'm just bearing it. One link broken, and it'll still be too soon! No, that's wrong... Grin and wear away a stone, right?" 2

"I'm not talking about that, moron! To neutralize poison you need resistance! How can you bear it from the get-go? You aren't immune, and you took a lethal poison - and it's working! So why are you still alive?! You should be dying, what fucking perseverance?!"

"Ohh. You're a good liar. It's like the difference between a walking corpse and a reanimated corpse, then. Mmm?.. It's not? Well, whatever. Anyway, you shouldn't have done that, kid. This stuff should be off-limits until eighteen thousand, not just eighteen!

Take my advice, drop it! If you stoop to this while young, in ten years you'll wind up either dead or a hopeless small-time thug. Ahh, but then, you..."

He bares his set of sharp, predatory teeth in a grin.

The youth felt some indescribable, cold evil spread from the pipe in his shoulder.

"...You're actually not going to live another minute anyway, hmm?"

The boy's loud scream echoes through the alley.

A deafening scream of agony. Before that screams meant fear of pain. Compared to that, the last scream belonged to a creature on the brink of death. Now even the most indifferent passerbys couldn't ignore it. The onlookers turned into concerned citizens and rushed into the alley.

In it lay a human body.

Covered in lacerations, but failing to spill even a drop of blood, as though smoke-dried.

"...What do I care. You're an idiot, after all."

Let's move twenty meters upward, to the roof of an office building.

A woman roughly twenty years old was addressing Hinomori Shusei, who jumped up and was now standing on the wall like a mountain goat, from there.

Wearing a hunting cap reminiscent of a movie detective and large-rimmed glasses. Also a beige raincoat with a high collar, a bit too large for her.

"Mhm. Well, I know I'm an idiot, but hearing it from others stings. Especially when it's so sincere, with slight contempt and great pity!.. Ah, but still, what exactly don't you care about, Maki-chan? The boy or my style?"

"Both. The unlucky child who stumbled into your sight as well as your manner of killing, paying no attention to your surroundings - I'm already used to it. If I were to stop to groan each time you did it, I'd never move from this spot... If you're done, I'm leaving. I'll call you when I find out anything else."

"Counting on you! Oh yeah, where do you live now? How many lairs do you have now, Maki-chan?"

"Three at present. One in the Nozu district, one in a cheap flophouse in Shikura's industrial zone and, to tap the phone line, a room near the police station. And now I can gather up to three faces for my disguises."

"Wow. Mhm, isn't she wandering near Shikura? That one girl, can you look for her?"

"I'll lure her out soon. She only goes for men thirty years of age and older, and I already know her favorite situations. I don't know why, but she's fascinated by the hunt. If I could become a man, it'd be easier, but..."

"Huh. So you can only wear female skins?"

"Currently, yes... But, Shusei. The girl you're looking for looked very strong. When you find her, you might not escape in one piece."

"Hmm... Well, that only confirms things",- Shusei self-derisively curls his lips.

His usual talkativeness hides in shadows, and his true obduracy shows itself.

"Surprising. You believe my conclusions. And to think you were putting me down - not worth killing, smell unattractive, no female charm."

"Those are good things, Maki-chan. It was exactly because you're of no consequence that you could convince me not to kill you. Besides, your lack of womanly charm and your slightly mechanical analytic nature are completely unrelated, no? You have a trained eye. As soon as you met me, you thought "I'm killing this one", right?"

"Well..."

"It's fine, relax, we fought to the death anyway, I don't mind! Still, it's not often that a possessed reacts like that. Usually they either run or fail no notice. Your analysis is always correct, Maki-chan. Thus the one I'm looking for is definitely more capable than I."

"But you're going to find and kill them? Planning a hunt, too? Look out, you might become the prey instead."

"Prey, you say? Well, yeah, this hunt was a hobby, and that is a job. As distant as heaven and earth! By the way, Maki-chan..."

"What? If it's some nonsense again, spare your breath. I don't have as much excess energy as you."

"Now, now, don't sulk like that. What, are you acting out a small girl who hasn't played enough today? You have it good, like, the second player's color, the third's. I don't have anything like that. Isn't that weird? I'm so upbeat and energetic, but I don't even have a cool nickname!"

"You do have a nickname. You've been called Vampire these past two years already, with rumors to suit it."

"Hmm, oh, that... Actually, it's not true... I don't like these simple ones. I'd like them to think before sticking a label on. Laziness leads to senility, dammit."

"You're senile yourself. That said, you really are pretty banal, Shusei. Calling such an odd-looking guy Vampire is somewhat lame."

'See, you get it', - Black Coat droops his shoulders.

Hinomori Shusei.

His achievements include staying free the longest and having the biggest list of deeds of them all.

Frankly, this man is a horrific criminal, but surprisingly, city rumors have yet to agree on a 'name'.

"Perhaps I lack charisma?"

"Well, at least you have plenty of stupidity. Anyway, I have to go. The other residents might start suspecting me."

The glasses-wearing woman sticks her collar up and turns towards the roof exit. Unlike Hinomori Shusei, she's not the kind of monster to scale building walls without any tools.

"Oh, something's been bugging me, too. Hinomori Shusei. This boy screamed that you should be dead; he's the sixth to do that already."

"Yeah. What of it?"

"Nothing. Even children not a day over fifteen have already had the chance to meet you, and the location of the meeting is of no significance. Neither are the date or reason of your death. You seem to not die when killed."

"Exactly. So you don't have any questions, after all?"

"Here's what I'm trying to say. Men, women, children, adults. They are all unrelated, so why are they all saying the same thing?"

There is only the howling of wind.

The Black Cape standing on the rooftop's edge and the woman who's stopped in front of the door. They peer into each other's faces over a distance of ten meters.

"Well... The information's outdated, to say the least. Yours truly is famous, even though I might not have a name. You've been in Origa and wouldn't know, but here, in this world, I am the "strongest possessed". Those guys probably heard that as well."

"Heh. You, too, seem unaware of what's going on inside the clinic. The strongest possessed? Yeah, great joke there."

The doorknob turns.

The woman in glasses leaves the roof.

Words chase her back:

"Well, a pleasure to work with you today. But be careful, Maki-chan. Not only the government's might is scary! Don't over-rely on your cool mimicry, use your investigative skills. I don't want to think of you as an enemy. Finding and killing you would be a royal pain, after all!"

Vampire's perky, upbeat voice.

Hinomori Shusei.

Nearly two years ago, in February 2003, in the town of Kareno located in the southernmost point of the S prefecture, this A disorder carrier caused an incident and was captured. He's the young man considered by rumors to be Shikura's first possessed, and he's also a large-scale criminal with over 20 murders under his belt.

In 1995 Hinomori Shusei was diagnosed with the A disorder, after which he placed into the Kinui public hospital. Three years of procedures later a decision was made to transfer him into the Origa clinic that's been fitted with appropriate facilities; this is the moment when all his trails disappear.

Since then he's been filed as missing, surfacing in the beginning of 1999 as a suspect in the Kareno station mass suicide case, and was captured by Kareno district's inspector with police assistance in the beginning of 2003.

Being escorted to the Origa clinic, he forcibly deprived an inspector named Tougo Kisara of consciousness, dealt fatal injuries to the driver and his assistant and escaped. After that he disappears again, and his identity can't be confirmed.

However, the likelihood of Hinomori Shusei being in good health is extremely low, as the driver of the other convoy car testifies. He witnessed the incident from about 10 meters behind, but he saw everything quite clearly.

After a sudden stop of the car he heard two sounds, presumably of a gun being fired. Then the door of the convoy car opened, and the suspect, Hinomori Shusei stumbled out, but another shot rang out from within the car, and the suspect swayed and dropped.

As the column stopped on a bridge, the suspect fell into the river and didn't come ashore. Later a search was conducted on the river, but there were no leads that could be ascribed to the suspect. Inspector Tougou, who accompanied the suspect, insisted that Hinomori Shusei was alive and continued the investigation to the suspect's home town in the northern part of the S prefecture, named Shikura, but found nothing.



Half a year later the investigation crew was reassigned. Hinomori Shusei, wanted prefecture-wide, was written off as possibly dead, and although the investigation is ongoing, there are too few people involved, and it's in a dead end.

This master of appearing out nowhere and disappearing back into it, the perhaps alive, perhaps dead killer was spotted in the S prefecture in August 2004.

His good health was confirmed by the traffic accident on the circular road, but Karen's police department limits its aid to some material assistance for the investigation and isn't very helpful.

Meanwhile Shikura's department, spurred on by the mass suicides repeating since October, has formed a team to apprehend Hinomori Shusei, dispatching twelve local policemen and two people from the central office.

The passive investigation elicited some protests from Karen's department, but Shikura's station is not responding to those for the moment.

Ishizue Arika doesn't go on trips, and with reason. Not enough money, and besides, his employer, Karyou Kaie, a natural hikkikomori, doesn't need him to leave Shikura.

Thus, if he's put into the spotlight, you'll get a low-budget house drama. That's one of the reasons why Hinomori Shusei calls him a "salted brother", and for Shusei, who's walked all over the prefecture, Ishizue Arika's lack of movement was inexplicable.

S is a fairly big prefecture.

Its total area is about 5000 square kilometers. It's located in Kanto's east part, on a flat, and is home to about 60 towns, its total population reaching 6 million. Shikura is located in its north and a bit to the east from the center, houses the only international airport in S and is two hours by express train from the capital's center, which is a fairly good location. It's absolutely rural - as you approach the airport you'll only see gardens and fields - but time isn't passing it by. Compared to the capital, it's as follows: below Tokyo's 23rd ward, but above its small suburbs; not amazing, of course, but still.

Anyway, the east is home to nature, an airport located among mountains and fields, and if you move west, towards the capital, you'll see city-like progress. By the way, a famous buddha and shaman lives near the airport, and on holidays up to two million people come to worship him. It's a rare land where this horde of pilgrims may freely pass, as though going through the gates of Hell. On the other hand, there's also a bustling hot springs district, open anytime except for winter holidays, and sometimes even inspector Touma Matou and Ishizue Arika spend a night there while working on some creepy case. And

sometimes Ishizue Arika learns of the mysterious Touma Matou's true nature or intentions, but that's a different tale.

So. To the west of Shikura and even the capital is the western border of the S prefecture.

Eleven o'clock PM. The top of the iron bridge over the river separating S and Tokyo.

On the arc bent like a bow, stretched like a web by the metallic cables, stands Hinomori Shusei, katana in hand. On a cable ten meters away crouches a monster as tall as a human. Limbs grasping the cable, red eyes distrustfully watching the hunter, flowing black hair. "Monster as tall as a human" might be imprecise. It's better to say it was a human that became a monstrous beast. Fourteen meters tall.

They both stand on the thin forty centimeters of metalwork.

The wind is strong, it'd be easy to fall on the rails below, or perhaps even lower, into the wide river.

Billowing black cape and long hair, Hinomori Shusei is covered in cuts. The cape is torn, as though a giant cat played with it. No fatal wounds, but a bit more, three centimeters deeper - and arteries would be torn, leading to death from blood loss.

On the other hand, the beast gripping its foothold is unharmed. And so presently it's studying the hunter, waiting for him to drop his guard, flashes its claws, getting ready to leap.

"Huh, tough luck. It's just as Maki-chan said. Too bad, so sad."

Either bluffing or defiant.

Twisting his mouth into a smile, Hinomori Shusei brandishes his katana.

As though in response, the four-legged beast lunges into the darkness.

Running on the stretched metallic construct, scattering diffused reflections, it attacks the black cape.

In order to, this time...

It howls: to, this time, tear this clumsy prey into shreds without fail.

"Phew!..."

And, standing on a barely visible edge, Shusei endures the attacks of the beast coming from multiple directions.

Evaded where possible. Put an arm or leg in the way where not, saving the vitals. The return attack with the katana came in time, stopping the opponent.

The attacking beast is three-dimensional, and Hinomori Shusei opposed it despite being a mere point.

A side observer would've thought this a hopeless defense. A one-sided game where a breach of guard, a swift end was a matter of time.

But - why has this been going on for five minutes already?

"Ha, aaaaah!"

Finally the beast let out a voice.

Not a howl, a human voice. With a cute girl's shout she leaps from beneath Shusei's legs, aiming for the head.

"Hi there."

Evading the beast's claws by hair's breadth. Casually - no. Specifically by a hair's breadth. On the level of one's finest hour, avoiding death through extreme luck, a maneuver nearing a miracle.

The secret is that Hinomori Shusei, who evades death by a blood-chillingly small margin, has nerves of steel.

"Hmm, you angry? I should've been shredded into bits? Tough luck. Your life not going well or what, why so slow? Such a body, yet your mind can't catch up to it. Where's the sparkle in your eyes, my fairy?"

"H, hhh!"

The beast's attack becomes even fiercer.

One arm won't be strong enough. Gripping the katana with two hands, Hinomori Shusei survives again.

Why is this a one-sided game? It's because Shusei is clowning around. He may pretend, but the beast has the edge in speed, energy and rage. So enough playing with his opponent. He was never planning to compete in prowess to begin with.

In these three seconds time seems to have frozen.

The train passing below shakes the bridge.

Again failing to kill the prey that seems so easy, the infuriated beast-girl jumps fifteen meters away and lands on a support pillar.

"What's with you?.."

Breathing heavily, the beast desperately, sincerely even, composes words. Although it's very hard to put that much will into letters.

"Hmm... Me?.. Well, I dunno..."

Shusei cocked his head to the side, thinking up an answer.

The situation is as follows.

The beginning of October, the situation getting hotter by the minute. The person he's looking for was found - a helpful volunteer informed him, and that very day he put together a trap, drew out the girl and is now fighting her to the death. The goal is death, so there's nothing to explain there. So all that's left is to introduce himself. But, well...

"Hmm. Well, I'm..."

Shusei didn't have an appropriate pretty phrase in his head.

He lost the timing to call himself Hinomori Shusei, and calling himself "just a passing immortal vampire" was not sophisticated enough. "I'm reborn time and again" sounds poetic, and he'd like to go with that, but the girl sees him for the first time. She wouldn't care...

"Well, so... I don't matter, but who are you? I'm told it's polite to introduce yourself first before asking others!"

This was his way of buying time.

"I'm Lawnmower."

Fervently, like a prayer, the girl continued:

"I'm a beast of that species."

She expressed her will to be that way with her words sharp as fangs.

"Holy shit..."

This must have been how the expression "scales fell from one's eyes" came to be.

It was the first and last time Hinomori Shusei felt respect for his chosen possessed opponent.

Seriously, he might've kneeled on the spot.

Indeed, Lawnmower! True, her claws are a tool of dissection and tearing apart. Eerie, like propeller blades turned into knives. Of course, that's why a lawnmower. Vroom - and ground meat scatters in all directions instead of cut grass; somewhat incongruous, but the name fits.

And the self-presentation is superb, too. Sharp. Complete and impactful, expressing a powerful impulse. Now compare to this:

"For I am invincible. So long as this hungering blood runs in my veins, I shall be reborn time and again..."

...To this lameness.

"Waaaaaah! What is this heeeeeell!" - Shusei even started twitching.

Bad. Very bad. Must hide away somewhere this very instant. Any small hole'll do. Time to hit the bullseye with another dart. His own, of course. To lay low and become a yellow tape-covered, gone and forgotten street tale. For Hinomori Shusei, who skillfully played a murderous maniac, this was a strong enough blow that such an all-consuming feeling of shame was a given.

"Damn... What's this feeling, what is it, mmm... Envy?"

Suddenly he breaks into a run.

No, into a flight, like a bullet.

"?!"

The girl's following leap was decisive and precise.

The previously clumsy prey bared its fangs. And, again, with a different kind of speed. The instant feeling of danger and attempt to dodge were only due to the girl's two-year hunting experience.

But she doesn't make it in time. Well, she did, but for a fraction of a second the prey was faster.

Two shadows cross in the dark.

The girl swings her claws, but the approach of the black cape is a bit faster.

There is a strange discomfort in the girl's mind. She opposed such speed many times already. But now she was too slow. Something is wrong. The speed of the prey seemed to differ in the principle of the beginning of motion.

Still not understanding the true reason, the girl swipes her claws at the prey that's moved into point blank range. And again the katana rises after a hair's-breadth dodge. And now Vampire is swinging down from his shoulder.

He's close enough to bite her neck.

However, biting is the prerogative of beasts. At the moment when, faster than the bite of the one called Vampire, her fangs were nearly in his throat...

"Aaaah?!"

An unfinished kick by Black Cape's leg throws her body upwards.

Knee bent, a twisted, rocket-like kick.

The girl flies far away from the metallic bridge and helplessly falls into the river. Black Cape watches, keeping the same kicking pose, as he...

"Oh... Crap, I can't recover either."

...must have swung his leg a bit too far.

Losing his balance, he falls into the dark river.

"...Have it your way. You're the fool who's seriously decided to oppose the entire world, after all."

Quite some distance from the metallic bridge, on the river's shore.

The woman Hinomori Shusei called Maki-chan said, addressing him as he calmly crawled out of the river. But the impression she gave off was startlingly different. Red highlight, pierced ears, black leather pants and jacket. Her bearing also changed somehow, and she resembled a teenage boy more than a woman.

"Have a towel. I3 figured it'd end like this."

Wet as a dog, Black Cape wipes his soaked hair with the towel given to him.

"The girl ran away to the other side, by thw way. Are you following her?"

"No, I'll leave Tsukiri-chan alone. I thought I guessed right at the beginning, but it turns out she was nuts even before."

"I see. All that effort for nothing..."

"Well, no, one less suspect is still progress. And besides, now I'm out of ideas, so now I can return to the main business."

"I'm talking about myself. I work, look, and you spoil the goods with a stupid kick. Don't do that. You know, I look at her and just feel angry... or not, but still, it feels like deep down she was mocking me... Well, whatever. Shusei, her name is not Tsukiri."

"What? Really? But it's written as "moon" twice and "league", right?"

"Yes, and read Tomori. And her last name is, by the same logic, read as Takanashi, even though it's small-bird-plays, I believe. Mountains where a small bird can play since there are no eagles. And here is a league of such flat land that you can see the moon because there are no mountains, like that."

"Hmm. That's just weird." - Black Cape nods. - "No wonder I couldn't find her. Well, whatever, thanks for the info. Still, it's a shame. Now I have nothing to ask you for, Maki-chan. What will you do next? Stay in Shikura? You're one of the few possessed capable of escaping the prefecture, don't you want to appreciate other countries?"

"Not really. Wherever I am, they won't find me, so I might as well stay."

"Huh. Fancy someone from Shikura?"

"Sh... Shut up, why would you care!.. What about you? You're sitting here, too."

"Well, it's like this. I just feel that Shikura is the place. The search for Tsukiri-chan was an aside, and I have bigger concerns, like I said. And this is the perfect place! And I found a friend - as good a reason as any, right? He might be salted, but when I say a word, he hears ten, and even pretends he didn't hear five of those so as not to make it awkward, what a guy. And reliable, no-nonsense... oh yeah, I'll ask him about my name! They say rightly, friends are the stuff! So Shikura's peace may rest easy with me here, Maki-chan!"

Black Cape loudly claps the woman on her back, attracting puzzled stares from the passerbys on the dam.

Correction. No matter how you look at it, those two are crazy rocker buddies, incredibly annoying and shady, but not enough to make the townspeople call the police.

"That's a scary thought... How depraved would a person have to be to become your friend. Are they human? To be near you and not feel down... are they right in the head?"

"Heh. You see, Maki-chan, there are such curious people in the world, you couldn't even imagine. Well, I'll be off. I'll contact you if I need anything!"

Leaving the woman, Hinomori Shusei crosses a dry riverbed.

And then, in the beginning of October, an unremarkable affair between possessed that they didn't know about happened.

And so, linked by an elusive thread in a place unknown to both, the two unmotivated killers - Yamanashi Tomori and Hinomori Shusei - met and parted ways.

Two months later, on the 31st of December at 16 o'clock, Yamanashi Tomori will be formally hunted by Touma Matou, but the end of this thread is unrelated to Hinomori Shusei.

"...Still, that was tough. If we met on even ground, I could have done nothing. She'd just overpower me and cut me into ribbons, no two ways about it. Looks like a pure, proper possessed is full of talents."

On his way back.

After parting with Maki-chan, Hinomori Shusei walked the road back in sad solitude.

Deep night, on a highway. Once every few minutes a car passes by, but generally it's quiet and devoid of people, as befits the late hour.

"So. Where do I spend the night? It's not the season to sleep under the stars any more..."

Holding the long cloth bundle with the sword, he massages his shoulders with the free hand.

Relaxedly thinking out loud, Black Cape trots on through the night. It's understandable. A martial artist would say that after a significant duel he finally released the accumulated stress.

It's a small breather both humans and possessed need. The preparation for the next battle, the new encounter needs some proper sleep.

In this necessary time, at the moment when anyone would drop the heavy burden after returning to where death isn't breathing down your neck, it arrived.

"Mmm, as usual, break into a house? For some reason no one ever finds me in the sitting room... No, sometimes I do have to chat with an early bird of a housewife, oh..."

A merciless strike from exactly behind him. The body of the man reminiscing about "extreme" wake-up calls flies stylishly.

A sudden traffic accident.

Maybe the driver lost control, maybe something else, but a car crashed into him at over 60 kilometers per hour. Swept under the knees by the car's front, hitting the windshield on the same impulse, rolling over the roof, he falls on the ground. Spin, another, plop. With all the tragedy of a garbage bag being tossed out.



Like debris, Black Cape curls up motionlessly on the roadside. Instant death, of course. However powers you might have, you can't argue with a random bumper to the back. And besides...

"Hinomori!"

If this was a premeditated crime, that was the finisher.

The door of the car opens. The driver appears, but they don't run to the victim and instead unsheath a pistol - an automatic S&W - and empty a clip into Black Cape.

A control shot.

Black Cape doesn't run and takes the shots directly. Of course. It was doubtful whether he was alive in the first place.

The driver quickly closes the door, floors the gas and leaves the site.

It all happened within a minute. A convenience store worker who happened to notice the crime while spicing up - although we're talking about cup oden here, so he was just emptying the packs - his food abandoned his cooking and immediately called the police.

Ten minutes later.

When the patrol arrived, it only found the shells discarded by the gun and blood that presumably belonged to the victim whose existence the cashier insisted on.

1 sen no sen: blocking and counterattacking simultaneously.

2 Shusei jumbles together the sayings "one link broken, the whole chain is broken" and "if we never see you again, it'll still be too soon". Then, "grin and bear it" and "constant dropping will wear away a stone".

3 Maki-chan uses male pronouns in this scene.

## 2/ R.HF (Intermission: Ishizue Arika)

"Arikaaaa-kuuun! Let's have fun!"

"..."

One night in the very beginning of December, Shusei-san showed up uninvited, as usual.

"Anyway, I'm coming in!"

Not using the door. Rather, through the window.

The window of my room on the fourth floor of a municipal dormitory, located a dozen meters from the ground, of course. No balconies. No other ledges to scale. Still, somehow he casually got in through the window. The very first time was accompanied by him breaking the anti-suicide window grate. This is no longer unlawful entry. It's an act of terrorism.

"Man, it sure got cold. Oh, the window? Might as well keep it open for ventilation and stuff. Or should I close it?"

"Close it from the outside. And go back to wherever you came from."

"Oh come ooon. I have presents, and you're still so unhappy to see me. I'm so overworked these days, let me relax a bit..."

Black Cape says that as he dives on the sofa and wails. Not even overexcited kids on a school trip do that, but this guy doesn't care.

"Shusei-san, you don't work to begin with. You just have fun all day. That's not the least bit like overwork... Presents, you say?"

"Mhm, you probably tried them already. Well, it's like a pipe you stared at while sucking on your thumb as a kid... Or a ten-year-old autographed CD of a singer... Or a guitar with swords drawn on it that you grabbed on eBay as a memento of your ending youth, not that it plays very well... Some useless and sad thing like that..."

Yeah. He's clearly half asleep now.

"So probably not food, then. Something useless and unfashionable... oh, a map of Torino-nori, perhaps?"

"Correct. Not that I'm very informed, but anyway, those are not being printed any more. I had a girl I know look for it, begged her... Well, she seemed like an enthusiast herself. I said, like, I want a map, around 1980, and she just goes "Oh, I have one right right here". Maybe she's a collector. Anyway, here you go, Arika-sempai. It's just a copy though, no street cred for you."

I take the copy.

An A5 sheet, which is curious in itself. I look it over - indeed, most of the map differs from the new one.

"That's one hell of a house... And there seem to be other buildings around it. How did those wild fields and forests end up there?"

"You talking about the forest around Shikura hill? Well yeah, there were some well-bred folks living there... And there seem to have been houses for servants and relations around. But they were weird. You had to have a name with birds, fish and other animal kanji in it, or they wouldn't employ you. Misanthropes, maybe?"

Shusei-san roars with laughter.

By the way, the copied map doesn't have those details.

Only the scale of the Karyou mansion corresponds to the map I saw somewhere before.

That said, there it was just marked as private land, but this map is many times more detailed, with the main mansion and outbuildings marked.

The cellar where Karyou Kaie now resides wasn't a part of the mansion, it seems more like a storehouse.

The map doesn't reveal anything else. If I want to learn about the old Karyou mansion, I'll have to look for people who remember those times.

This seems to be all. I'm just curious what his house looked like. No need to seriously investigate. For now, at least.

"So? How's it going lately? I hear Nozu smells like trouble?"

A question by the man with the worst smell of trouble in the S prefecture, casually changing the topic to Shikura.

Hinomori Shusei. The suspicious guy I came to know in August turned out to be a maniac killer working in a large area, but I only found out in the beginning of October.

Oh, the police booth has a musician poster on it! Either it's a show of will to resist the law or a "we're law friendly" statement - brave either way! Upon a closer look it turned out to be a wanted poster, though.

...Anyway, we talked like this before that, and I'm a bit uncomfortable telling him killers shouldn't roam free. After the November underground incident I learned his reason for killing, but I couldn't just ignore him and chase him out, which leads us to the present moment.

"The Nozu industrial district is growing more closed. The inhabitants of our dorm are often lynched right on the streets, it's scary to go outside. Well, you know, it's fine to never leave. A truck brings food, we commute via a special bus. And there's a patrol car stationed near the entrance. I only caught a glimpse, but it's definitely an inspector."

"Not very nice. The Nozu industrial zone is on top of a hill. There's only one state highway. And they're closing it now? ...Heh. That's almost quarantine", - Shusei-san bitterly smiles, laying on the sofa.

...The weirdness in the Nozu industrial district began towards the end of September.

Some empty rumors that only possessed lived here started circulating, the locals started feeling uncomfortable before I knew it, and towards December - that is, now - everyone thought the rumors to be true.

The rumor that spread through the district before - that a building's inhabitants all had the same faces - kept growing until it graduated into a scary story about the entire district.

"I think the place has always been full of scary stories, though. It's just, for some reason this time it became a serious problem..."

"Because the sparks of the rumor reached our neighbours, of course. Previously the scares began and ended within the district. The rumours didn't leak, and everyone just ignored them."

"Ooh... I see. You're a smart one, Arika-sempai."

Shusei-san performs an agile half-roll. Like a panther, or something.

"Hmm, by the way, how's Kirisu-kun?"

At this, seemingly remembering Kirisu a bit too late, this panther jumped up and peeked into the other room.

"Not here. Says he's visiting some woman. He's got no money, so he might even bring back a check."

"That so. Well, that kind of dinner can't be bought with money anyway... Hmm. Still, a random woman - not good. Is Kirisu-kun a womanizer?"

"Not quite, I think. He takes entertainment seriously. Well, I do admit he's amorous. I think he just unconditionally falls in love with every cutie he sees."

"Oho. A true man."

"You think? Well, if you look at it from a different angle, he doesn't get with serious girls. His romantism isn't a focused laser, it's more like a multilaser. He likes them all, but just can't find her, the one and only, something like that."

That said, should he meet a girl he'll seriously fall in love with, I'll support them wholeheartedly and help out as an old friend. This kind of guy sheds old skin when he changes class to husband. Because inside he's packed with the sense of responsibility.

"Uh huh. What about you, man? Got a girl?"

"I'm not sure. Kinda yeah, but kinda no. I can elaborate, if you don't mind some sappy gushing. Interested?"

"Hmm, I am curious, but I'll pass. I might just turn green from your stories, if you get my meaning... No, normally gloomy types grinning and running their mouth is not something that happens! What is this happy end aura anyway?! As though you scored the goal long ago! Damn, don't tease me with your red string stories!"

Black Cape flails his arms and legs on my bed.

He looks irritated but also happy - looks like he's having fun.

"Fine, fine, and take away the trash you scattered when you leave. What about you, Shusei-san? Idiot or no, you might pass for a cool dude when you keep your mouth shut."

"Hmm..."

Like an unwinding spring, the hinomorilimb flailing mechanism stops.

Shusei-san straightens his crooked back:

"I don't care for 3D women", - he proclaimed, and immediately: "And women in general!"

With this exclamation he turned to the wall.

"Well..."

"Hold on. Why did you just roll away into a corner on your chair?"

"To avoid infection. Why did you come anyway?"

I stare at him. Shusei-san coughed, put a serious expression on his face and switched modes from sprawling on the bed to sitting on it cross-legged.

"Well... Actually, I wanted your advice."

Looks like he's telling the truth.

I'll digress a bit: his statement about not being interested in women has a different meaning. I'm a bit jealous. He just thinks about a certain woman so much he doesn't recognize others as the opposite sex.

So.

That day Hinomori Shusei came for my advice on a silly, as usual, matter.

"Oh, so you want a nickname?"

"Well yeah, yeah. Maybe you can think of one, Arika-sempai? Something cool."

The pervert stared at me with eyes full of hopes and expectations.

As Shusei-san explained, he'd always wanted a catchphrase, and a possessed he met recently said some cool words, so now he wanted a neat name even more.

"..."

How do I put this... I lamented Fortune's prank my life had become, but that evening the lament turned into practical experience... It's midnight, after all. In what kind of world is this a time for a phantom to visit an ordinary man and demand a presentation?

But since it's come to this, and I have time to curse my misfortune, the best thing to do with that time would be to think up a name and send him on his way. I brightened up.

"You have Vampire and Invincible already. That's enough."

"But they sound laaaame. I don't want to be a cliché, I'd rather have something more specific. Some pseudonym."

Pseudonym... A made-up name. Hmm.

"Mhm. What about Zofu Tsukumu - Gut-Ripper? Sounds badass."

"Ghah?! Well, that's more badass than I expected, so bold!.. But my friend, let's reverse the direction a bit!"

"Reverse it how?.."

No ideas of his own, but always full of criticism.

...That said, seems like he doesn't want it to sound like a human name?

So it has to be symbolic, expressive of Hinomori Shusei's distinctive traits.

"Shusei-san's traits, huh... I mean, inside or outside, you're just a phantom in a black cape... Oh. By the way, it's been bugging me for a while now. Shusei-san, how come you don't die?"

The self-proclaimed immortal vampire.

That's what they say... well, that's what he says, and yes, it's his quirk. Even battered like crazy, the next day he shows up alive and well. Invincible might be too much, but he is oddly tough.

"No, actually I'll die just like everyone. Pierce the heart or chop off the head, and it's bye-bye... Ooh, that's how it is. Well, yeah, not dying when killed is different from unkillable even if put to death. Uh huh. You're the only one I'll tell, man. I just try to not die no matter what, that's it."

"What?"

I'm even more confused. It sounds like your usual spiritism, but in his case it becomes a reality.

Pushed from behind in the underground before a speeding train, scattered into mincemeat all over the station; the next day his "hiii" and face in my window nearly gave me a heart attack.

"Come ooon. I'm not invincible, I'm undying. I don't need invincibility to be immortal! Whatever happens, I won't die - that's immortality, isn't it?"

"Come ooon, I'm asking you to elaborate from that point on. I mean, true enough, Shusei-san. While you're not dead, you're immortal. But after falling under a car or falling from a roof a man becomes mincemeat. You can't deny that, right?"

Uh huh, the killer nods. This guy is possessed, but actually not that seriously. In Origa he'd be assigned to building B or C. His wounds bleed. If all of his blood drains away, he'll die. How does he claim immortality with such a normal body?

"It's actually not that hard. Animals have a hard time dying, after all. So it's about speed, Arika-kun. For example..."

And here, as usual, Hinomori Shusei explained his personal theory of immortality.

This ability to survive however dire the situation.

This lifestyle of the one who boasts of immortality, the fastest possessed in the world.

"That's how it is. Anyone can do that, right?"

"..."

Of course not. Hinomori Shusei's lifestyle was literally a brain-searing death run. He spoke in a way that made me want to call him a workaholic, but the word is too bland for him.

No, the problem doesn't lie in the bodily sphere, it's in the aspects related to it. How does one reach such a method? On what basis can this formalization be considered consistently usable?.. The attempts to make my consciousness work in this fashion make me uncomfortable, and I want to forget it all.

"Anyway, it's about isothermic blood... Mhm, isotherm plus Shusei equals..."

A match made in Heaven comes up. In a certain creation myth the god of fire was imprisoned in a spirit prison with the help of a certain incandescent unmoving star, if I remember this right.

"Listen. You know this story?"

I should really leave it be, but the words just started flowing.

And in a few minutes an extremely happy Hinomori Shusei shook my hand - that's just it!

"Perfect. Oh yeah, this is super, Arika-sempai! It's fine, I'll add the final touch myself! No, really, this name will win for me! At least it'll beat Tsukiri-chan!"

"You sure? This manner is a bit old-fashioned."

"That's the idea. Your pose is something that should be slightly embarrassing!"

"Well, see you" - with those words Hinomori Shusei happily left through the window.

Closing it, I looked outside, but the black-caped figure was nowhere to be found. When all's said and done, he's still a phantom leaping across rooftops.

Still...

"I don't even know. In my personal opinion, Vampire suits him better..."

Well. Whether the nickname we thought up this night will spread depends on his further actions, but honestly, in any turn of events his actions are just murders. I don't condone them, I try to ignore it, but in my helpless position I can only pray for this madness to end as soon as possible.



### **3/ Present time (2004,the end of December)**

In Shikura town's police department Touma Mato was treated very delicately.

Not because she's that delicate, rather, because she tends to explode if approached incorrectly. So fragile, so ready to trample everything around at the drop of a hat... she is delicate after all.

The HQ gave her the post of Assistant Inspector, but the forcedness of the assignment was clear as day. Originally from the second department (social order)... experience with work conflicts and ultra-left demonstrations... that's all her, but Imai Atsushi from the first department (investigations) of Shikura's police station was suspicious of even such a resume.

Clearly a careerist. Touma Mato isn't even thirty. Getting to Assistant Inspector in this time is only possible through pure careerism. Normally it goes like this: being on duty in a local district as training, then, after about a year of study, getting assigned to the same department as a patrolman. In a year or two the graduate goes through sergeant exams and, if he manages to win over several hundred people in the competition, becomes a police sergeant. Usually by this time they're about thirty. Assistant Inspector is an even higher rank, but careerists tend to have it upon entering the office for the first time.

As such, Assistant Inspector Touma Mato is an elite, of course, but even if you assume that she really distinguished herself in her last workplace, her true nature becomes even less clear. She's not just a careerist. You don't get privileges like those without someone powerful backing you.

And her description by the head of Shikura's police department began and ended with the following: 'If you enter Assistant Inspector Touma's eyesight, just surrender'.

"Just who is she?.."

Having walked a policeman's path since college at a friend's suggestion, becoming an officer of the first department at twenty-nine before he knew it, Imai saw Touma Mato not quite as a heavenly being, more like a valkyrie... or a monster... or maybe even higher than that. - "Investigator Imai. Do you mind bringing me November's roadkill cases?"

Imai Atsushi still hadn't comprehended his miserable fate of being subordinate to this woman as the reality it was.

Touma Mato has four colleagues she brought along (brought along!), who spend day and night locked up in their suspicious investigation headquarters.

Her four 'servants' smell just like riot troops from the second or even inspectors from the fourth - tough, aggressive. Actually, they cheerily eat lunch and chat with the guys from the fourth.

Touma Mato deemed them insufficient and incorporated Imai Atsushi, who was just passing by, into her team for some reason.

He was literally sold off. No warning or 'with your shield or on it' farewell from the chief. He only found out when Touma Mato stopped him with the words 'Hey, guy. I'll trust you with driving the car. I'm not too used to 'crowns', see'.

"Well, I suppose the rifling patterns are similar enough. Just an extra for the investigative conclusion, we have enough evidence as is. Imai-kun, I need the records of the usage of the gun belonging to Tougo Kisara, contact the Kareno department."

"Got it. But I think the answer won't arrive today. It's this kind of day."

"Fine, I guess. This is just to leave a record of the request anyway. Actually, the answer being late is better for us."

Assistant Inspector Touma Mato was responsible for several investigation teams.

One is a team for investigations related to the A disorder, known as the "Burial Agency", which she was the head of. The name was sarcastic, of course. The majority of their "clients" arrived to the clinic already cold, and so it stuck.

In the other, more presentable, teams she works as a rank-and-file member. No one knows how she finds out, but at the slightest scent of A disorder carriers she sprints right off. It pisses the detectives off. Even department heads lose hope and throw small objects at walls. Stress and antipathy abound.

And thus, Imai Atsushi postulates, he was chosen as the bridge - grease, rather - between the suspicious former social order inspector and the respectable inspectors of Shikura's department.

Basically, when Touma Mato throws around police resources, his role is to run around getting the materiel and orders for her.

"Miss Touma, may I?.. You're presently acting as the Assistant Inspector on the case of Yamanashi Tomori's disappearance, right? But you're supposed to investigate the hit-and-run case of two months ago, right?"

"Well, yeah. I want to concentrate on the main case too. But your bosses throw bonus tasks at me. The kidnapping in Nozu, have you heard? They said, like, surely it's your territory, give us two people at least. And now everyone's got themselves a headache!"

"Uh huh... So what next?"

"We have to close the case quickly. Oh, when you speak to Kareno's department, don't forget to ask for senior patrolman Tougo Kisara's whereabouts if they have those... Oh, whoops. Former senior patrolman."

Getting up, Touma Mato busily left the first department. 'Quickly closing the case' is one of her sayings you don't want to hear. When she says 'close the case', Touma Mato stops being a police officer. She becomes a soldier. A state Ishizue Arika calls "assault Tomato" and runs like hell.

"Ohh, I wish I could just disappear..."

He's certain that tomorrow he'll have to see, and document, a gut-wrenching crime scene.

Left behind, rubbing his drawn-in belly, Imai Atsushi regardless realized that these workdays were more fun than those before.

Looking up, he saw that the landscape behind the window became snowy.

Thirty-first of December, 9 AM.

The snow that's been falling since early morning repainted the entire town a monotonous white.

"Yes. The Koala-kazaka office building. There're also the Nishiguchi and Hayashi buildings there. She's hiding somewhere in there. Watch them, call if there's any movement. The other matter is urgent, but I'll try to deal with it quickly, wait for me. Oh, and her, the chipper one. Tsuranui-san? Bring her along. She'll be a great talisman for today's patient. Okay, counting on you. It'll be awkward if you die on me on the last day of the year, after all. At the end of the night I allow you to congratulate me with New Year's - don't lose your chance, no messing about."

Touma Mato ended the call and stared through the binoculars again. Hazy in the falling snow, a three-story entertainment center was towering in their vision.

December 31st, afternoon.

She's fifty meters away from the three-story building she's observing. Touma Mato with two subordinates was watching a kidnapper across a six-lane road.

"Chief. The search warrant for Tougou Kisara's house has been given. Do I contact the investigator in charge?"

"Right now? Forget it. If they say this isn't necessary, it'll be too late to stop, and anyway it's better if they don't show up here now. The patient will notice more people than just us. And we'll have a full siege on our hands! If there's an investigation team made for every one criminal, it'll be next year before we can nab any. And anyway, it's two hours from Karenos to here. We three'll lose any tension while we're waiting for them to get here."

"So we do nothing?"

"Sounds arrogant, but we can handle this. I won't brag, but it is our bread and butter. Well, yeah, it's not our territory, but still, the victims might really turn out to be possessed. My hands are itching."

Touma Mato with her subordinates has chased down a kidnapping suspect. No, observed is closer to the truth. There still hadn't been an arrest order, after all. It should be issued today at exact noon, but the situation doesn't allow waiting for the paper - the suspect has captured residents of the Nozu district and dragged them to the defunct amusement park.

"Still... This one picked a weird place as well. An underground parking lot on floor minus one, a bookstore on floor one, a game center on floors two and three; all the floors are open through. Thus, you can see what's going on in the store from the third floor. The floor structure is a staircase. Like mountain plantations."

This amusement park is next to a state highway, no living districts can be seen around.

In a branch off the six-lane road, where only cars pass, big shopping centers are lined up. But half of those is closed right now. Only small shops are open, and the personnel of the places appropriate for this scale is on holiday break since yesterday.

Considering the proximity to a highway, the buildings are thirty to fifty, up to two hundred sometimes, meters apart. Times wider than the buildings spread the parking lots; a quirk of the C prefecture's western planning.

And, in the center of an empty flat circle fifty meters wide, the amusement park building stands, also serving as the criminal's hideout.

The parking lot on its territory holds a few cars covered in snow. Upon inquiry the owner answered that the open sedan, van and six more cars belonged to him. His friends are allowed to park there too, so even on an empty day there would be a few cars standing there.

The car of the criminal hiding in the building is in the underground lot, so capturing it is trivial, but as soon as they move down they'll have any amount of wheels. The cars outside are likely just bait, and the ones underground would be their real bet. However, heavens are on our side today. The snowfall will complicate driving, and the exit of the underground parking lot is growing more and more blanketed in snow.

"I think it's time. They're alone. One stun grenade, and they're suppressed."

"Chief, query confirmed. Nozu's inspector really was senior patrolman Tougou Kisara. She often falsified inspections of Nozu's industrial district in order to provide a cover story, there are witnesses of her heated interrogations of several locals. She put the citizens she captured in a car and drove them to the various crime sites."

"Not too shabby, going from once a week to a person a day toward the end of the year. She realized she could use the shop and began gathering a crowd - I wonder why? Well, we'll look into that after the arrest. So", - she continued. - "I believe there are four civilians, what about you?"

"I didn't notice any more than four either."

"Me neither. The working hypothesis is five, including the suspect? You can't be beaten in these things, Touma-san."

"..."

Busy looking through the binoculars, Touma Mato darkened.

As the guys say, she'll get top grades in a wide variety of subjects, but best of all she can... rather, perhaps, her God-given talent is the assessment of a location through binoculars. Touma Mato herself sometimes grumbles that her special skill is boring. Her other skills were built up with a gun in her hand, so they can't be called natural.

"Still, chief, what would Tougou Kisara want with Nozu residents? She's a Kareno inspector. There's no reason for her to show up in Shikura..."

"She's a former inspector. Over October she kept going AWOL and abandoned her duties as senior patrolman. It came back to bite her, and yesterday she was told to consider herself fired at her own request since October. She chased down that vampire, I think, but right before she could nab him her daughter was killed. And now she's a radical anti-protector."

Anti-protectors. A movement that considers A disorder carriers born criminals instead of sick people and doesn't accept sheltering them when it comes to legal punishment. Anti-protector activists try to erase possessed and stubbornly call for violent measures.

"Revenge on A disorder carriers? But that's still unrelated to Nozu citizens."

"It is related. Everyone in Nozu is possessed, remember? Well, I don't know how much Tougou Kisara believes that, but she still kept catching them and putting her gun against the backs of their heads; work and revenge in one package. It's just..."

"Weird, right? She could go on kidnapping and killing them one by one. Why'd she gather four at once, and in such a place?"

"Uh huh, just like hostages. No terrorists claiming responsibility, though. Perhaps it's none of our busi..."

Touma Mato's voice went cold.

Abandoning the binoculars, she immediately started putting on the armored vest.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Touma-sa... whoa! Wh-what's this Black Cape there?! Where is he off to through the foyer?! It's clear that the shop's closed!"

"What, a civilian?! What bad timing... Assistant Inspector, what do you th..."

"Give me the MP5. You wait here. Report anything wrong in full."

Strapping on the armor, Touma Mato puts on clothes on top of it.

Grabbing the suitcase, she immediately headed for the exit.

She, talking about a single stun grenade so recently, said that the Berettas in her pockets would be enough. But now it's different. The very sight of the figure casually walking through the empty amusement park sent chills down her spine. Thus, it'd be too dangerous without this high-class armor. Thus, just a Beretta M-92 wouldn't cover the difference in abilities.

She knows nothing about the nameless caped man's identity. Whether he's just a passerby or the criminal's associate. Right now it's unknown whether he's friend or foe.

It's only clear that the man is an unspeakable criminal. The villainous twist of the mouth as seen through the lens tells Touma Mato's sixth sense that his victim count is in the tens.

"Damn, the safe tactic is out after all!.."

The room taken for reconnaissance is too far from the target location.

There's no time to leave the building and take a detour on the walkway. Three lanes each way, six total, will have to be crossed directly.

Right now we're on the sixth floor. Three minutes to leave, a minute to go around the building, a minute to reach the amusement park, no, another minute if you factor in the snow - there's desperately little time.

Blood for blood.

Revenge for revenge.

This is Hinomori Shusei's creed. And a normal human emotion in general. This is how the chains of hatred are forged.

Hinomori Shusei is not angry over the hit-and-run and the control shots. It's just that if such interruptions continue, there'll be a delay in his work, and that is best avoided. For this extremely robot-like reason, he came to the amusement park.

"Wow, good job, Maki-chan. Always finds out everything about Shikura's possessed before everyone else."

A giant tombstone being covered in snow.

Fifty meters wide, fifteen tall, made of concrete, three stories. In a dark corridor, unlit by the electric lights, the black-caped killer drew a long sword.

"Thus, dear ladies and gentlemen, the show begins. As a possessed, I consider it necessary to teach my arrogant fellow a lesson."

A wide swing with the katana. Hinomori Shusei hits the defunct automatic door with a blow aiming to cut it in half... and failing, so he takes a short run-up, smashes into the door with both heels, gets up and becomes a visitor of the amusement park.

The entrance wall is all glass, so the building is still bright. Sadly, the snowfall dulls the sunlight, but it still draws a peaceful picture, industrial decay style.

First floor, the book store. No people in sight. Up the staircase in the middle, to the second floor filled with the large arcade machines of the game center. From the crane with plushies in it to the card games and races supporting up to ten people, he expects a hidden killer in every shadow. No adventures here either. As such, up to the third floor. The staircase is in a corner of the floor, going up in a small arc.

Arriving at the top, Hinomori Shusei whistled.

On the third floor, machines with fighting and shooting games were even now lit with images of critical battle moments.

Behind the glass is a peaceful landscape fully covered in snow.

The floor themselves was an illustration of child violence, however.

"Why are you alive?"

And there, automatic pistol in one hand, ten-year-old child with teary eyes and a gag in his mouth crying for help in the other, stood former officer Tougou Kisara (f., 35).

Post script: at the floor's borders - near every wall not adjacent to the entrance - are three bound children. They were directly in front, to the left and to the right of Hinomori Shusei.

"Long time no see, Kisara-chan! When have we last met like this, face to face? When you shot the driver of the convoy and tried to shoot me as well, right? You released your anger so violently I thought you'd run out and return to being a proper officer..."

"True. I was planning to. If I didn't hear that you were still alive this summer, that is."

A voice full of hatred.

The child in Tougou Kisara's left hand winced painfully.

Of course. Grabbing him by the neck, Tougou Kisara mercilessly pierced his skin with her fingernails.

That said, blood was not just flowing there - even from afar one could see the brown stains on Tougou Kisara's shirt.

The child she's holding and the three bound near walls - all have swollen faces, bloody marks on their lips, one's arm is particularly bad, crudely bandaged. Presumably she forgot herself too much and, later realizing that a death could cost her dearly, bandaged the wound just in case.

"Brutal. What do you have against kids in particular?"

"Possessed are not people. They're all monsters. Like you."

"Very brutal. Look now, they're all watching you in fear, Kisara-chan! Like slaves waiting for their master's anger to pass over! It's bad for their upbringing! Really, this is going too far. They're all the same age as your daughter!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Tougou Kisara's pistol spits fire.

The bullet grazes Black Cape's sleeve. Either she missed due to rage, or he dodged. Probably the former.

"Oh. You're still hung up over that? Women, am I right? Come on, Kisara-chan, it wasn't you that died. Okay, condolences about your daughter, so? I took off her head, so? She's not alive anymore, so what? What now, keep reminding yourself of what was two years ago? We're not watching an anime remake here."

"You..."

Teeth grinding.

The captured and bound kids, remembering the cruelties they went through over the last two days, started shaking, expecting the worst.

"Right here!.. Right now, I'll kill you!"

The muzzle looks at Black Cape...

But there's no shot. Before shooting Tougou Kisara released the kid she held.

Kicked him in the back, towards Hinomori Shusei.

Whether or not Tougou Kisara considers the kids possessed, Hinomori Shusei definitely is one.

As such - what will he do with the child? Even if he doesn't save him, he should at least think of him as kin.

And that's the moment she'll shoot. It doesn't matter whether Hinomori Shusei saves the kid or abandons him and lunges at Tougou Kisara.

At the moment of this unnecessary action she'll put a bullet into his forehead. With this plan of gaining at least this advantage Tougou Kisara puts her finger on the trigger.

"..."

In those two seconds...



The child seeking a handhold. The gag, painfully tightly bound. Inflamed, bleeding, swollen corners of the mouth. Eyes red from an entire night of crying. Weak body, left without any food, of course.

Hinomori Shusei hugs the child.

No. In a seeming embrace he plants the kid on his sword and throws him off to the second floor.

"What?!"

Naturally. Because in the child's hand was a knife, and he suddenly lunged, aiming to pierce Hinomori Shusei's belly.

"Are you a demon?!"

Having forced the child to do this to be safe herself, Tougou Kisara shoots and retreats.

It was all irrelevant. He could save or ignore him. It'd be even better if he let the child be. The child would have an easier time stabbing Hinomori Shusei in the back. She would empty the clip at the stunned Hinomori Shusei. That was Tougou Kisara's first plan.

But it didn't work. Yes, however hard it is to believe. This man, as soon as he extended his hand towards the hand of the child gripping a knife behind his back, mercilessly pierced his shoulder. Good reaction time? It's not about that. It's about how he seemed to react to something that was yet to happen.

His danger sense is close to future sight. Even now he, walking casually, keeps dodging Tougou Kisara's bullets or deflecting them with his sword...

"Why, why won't you die?! Back then, too, and then, and then!.. I put a bullet into you, threw you off a bridge, ran you over in a car!.. And still you, like just now, I thought I'd kill you for sure, and you!.."

"Nah, this isn't for sure. That time you hit me with your car and drove away, but you know, I just jumped and sprung off it. And deflected the bullets with this toy here. And you dropping that on top of me, eh, a bit of thrashing around, and you'll survive it. And this time your firepower wasn't enough to be called seasonings, much less a full course."

Hinomori Shusei is unstoppable. Her ammunition is long gone. As he said, the method of shooting him point-blank, foolproof in principle, met a similarly foolproof defense.

"A... ah."

This is impossible. This method won't kill him. Losing her will to fight, Tougou Kisara made a decision.

Hopelessly lowering the gun, she absently watched Black Cape walk towards her.

"H... el..."

"Eh, giving up? Hmm. Oh yeah, Kisara-chan is not possessed, if she gives up, she can just go home free... but tough luck. Or good luck, should I say? Seems like the kid really was possessed."

'There's a fire somewhere', - Tougou Kisara thought.

On the second floor?.. There's a cracking sound and the smell of burning meat.

"Don't kil..."

"Gathering hostages against me was pointless. Your excess violence has made you the enemy, Tougou Kisara. Your blood is already infected."

The vampire slowly advanced towards the woman with her back to the wall. Seeming to get used to the terror, Tougou Kisara shrilly...

"Forward!.. If you don't want to die - do as ordered, runts!"

...gave a command to the leftover children.

This time the surprise worked.

How did she scare them into that?.. The three children, still bound, ran at Hinomori Shusei. Of course, Black Cape heartily readied a swing. But...

"Oh?.. You aren't, actually."

He stopped himself.

Tougou Kisara's mouth bent into an evil smirk. Jumping to the second floor, she pressed the switch prepared in advance and triggered the trap that could be called the main course.

She left explosives in a corner invisible to Hinomori Shusei so he wouldn't notice. And now she detonated them.

The amusement park shook.

A bright greenish-blue light obscuring vision. The entire third floor is wreathed in fire that consumes Hinomori Shusei and the children.

She saw a miracle.

In the hell lasting less than ten seconds the girl saw a vampire dancing in the flame.

The explosion consuming three children.

Red smoke immediately obscuring the sight.

Arcade machine covers jumping in a mad dance as though alive.

And - becoming shrapnel, tearing their bodies apart - pieces of furniture.

All of this Black Cape let pass by him.

In the girl's eyesight the child who spent all night crying was turned into a distasteful piece of fried meat. A chair passing by hit his shoulder, and the flesh that'd irrevocably lost its form was consumed by the tongues of flame.

Luckily, the girl's eyes and ears were blinded by the flash and deafened by the rumble of the explosion. The horrifying scene became blurry. And immediately after - perhaps not even a second passed - Black Cape enveloped her. Wrapped in a cape, carried in arms, protected.

Whatever happened after, she knew only from her sensations. Those sensations tell her she rode a rollercoaster. The girl's eyes were covered, after all, and she didn't see what happened outside of the cape.

However, she definitely saw him in that darkness.

The silhouette of the vampire who picked her up without hesitation and completely shielded her from the blast.

His wounds are bleeding.

If all the blood leaves his body, he'll die.

With this body so close to the norm, this time he wasn't ready for the sudden attack from the outside. The best he could manage was quickly, as much as his abilities allowed, using his sensitivity to the situation close to future sight, rushing through that hell, through the needle's eye created by the hundreds of objects.

The vampire boasting of immortality.

The logic at his core is too simple.

"...It's actually not that hard. Animals have a hard time dying, after all. So it's about speed, Arika-kun."

Hinomori Shusei smiled at the youth whose life was the most - diametrically even - opposite to his own of everyone he knew.

Death that you boldly step towards yourself.

A spontaneous, jumping out from behind reason's back, irrational threat.

You must understand that to you they are one and the same.

Even now, while talking, he thinks about the death awaiting him in 0.2 seconds.

"So, once you experience something spooky, stay in that state. Like, when you get into it, when you barely dodged a car, your body shifts a gear, right? So, if you constantly keep that up, you can react to danger at any moment."

He assumes the worst.

Not quite correct. He imagines a slaughter.

He has no intention of returning to the hell he once fell into.

"Say, let's put falling from a cliff in a car down as a five. Compared to that, an attack with a katana is a 2-3, right? You can dodge that in your sleep.

"Just keep up the, what's it called, alertness? On-edginess? Compared to normal people like us, born monsters have maximum speed so much higher it hurts... So I'd lose in a fair race. But it doesn't mean I can't win. The starting speed of a genius and the peak speed of a normal man might actually compete."

A warm-up before activities. The first strike of the mind, revving up the relaxed psyche. That's what he reached four years ago... I can't imagine what kind of hell he went through, but he left his reasonable self, accumulated over more than twenty years, behind.

"Uh huh. A proper man would die without a fight, and if so, I'll at least maintain the speed. I won't ever relax after stepping over the border. Burning my boiling blood until I die, I'll keep up the maximum speed for my entire life."

In other words, it's...

"This is the speed of avoiding a threat. See, dear Arika, this is my speed - I will never stop."

Even as he explained, he was nothing but a psychopath out of his mind.

Insane scenes whirl around in his mind. Giving himself over to madness, he maintains the highest speed.

Boiling, fiery blood. With a body at the limit, a psyche ready to break, knowing no end, he meets the accelerating monsters with a return strike. They can't reach their maximum speed before he gouges the limit of his abilities into them.

...Thus, even surprise attacks on him won't succeed. Just the opposite. Because the one doing the surprise attack is always him.

Against everybody who needs an initial impulse is his speed, maxed from the start. Not physical capabilities but his broken mentality build this incredibly obvious theory of not dying.

This is how simple the undying vampire - Hinomori Shusei - turned out to be.

"Yaaaawn. Well, of course, usually people die from that, yeah" - Black Cape drops with a casual yawn, standing on the burnt third floor that's been turned into a field of charred ruins.

His unsinkability is still based on nothing but mentality.

His personal quirk, the new growth of a possessed, is aimed at enhancing the abilities of the body as a whole, like Yamanashi Tomori. He's not as beast-like as her, but Shusei himself counts an increase of between three and five times in the mechanical abilities of the body when compared to a grown man.

"Still, what a dull finale. I hoped she'd at least strap a smoke grenade to the kid's back. Well, it's over, you've been through enough", - he unwraps the cape around the girl. - "The other three weren't lucky. Forgetting them is sad, so you better treasure the memories of your friendship."

He fixed the sunglasses that slipped off.

In the girl's eyes looking up at the black-caped monster there's no amazement. She's not afraid, the opposite, rather.

"Mister, the fire..."

She expressed her gratitude for being saved through worrying about the man with the smoking back, shoulders, left leg. To Hinomori Shusei that's a minor thing.

"Oh... Another interruption."

He felt a human presence from the direction of the entrance. His hearing, sense of smell and skin nerves jointly relayed that knowledge to him.

That isn't Tougou Kisara, who jumped to the second floor. Somebody else entered the amusement park.

Hinomori Shusei shifted his gaze from the girl to the outside. Looked at the broken window.

"All right, this is where we part. Oh, but don't think I saved you because you're a good girl, get it? I wonder if you really were more fortunate than the others."

The one who entered the first floor is a woman. She's heavily armed. The lift is frozen on floor B1. Shusei is in control.

"But yeah, your life has been saved. Now use it wisely. Mister will see to the bad woman's funeral rites and then go bye-bye."

Black Cape ran through the floor, still on fire. Just a three-meter run-up. A sudden leap. Without using the stairs, he jumped out of the broken window to the ground.

Thus avoiding the woman.

And so. Before him, who landed with smoke trailing behind him all the way, was the slope to the underground parking lot.

Heavily breathing, Tougou Kisara jumped out of the elevator.

Two minutes earlier - jumping to the second floor to the third, having made sure Black Cape was engulfed in flame, she escaped to the parking lot via elevator.

"Hah... ha-ha, ha!.."

Guilt from killing the hostages as well.

Excitement from destroying the building.

Exhilaration from finally wiping this unkillable possessed off the face of the Earth.

Dimming the huge emotions threatening to tear her mind apart, Tougou Kisara ran to the 'wheels' she prepared.

Yes. Dead. Died. Killed, in fact. This time for sure. The one who even death couldn't stop so many times. This monster rising from the grave, this time it burned to aaaaash!

"Hooray... hooray, hooray, hooray!"

In retrospect these three years seem a nightmare.

When her daughter was murdered by this lowly killer before her eyes, she still begged him to spare her life. Regret and shame. Fear and rage. Miserable days that made her want to die from just knowing he's alive. It's finally all in the past. Send him to the Origa clinic? Tougou Kisara couldn't move on without ending him with her own hands. She couldn't start life anew. Since that time she lived for revenge. Shooting the convoy driver, shooting Hinomori Shusei, blame it all on the killer - that was the plan. Except that Hinomori Shusei survived his planned execution. When Karen's police department disbanded the investigation team, she nearly went mad. And though she told herself that this guy wouldn't come back and lived a life akin to a walk on a tightrope, Hinomori Shusei revived with his usual certainty. But she couldn't reach into Shikura. The same was true for Hinomori Shusei, so she understood she could just keep quiet and be safe, but once she saw him she couldn't stop any longer. He was like a mosquito on the ceiling: unbearable, demanding to be squashed. The house is uninhabitable until you get rid of it. To think just how her life shattered after the loss of her daughter. She lives separately from her

husband, has lost the meaning of her life - like a living corpse. And all of this accumulated and spilled out on Hinomori Shusei... no, on possessed, to be more precise. Kidnapping Nozu residents, making them plead for mercy and shooting them was absolutely, completely unpleasant. Sickening, even. Because she didn't want to touch possessed with so much as a finger. But without at least this much stimulation she couldn't have done her duty. After all, she understood she couldn't kill the monster without becoming a murderer herself.

And so - sweeping away common sense and any virtues, she prepared this trap. And in the end, finally, at last this...

"Excuse me. This is where the curtain falls, Tougou Kisara."

"W... h... y..."

This. The demon standing before her right now, the one she thought had fallen.

"Why. Why."

He's real - this crushes Tougou Kisara's last mental support.

He's a real, no-frills killer.

He may not be undying, but if he avoids the Reaper's scythe every time, it is a true immortality of the body.

"Why... are you still alive?!!"

She draws the gun and pulls the trigger.

She'd reloaded the pistol. All eight bullets were shot without jamming. And the burning man avoided them all.

"The last question of your life. It'd be proper to answer. All right. So, why I won't die..."

His liveliness instantly disappeared.

In his mirror-lens sunglasses was reflected an unsightly, ugly, alien Tougou Kisara, who sighed heavily...

"I am the God of Flame, fiery Cradle - Fomalhaut.

"Long as a drop of this blood Mine runs in these veins, I shall be reborn anew."

...Majestic.

She heard a sound - from the warped stake piercing her heart.

The third floor of the amusement park was engulfed in flame just as Touma Mato got past the parking lot.

"Touma-san, the third floor blew up! This is terrible, in a few minutes it'll all burn away! The client is wrong in the head!"

"I have eyes! Anti-fire measures, cretin, now!" - gripping the handle of the suitcase with the submachine gun, she shouted into the radio. Of course, even in these circumstances Touma Mato didn't break her running pace.

She forcefully ran on the asphalt covered by twenty centimeters of snow.

Six minutes exactly to the site. With a speed that'd make an athlete blush, right across the six-lane road, through the two hundred meters of parking lot, she arrived at the entrance to the amusement park destroyed by somebody.

"I'm going in. Keep a two-minute record of the communications."

Taking the submachine gun out of its case, she assembled it in a few seconds. No time to re-check.

...Hard to believe, but there was someone on the exploded third floor.

Perhaps Tougou Kisara, or, maybe, the recent uninvited guest. Either way, she couldn't kind out without entering.

From shadow to shadow. Touma Mato concentrated and carefully but quickly ran between pieces of cover. First floor, the staircase up from it, then to the second floor.

There were several meters to the stairs to the third floor. Straight ahead, on the third floor was the target. Lurking in the shadows of the stepped structure, she arrived at the staircase to the third floor.

She heard a voice. Carefully but quickly reaching the end of the steps, Touma Mato aimed the gun at the room. And just then, as though having waited for her to arrive, some black humanoid made a running jump outside.

She really wanted to pursue straight away, but there was a person needing rescue on the third floor. Touma Mato took care of the injured girl, led her to the middle of the parking lot and told her to go on alone:

"Get to that sidewalk, there are policemen there. Run and don't look back."

Then she turn around and ran for the amusement park.

The recent black man was nowhere to be seen. They passed each other by, but still, it hasn't been two minutes. He couldn't just vanish.



Thus... it's clear where this uninvited guest headed. To the underground floor of the amusement park. To the parking lot where the criminal presumably left her car.

The parking lot entrance was on the east side. The tracks of a single person. Following them to the driveway, she tiptoed underground.

And there, when Touma Mato took in the parking lot about fifty meters wide...

She only had a second for her next step.

In the depths of the underground parking lot, among lined-up cars, stands a single man.

An outsider in a black cape. Back to the entrance - to Touma Mato. Before him burns a fire.

A sprawled human. Most likely Tougou Kisara. Her body is on fire. No noise, as though it's being smoked. The flame sways like a human-shaped candle.

After the second it took her to take note of all this... no, it happened in half a second... Touma Mato pulled the pin on the item resembling a paint can on her belt and threw it under the man's feet.

A thirty-meter throw.

She immediately hid in a car's shadow, shifted her gaze and covered her eyes with an arm.

In a second...

A retina-burning shine and eardrum-rupturing thunder spread through the parking lot.

A stun grenade. Used when sieging criminals or against terrorists. A hand grenade robbing the target of sight and hearing.

The powerful light blinds the eyes and robs the opponent of their vision. The light hurts the brain as well as the eyes, causing nausea and disorientation. And the sound. The soundwave that can be felt striking the skin neutralizes hearing, and for the next few minutes the target is left in complete silence.

This suppression weapon leaves the criminal unable to resist, ensuring the hostages' safety. A combined attack of light and sound that nearly completely disables an inexperienced opponent.

Confirming its devastating effect, Touma Mato leaned out from behind the car and aimed at the man...

"Kh!.."

...noticing his eyes covered by an arm in the same instant.

Touma Mato didn't know this, but the Black Cape, Hinomori Shusei, wore mirror-lens sunglasses. Clamping his eyelids shut, protected by the sunglasses, he also defended against the light with his arm. The effect on his sight is minimal.

However, he'd be unable to protect his ears. With a katana in one hand, covering his eyes with another, he couldn't plug them. The stun grenade completely took his ability to hear. A person submerged in total silence loses the ability to make rational decisions.

Without losing his sight he lost his hearing.

'This should be enough', - Touma Mato decides and squeezes the trigger.

Diametrically opposite to the grenade, this has a quiet effect. But the physical attack that definitely outdoes the grenade in the damage department strikes the black cape.

MP5. A counter-terrorist suppression weapon known as "the police standard", a submachine gun. Initially placed in the "spray and pray" category over "one shot, one kill" due to its high firing rate, this amazing automatic weapon still allows for high-accuracy fire. On a battlefield just accuracy is not enough, but in this set of situations - a hostage situation, armed criminals taking over a building - it shows great power.

And so it spews fire.

Nine-millimeter bullets - a dozen per second. Even with meager destructive power it's more than enough to turn the deafened human target into a honeycomb. The famously accurate MP5 with Touma Mato's shooting skills allow no misses. And anyway, Touma Mato is not a person who presses the trigger to miss.

But he dodges. Black Cape dodges even that.

Before disbelieving her eyes Touma Mato sends a few more bullets after the running, as though in a nightmare, target.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Twenty rhythmical shots - and the monster pursued by them, but still unharmed.

How did he notice Touma Mato's surprise attack?.. Black Cape, barely dodging the submachine gun's bullets, jumped straight into the cover of a parked car.

"Damn..."

Touma Mato took her finger off the trigger and looked at the car Black Cape hid behind.

Shooting at random to smoke out the hidden criminal - she doesn't toy around like that. She might have had some fun with a large-caliber gun, but currently it's not necessary.

She is positioned to block off the exit of the underground parking lot. Her opponent has some long likeness of a sword, but doesn't possess firearms. With this disposition she can hold out. Suppression is a matter of time. In five minutes her subordinates will arrive. Then they'll pin him down. Taking a target without a gun as a trio - a bit boring, even.

...Another minute. Black Cape's hearing must have come back, so Touma Mato shouts:

"Hey, I forgot to say, this is police. So I'll still offer you to surrender, if you don't mind. Right now, as an exception, I'll only shoot your legs through."

A statement unbecoming of a police officer.

What did he think about Touma Mato, who didn't even think about the right to keep silent or call his lawyer?..

Hinomori Shusei, sitting in the cabriolet's cover, grinned - so that's what kind of enemy we have here!

"All right! If so, let's play!"

Black Cape, formerly sitting on the ground, stood up.

"Hah."

They shoot each other a wicked grin.

Hinomori Shusei is curious about Touma Mato's inhumanity.

Touma Mato is intrigued by the impudence of Hinomori Shusei, who accepted her challenge.

A rain of bullets.

A long katana, sent flying like a spear.

"Kh!.."

Touma Mato, instantly letting the katana thrown straight at her heart fly past.

Using this fraction of a second to his advantage, Black Cape went on the attack.

All according to plan. Even easier to aim - and Touma Mato straightens up, corrects her aim...

"Ah-ha-ha! I always wanted to do that!" - an overjoyed voice rang out from the driver's seat, and her pupils shrunk into dots before the monster who sunk the gas pedal, attacking her with the car itself.

"Ah..."

A speeding cabriolet. Distance - twenty meters. He seems to have triggered the ignition while hiding. The engine started up. How many seconds until acceleration? No, such crazy drivers need to be shot!

"Sorry, but this won't work!"

"Aah?!"

The seat disappears. Black Cape fully lowered the adjustable seat and casually sprawled in the car. Yes, this does make it hard to hit the driver, however you aim.

The lively monster floors the gas with one foot, the other is on the steering wheel. The seat is still down. Lying legs to his target, barely raising his face, he shoots Touma Mato a glare:

"Well, let's go! You're gonna shoot my legs through, right?!"

"Are you a moron?!"

He is. The cabriolet, "american style", not even drunk junkies drive those nowadays, ominously rushed forward. In a few seconds this large thousand-kilo prop will surely splatter Touma Mato on the wall.

"..."

0 seconds. Thoughts flow with interruptions. Stop the car. How? Shoot the hood randomly, hit the engine, boom. Impossible. Hard with the MP5. She can hit it with some luck, but you can't aim in this situation. So, impossible. Can't shoot the driver either. The MP5 is just baggage here.

1 second. Jump away. Dodge and immediately from the side. No sides, lead him from behind until the clip runs out. Impossible. The foot's on the wheel for a reason. He'll adjust the direction, however you run. Back, to the sides, suicidal. Therefore.

2 seconds. Ten meters left. It's settled. If she stands like that, in two seconds there'll be a collision at sixty kilometers per hour. But now, if she runs at it herself, it'll be at less than sixty!..

"Ah, yooooou!.."

Dropping the MP5, Touma Mato leaped onto the approaching cabriolet from a run.

She turned the ten remaining meters into five.

Kicking the hood in her flight, Touma Mato jumped.

A beautiful, but also powerful side somersault. Using the hood as a foothold, group your body together and turn in midair. Oddly enough, this was exactly how Hinomori Shusei avoided being hit by Toujou Kisara's car.

However, Touma Mato added the gymnastic element of "taking her Beretta out of the holster while upside down".

"Eh, what the?.."

Time to shoot. Touma Mato started firing from the air at the moron sprawled like a king in the driver's seat.

"Lady, what's with you?!"

Black Cape, jumping out of the seat while still lying down. He must have used just his arms, but the incredible movement looked as though he had a spring in his back.

Losing its driver, the cabriolet heavily crashed into a wall.

The police officer landing with a Beretta in her hand and the killer falling where he threw his katana.

Touma Mato is in the depths of the lot. Hinomori Shusei is with his back to the exit.

A castling.

Taking down the monster that didn't die to the submachine gun with a single shot from the Beretta is unthinkable. 'Last time on Shikura Hill it was a shotgun. Now it's a stun grenade and an automatic. I really want a better weapon'. Touma Mato ground her teeth in anger.

And then... Looking at this woman nearing thirty, worrying over the advantages of various armaments instead of clothes, Hinomori Shusei had a revelation. Gripping the katana, he spoke with a grin:

"Oh. I know about you. You're Touma-san, right?"

"Yes. How'd you know?" - Touma-san dropped while aiming the Beretta.

Her mentality is not one for talking to a criminal as an equal, but Black Cape's question touched something in her.

"Well. 'There's a scary cop in Shikura, she'll make cutlets of any possessed in an instant, better not run into her', as someone told me. Hmm, who could it be? Nah, I can't talk about that! My informer strongly forbade me to give his name, after all!"

Hinomori Shusei is being his usual self and appears to Touma Mato who sees him for the first time to be a typical drunk. No, more like a drug addict, she decides earnestly.

"I see. Well, I don't know who that is, but they're an accomplice. If you meet him again, say hello for me."

"Again? What again? Will there really be another time?"

"Well, will you give up without running, possessed?"

Killing tools in hands, silently standing off.

Some time will pass before they'll learn of each other's way of life.

Recently Touma Mato fought a superhuman whose abilities exceeded those of man and achieved a decisive victory.

This person in a black cape is their butler... no, a demon that possesses the abilities of two at once.

"Hm... I'd really like to go on a walk with you, miss, but you want something different. I don't want to get hurt for no reason, so could you let me go? Oh, by the way, the explosion upstairs was not me. But yeah, tough luck with the kids."

"There was one survivor. She said a black mister saved her?"

"Well, love thy fellow man, right. Your work is about saving those you don't really want to as well, right? It's the same thing. To kill or not to kill - emotions don't have a role. It'd be good if Kisara-chan understood that, but oh well."

"You're Tougou Kisara's acquaintance?.. I see. So you're Hinomori Shusei. The hit-and-run case of two months ago. Were you the one Tougou Kisara ran over?"

"That's right. Well, I didn't get too hurt, so I decided not to bother the police."

"Heh... You want to say that you didn't kill her in revenge?"

"Of course. Actually I came to ask her to not get in my way. But it so happened that we began killing each other."

"I see. I thought you were just a killer, but you have a quirk. I looked through the vampire killer report... Hinomori. Is your target "H", Heartless?"

"Hatless\*? What's that?"

"An A disorder carrier whose growth is in their heart. In the D building the most special patients are called "nots". Well, that's a codeword to signify that their humanity is gone. So far three go by that designation. Heartless, or Heartless, is one of them. Actually, they're one of the patients who were designated for D before the Origa clinic was even built..."

"Hmm. That's not a bad name for rumors... Well, I'll let you guess about that. Or are you going to help me out now?"

"Like hell. Whatever the circumstances, I'll cut you into pieces, bag them up and send the bag to Origa."

"Yay, peace talks have failed! Oh well, that's why others are only hindrances. Now, let's conclude. I'll see myself out, okay?"

Of course it's not okay, but Touma Mato can only drill him with her stare.

As it stands, she can't capture Hinomori Shusei. After all, the weaponry and ammunition were taken with the capture of Tougou Kisara in mind. If Touma Mato was still blocking the exit, she could've held him back until the police's arrival. But..."

"Go away. But there'll be no next time, vampire."

"Tut-tut. No, Touma-san. My name is Fomalhaut. Like, I mean, the cradle of the god of fire and, yeah, the fiery Fomalhaut... this nick..."

Hinomori Shusei didn't sound too confident.

Touma Mato watched him emotionlessly.

"Hmm?.. What is this, don't I look bad?! It can't be. Oh, the shame! What am I embarrassed for?! Oh no, don't look at me! Ugh, I said it so naturally just then - what was that, me, a miracle of nature?!"

"..."

Touma Mato silently watched Black Cape who clasped his head.

"Damn, get used to it, gotta get used to it! You'll see, lady, when we meet again, it'll be different, just wait impatiently for the reborn me!.."

Throwing this nonsense over his shoulder, Hinomori Shusei ran away. With ridiculous speed. The black silhouette was soon lost in the strong snowfall.

"What was that... You couldn't catch a guy like that even with thirty people. If I really want to take this one, I'll need a tailored spec ops team", - she lowered her weapon with a sigh.

The criminal escaped, but her task is done.

Taking care of Tougou Kisara's remains and putting out the amusement park fire is a headache, but luckily she has support that knows its job - the job of cleaning up after her.

"Touma-saaan, are you heeere?"

Speak of the devil. One of her underlings entered the underground parking lot.

"Yeah, come in. It's clear. Did you keep the girl safe?"

"Iwa-san is with her. He told me to run and find the Assistant Inspector. That's some scene you made once again! What about Tougou Kisara? Or Black Cape?"

"Those remains over there are Tougou Kisara. I let Black Cape slip by."

"What?.. Impossible!? Whoa, you let him slip, really?! Touma-san?! Not let him run to tire him?!"

"Who do you take me for? If I wanted to tire him, I'd capture him first. I'll tell you who this Black Cape was some time later... Still, Fomalhaut, huh..." - she thoughtfully muttered.

"Fo... what?"

"The famous first star of autumn. It means "fish mouth", I think."

Palm near her mouth, head in the clouds, she looks somewhere into the ground. Snow is falling past the driveway. Remembering the black cape that vanished into it...

"Heh. I don't want to admit it, but not bad. Enemy or not, he has some taste."

...Touma Mato mutters in admiration.

Like Hinomori Shusei, her tastes are stuck somewhere in the eighties.

**\FOMALHAUT.end**





4.

/Vt.in day dream.

disconnection  
disorder  
2

The calendar says it's the fourteenth of February.  
Carnival, Easter - pick whatever you like.  
Turn your gratitude and joy into flowers, scattering petals through  
the skies.  
As a sign of your naive resolutions, sprinkle the cake with crimson  
sugar.

"All right... Why don't I do some spring cleaning?.."

She smiles and rips out the steel door.  
To her the fourteenth of February is the physical activities day.  
A day with no shyness, no mercy, doing as the mood directs, as the  
soul unfolds.

But her invasions end in glorious death.  
Her overflowing heart creates a heap of broken things.  
What is this karma? Why?.. As though a curse was laid on her three  
years ago.

Naturally, this year is no exception.

A fantasy after the story's conclusion.

A postscript seen by a girl in an unremarkable dream where she was  
with Arika.

-----/Vt.in day dream.

0/

**(2005, 14th of February)**

The alarm signal from the Origa clinic arrived in the fourth hour of the night, when even the trees sleep. Everything happened some time past 3 AM, about three hours before sunrise.

Touma Mato, who took the call (not as an inspector, rather as the consultant of the clinic's social order control department), hurriedly prepared a helicopter and flew to the mountainous outskirts of the N prefecture, which is where the clinic was.

On the 13th, at 22 o'clock, an outburst of aggression happened among the Agonist Disorder patients.

The rampage began with a small breach of discipline among the C building patients, but soon the spark spread to the B building as well. As though it was planned beforehand, the patients started rioting at the same time. Confirming the unity of the diseased, the hospital staff evacuated from buildings B, C and D, inevitably retreating to the A building. At 0 o'clock of the fourteenth the patients occupied the central A building up to the third floor, but when the security squad mobilized, the situation reversed completely. The revolt of the B and C patients was immediately suppressed.

However... They bought enough time, and the instigators of the riot - C building patients - unlocked the D building. The appearance of a girl from the depths of this structure changed the situation on a fundamental level.

The next day, 3 AM.

The temporary aggression outburst among patients turned into mass murder without distinction or countermeasures.

Thus presently, in the mountainous part of the N prefecture, 2 kilometers high...

"...This is the situation. Today, as an exception, I authorize the use of weaponry. Defend yourself on your own."

We were sitting in a vibrating, roaring helicopter, and Mato-san passed me a small pistol.

"Wait, that isn't what we talked about! Why?! Why am I here?! I'm not involved, this time I'm one hundred percent innocent!"

I shook my head with all my might, denying my complicity, but alas, my shoulders were firmly held by the harness belts. Seriously, what's the point? Due to some karmic injustice I, Ishizue Arika, having only wanted to finish my sleep a minute ago, have been thrown straight into hell by Mato-san's hand!..

"Relax, Shozai. When I said I hadn't been to an amusement park for a while, it was you who suggested we go sometime. This is a good opportunity... Well, yeah. I guess a mountain lab is not the best place for a first date."

"I was joking! That was irony! I'm interested in neither rats nor cats! Come on, Mato-san, this place doesn't even have a rollecoaster, right?! This is Origa, there's no fun to be had there!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Come on, I'm sure it'll be interesting! At the very least, we're already one hundred percent excited."

The least fun hundred percent ever.

"What's with the cheery smile?.. That impatient to drag me into the D building?!"

"Hey... Don't be so angry. To be honest, Origa's layout is an important secret. It'd take too long to clear my people for entrance. You're all I could scrounge up in half an hour. I apologize for dragging you into it."

"Oh... O-okay."

The surprise scrambles my thoughts.

For M-Mato-san to apologize so earnestly... I'm a bit dizzy. Not from fear, though; more like a thought: 'whoa, I'm getting married tomorrow!..'

"It's almost time. Listen, this gun holds tranquilizer darts. Just score a hit, and it'll work. I'm not expecting great marksmanship of you, of course. But if you're grabbed - pull the trigger. There's enough poison for the thing to die on the spot. According to yesterday's data, batrachotoxin hasn't been tested yet, after all. There shouldn't be an immunity yet."

"I don't think that's a tranquilizer any longer, Mato-san... And anyway - what if the enemy doesn't grab me?"

"I'd suggest saying your prayers in advance... Anyway! We're going down. You're my first trump card. Don't move away from me."

The chopper came to a halt over the Origa clinic's central building.

Mato-san grabbed two comically large automatic pistols and even more comically rested the barrels on her shoulders. Some real anti-tank firepower there. Looking closer, I noticed

these weren't her usual Berettas; those were Desert Eagles, proudly bearing the title of "largest pistols in the world".

"Hmm..."

No-no. It's impossible to carry those beasts in two hands. Even Mato-san holds them more like axes; it may look cool, but aiming is simply not an option.

I was ready to sigh heavily - either she really wants that much firepower, or she's just a pyromaniac - but we'd already entered the central building through the roof, and I had to concede that the measure was justified.

The corridor suffered an eerie change. Floor, walls, ceiling - all was decorated with human bodies.

Some scattered in pieces, like food.

Some stacked in piles, pathetic remains of staff and patients.

Most likely, even the luckiest of the eight hundred people locked in here couldn't make it to the roof and were killed by someone.

## **RUMMMMMBLE.**

A local earthquake shook the central building.

If you imagine what must be going on on the lower floors, Touma Mato's armaments make even more sense.

"Mato-san... Are there actually any living people here?"

"The biolocator says there's seven. One is definitely among these. Here are you and I. One in C, one in B, one in D. Well, and also..."

The last one doesn't need to be mentioned.

On the highest, twenty-fifth, floor which we occupied, in the end of a curving corridor a suspicious shadow showed itself.

The man dressed in a D building patient's uniform smiled from ear to ear, welcoming new prey.

"Kuramitsu Meruka!.."

Mato-san's Desert Eagles instantly spit fire.

Easily outdoing Berettas, destroying the body with a single shot, the .44 magnums unloaded into the D building patient Kuramitsu-san.

...Wherever you look, there's just a sea of blood.

A square metallic corridor. A wide swamp on the floor, rising up to the ankles.

A vivid surface reminiscent of slick jelly. The amount of blood made it impossible to perceive anything resembling human bodies. Everything looked like the blood drained from some room and flooded the entire D building.

Ishizue Kanata stands on this red carpet.

Like a magnificent rose, a graceful chrysanthemum, a bright sunflower, the girl was a flawlessly harmonic contrast. Beautiful like a flower - there's no better metaphor. Today is her seventeenth birthday. A naive girl two years ago, now she's grown into a gorgeous woman. At least to an outsider's solely fleshly gaze.

About five meters away from her stood a girl very reminiscent of her.

Her name is Helmia Russell.

More hateful of Ishizue Kanata than anyone else, she tried to escape to the central building, but got called from behind and was now a regrettable victim of the motto "no one escapes".

"Nonsense. You really want to kill every single one?"

Proudly, with a stare full of hatred and disgust, Helmia Russell raises a questioning eyebrow. She's whirling in a mad hurricane of thoughts, considering whether she should run and be killed or stand up to the danger and live.

And so...

"Ooh. What wonderful words you utter, Helmia-san. Four years in here, and your beliefs stay unchanged still. Must be hard to live like that, eh?"

Ishizue Kanata smiled casually. In this sea of blood she and Helmia Russell are polar opposites: in position, in abilities, in ways of thinking.

They could be called the hunter and the hunted.

Unlike Russell who's trying to somehow get out and survive, Kanata isn't too troubled. Just a bit dissatisfied. She's wearing a sports suit that looks more like underwear. Everything happened very suddenly, and she didn't have much time. To tell the truth, she wanted to wear a proper dress when the time to rampage arrived.

"Don't compare me to yourself. I'm sane. Don't take me for a cheap thing that goes mad this easily."

"Oh, I'm very sorry. But I'm sane too, all right? I calmly and rationally concluded that I can kill everybody alone. Otherwise I wouldn't start this fight! Running headlong into a battle you have no chance of winning - the mad one here is you, it seems."

"This is why you're a psycho!.. Kill everyone alone? Seriously? You, who only have physical strength to boast of?.. Don't make me laugh. Yeah, you have no equal when it comes to breaking stuff. But when it comes to playing, you're not even fit to lick my boots. Just like everyone else. You can't even imagine the possessed of building D. Maybe you can handle those in C, but us..."

"Aah. I see, you don't know. Sorry, Helmia-san. At this point, the only ones alive here are you and I", - she twittered with a broad smile.

"Ah!.."

Naturally, Helmia Russell is speechless.

The D patients were treated like monsters. The people showing symptoms of the A disorder were considered "ill", but even the clinic doctors working with them left them to their fates. Their symptoms were beyond medical science, and they were plainly called "possessed", monsters. And of those forty equally lethal creatures only they were left?..

No, there were also those who were just in a bad condition and didn't move a muscle. Out of forty were there even ten like Kanata, capable of mass murder?

Still, this was exactly why they were the chosen of the chosen. They were the ones who bore the "possessed" title with pride. They were monsters feared by Origa's personnel. And they were no more? What about the pool full of guts, nauseating to look at? Or the man who retreated so deep into his personal space it could be called an alternate dimension? Or the child that made bodies instantly rot and turn into soup? Or the creature whose mind was so confused it turned everything around it into nonsense?

And all of them were exterminated by this woman with her bare hands?

"...Ishizue..."

"Oh, finally resolved yourself? Great. Now I'll have you for desserts. You only get such a chance once in a lifetime, after all. It'd be a waste to not have a taste of all of you, right?"

Kanata crouches, puts a leg forward a bit, ready to lunge at her target.

Just this motion causes a quake, sending a ripple through the red carpet.

"!!!Kanata!!!"

Russell's vocal cords shake the atmosphere.

Even a monster like that can't beat the speed of sound. Kanata, splashing crimson as she runs, meets the return strike of Russell's new growth. A sound-based hypnosis on a biological wave frequency. The electrical impulse generated by her bodily biocurrents invades the human brain. It's effective at a distance of up to thirty meters.

## **RUMBLE.**

Their two-second encounter is over. The extended right fist of Kanata, who ran casually, destroys the wall behind Russell's back.

The metallic wall caves in with a pathetic screech. If this was a direct hit, Russell's organs would have been pulped, but it was off to the left and missed. This was not Russell dodging; Kanata's eyes failed her.

Unbelievably, Kanata's accurate movement failed to land. The girl didn't understand why she missed. She immediately shifted her stare to the target, but to the side...

"Eh, aaah?!"

Kanata stunnedly looked up at she who used to be less than a hundred and sixty centimeters tall. Now of such a height she had to look up at the figure now ten times larger. A figure so giant she couldn't see the top.

"Hee hee... Welcome to my world. Now the game is over, marionette!.."



Of course, it wasn't that Helmia Russell was a giant. Such accelerations going counter to the laws of physics can't happen. So, it's the other way around. Did Ishizue Kanata shrink to a tenth of her size in just a few seconds? That's even less likely, of course. Atomic forces wouldn't allow such a nonsensical compression of a living being.

The problem is not physics, it's the mind. Ishizue Kanata's senses created an anomaly. Space didn't extend, neither did she shrink, but the scale of the perceived image and the visions perceived by her brain just went insane without asking her!..

"Oh. So it's all re..."

It's not reality. No, it is, but only within the bounds of the brain's perceptions. Even with this understanding, her senses took the giant world too realistically. For the current Ishizue Kanata the red puddle became a lake coming up to her collarbone.

Helmia Russell.

Having lived with a visual impairment since childhood, she constantly claimed despairingly: 'Everything around me presses me down'. Her parents couldn't understand her. She, huddled in a corner in a corner of a room, eyes shut tight, was just carelessly considered shy, unable to adapt to society.

But still, the world really seemed gigantic to her. A slight impairment of sight and a heavy perception disorder. Eight years later the insane gears finally joined together into a working anomalous mechanism. She couldn't feel the distance to objects. The girl kept screaming about the horror of a warped world sometimes large, sometimes distant, but she was still misunderstood and left on her own.

Dysgnosia - a malfunction of learning capability, a misunderstanding of the true scale of the world. And so these lonely times let a demon possess her. Not to cure the anomaly. She created the growth to make others understand her nightmare that nobody wanted to even hear about. She wanted to show her pain.

"Oh. It's "Double Bind" - a possession capable of inflicting your dysgnosia on others..."

"Correct. It was limited to shared perception at the beginning, but now it's different. You can only ever kill a single person through sharing, after all! To cripple the entire class, such wasteful behavior can't be allowed."

The giant Russell lifted her foot.

An observer would've seen this as a simple step forward. But it seemed to Kanata that a true, grand horror was raised above her.

"Not only can I share my perception, I can substitute that of others'. Didn't I tell you, my dear? You're good at destroying, but in playing with minds I'm miles ahead!"

"Khh!"

A hallucination of a falling fifty-ton mass.

Kanata strongly jumped backward to dodge, but the distance between them didn't change at all. The mobility of her body was limited by her shackled mind. Just now she intended to jump back ten meters, but in reality her body stepped back a mere ten centimeters.

...Yes, this is hard to bear.

She sustained no bodily damage, but her mind would begin to melt after being subjected to this nightmare for hours.

"Can you keep running for long? I can add more scale if you want."

An error of perception.

The owner of the insane perspective raised her foot. She can't escape. The perception of Kanata, capable of evading Russell's strike just a moment ago, already considered the scale of the surroundings to be the truth.

Working through electromagnetic pulses, a psychic disease affecting the brain directly. A brainwashing of incredible power. Only an intervention by a third party and deprogramming can fix this.

And also... The girls couldn't know about him, but there was a possessed who would act even more normal when subjected to such an attack.

He, the possessed with the sign opposed to Russell's, Hinomori Shusei, and Kanata will meet very soon.

Each of them had their own way of dealing with mental interference.

"No, that's enough, Helmia-san. Yes, I really needed time... but I already tried dreams like that a year ago, after all."

She can't run from Helmia Russell. Rather, she doesn't need to. To Ishizue Kanata this growth is already a thing of the past.

"What?.."

A chill goes up her spine - forget the spine, it reaches her brain.

Helmia Russell raises her head towards the source of the voice, located high above her head.

She can't believe her eyes... She'd never be able to do that! Ishizue Kanata is towering there, head only not brushing against the clouds because there are none.

"And you know what? Sorry, but this is not funny at all."

As though the skies fall.

Not an illusion born of compressed perception, but a very real right foot stomping on Russell offhandedly falls right next to her.

## **RUMBLE.**

The strike shakes the crimson liquid, the corridor and the entire building altogether. To Helmia Russell, who's got her powered-up dysgnosia back, this is enough to erase her reality, to make her apocalypse come.

## **RUMBLE.**

After a heated battle Kuramitsu Meruka fell to Mato-san's "five strikes down the middle". Chest!

"Lucky... I just knew Kuramitsu's state. And his possession is easy to deal with if you know where the center is. If he was the same type as Yashikido Kyouma's "Visceras hyperplasia" or Yoruguchi Shishiya's "Freesia", I'd have to rely on this."

Mato-san nodded at the RPG on her shoulder. I'm the first trump card, and it would seem to be the second one.

Abandoning the body of former D building resident Kuramitsu Merula, Mato-san heads for the stairs. Either the light was off or someone broke the wiring, but the elevator stood still.

## **RUMBLE.**

The central building shook from the mysterious earthquake again. The source of the quaking is clearly on the first floor. That's some hammering, felt even twenty five floors up. I didn't want to go down in the slightest, but Mato-san's beckoning me - get over here, fast.

"Mmm, a question, Mato-san. Off-topic, though."

"No life signs until the third floor. Fine, we can talk for now. Out with it."

"Yeah. You were talking about visceras and freezers, or something?.. Are those patient nicknames?"

"Well, yeah... Just keep in mind, that wasn't me! It's well... When they arrived, they were written down like that by someone overzealous, so", - she handed me a notebook page.

Familiar writing... I saw it a few times when accepting tasks... Oh, right, there was a lover of giving out nicknames. She was fourteen, no, fifteen back then. Why not, after all? Still, those are outrageous. Well, I guess it's a good thing when a person has imagination.

## **RUMMMBLE.**

Still... The central building was shaken even harder and meaner.

We passed the twelfth floor. The lower we descended, the more oppressive the smell of blood became.

...The twelfth was still of the human world. Although hell reigned here for a long time. Walls of a pink organic color. Air like sweet treacle. All kinds of destruction on each floor, and the twelfth - I took a quick peek - had the east wall erased altogether. Only a bulldozer could've take everything apart so thoroughly. After that I decided I wouldn't be surprised if it suddenly became a giant, and managed to keep its form, at that. The law of conservation of energy was violated on every step anyway.

"M-Mato-san. Do you think these rockets will work on her?"

The question could be said to express the very core of my worries.

If she answers 'I don't', I'll start a marathon in the opposite direction. Whatever happens, I'll get to the roof and watch the grand final boss monster fight from a height of three kilometers.

"They will, for now. This "for now" would only last another five minutes, though... If in these six hours it experiences a death that'll see it torn into pieces, our friend here will become useless."

"What? Explain it properly."

"Like I said. It's a possessed that's immune to everything in the world. Like I said, now it can't be killed just like that... A small accident happened in the beginning. The personnel got the amount of nerve gas wrong and thoroughly killed it."

"I have quite a few questions about that, but do go on."

"Uh huh. A regrettable incident, but what's done is done. We were already in the middle of the autopsy when it suddenly came back to life. The strangest thing is, the body was completely dead, but the brain seemed to function independently. After that the gas stopped affecting it. The body didn't die. Can you guess what followed? The personnel was nervous and excited at the same time. Understandable. Death from poison and then, after some time, the production of effective antibodies. Long story short, deadly experiments could be performed with just one subject. A perfect test dummy."

RUMBLE.

The monstrous pulse was slowly getting closer.

"...But in a month it all went awry. Naturally, the chemical reactions in its body stopped resembling those of humans. Science was no longer applicable. The data of hundreds of experiments gave no results, but sadly, it developed immunity to those hundreds of deaths."

**CRASH! THUMP!**

We're on the fifth floor.

Eerie. The smell of blood emanating from the lower floors makes me dizzy.

"Get it? The medicines in Origa's storage can't kill it anymore. There's any number of other ways, of course. If nothing else works, you can throw it into a press or, like now, use explosives."

"But... if it revives regardless, what next?" - she continued. - "If the pieces of meat come back to life, we're done for. We'll run out of ways as far as physics is concerned. And Origa's personnel was afraid of that 'if'. They had no right to create the "final solution" with their own hands. After all, if they manage to kill it, but that power will not be enough to completely destroy it, the "we can still kill it" hypothesis will disappear. A normal man's

most impossible dream - bodily immortality - will come to life in a monster. In the end, they decided 'No more killing'. Right now it's still possible there are deaths it didn't experience. And since that's true, it's not immortal - so they covered up their actions as best they could. But it matures with each day. We can't secure the door with the same lock forever. The D building was modified half a year ago exactly because they feared it. After all, it's possible it'll die of old age soon, so let's manage to hold it in until that death, and the question of responsibility will just vanish! Thus they underestimated the issue and..."

## **CRASH! THUMP! SLAM!**

We arrived at the third floor. Eww. Shit. Bad. What's bad? Well, the lake began on the third floor. Hard to believe, but the first and second floor were flooded in an incredible amount of blood. I very much didn't like that. Not so much because of the question of the source of this blood, but more because something that had that much red liquid had already died at its hand!..

"We'll have to move to the D building from here. All right, there was a fire ladder somewhere..."

Unlike me, Mato-san didn't even raise an eyebrow.

Her look is heroic - behold, it truly is the one whose vocabulary lacks the word "danger"!

"We can't get through! Let's return to Shikura right now, Mato-san! It won't work, trump card 2 will definitely fail!"

"Idiot, don't diss the rocket launcher! It eats fortifications and even Type 90s for breakfast - this is a work of weapon-making art made for infantry! The only thing that might survive that is a Tyrant\*!"

"Holy shit!"

I... just noticed! Mato-san was panicking, she's been on pins and needles for a while now!

"Come on, Shozai. With you we might just manage. Do you know about the paradox?"

"!.."

Touma Mato grabbed me by the collar and let out a battle cry.

Then she ran down the third floor corridor flooded with blood. I was trying to run the other way. And then... heavy, the highest-pitched and strongest

## **BOOM**

shook the central building.

"What?!"

"There it is..."

What "there it is"...

The wall ten meters ahead of us was shattered into dust. Judging by the hit, it must've been struck by a dump truck.

Splattering blood and a black-haired girl bathed in the light of the dawning sun.

...It's been two years.

The bloody dress is gone. She executed an unbelievable slaughter, yet there wasn't a single stain on her, not one drop of red. Once defeated by Touma Mato, finished off by Ishizue Shozai, she was nothing like the one that now stood here and triumphantly smiled:

"Long time no see, old lady. I've been waiting for this for two years. And here, with a face like he's just stepped into a pile of crap, would be my dear brother?"

Clearly having also greatly developed mentally, she greeted us.

By the way... actually, I already saw that in that video... hmm, I think she grew up a bit too much.

"Shozai!"

But my impressions of our encounter didn't concern Touma Mato. A mutual, oppressive difference in fighting power.

Can't afford even a spare word, determine Mato-san's instincts honed to a warrior's perfection.

Abilities grown beyond any limits.

Endurance trained past any bounds.

Yes. "Monsters" similar to her simply don't exist.

Not a single chance of victory, running - if only right this instant. Touma Mato aims her rocket launcher to protect Ishizue Shozai...

"Forget it. Too late, old lady."

The monster crosses ten meters in an instant, she hears its voice.

Her right fist descends like a pile driver.

The fist capable of punching through a steel wall ten centimeters thick mercilessly...

"Go, Shozai shield!"

...slams through the middle of my chest. Ghah!..

"Damn, I didn't even think of that!.." - Ishizue Kanata stretches her lips in admiration.

Then trump card two goes off. Ghoh!..

That's how it is, now I, ghah, see why the trump card were gh-numbered, like, tha-khh, ghoh-khoh, ghah!..



**Year 2005, the fourteenth of February, 7 AM.**

I'm in an indescribable mood. Thoughtlessly, I peel my eyes open.

"What a dream..."

That was a dream. The worst of nightmares.

Well, it was weird in places, and the hints about the plot were plain to see, so it was kinda easy to bear, too... But I want to make one thing clear - this is not my fault at all.

"...Every year, every single one, something happens. Looks like the fourteenth of February is a psychological trauma for me..."

Rubbing my chest that had a gaping hole in it a short time ago, I quickly get off the bed. Washing the nightmare's chains away, I turn the TV on, mood improved.

The weather is cloudy. So that's how the unbelievably beautiful sunrise from the dream really looks.

"Hmm?"

My phone rung. "Tomato-chan" is displayed on the screen. Nice name... although if she sees that, I'm dead. Since Mato-san oversees former Origa hospital patient Ishizue Arika, she has to call like this once every four days.

Usually after that she accompanies me to the Marion that's in front of the establishment.

I have to pay my check myself, of course.

"Yes, hello. Good morning, this is Ishizue."

"Oh, Shozai. I have bad news. Get comfy and listen."

The voice in the receiver is serious, but also calm. This is how Touma Mato sounds when she's on the cliff's edge. The indescribable deja vu makes me slightly sick.

"This morning, Origa clinic has been demolished. All departments are in ruins. We're looking for the patients and personnel, but it doesn't look good for the other survivors. We'll find one or two if we're lucky. Security cameras show this was the doing of a single patient. They exterminated every escapee. Then they broke through the lobby and discharged themselves, shall we say."

I felt a jolt, as though of electricity. 'All right, where is my international passport?' - I think, rising from the sofa, but I, who's treated as an A disorder carrier, am not allowed even a driver's license.

"Get it?.. They're searching for the suspect with all of their resources right now, but they haven't determined their identity yet."

Right. Origa is an island separate from the mainland. No one can enter from the outside. Any disaster in that place must happen inside. Destroying Origa is like pressing the self-destruct button.

Thus the sole survivor equals the real criminal.

"Shozai. Ishizue Kanata will appear again."

So, it wasn't any mere nightmare.

It was a prophetic dream interspersed with reality. Inevitable for Ishizue Arika.

His headache that will never go away.

**/Vt.in day dream.end**

# 2005 Driga Cup Set V Hospital Strongest Innate

Battles that lasted three seconds or less were too much of a hassle to write and thus omitted.

Ward, Disease, Name, Results

D: "B" (Brainless) → taking applications: Ichizue Karata, Himself to Victorious.

D: Visceras hypoplasia, Yoshikida Kyumei, Sweeping Victory. Best fight so far. Just as expected from his reputation, the strongest demon possessed in terms of output. From the beginning to the end, ten minutes of high tension. Even his final form kept thriving.

D: Cognitive Disability Shaker (Double End): Hinanaga Ruzen, Bitter Victory. She surprised me for a moment. Ruzen said that she couldn't stand my name.

D: Amnesia Nightmare, Iguchi Arou, Victory. Fused the whole Ward along with the central six-story building and self-destructed later. It was just wait and see until the end.

D: Ice Flower (Freesia), Yaguchi Shishiga, Total Victory. Capable of making time stand still.

D: Sea turtle style, Koda Hamura, Overwhelming Victory. Sorry but poisonous abilities aren't effective against me.

E: Fish-suit dreamy sister, Driga Marine, Unearned Win, was already dead inside a special hospital room. I had already lost interest anyway.

D: Seeking Strongest NEED, Okumachi Motomichi, Narrow Victory. Super powerful enemy! Super invincible! Won by a paper thin difference!

D: Inescapable Brain Pitfall (Kain Cube Cleaveress), Kuramitsu Menda, Awarded Victory. Advocate of defeat. Effortlessly refuted inside me, although I could not strike him there was nowhere to escape.



Clean (Maver-san, Yamashita Tami): Won without fighting. Since she obediently surrendered through her ability with me to the underground cage, then I threw her out to the underground passage. Maybe you can make your way out before flying up?

Clericaly Stone Assassin (Murtle Fumble Martel), Nishiki Yuki, Overwhelming Victory. Strangely professed himself to be a former charismatic salesperson. Really flies to divulge people's weaknesses and traumas.

G: Sunny Day Raincoat, Kuzuhiko Namida, Overwhelming Victory. The girl with the watery curses ability.

Always more raincoats even during Sunny days.

Chloe eraser tune (track 3), Makoto Mo, Overwhelming Victory. I want to take care of the loud singing.

Relly: B, Yamada Beta, Umikaze Tachino, Crushing Victory. My first memorable fight! wonder if him and company served me as preliminaries?

B: Eccentricities Projection (Tribute Anthology), Miyahara Mumei, Explicable Victory. A bungled version of Hsiao-san. Nonetheless we had some fun three minutes. I hoped she could accompany me one more minute though.

B: Heart Sheller of the Moon, Yaejin Arishio, Ritsuka, Overwhelming Victory. "Hi Yaejin". She's got a secret fist-pumping sub. How should I put it, it's pretty intense. By the way, she's the demon possessed who has murdered most people. Did she really kill ten thousand people in the north?

A: (nothing special), Hinamon Daka, Super landable Victory. Three seconds exactly were needed to settle the winner. No new organs confirmed at all. Yelled a huge Japanese word.

...How, but could it be that make this person is the most powerful in Driga?

The person?