

# 空中之境界

the GARDEN of sinners 中

奈須蘑菇



# Kara no Kyoukai Volume 02

## The Garden of Sinners

By Kinoko Nasu

Translation at Baka-Tsuki

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# 4 伽藍の洞

garan-no-dou.



## Chapter 4 - Void Shrine - Garan-no-Dou

## Void Shrine - Garan-no-Dou

---and she said.

If you are willing to take in anything  
You'll never be wounded.  
Anything that you don't fit.  
Anything that you don't like.  
Anything that you don't allow.  
If you take in anything without reacting  
You'll never be wounded.

If you are willing to reject everything  
You'll only be wounded.  
Everything that you fit.  
Everything that you like.  
Everything that you dream.  
If you reject everything without a sacrifice  
You'll only be wounded.

A gap between two hearts.  
Unable to both affirm and deny.  
Between them, there is nothing.  
Between them, there is I.



"Hey, about that patient in the third floor private room, have you heard?"

"Of course. That story was all over the place by the middle of yesterday. Even that stony Dr. Ashika in neurology lost his cool, didn't he? There's no way a secret like that wouldn't leak out. I couldn't believe it but, they say the patient's recovered."

"No, no, it's not that. Well, it is definitely about that patient, but there's something besides that. That patient, you know what she did as soon as she woke up? Don't be shocked, but they say she tried to crush her own eyes."

"--- What are you talking about? Is that for real?"

"Yeah, I think it's being kept secret inside the facility. I heard it from a kid who always follows Dr Ashika around, so it's definitely true. Apparently, as soon as Dr Ashika took his eyes off her, she smashed her eyes through the bandages with the palms of her hands. She's a total terror."

"Wait a second. That patient, she's just been lying there for two years, hasn't she? Then there's no way she could move her body."

"Well, yeah, normally. That family is rich, aren't they? While she's been here, we've exercised her limbs everyday, so her joints and stuff haven't stiffened up. But I guess that since it wasn't the subject herself doing the exercise, the movement of the joints was unnatural to her and she couldn't move very well. Thanks to that, her attempt to savage her two eyes ended in failure."

"--- Even so, that's awesome. We learned that while a supine patient is more comfortable, it's much easier for their bodies to get weak. If she's been sleeping for two years, she should barely have been functioning as a human."

"That's why even the doctor was caught off guard. Hey, what do you call that? You know, when a patient's sclera is bleeding?"

"Subconjunctival hemorrhaging."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. It's supposed to become alright by itself, but since the patient smashed her eyes right to the point of glaucoma she can't even see through her eyes right now. They say that they just bandaged her eyes according to the patient's wishes."

"Hmm. So even after waking up from the coma that patient hasn't seen the sunlight. ... darkness within darkness. It seems a bit wrong."

"A bit? And on top of that, there's another problem. Aphasia... loss of speech? It feels like that. She can't talk, so the doctor's bringing in a speech therapist. There's no one like that at our hospital."

"Yeah, since Dr. Araya quit last month.

But --- if she's like that, will they disallow visitors for that patient?"

"Probably. Until she's recovered her psychological balance, even her time with her parents will be limited."

"So that's how it is. In that case, I feel kinda sorry for that boy."

"Who? What boy?"

"Don't you know? After that patient was brought here, there's this kid who came to visit every Saturday. I guess he's too old to call a kid anymore, but, if possible, I want to let him meet her."

"Ah, you mean Polite-Puppy-kun. Lord, he's still coming.

I doubt there are many people as earnest as that in the world these days."

"Yeah, for the last two years that kid's been the only one who watched over the patient. So --- I'm thinking that maybe the major part in the patient's miraculous recovery is due to him. ... Wow, I'm saying this sort of thing after working here for how many years? I'm beginning to think that maybe something's happened to me."

# 1

This place is dark, and the floor is pitch black.

When I realized that the only thing around me was the darkness, I accepted the fact that I was dead.

I'm floating in a sea with no light or sound. Naked, without anything to cover her, the human being called Ryougi Shiki is sinking into the depths.

There's no light here. No, I suspect I never fell in the first place.

Since there's nothing here.

It's not just that there's no light, there isn't even any darkness. Since there is nothing here nothing is visible. There is no meaning to the concept of falling.

Inside the 「 」 within which even form is meaningless, just my body keeps sinking. The naked me, I'm a poisonous shade which makes me want to turn my eyes away. Because everything 「here」 bears such a poisonous aura.

"--- This is death."

Even the sound of my muttering seems like a dream.



Then, I observe something like "time". Time has no meaning inside 「 」, but I become able to observe it.

As naturally as flowing water, as grossly as putrefaction, I am just marking time.

There is nothing here.

Even if I keep continuously looking in the distance, I can't see anything.

Even if I keep waiting continuously for something, I can't see anything.

It's very nice and peaceful.

No --- Since nothing has meaning, just 「being」 here makes everything perfect.

This is death.

The world which only the dead can reach. The world which the living cannot see.

But, I'm still alive ---.



I thought I would lose my mind.

For two years I sat there in the midst of the concept called "death". Rather than observation, it was closer to the struggle of battle.



With the arrival of morning, the hospital slowly comes alive. The footsteps of the nurses traversing the corridors and the noise of the patients waking up and going about their own business is repeated many-fold. Compared to the silence during the night the bustle of the morning makes me feel like I'm at a festival.

For the recently woken me, the riotous noise is too much.

Thankfully, my ward is a private room. It's noisy outside, but at least inside this box it's calm and quiet.

Not much later, a doctor comes to examine me.

"How do you feel, Ryougi-san?"

"--- Well, I'm not really sure."

At my emotionless reply, the doctor shuts up as if he's perplexed.

"... Really? At least you seem calmer than yesterday. It might be troubling for you, but I'll explain your current situation. If you don't like what I'm saying, don't hesitate to tell me."

I replied to the doctor's words with silence. I don't have any interest in such obvious stories.

I think he mistook that as a sign of acceptance.

"In that case, I'll make it brief. Today is the fourteenth of June, 1998. You, Ryougi Shiki, were involved in a nighttime traffic accident on the fifth of March two years ago and were brought here to this hospital. The accident involved you being hit by a car while on a pedestrian crossing. Do you remember?"

"..."

I don't reply. --- I don't know that sort of thing. The last image I can take off that shelf called "memory" is that of my classmate standing dumbly in the rain. I can't remember anything like how I got into an accident.

"Ah, it's alright if you can't remember. We think that just before you got hit by the car, you realized the danger and tried to evade it. Thanks to that, the injuries to your body weren't serious.

In exchange, we suspect that you received a hard shock to your head. You were already in a coma by the time you arrived at our hospital, but luckily your brain

itself wasn't injured. So, the reason you can't remember is probably the confusion brought about by being in a coma for two years. It should only be temporary, as during last night's examination we didn't find any abnormalities in your brainwaves.

Your memories should slowly come back, but I can't guarantee that it will definitely happen. First and foremost, the very fact that you recovered from your comatose state is a miracle in itself."

Even if he says it's been two years, it doesn't feel real to me. To the sleeping Ryougi Shiki, that blank space is close to nothingness.

To the being called Ryougi Shiki, yesterday is definitely that rainy night two years ago.

But that isn't how I feel at all.

To the current me, yesterday is 「nothing」 .

"Oh, and the injury to your eyes isn't so serious either. Injuries caused by blunt weapons are among the least serious eye injuries you tend to see. It's a relief that there weren't any knives or similar objects in your proximity last night. We are going to take the bandages off soon as well. You'll have to leave looking at the scenery outside for another week or so."

I get the feeling that there is a sense of reproach mixed somewhere into the doctor's words.

He's probably nervous because of my attempt to destroy my own eyes. Last night he kept asking me why I did such a thing; I didn't give him an answer.

"From now on we will be doing rehabilitation exercises in the mornings and afternoons. In regard to visits from your family, I'm afraid one hour will be the limit. You can leave as soon as you recover your body and mind's equilibrium. It will be hard, but please try your best."

As I expected, his words ruin my mood.

Tired of poking fun at the doctor, I try moving my right hand. ...My body doesn't feel like my own. Just moving takes time and my joints and muscles hurt as if they are being pulverized.

Of course, it's only to be expected after not using them for two years.

"Well, that's it for this morning. Since it seems that you've calmed down, I won't call a nurse. If you need anything, press that button near your pillow. There's always a nurse standing by in the room next door, so don't hesitate to use it, even for small things."

Soft words.

If I could see, I would be able to observe the doctor's instantaneous smile.

The doctor gets up to leave, but stops at the door and adds something, as if he just remembered.

"Oh yes. A counselor is going to come starting tomorrow. Since she's not much older than you, please talk freely with her. Right now, what you need most to aid your recovery is conversation.

And so I was left alone.

I lay back on the hospital bed, just lying there blankly with arms wrapped around the eyes I had closed myself.

"My name ---".

I said with dry lips.

"Ryougi Shiki".

But no such person exists here.

Because the two years of nothingness killed me.

I can remember clearly all the memories of growing up as Ryougi Shiki. But what does that matter? What are such memories to me, who died and came back to life?

The two years of emptiness completely disconnect the me of the past and the me of the present.

I'm definitely Ryougi Shiki, not someone else. But the memories of the past, I can't feel that they are mine.

To the resurrected me, it's only as if I'm seeing a movie of the life of a person called Ryougi Shiki. I can't think of the movie's main character as being me.

"It's as if I'm a ghost caught on film".

I bite my lips.

I don't know me.

I'm not sure whether I really am Ryougi Shiki.

I feel like a human who doesn't know their own identity.

This shell of a body is empty; it feels like a cave.

Even the air passes through, like the wind.

I don't know the cause, but it really feels like a huge hole has been punched into my chest.

It's so unsettling, --- indeed it's lonely.

My heart is a misplaced puzzle piece. Inside that empty space, this feather-like me can't stand it.

It's so empty that I can't even find a reason to keep living.

"But --- so what if it is like that, Shiki?"

It's really not such a big deal.

It's fascinating --- this unsettling feeling and nervousness that makes me grasp my chest, I don't feel that it's either agonizing or sad.

There's anxiety. There's pain.

But that's all something the child called Ryougi Shiki is holding onto.

I'm just apathetic. Even that fact that I've come back to life after two years fails to move me.

I'm just swaying with the wind and wandering here and there.

Without being able to feel that I'm actually alive.

It's now the next day.

The fact that even I, who can't see, can tell the arrival of the morning is a small but satisfying discovery. Little things like that are a cause for joy. While I wondered why they made me happy, my morning check-up began and ended before I knew it.

It wasn't very quiet in the afternoon, because my mother and older brother came to visit me. Our conversation wasn't very smooth. They felt like strangers to me. With no alternatives, I answered their questions according to Shiki's memories, as a result of which my mother went home with an easy mind.

Everything was funny because, it seemed like I was acting.



When evening came around, the counselor showed up.

The woman who initially introduced herself as a speech therapist was so bright and cheerful that I couldn't see any depth to her personality.

I've never heard of a case where a doctor greeted a patient with the words "Hi, how have you been?"

"Oh, I thought you would be all emaciated, but the vibrancy of your skin is no joke. You know, when I first heard your story I pictured something along the lines of a ghost under a cherry tree, so I didn't really feel like coming. But hey, you are a cute young lady along my line of fancy, so it's my lucky day!"

The woman who I reckon to be in her late twenties, judging by her voice, sits down in the chair next to the bed I'm lying in.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm the speech therapist who is to help you get over your aphasia. I'm not a resident doctor here, so I don't have any ID, but I guess it won't be a problem since you can't see anyway."

"--- Aphasia? Me?"

"Oho."

The doctor goes, after finally getting a reply. I get the feeling she nodded her head as well.

"There you go; it's normal to show anger. After all, aphasia isn't a very good image, and in your case it's a misdiagnosis. Ashika-kun is a textbook doctor, so he's a bit weak when it comes to special cases like yours. Even so, you are being

naughty. People are getting such misconceptions because you can't be bothered to answer them."

The woman smiles as if she is great friends with me. --- It was totally my own opinion, but I decided then and there that this was a person who wore glasses.

"So they think I have aphasia."

"Yeah, since you did hurt your brain in the accident they are wondering if your speech circuits are damaged or something. However, that's a misconception - the reason for your silence isn't physiological, but psychological, isn't it? So it's not aphasia, just you being stubborn. In that case my role isn't needed, but it feels bad to be cut off before a minute has passed, and since nothing's happening with my main job I'll play with you for a bit."

--- This is a useless act of kindness.

I reach out for the button to call the nurse, but the lady doctor quickly removes it from my reach.

"... You."

"Dangerous, dangerous. If you talk to Asika-kun now I'll be kicked out straight away. Anyway, isn't this good? If you pretend to have aphasia, you won't have to reply to useless questions. It's better this way, right?"

... That's correct. But who is this person that can say such things so boldly?

I turn my bandaged eyes towards the unknown lady doctor.

"You are not a doctor, are you?"

"Nope, I'm a magus as my main job."

That's so absurd I let out a sigh.

"I don't have any business with a magician."

"Ahahaha, that's correct. A mage can't fix that hole in your chest. The only thing that can fill it is a normal person."

"--- A hole, in my chest ---?"

"Yeah, you should be feeling it. That you are alone now."

The lady doctor smothers a laugh and stands up. I can hear her arranging the chairs and her footsteps as she goes out.

"I think it's still too early, so let's leave it at this for now. I'll come again tomorrow, bye!"

After appearing so abruptly, she leaves equally as suddenly.

I touch my lips with the right hand that I have difficulty moving.

Now... Alone...

A hole... in my chest...

--- Oh, how can this be?

Oh no, I hadn't realized.

No one. No matter where I call he's not there. The existence called Ryougi SHIKI that existed within Ryougi Shiki has disappeared without a trace.

Shiki was a dual personality disorder sufferer who possessed another personality within herself. Inside the Ryougi family, children with two personalities were born genetically. That which would be shunned in a normal family was instead celebrated as inherent of a transcendent being, and the bearers were treated as the true heirs of the family.

... Shiki inherited that blood. It was the reason Shiki surpassed her older brother to become the heir to the Ryougi family.

But this kind of thing doesn't happen very often.

Two personalities --- Yang affinity males and Yin affinity females. Between those the leadership of the Yang affinity male is usually stronger. Among the few true Ryougi heirs until now, all had been born as men and had female personalities inside. But due to some mistake, Shiki was the reverse of the norm.

Inside the female Shiki, the male, SHIKI, was included.

The one with dominance over the body was the female Shiki --- me.

SHIKI was my *minus* face. He contained my suppressed emotions. Shiki grew up suppressing the darkness called SHIKI. Time after time, she killed the self called SHIKI and lived pretending to be normal. SHIKI didn't seem to have any complaints about that. After being asleep inside of me, he woke up for things like sword training and took charge while complaining as if it was annoying.

... It might seem like a master/servant relationship, but the reality wasn't like that. In the end, Shiki and SHIKI are one person, so Shiki's actions are SHIKI's, and SHIKI suppressing his own fancies was also Shiki's wish as well.

... Yes, SHIKI was a murderer. As far as I know he had no experience at it, but he had a desire within him to kill those beings called humans that were the same organism as him. The dominant personality of Shiki ignored this - in short, she forbade it.

Shiki and SHIKI were inseparable beings, although they ignored each other. Shiki was lonely, but because of the self called SHIKI, she wasn't alone.

But the time came when that relationship would be destroyed.



Two years ago --- when Shiki was a first year high school student. The season when for the first time, SHIKI, who until then hadn't wanted to use the body, had asked to go out of his own volition.

From there on, Shiki's memory is hazy.

Right now I can't bring to mind any of Shiki's memories from the beginning of the first year of high school, until I was involved in the accident.

The thing I remember --- my shape standing at the site of the murder. More than that, there's an image that I can remember even more clearly than that.

The classroom burning red in the light of the sunset.

The one who destroyed Shiki, my classmate.

The boy, who Shiki wanted to kill.

The piece of normality, that Shiki wanted to protect.

I got the feeling that I knew this a long time ago.

But, this me that has woken from a long sleep, his name is the one thing I can't yet remember.



Night falls, and the hospital grows quiet.

Only the occasional sound of slippers echoing through the corridors makes me feel that I'm awake.

Inside the darkness --- no, because I'm in the darkness. This blinds me, I take to heart the fact that I'm alone. If I was the previous Shiki, I wouldn't have had this kind of feeling. Shiki, who had another self inside her. But SHIKI no longer exists. No --- I, I don't even know whether I'm Shiki or SHIKI.

SHIKI had disappeared from inside me. With that alone, I recognize myself as Shiki.

"Hic hic... What kind of contradiction is this? Not knowing which side one is if one side is missing."

I try talking to myself, but the emptiness in my chest doesn't even fill a little. Even just the thought that I am sad would have some change on this emotionless mind of mine.

I won't be able to know.

Since I am no one, I can't feel that Ryougi Shiki's memories are really mine. Even if the shell called Ryougi Shiki exists, when the contents are washed away, the shell has no meaning. .... Oh, it hurts. What must go inside this empty cave?

"--- I, will, go, in..."

Suddenly I hear words like that.

A movement of the air as if a door has opened.

*It's probably my imagination*

I turn my closed eyes that way.

There's --- something there.

White smoke is billowing. My eyes that shouldn't be able to see can see the shape of the smoke. The smoke strangely resembled a human. No, it seemed as if a human lacked bones and was swaying in the wind like a sunflower.

The unpleasant smoke comes straight at me.

I can't move as I like yet, so I just blankly wait for it.

Even if this is a ghost, I'm not afraid.

The really scary things have no shape. No matter how weird something is, if it has form, I can't be scared.

And --- if it is a ghost, the current me may as well be the same. After all, there's not much difference between a thing that isn't alive and me, who has no reason to live.

The smoke slaps me.

My whole body and mind go into overdrive. The chill that rakes down my spine is as sharp as a bird's talons.

It was an unpleasant sensation, but I just dumbly sat there and watched. After touching me for an age, the smoke melts like a snail sprinkled with salt.

The reason is simple. It's been five hours since the smoke started touching me. It will soon be five o'clock. The ghost melted because it's now morning.

Since I haven't slept, I decide to go to sleep again.

The *something* morning since I woke up comes around. My eyes are still wrapped in bandages, so I can't see a thing.

A quiet morning with no one around.

The wavelet-like silence is so dazzling that I lose my sense of self.

--I can hear the chattering of little birds.

--I can feel the warmth of the sunlight.

--The clear air feels my lungs.

--Ah. Compared to that world, this place is so beautiful.

But, there's a self that's not happy with this. Every time I'm wrapped in the morning air that I can only feel by sense, I just think:

--They are this happy.

Humans are loners like this. Being alone is safest, so how come we can't bear being alone?

The past me was complete. Because I was self-sufficient, I didn't need anyone else. But, I'm different now. I'm no longer complete. I'm waiting for a part I lack. I'm just desperately waiting like this.

But just who am I waiting for...?



The lady doctor who called herself a counselor came daily. Before I knew it, I seemed to be treating my talks with her as my only relief from the mundane during the course of the days.

"Hmm, as expected. It's not that SHIKI didn't have control over the body, it's just that he didn't exercise it. You two keep getting more fascinating the more I hear about you."

Still bringing the chair over and sitting there next to the bed, the lady doctor talks as if she's amused by something. For some reason she knows my circumstances very well: the dual personality that only a few even within the Ryougi family know about, my involvement in the serial murder case two years ago. Those are details that normally I would have to keep hiding, but to me, they are inconsequential events anyway.

Before I knew it, I was responding to the counselor's light teasing.

"There's nothing funny about having a dual personality."

"No, no. You know, you two don't have anything as pleasing to look at as dissociative identity disorder. Existing simultaneously, each having their own unique will, and on top of that your actions are coordinated. That sort of complex personality shouldn't be called a "dissociated identity," but rather a "united independent personality"."

"United... independent personality?"

"Yeah. Still, some questions remain. In that case, there was no reason for SHIKI to stay asleep, but according to your story he was always sleeping. That part of it is a little strange."

SHIKI, who was always asleep.

... I'm probably the only one who knows why.

SHIKI, more than Shiki --- liked to dream.

"So, is he still sleeping, that guy?"

I don't reply to the lady doctor's words.

"So that's how it is. He did die. Two years ago during the accident, in your stead.

That's why you have an omission in your memory. Since he's dead, those memories won't be coming back... How Ryougi Shiki was associated with the street serial killer... with this, that knowledge has truly disappeared into the darkness."

"That event. They said that the criminal was never caught."

"Yeah. After your accident, the criminal disappeared as if he were a lie."

I wonder to what extent that is true, the lady doctor said with a laugh.

"However, there was no reason for SHIKI-kun to disappear. If he just stayed asleep, ignoring the world outside, Shiki would have disappeared. For some reason, he must have wished for himself to disappear."

That kind of thing, even if she asks me I don't have any answers.

"I don't know. More importantly, did you bring the scissors?"

"Ah, as expected, I couldn't. You have a history, so any potential weapons are strictly forbidden."

The lady doctor's words are according to my expectations. Whether or not it was due to the daily rehab exercises, my body has recovered to the point where I can move easily by myself. They said that I am the first to have recovered so quickly with just a few minutes of exercise twice a day.

As a celebration of sorts, I asked the lady doctor for a pair of scissors.

"But what are you going to use a pair of scissors for? Planning to do some flower arrangements?"

"As if. I just want to cut my hair."

That's why. Now that I can move my body, my hair that reaches my back has become inconvenient. Hair that bounces around from my neck and flows down to my shoulders is pretty annoying.

"Then you can call a hairdresser. If you find it difficult to talk, should I call one for you?"

"No thanks. Another person touching my hair? I don't even want to think about it."

"That's right. To a woman, her hair is her life. The fact that your hair has grown while you are the same as you were two years ago is a wonderful thing."

I can hear the lady doctor standing up.

"So, shall I give you this instead? It's a stone, carved with a rune; it should do the same thing as a charm. I'll put it over your doorway, so be careful not to lose it to anyone."

It seems that the lady doctor used her chair to place the charm, or whatever it was, over the door.

And just like that, she opens the door.

"Then, that's it from me. Someone else might come starting tomorrow, so stay well."

Talking in a strange roundabout manner, the lady doctor left.



That night, the guest that always came to visit didn't appear. The smoke-like ghost that appears without failure at midnight - for some reason, it didn't enter the room.

The smoke was coming every night and touching me.

I knew that that was dangerous, but I just left it alone. If that ghost got angry at me and tried to kill me, that would be okay too.

No, rather, how comfortable would it be if it had just killed me?

For I, who cannot even feel that I'm alive, there is no reason to keep on living. Instead, it would be easier to just disappear.

In the darkness, I try touching the bandages covering my eyes.

My sight will soon come back. In that case, I will completely ruin my eyes this time around.

I can't see it now, but if I fully recover it will be visible again. If I'm going to see **that** world again... I don't need anything like these eyes. Even if destroying my eyes means I will be unable to see the world on this side of that divide, it's still better than *that*.

But until that moment, I will be unable to act.

The Shiki of before would have destroyed her eyes without any hesitation, but the current me is stopping at achieving a temporary darkness.

--- It's so... pitiful.

While I have no will to live, I don't even have any will to die. This emotionless self of mine doesn't feel any attraction towards any action. I can only affirm another's will.

So if that unidentifiable smoke tries to kill me, I have no thoughts of stopping it.

The thought of death holds no attractions for me but I don't feel like resisting it either.

Because... Happiness or sadness, if they are things I could only obtain as Ryougi Shiki...

Then the present me has no reason to live on.

## ／Garan-no-Dou／1

Aozaki Touko first heard the story of the person called Ryougi Shiki on a nice afternoon, not long after they had entered the month of June.

The origin of it all was that the new employee she had just hired on impulse was Ryougi Shiki's friend, and as a way to pass the time, she lent an ear to his story.

According to his tale, the person called Ryougi Shiki fell into a comatose state after a traffic accident two years ago. She was retaining her life functions, but there was no possibility of her waking up. Not only that, but the growth of her body also seemed to have stopped. At first, Touko couldn't believe this apparent contradiction. How could a person's life functions continue if they've stopped growing?

"... Hmm, the only time an organism does not grow is if it is dead. No, even pressure over time affects the dead. A corpse passes through the growth called decay and returns to the earth. The only thing that moves but doesn't grow would be that wind-up doll you brought in and set loose a while ago."

"But it's true. Since the accident, it doesn't look like she's aged a bit. Are there any other cases where a person is in a coma for which there's no explainable cause, Touko-san?"

"Hmmm..." goes Touko upon hearing the new employee's question, and crosses her arms.

"Let's see. There was that famous one in that country over there. A newly married woman in her twenties fell into a coma. She woke up after fifty years had passed - don't you know that one?"

In reply to Touko's words, the new employee says "No," and shakes his head.

"Uh, how was that person when she woke up?"

"Extremely normal. As if she hadn't been sleeping for 50 long years. Her mind was revived just as it had been in her twenties - apparently, it made her husband sad."

"--- Eh? Sad? How come? His wife's recovery should be a joyous occurrence."

"The thing is, her mind was still just as it was in her twenties, but her body had grown old into its seventies. Even in a comatose state, leaving something alive means that it will degrade - you can't do anything about that."

So this seventy-year-old granny is always urging her husband to go out as if she's still in her twenties. The husband has lived the seventy years normally, so he's normal - the problem is the wife. Because fifty years have flowed past



without her knowledge, she can't accept the fact no matter how you explain it. It's not that she doesn't want to accept it, she really can't conceive it to be the truth.

It's a tragedy among tragedies. They say that the lady who wanted to go out to play with that wrinkled face of hers was persuaded not to by her husband, who was in tears. They also say that he had this thought: if it was going to be like this, it would have been better if she hadn't woken up at all.

How was it? This dream-like tragedy, it's actually something that happened in the past. Was it useful?"

In wonder, he actually nodded in response to Touko's sarcastic question.

"Oh, are you onto something?"

He gave a small nod to the impishly smiling Touko.

"...Yeah, a little. I'm thinking it might be like this. That Shiki might be trying not to wake up."

"It sounds like there's a past there. Good. Since I'm bored, shall I listen to the story as a way to pass the time?"

He gets angry at Touko, who really thinks of it as just another way to kill time, and turns away.

"No thank you. Touko-san, your insensitivity is a real problem."

"What? You are the one who brought it up. I understand, so spill it. It's not just a whim for me either. That Azaka, every time she rings it's Shiki this and Shiki that. If I have no idea as to what kind of person this Shiki is, I can't reply, can I?"

At the mention of Azaka's name, he put on a sour face.

"I've been meaning to ask you for a while, but... how did my little sister come to know you, Touko-san?"

"One year ago at a tourist spot. I got caught up in an impossible situation and my cover was totally blown."

"...Well, okay, but Azaka is a very naive child, so please avoid that talk of what's there and what's not around her. She's in that period where I'm worried about her even without her getting involved in all that."

"Azaka... naive? Well, your relationship with your little sister is your problem, so I won't get involved. Instead, share that story about that kid called Shiki."

Unable to withstand Touko, who had pushed herself onto the desk, he began talking.

About his friend Ryoudi Shiki's personality and her unique character.

During high school, he and Ryougi Shiki were classmates. He had a relationship with the name Ryougi Shiki before entering high school, and after getting put in the same class as her, became friends. The only person to have a friendly relationship with Ryougi Shiki, who didn't want any friends, was him.

But, after the street murders during the first year of high school, Ryougi Shiki began changing in a strange way.

She confessed to him that she had a dual personality, and that her other side enjoyed murder.

To be truthful, how R. Shiki was connected to the street murders two years ago is still a mystery. Before anything could be confirmed, she had an accident in front of his eyes and was moved to the hospital.

During the first days of March, on that cold night of the falling rain.

That kind of story about someone's life. Touko treated it as just another story told over a beer, but as the story progressed the smile disappeared from her face.

"--- That's all there is to know about the relationship between Shiki and me. Although the story is already two years old."

"--- So is that why her growth has stopped? Stocking up her life. It's not even as if she's a vampire."

Heh, Touko smirked, with the end of the lips curled up.

"So, how do you write that kid's name? It would be in kanji, wouldn't it?"

"Shiki(數) from (神), why?"

"Is it the Shiki of Shikigami(式)? And her family name is Ryougi at that. That's just perfect."

Stubbing out the cigarette she had been biting in the ashtray, Touko stood up, as if unable to tolerate something any longer.

"Was that hospital in the suburbs? This is getting interesting... I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a reply, Touko left the office behind her.

*I can't believe I'm getting involved in this sort of nonsense at a place like this. What kind of fate is this?* Touko bit her lip.

## ／Garan-no-Dou／2

Ryoudgi Shiki's recovery is a few days later.

The fact that the situation doesn't even allow for the relatives to visit means that normal visits are out of the question.

Is it because of that?

Is that the reason that the new employee is concentrating on his desk-work with a sulkiness which makes it seem that his whole person has undergone a change?

"It's gloomy, too gloomy."

"Yes ma'am. A light, I'll obtain one that's suitable."

He replies without even looking at Touko.

There are times when a dutiful person will show absurdly eccentric conduct as a result of having missed something. Thinking this teen is of that sort, Touko speaks to him.

"Don't think so obsessively about it. You seem ready to just charge in there tonight or something."

"Impossible, ma'am. That hospital, the security is nothing short of a research lab's."

In contrast to the casual manner in which he replies, it seems as if he's carried out a pretty thorough investigation.

Touko shrugs, thinking: *Well, I can't let a brand new employee become a criminal.*

"... I was going to stay quiet about this, but since you are so agitated, I'll tell you. I'm going to be working at the hospital as a stand-in from tomorrow. I'll find out how Ryoudgi Shiki is, so just sit tight for now."

"--- What?"

"It just so happened that I got invited as a doctor. Normally I would have refused, but this time it's not as if it's someone else's business. Seeing as I dragged the story out of you, I thought that I had to at least do this for you."

Touko speaks as if it's no big deal.

Rising up from his chair, he approaches Touko and grabs hold of her two hands. Voom, voom. The two people's hands go up and down. ...Not realizing that this is an expression of his admiration, Touko stares at him with a stiff face.

"You have some strange hobbies, don't you?"

"I'm delighted! In fact, I'm stunned! There's a gentle and virtuous side to Touko-san like in other people after all!"

"... I realized I'm not like others, but I think it's better not to say things like that."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Ah, so that's why you are dressed formally today. It looks very smart; it really suits you. I couldn't recognize you!"

"... My outfit's the same as always, but whatever, I'll accept the compliments."

It's useless to say anything, Touko realizes, and quietly folds things up.

"So don't do anything rash. Even without that sort of thing, that hospital is strange. You will sit here and look after the office, got it?"

At that, the until-then hyperactive employee settles down.

"... Strange, you mean that hospital?"

"Yeah. There's a ward against something placed there. It seems like another magician was meddling with things. Of course, the target wasn't Ryougi Shiki. If it was, they wouldn't have held off for two years."

It was a whopper of a lie, but the confident way in which she spoke meant he didn't suspect a thing.

"... Uhm, a ward. That's like the second floor of this building, isn't it?"

"Yep. A ward is something of different levels which isolates a specified area. They range from ones that really create a wall to ones that cover the target area with an invisible barrier. The highest ranking wards are a form of subliminal coercion that goes, "nothing has been done but no one approaches". It's the same as this building. If you put in place a *suggestion* like "anyone who does not have a reason to come here will not be conscious of this place", a ward will be formed which will continue to exist without anyone noticing. A ward that just mimics another world and makes people realize that something is wrong is the worst of the worst."

A strangeness which prevents you from noticing strangeness - that is her rule of vacancy. A ward which everyone ignores and passes although it's on the map. A world where a pre-eminent magician lives appears to be just like any other neighboring house.

But, that ward, this new employee unconsciously broke it. This building which he shouldn't have been able to find unless he knew Aozaki Touko, he found too easily.

... Well, that is also the reason she hired him.

"... So, is that hospital's ward a dangerous one?"

"Try listening to what someone is saying. A ward itself does no harm. That word, it originates from Buddhism. A ward is always something that isolates an

area from the outside world, although it has somehow come to represent technique by which a magician protects his or her body.

Understand? I said this just before, but the best wards don't feel weird to a normal person. Let's call it "an idea which forces itself on the unconscious mind". The best of the best reach the stage of "disconnection of space"; but to go that far you are looking at magicians rather than sorcerers. Currently there's only one magician in this country, so basically that kind of ward just can't be formed.

Well, nothing that powerful was formed, but the ward placed around that hospital is pretty complex. It's good enough that even I didn't notice it for a while. There's a ward specialist that I know - this skill is at the same level as that guy's.

... Well, among ward specialists there are a lot of philosophers. Most of them are well distanced from anything accompanied by violence, so it should be alright for now."

That's right, there's no danger in the ward itself. The problem is what is happening within the bounds of that space cut off from the rest of the world. That hospital's ward is aimed inwards, not outwards. In short, it's of the kind that makes it so no one notices no matter what happens within the building. For example, if a room was to explode in the middle of the night, not one person would be woken up by the noise.

Touko didn't tell him that. Saying something about the time creeping along, she walks out with her eyes focused on the clock.

His voices catches on her narrow back.

"Touko-san. Shiki, take good care of her."

"Alright," Touko says, waving. He asks her another trivial question even though she didn't even bother to turn around.

"Ah, yes. Touko-san, who's that ward specialist you know?"

*Tock*, Touko's feet stop.

She falls into thought for a second, then swings her head around to pierce him with her eyes as she replies.

"Well, if he's a ward specialist, he's a monk of course."

Around six days had passed since Touko was invited to the hospital as a provisional doctor. Every time Touko passed on the news to her employee that Ryougi Shiki's condition was improving every day, she couldn't help but have one little worry.

That is, whether or not the Ryougi Shiki of the present and the Ryougi Shiki of the past were the same to another person.

"Taking physiotherapy twice a day and getting a CT scan are like work for her. You'll be able to see her on the day she's released, so just wait a little more."

Having come back from the hospital, Touko smooths out her orange necktie and sits on the desk.

The time of evening with summer just ahead.

The red blaze of the sunset dyes the lightless interior of the office a dark orange.

"Physiotherapy twice a day? Will Shiki be okay with just that? She's been asleep for two years."

"They say they moved her joints for her even though she was asleep. On top of that, physiotherapy isn't exercise. Five minutes a day is sufficient. Originally, the term rehabilitation wasn't a medical term, but meant the recovery of one's dignity as a human. That's how Ryougi Shiki, who has been lying around until now, has been able to regain the feeling that she is human. The body's recovery... well, that's a different story."

Touko lights the cigarette she's holding in her mouth, cutting off the conversation for a while.

"But you know, the problem isn't of the body, but rather the mind. That kid is becoming different from the Ryougi Shiki of before."

"--- Is it... memory loss?"

As if he had prepared for such a thing, he hesitantly says something stupid.

"Hmm, I wonder.... I believe her personality itself is the same as before. There hasn't been a change to Ryougi Shiki herself. What has changed is Shiki. I don't know if this will come as a shock to you."

"I'm plenty used to this kind of thing by now. Please explain fully. Shiki... what's happened to her?"

"Mmm, to tell the truth. She's completely empty."

Shiki, who until now had always carried around another person inside of her... SHIKI no longer exists. No, she must be unsure whether or not she's even Shiki or SHIKI.

When she woke up, SHIKI was already gone from inside her. Through his loss, her mind has become a blank space. Maybe --- that kid won't be able to stand the empty space... Her heart is empty. Like a hole, it's completely open. Even the air passes through like the wind."

"What do you mean, SHIKI's gone --- how come?"

"He probably died in Shiki's stead. However it happened, Ryougi Shiki died in that accident two years ago. You might misunderstand since she's somehow still alive, but just assume for a minute that she died. Ryougi Shiki came back to life as a new entity inside the body of Ryougi Shiki. The Shiki of now, the Shiki of the past, and the Shiki of the present derived from those memories are nothing but strangers. No one can accept another person's history as their own. That child will perhaps be spending her nights with the thought that 'I'm still not myself'."

"... Another person? So, Shiki can't remember the things that have happened?"

"No, she remembers. At present she is definitely the Shiki you know. The reason she's still alive is because she had the equal but separate personalities of Shiki and SHIKI.

Ryougi Shiki suffered a death of the mind due to the accident. Let's say that SHIKI accepted the role of dying at that time. So, although she should have died at that moment, Shiki was still there in her brain, and as a consequence, her mind didn't die. Shiki has been asleep because of the death of Ryougi Shiki, but since it was SHIKI that died, she was able to survive.

And so --- she was in a coma for two years, and although her body kept functioning, she didn't grow - all because she was dead yet still alive.

But the revived her is different from the past Shiki in the details. It's not so bad as to be called memory loss, but she probably won't be able to bring to mind any memories unless she needs to.

You can't say it's another person or that it's a complete stranger, but she's now different from the Shiki you've known until now. A third personality which is an amalgam of the personalities of Shiki and SHIKI - it would be most appropriate to accept her as such."

... That's what she said, but in reality such a thing could not happen.

As long as Shiki was Ryougi, there was no need to mix with SHIKI, who was her other half, and Shiki wouldn't be able to fill the hole left by SHIKI's absence by herself.



Avoiding any reference to that fact, Touko continues talking.

"Even if she's revived as a wholly different person, she's still Ryougi Shiki. No matter how little confidence you have in the fact that you are you --- that child is still Ryougi Shiki. Right now she probably can't even feel that she's alive, but the time will come when she will accept that she is Shiki.

A rose is born as a rose. It doesn't become a different flower just because the ground it's on and the water it receives change."

So don't be so hung up over it all, she added in a whisper.

"Eventually, an empty hole has to be filled. She will have to build a new self, not based on her memories of the past, but through her experiences in the present. That's a shrine that no one can help her build. It's not something another person should meddle in. In short, all you have to do is treat her as you've always done. Oh, and it seemed like they were going to release her pretty soon."

Throwing the burnt-down cigarette stub out the window, Touko raises her arms and straightens her back.

Crick, crick, crack. The sound her bones make can be clearly heard.

"I knew I shouldn't have done something I'm not used to. The cigarettes tasted so bad that I was about to go crazy."

She talked while letting out a long sigh, as if she was tired of the world.

As the usual morning check-up ended, I realised that it was now the 20th. Which meant that it has now been seven days since I woke up. My body has also recovered without a hitch, so I am going to be released tomorrow. The bandages over my two eyes, I will also be able to take them off tomorrow morning.

Seven days... a week.

I haven't gained much during this period of time.

I've lost so many things that I'm not even sure what I've lost.

My parents, Akitaka, they are probably the same as they were before. But to me, they feel like different people. The fading away of all that once surrounded me is something that can't be helped, since the one called Ryougi Shiki has changed.

I touch the bandage covering my eyes.

The only thing I gained in exchange for everything I have lost is this.

I, who experienced 「death」 for two years while still alive. My body has changed so that I can now view such formless concepts.

The first thing I saw upon waking up from the coma was not the surprised nurse running towards me... it was the line wrapping around her throat. People, walls, even the air itself... there are incredibly fine lines visible on everything. Those lines were always moving and irregular. But I suffered from an obsession with the idea that death would spread out at any moment from those individual concepts and pull me in. I saw a hallucination in which the approaching nurse crumbled into pieces starting from the line in her neck.

When I understood what those lines were --- I crushed my two eyes with my own hands.

My hands hadn't moved in two years and just clenching them brought on agonizing pain, but I still moved my arms. Luckily or unluckily, my arms were still weak and I was stopped by the doctors in the process of destroying my eyes. They decided that it was just a sudden impulse brought on by the turbidity of my mind and weren't particularly interested in why I had tried to crush my eyes.

"Are my eyes --- going to recover soon?"

I don't want that. That kind of world, I never want to see it again.

A world where nothing exists. While I was 「there」, I was content and at peace.

--- I can't believe it now. Remembering that world after I woke up I thought about it and there couldn't be anything more pathetic than that world. That darkness, even if it was just a nightmare I dreamt up during my sleep --- I can't stand the thought of falling into that place again.

And, these two eyes of mine that are connected to that place.

I bring my fingertips to my eyes.

After that, all that's left is to stab my eyes with those fingertips as cleanly as if I was swinging a bamboo sword.

"Just a second, hold up. You give up too quickly."

Suddenly a noise.

I turn my senses towards the door.

The thing that is there is --- what is it?

Without a sound the someone comes closer, coming right up to the bed where I'm reposed.

"Is it the 'mystic eyes of death perception'? It's too wasteful to destroy that, Shiki. Especially seeing as anything you can see will be seen even if you ruin your eyes. You see, a curse is something that comes back if you throw it away."

"Are you --- human?"

My question provokes a reaction which sounds like somebody trying not to laugh.

Whoosh, I hear the sound of a lighter being flicked and a flame springing out.

"I'm a sorceress. I came here to teach you how to use those eyes of yours."

That familiar female voice... This someone is without a doubt the counsellor.

"What do you mean, how to use these eyes...?"

"Well, it will only be a little better than now, but I suppose it's better than nothing. Your mystic eyes that can conceive another's death by just looking are the first since the time of the Celtic gods. Erasing them is too wasteful."

It's called [Balor](#). The lady adds some incomprehensible words.

"Mystic eyes are normally the result of you bringing about some kind of augmentation effect for your eyes through spiritual surgery. But in your case, I think they came about naturally. An ability you originally had was brought to the fore by the accident. By the sounds of it, it seemed that the child called Shiki was always seeing to the heart of everything."

... She talks as if she knows.

Actually, as she said, Shiki had always been gazing at a far-off location. I think that even while looking at a person, she saw not the exterior, but that person's core.

Although Shiki herself wasn't aware of it.

"Well, you see, that was definitely a control mechanism Shiki used unconsciously. You shouldn't try to look at exteriors.

Every object has flaws. The fancy of wishing everything could be taken apart and remade only exists because there's no such thing as a perfect object.

Your eyes can see those flaws, as if they were a microscope. Your spiritual sight is too strong. You can see those lines that are invisible to us, and that brain of yours that was in contact with death for so long can even understand what they are. In conclusion, you can see death. Not only see it, but you can even touch it. A living organism's lines of death will keep changing position as long as it's alive. The ability to see those lines clearly, there's not much difference between that and mystic eyes that can kill with a look. If you must stab those eyes, I will receive them instead. I will pay you any price you name."

"... Did you say I will be able to see this even if my eyes can't see? In that case, there's no reason for me to stab them."

"Well, yes. You can't lead a normal life anyway. Leave your agonizing at that, Ryougi Shiki. Open your eyes a bit. You are originally a human of my kind. If you are --- abandon any dreams you have of living like everyone else."

"---."

... That one sentence, in some ways it was conclusive.

But I felt as if I shouldn't accept it for some reason.

I reply with the strongest rebuttal I can manage at this time.

"Something as pitiful as an urge to live on --- I don't have any such thing."

"Heh. Is that because you've emptied your mind? But you don't want to die, do you? Because you've seen that world. Since you've reached a state of realization that not even a [Keter](#) can reach, you gorged brat.

Do you understand? Your problem's simple. Okay, you've revived as another person. So what? It's just that SHIKI isn't here. I guess since you and SHIKI were definitely a set, his absence alone would mean that you are a whole different person. Even if you are the very embodiment of Shiki, I understand that you are different from before.

But what I'm saying is that that's as far as it goes.

Right now you are desperately rejecting death while you have no will to live. You have no reason to live on, but you fear the thing called death. Life or death - unable to choose either side you are walking a tightrope on the boundary of the two. I suppose it's enough to empty your mind."

"... You keep chattering away as if you know everything..."

I glare at the woman. At that moment --- without a hint of doubt, my eyes which should be blind catch sight of the woman's outline and black lines.

「death」 coils out towards me from the woman's lines.

"Did you see it? It's because there are flaws that they move with just that much contact. In the eyes of the idle spirits here, your body is the perfect vessel. If you don't wake up you are going to be dragged away and killed."

By that talk of being dragged away and killed, does she mean that white smoke?

But that doesn't come around here anymore.

"Idle spirits are nothing more than a part of the soul left behind after death. They don't have a will, so they just wander around. But as they are parts, they keep grouping together to form a whole until they become a ghost. They don't have a will, but basic desires remain. Things like 'I want to return to my former self', or 'I want a human body'.

A hospital has a lot of idle spirits. They form drifting ghosts and look for a body they can inhabit. Since they are so weak, normal people can't feel them or even come into contact with them. Formless spirits only follow people with paranormal abilities who can perceive them. Sorcerers who make a living out of talking to ghosts protect their egos with a shell, so it's very rare for them to be taken down by a drifting ghost.

On the other hand --- they will probably latch onto a person with an empty heart, say you for example, pretty easily."

There is a hint of contempt in her voice as she speaks.

So, was that why that smoke came to me? If that was the case, why didn't it possess me? If it had tried to become my kernel, I wouldn't have resisted.

"--- Pathetic. Even the rune's protection is meaningless like this. That's it - as expected, this doesn't suit you. Just do as you will after this."

After speaking so venomously the lady distanced herself from the bed.

Just before she shut the door to the room, that lady left behind one last remark.

"But you know, did SHIKI really die for nothing, Ryougi Shiki?"

I couldn't reply to that.

Really --- that lady only touches the subjects I am avoiding and leaves them behind like thorns.



It's night.

Darkness surrounds me. Tonight there isn't even the sound of anyone walking through the corridors.

In the midst of that night which was peaceful as a silent lake deep within a mountain range, I was recalling my conversation with that lady.

No, just that last undeniable question.

For what reason did SHIKI die in Shiki's stead? SHIKI isn't here to reply.

--- SHIKI, who is no longer here.

Exactly why did he disappear?

What did he disappear in exchange for?

SHIKI, who liked to dream.

He was always asleep. But on that night of the rain, he abandoned even that action and died.

The self I can no longer meet, the self I could never meet in the first place.

SHIKI, who was always myself.

My consciousness settles down.

In an attempt to reach the conclusion he reached I look back through my memories.

Creak, the door to the room opens.

Following that slow footsteps approach me.

Is it a nurse? No, the time is already past midnight.

If it's a visitor, it could only be ---

At that moment a human hand wraps around my neck.

The cold hand squeezes as if to break my neck just like that.

"Ah ---."

The pressure on her neck makes Shiki cry out in pain.

I can't breathe. My throat is getting crushed. At this rate my neck is going to be twisted off before I have any problems breathing.

Shiki stares at the opponent with her unseeing eyes.

... It's not --- a human.

No, the body is that of a human, but the person who is choking the life out of her is already dead. A corpse is moving by itself and attacking Shiki who is on the bed.

The pressure on her neck does not ease.

Shiki resists, holding the attacker's arms with both hands but the difference in strength is obvious.

More than anything --- wasn't this what she wanted?

"---."

Shiki stops breathing and removes her hands from the corpse's arm.

If I'm going to be killed like this it's okay, so just give up. After all there's no meaning to my life. To exist when you cannot even feel that you are alive, there can be no greater agony than that.

To just disappear is natural providence, even a thought like that comes into my mind.

My strength is slipping away.

Although only a few seconds would have flowed past the time seems to pass very slowly. It stretches like a rubber band.

The corpse squeezes down on Shiki's throat. Heatless fingers that feel as if they are made of wood dig into her neck.

This murder has no feeling to it, and from the start there was no sign of a will behind it either.



The flesh of my neck tears.

The flow of blood is proof that I'm alive.

By dying --- dying like SHIKI --- I am throwing that away.

... Throwing it away? That phrase makes Shiki regain consciousness.

A sudden question forms.

Would he have died so willingly.

... That's right, I hadn't thought of that.

Whatever the reason, would his will have been completely behind his decision?

There's no way he would have wanted to die.

--- Death is such a lonely and worthless thing.

Death is such a black and unpleasant thing.

Death, would have been scarier than anything else --- !

"--- No."

All of a sudden Shiki's body is vitalised.

Grabbing the corpse's neck with both hands she pushes the opponent's belly with one foot from her squashed position and ---

"I don't want to fall into that place again --- !"

--- Kicks the lump of meat with all her might.

Slip, slipping from the bloody flesh the corpse's hands come off Shiki's neck.

Shiki gets off the bed.

The corpse leaps at Shiki straight away and the two get tangled up in the lightless hospital room.

The corpse's body is that of an adult human, two heads bigger than Shiki. No matter how she struggles Shiki is pushed back. With both arms trapped Shiki slowly pulls back. It's a small hospital room so she soon reaches the wall.

Whack, the moment she touched the wall Shiki made up her mind.

She voluntarily fled so that there would be a window behind her.

She calculated how she would fall back.

The problem --- how many floors up it is.

"--- Don't hesitate."

Scolding herself she removes the arms that were holding the corpse back.

The corpse stretches its hands towards her neck, but faster than that --- she opened the window with her freed hands and the two fell out as if they were getting tangled up.



The instant I begin to fall.

I grab the corpse's head and reverse who is above and who is below.

(spin - SoundFX), after the arrangement changed so that the corpse was on the ground side and I was on top riding it, I jumped by sense alone.

The ground already seems to be right in front of my nose.

The corpse's body gets hurled against the ground, and I was jumping horizontal to the ground before my body could roll over.

(Ururu - SoundFX), scattering the dirt of the hospital lawn I land with both arms and legs.

The corpse fell on the hospital flower beds --- and it happened that I slipped and fell on the lawn which is a fair distance from there.

I had just executed a miraculous fall, the likes of which I hadn't done once in the dojo --- but the weight of that great height of three floors was paralyzing my body.

Around me are only the trees of the garden and the silent night, where not a sound can be heard even when it's like this.

My body doesn't move and I can only feel the pain in my neck.

Ahhhh --- I'm still alive.

And --- That corpse hasn't died yet.

If I don't want to die it's obvious as to what I need to do.

Kill before you are killed. Just by thinking that the emptiness in my heart disappears. At the same time a lot of feelings are unlocked.

"Really, what is this." I grumble.

Through this sort of thing I open my eyes.

Yes --- the me that was brooding for so long seems like an idiot.

When the answer is so simple.



"How surprising. Are you a cat?"

The voice comes from right behind Shiki.

Without turning to look Shiki was valiantly enduring the shock of the landing.

"You? Why are you at a place like this?"

The self-titled magus/counsellor answers Shiki's question as if it wasn't important.

"Because I was keeping watch. I was standing guard thinking they would come around tonight or so. See, you don't have any time to rest. A hospital definitely has some strong corpses. They can't get into a live body so they decided to show their abilities. After infecting a corpse they were going to make you theirs after killing you."

"Whatever's going on, it's all the fault of that weird rock you gave me."

Shiki talks as she leans against the ground. In her words there's not even a hint of the hesitation she has shown until now.

"Oh, you knew? Well, yes. This is definitely my mistake. I placed a ward around the room so spirits couldn't get in, but I never expected they would go and obtain a body in order to break it. Normally they don't have that sort of intelligence."

Hahaha, the magus laughs as if she's amused.

"Really? In that case you do something."

"Okay."

Tock, and the magus lifts her finger.

How would it have looked to the Shiki who couldn't see?

The magus writes in the air with her cigarette flame. The writing is reflected on the corpse as if it were being projected.

The far-off country composed only of straight lines, the engraved sorcery of a far-off world. The circuit called Rune moves and in an instant --- the body of the corpse lying collapsed on the ground begins to burn.

"--- it's too weak with just the F in the air." The magus mumbles.

The flame covered corpse slowly stands up.

Somehow moving with two completely broken legs the corpse drags itself towards Shiki as if moving by muscle power alone.

The flames soon go out.

"Oi --- you charlatan."

"Don't shout like that. It's very difficult to destroy something the size of a human. A living person is finished if you just burn the heart, but you can't do that with the living dead. They are dead so it doesn't matter whether they lose a head or an arm. You realize that you can't get rid of a human itself with something that has the firepower of a gun right? To stop that thing you would have to bring the firepower of a crematorium --- or a monk of high moral integrity."

"That's enough showing off. Whatever the problem I think it's too much for you to handle."

It seemed that Shiki's comment severely hurt the magus's self-respect.

"It's too much for you to handle as well. A corpse is already dead so you can't kill it. Coincidentally, while you can kill a person with what you have you can't get rid of them. Let's run away for now."

The magus retreats.

But Shiki doesn't move.

It's not that the descent from the third floor broke her leg.

She is, just smiling.

"Whether it's dead or whatever, that corpse is 'alive'. In that case ---."

She gets up from her leaning position.

That was similar to the bent-back posture of a predator leaping at its prey.

Shhhk, she touches her neck. Blood is still flowing. The flesh is torn. There is a mark where she was strangled --- but she is still alive.

And that was an ecstatic sensation.

"--- Whatever it is, I'm going to kill it."

Shrrrg, she unwraps the bandages covering her eyes.

In the darkness the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception are awakened.

Two delicate legs kick the ground.

The corpse reaches out with its arms at Shiki who is rushing towards it.

Narrowly slipping past it she rips apart the corpse with one hand as if she is feeling for the line visible to her eyes.

Shiki's nails pass through in an even cut from the right shoulder to the left hip.

Thanks to that her fingerbone broke but the corpse's wound was much greater.

(collapse -SoundFX), because the strings controlling it have been cut the corpse falls to the ground. One arm though apparently still has strings attached and the corpse which has slowly crawled over to her grabs Shiki's ankle.

Shiki doesn't hesitate and grinds that arm under her foot.

"A dead body shouldn't appear before me," said Shiki and laughed silently.

I'm alive.

It's like my state of mind until now was a lie, to think that I can so clearly feel that I'm alive...

"Shiki!

Calling Shiki loudly the magus throws something towards her.

One undecorated silver-coloured knife.

Shiki grabs the knife which stuck in the ground and looks at the still moving corpse as if it were a wart. And just like that, she stabs the corpse's neck with the knife.

The corpse quickly stops moving --- but then.

"Idiot, if you are going to stab it stab the main body itself!"

The disastrous result appeared faster than the magus's scolding.

As soon as Shiki stabbed the corpse --- smoke popped out of the dead body. Becoming desperate as if it wants to run away the smoke disappears into Shiki's body.

"---,"

(collapse-SoundFX), Shiki's knees limply hit the ground.

Unable to infect her till now because she was conscious, the spirits take advantage of the instant when Shiki loses her sense of self due to the excitement of killing and invade her body.

"You fumbled the finish idiot."

The magus comes running over. But Shiki's body stops that with one hand.

Don't come, at this signal the magus stops and stands still.

Shiki's body grabs the hilt of the knife with both hands and points the blade at her own chest.

The blank eyes regain their strong resolve.

Lips shut tight, she bites down on her teeth.

The tip of the knife touches her chest.

Her will and her body --- they have not been taken over by something so weak as a wandering spirit.

"Now I won't lose you."

Her mumbling isn't directed at anyone else, it's directed at herself. Shiki perceives the death of the thing crawling around inside her.

What is being stabbed is Ryougi Shiki's body. But, that only kills that collective entity that cannot exist. Shiki is confident that she will not receive a wound.

And so she gathered her strength.

"I am killing the weak me."

To something like you --- I will not hand over Ryougi Shiki.

The knife slides easily into her chest.



She pulls out the silver-coloured knife.

No blood flows. She only has the pain to tell her that she has stabbed her chest.

Shing, Shiki swings the knife as if she is shaking the dirty soul of the blade.

"Hey, you said it. That you would teach me the way to use these eyes."

Her way of speaking now begins to settle into a pattern. The magus nods her head in satisfaction at this change.

"There are conditions, but I'll teach you how to use your death perception. In return help me with my work. I just lost the one I bossed around so I need a new pair of feet and hands right now."

Shiki doesn't even turn around to face the magus and quietly says, "So that's how it is".

"If I do that can I kill people?"

It's an utterance to make even the magus shiver.

"Ahhh, of course."

"In that case I will do it. Use me as you will. Since I didn't have any objectives apart from that anyway."

Shiki with her melancholic voice, she slowly sinks to the ground. Maybe because of her exhaustion from the recent events --- or maybe because of her violent act of stabbing her own chest.

The magus picks up her body and gazes at her sleeping face. A face too ambiguous to call it sleep --- a frozen face as if she is dead.

The sorceress who gazes upon that face for a long while. Before long she mumbles some words.

"You say you don't have any objectives? That's tragic, you know, you are still confused."

Shiki's peaceful appearance.

The sorceress talks as if she resents it.

"The fact that you are empty means that you can fill that emptiness with as much as you want. You happy person, where's a better future than that?"

Mumbling something like that the magus clicks her tongue.  
Because she is embarrassed at herself for saying such sincere words.  
... When they were things she had forgotten for such a long time.



## Void Shrine(Garan-no-Dou)

I think of the time when my consciousness has fallen into dreaming and settled down.

SHIKI who has disappeared. A self who was another person. What did he disappear in exchange for, what did he sacrifice his life to protect?

Going through Ryougi Shiki's memories, I realised what.

Probably --- SHIKI protected his dream. His dream that he would live happily.

Was that dream that class friend? Or was that young man the person he wanted to be as a man? That's something I can no longer find out.

SHIKI disappeared so he wouldn't lose him and Shiki.

Leaving me, with this deep solitude.



The morning sunlight enters the room.

At that warmth, my eyes, which have recovered their sight, open.

I'm sleeping in the bed. That incident last night would have been settled well by the sorceress. No, that kind of thing is unimportant. Rather than things like that, let's think of him for now.

Still in that prone position, I lay there without even moving my head and breathed in the morning air.

How long has it been since I woke to the morning sunlight?

Thin but strong. The bright light colors over the darkness in my heart.

This strange life I have just taken hold of and --- The other me that will not return, they melt together and disappear into the light. The existence of Ryougi SHIKI and his dreams... are disappearing.

If I could cry, I wanted to shed tears for him. But my eyes are dry. I've decided to cry only once, and it's not right to cry about this.

Now that I can no longer go back, I'll never regret it again.

Like this darkness, opening up in front of the morning sunlight.

To disappear cleanly like this, it's what he would have wanted.



"Hello, Shiki."

A voice from next to me.

I just twist my head to the side.

Standing there is the friend I knew a long time ago. The black-rimmed glasses, even his unstyled black hair, he really hasn't changed.

"Do you, know me... ?"

His voice is strangely shaky.

... Ahhh, I already knew. That you were always waiting for Shiki, and that only you were always there, protecting me.

"Kokutou Mikiya. Sounds like a French poet."

At my mumbling voice, he smiles brightly. Like when we met at school after just one day, that brightly.

How much effort was hidden in that simple smile, I can't know.

Only --- it seems he remembers that promise as well.

"It's great that the weather is nice today. Perfect to get out of hospital."

With tears brimming in his eyes, he speaks as naturally as he can.

To the empty me, that was warmer than anything. A smiling face over a crying face, that's what this friend chose.

To acknowledge isolation rather than be isolated, that's what SHIKI chose.

--- Although I haven't chosen either side yet.

"... Ahhh. Are there things that don't disappear?"

His smiling face that seems to become one with the soft sunlight, I just blankly gazed upon it.

Until I was sick of it.

--- I know that the hole punched in my chest can't be filled with things like that, but right now, I don't want to do anything else. Because...

... His soft, smiling face.

That was the same face as the one in my memories.

**/End**





5 矛盾螺旋・上

Chapter 5 -

Paradox Spiral

- Enjou Tamoe

Paradox Paradigm.

## ／ Paradox Spiral

When I was young, that piece of metal was my treasure.  
Bulky, rough, small, only functionality.  
The silver piece was cold, and to my memory, holding it tightly hurt me.  
Click, and it spun the beginning of the day half way.  
Click, and it spun the end of the day half way.  
The young me felt honored whenever I heard the sound.  
However, whenever I heard the sound, I could feel my eyes water.  
Click, click, once at the beginning, once at the end.  
It would circle around a day, and it repeated circling.  
Circle and circle, never tiring, never complaining.  
Half joy, half sorrow. The days it circled without a surprise were like a barber pole.  
But the endless days ended without a warning.  
The silver piece was only cold --- no joy.  
If I held it tightly, I bled ----- no sorrow.  
Obvious. A piece of metal is a piece of a metal. There is no fantasy.  
When I became an 8-year-old who knows reality, the piece of metal was no more glittery.  
Then I realized, that becoming a grown-up is selling fantasy for wisdom.  
Because I thought doing so was so premature, I thought the fact was something to be proud of.

Autumn was short this year.

With November having passed and winter about to come, Officer Akimi encountered a strange ghost story.

At a workplace, which is second only to a hospital in number of deaths encountered, there is no seasonal time for ghost stories. It is normal that such stories come up year-round with no end.

Naturally, Officer Akimi he wouldn't bat an eyelash at most stories, but this story was of a different level than the others. Anyway, something was recorded in an official report that could only be interpreted as a ghost story. The reason that this story, that no one would normally be interested in, had gotten into his hands was because his love for mysteries was famous.

That event was concluded to be a false report made by a robber who was wrong in the head.

The contents were rather simple. At the end of October, at a housing complex close to the heart of the city, there had been a robbery. The inhabitants of the house had been away at the time, and among the 10 high-class mansions in the complex, the robbed house was the most exquisite.

The robber was someone with a previous criminal record. He was not the type to plan beforehand, but rather someone who suddenly decided to take the opportunity when the house was empty. It is said that the robber went into an empty mansion, took a quick look around, and went into a house that looked like no one was home.

The problem was that a few minutes later, the robber ran to the nearest police station and asked for help.

The robber was in shock and couldn't explain properly, but he had found everyone in that home had been left dead. The policeman who was there followed the robber back to the house. However, contrary to what the robber had said, the members of the house were all alive and enjoying a nice family dinner.

The robber was perplexed, and when the policeman found out that he had broken into an empty house, he was arrested.

“Geez, what is this?”

Having briefly skimmed the report, Officer Akimi muttered to himself on his squeaky chair.

It was definitely a strange story, but it really wasn't especially worth remembering.

The report said that the robber hadn't used alcohol or drugs, and there wasn't anything wrong with his mental condition. To get arrested while making a false report, it was definitely a rare event.

He didn't have time to waste on such a boring and closed case - it was a stretch to even call it a case.

Right now, he was as busy as he was three years ago. In fact, the current disappearance cases were enough to make him suspect that this was the second coming of the case three years ago. It was not very well known, but since October, four people had already disappeared. It was getting more and more difficult to keep the families of the victims quiet.

In such a situation, he couldn't waste time with a story like this. He couldn't, but for some reason, it appealed to him.

“Shit.”

Muttering to himself, he picked up the phone. The place he was calling was the station where the case had been reported. The phone was answered immediately, and Officer Akimi started to ask detailed questions about the case.

Whether they had checked with the neighbors of the "family of corpses" the robber had mentioned, whether there had been any inconsistencies in the robber's description of the bodies.

As expected, the reply was that they had indeed checked with the neighbors and that besides the fact that it was completely false, there was nothing of note about the robber's description of the bodies.

He thanked the person and hung up. Just then, there was a noise behind his back.

“What are you doing, Daisuke? Hurry up, a second body has been found.”

“Already? By the way you say it, I'm assuming it was also left partly eaten?”

Officer Akimi stood up and quickly switched his train of thought. No matter how much this case bothered him, it was already a closed and not something he needed to take care of urgently.

In this way, even Officer Akimi, who was known to be supremely eccentric, forgot about this case.

## 1 (Paradox Spiral, 1)

Even though October had just arrived, the roads were already chilly.

The time is a little before 10 at night.

The wind is cold, and the darkness of night is oppressive.

Normally the roads should be plenty bright at this time, but tonight, they were so gloomy as to make one wonder whether the clocks were slow by an hour. The cold sky, from which it wouldn't be odd to see snow fall, makes one feel that the winter is arriving too quickly.

Maybe it's because of that, but in front of this normally busy station there is none of the usual liveliness.

The people coming out of the station are all wearing heavy overcoats and going straight home without stopping anywhere.

The thing called a home, no matter how small it is, is a warm resting place. On a chilly day like this everyone quickens their feet in order to hurry home.

The flowing people. The non-existent heat. The especially dark city streets.

A boy was vacantly looking at such a scene.

Next to a soda machine just beyond the street in front of the station. Sitting there as if hiding, the boy's gaze did not look normal.

This boy who was hugging his legs, it would be impossible to tell his gender from just a quick look.

A delicate face and a slender body. The dyed-red hair looks like it might be curly and has a bad texture. He looks 16, maybe 17 years old. His eyes that lack focus are nice and slender, and if he were wearing girl's clothing, he could easily be confused as being a girl.

Even the clothing on this boy, whose teeth are chattering, is strange. Besides a dirty pair of jeans, he only has on a large blue blazer over his body. Under the jacket he is bare.

As if he is resisting the cold---or maybe something else, his teeth chatter and make noise.

How long has he been here like this?

Even though fewer and fewer people are coming out of the station, a group of youths have surrounded the boy.

“Hey, Tomoe.”



One of the youths spoke, with a hint of contempt.

The boy with the red hair does not reply.

“...Enjoh. You brat, don't ignore me.”

The youth forcefully grabs the boy's jacket and pulls him up.

The one who spoke is about the same age as the boy. Indeed, around him are a group of five boys about the same age as him.

“What is it, are we strangers now that you quit school? Oh, since Tomoe-sama is a man of society, he can no longer interact with children?”

Hahaha, laughter erupts.

But the boy, Tomoe, does not respond at all.

With a “hmph,” the youth takes his hand off Tomoe's jacket and hits his cheek. An impact with a bam. Clink, the sound of something hitting the ground.

“-----.”

“Don't fall asleep, you idiot.”

With that the people around him once again start laughing.

At that noise the boy Tomoe began to come back to life from a state of shock.

“...Enjoh...Tomoe.”

He mutters his own name. Tomoe, whose thought process had been stopped, had even forgotten his own name. Muttering his name is like a ritual to restart activity.

Having come to his senses, Tomoe looks at the boy in front of him.

A former classmate and his cohorts..

He remembers them. Pretty regular students, not really delinquents, they are the type to bother people weaker than themselves. Like himself.

“Oh, you're Aikawa. What are you doing here at a time like this?”

“That's what we should say. I was worried that you might be selling your body. After all Tomoe is a tender girl.”

The boy looks around at his comrades, saying “isn't that right?”

Of course Tomoe is not a girl. When Tomoe was still in high school, due to his slender physique and his name, he was made fun of in that way.

Tomoe does not reply in any way, and instead picks up an empty can.

“Aikawa” he calls out the boy's name.

Tomoe roughly pushes the can into that acne-filled face turning towards him.

The can is stuck in the boy's mouth. At that state, Tomoe hits the can with his palm.

“Ugh.”

The boy falls down immediately. The can that he coughs out is smeared with blood.

Dumbfounded, the boy's comrades still haven't moved yet.

They were just thinking that they could earn some money by robbing a former classmate who had quit high school. They could use violence, but they never thought that Tomoe would too.

They couldn't react quickly after having their comrade get hit and fall down.

“Aikawa, you're as stupid as ever.”

Saying that, Enjou Tomoe kicked the fallen boy's head. As if he were playing soccer, as hard as he could with the tip of his foot. In contrast to Aikawa's light-hearted tone, Tomoe was acting as if he was trying to kill.

The boy cannot move any more. Maybe he has fainted or maybe his neck is broken. -He couldn't get up due to the pain, Tomoe makes sure before running away.

Instead of running towards the watchful eyes in front of the train station, he dove into a back alley.

Seeing Tomoe's sprint, the others finally understood the situation.

The victim they were trying to rob has beaten up a comrade and run away. Their friend, who has been taken down, is dripping blood from his mouth and on the ground.

“That bastard, he wasn't even scared? We'll kill him!”

As someone says that, the fury spread to the remaining five members. They started running in order to catch up to him and take revenge.



“We'll kill him,' eh?”

Hearing their shout, I couldn't help but laugh.

They were serious. But they don't know what the true meaning of killing is. That someone that unprepared would say “we'll kill you” to someone who just did what I did, how rash an act.

-I just killed someone before coming here.

Squish squish squish. The feeling of stabbing a human returns, and I felt like I was about to throw up.

As that thought comes up, my body starts to shake again. My teeth chatter so hard they're about to break and a storm is going through my head.

They don't know what it means to kill someone. It's because they don't know that they can say something like that.

-in that case, I'll teach it to them.

With my mind cleared, I crack a smile.

I don't have a particularly violent personality. I believe in giving out as much as I take, but today is the first time I made someone faint like that. I was strange tonight. ...no, if that's not right, maybe I want to become strange.

-here should be good.

I enter an alley between two buildings, far enough from the main road that you couldn't call for help.

They catch up to me.

No, to be exact, I let them catch up to me.

Stopping at this discreet back alley, after making sure that they are the five who followed me in here, I attacked the first enemy who came forth.

With my palm I hit my opponent's chin. When novices fight it goes back and forth, hitting and getting hit, over and over again. The one who can't last as long is the one that gets defeated. I know that if I get into a fight like that, I have no chance of winning. Therefore - if I want to win, I have to fight like I want to kill.

I don't even pay attention to the situation. Before the others can jump in, before I can be surrounded, I have to take care of them one by one.

My first opponent tries to counter. I'm faster. I stab his left eye with my finger.

"Uh... Uaaaaa!"

He screams in pain. Given this opening, I grab his face with all my strength and slam the back of his head against a wall.

With a \*puck,\* the first guy slowly falls against the wall. Blood comes out one of his eyes. The back of his head is leaving a bloodstain on the wall.

-despite all that, he's still alive.

At that horrible sight, the other four guys lose their excitement and just stand there. They may have done some fighting and seen some blood, but this is the first time they've seen bloodshed in the context between life and death.

At that opening, I jump at the one closest to me.

After hitting him with my palm, I grab his hair. I pull his head down and kick my knee upwards. I feel his nose break against my kneecap. With that blow, he loses his will to retaliate.

From there I knee his face three more times, I slam down my elbow onto the back of his head.

With the impact, I feel a tingle run up my arm from my elbow.

The second one was down.

My knee that kept kicking my opponent's face is soaked with his blood.

"Enjoh, you bastard-!"

Two people. With two people incapacitated it seems the rest of them finally understand what they're into. The three of them come at me all at once without any reason or leadership.

In that case, the outcome was clear.

Being alone, I can't take on three people at once.

Getting hit and kicked, I'm mercilessly slammed against the wall before falling to the ground.

I get hit hard on the cheek. Kicked in the stomach. Still, with cold eyes I see that they can't commit as much violence as I had.

-are these three just going to beat up a non-resisting human.

This violence definitely has no killing intent. However, if this keeps up, I will eventually die. Even if the impacts are not fatal, they will eventually reach my heart. That I have to wait until then and endure is the pain of pains.

-look. Even without meaning to kill, it is easy for a human to kill another human.

Is that a sin? A killer like me with a clear killing intent, or killers like them with none who do it by accident, I wonder which is the heavier sin.

Thinking such things with my dizzy mind, I kept getting hit.

My face and my whole body became covered by bruises, and I began to get used to the pain. Probably they too have become so used to hitting that they can't stop.

"You're quite something, with that cute face of yours, Enjou!"

At that moment, I was hit in the chest and started coughing. Either the inside of my mouth was ripped through the beating or it came from my stomach. Mixed in my saliva was something like blood.

Even though these three people have no such intent, if this continues for a few more seconds, Enjou Tomoe will be dead.

...I realized just then. That I didn't consider my own life to be very important. Just as my vision disappears, when one of their fists hits one of my eyes, my consciousness is about to disappear as well. At that very moment-

Clatter.

I heard a beautiful noise.

Completely different from the dullness of hitting a person, a small and marble-like noise.

The three stop their movements and turn towards the direction of the noise... the narrow entrance that they used to get into this alleyway.

I barely open my swollen eyes and look at the person.

"----."

My mind, is frozen.

Thinking only of that nameless figure, I cannot take my eyes off this person.

That's how unusual that person's shadow standing at the entrance of the alleyway was.

In this cold weather, the person was not wearing socks, but a pair of round Japanese clogs. The varnished black bottom and the red strings making the white feet look even more beautiful, it was a sight to leave you speechless.

No, that's not the only special thing.

That person was wearing an orange kimono. It's not fancy holiday clothing, but rather the simple kind of kimono you see often in festivals. Covering that is a red leather jacket.

Clatter- the sound is made again.

And then the sound of feet hitting the ground. The person draws towards us step by step. The swaying hair, the sound of rustling clothing- I realize that my eyes want to take in every movement this person makes to the very end. Without concern for my - Enjou Tomoe's thoughts.

The shadow approaches in a natural manner, as if nothing has happened.

The black hair, black as if doused in ink, doesn't even reach the shoulders. It has been cut carelessly, but somehow it fits this person.

A narrow face and frame. White skin and---eyes so black they seem to look into your soul. A beauty that did not belong in a dirty back alley.

That person somehow looked like a woman. ....no, she looks about the same age as us, so maybe I should call her a girl.

The face is so neat that I can't tell the gender. Of course, no matter which it is, there's no doubt that this person is so beautiful that it would send a chill down your spine. But for some reason I thought that it was a female.

"Hey."

The girl spoke in a blunt manner that was a mix of Japanese and Western style. After looking at this direction with an annoyed look, the girl comes towards us for no reason.

The three guy surrounding me were puzzled and started surrounding the girl. Dulled by the violence, they were so frenzied they decided they wanted this girl. They show their suppressed urges they normally wouldn't show anyone and converge on the girl.

"You got some business with us?"

They say while walking. Seeing them surround her as to not let her get away, it seems that their three minds have become one now.

Those dirty cowards, I swear, but I can't do anything. My incapable arms and legs are filled with bruises and don't have any strength left.

Can I stand by and let this kimono girl being defiled by these street punks? No--but can she really be taken by these guys?

"We asked you if you had some business with us. You have ears, right?"

One of them comes right up close to her and yells.

Instead of replying, she raised one of her hands in whichever way.

...what happened after that was truly like magic.

With her thin arm the girl grabs his arm. She pulls with no effort. As if he were weightless, the boy spins around in a full circle and falls to the ground head first.

Maybe that's one of those judo throws. The movement was very quick, but it was so natural that it looked like it was in slow motion.

The other two leap at the girl. She pushes one of their chests with her palm, and with just that her opponent was down. Even though it took me so much violence just to knock out one guy, this girl made two people lose consciousness without a single wasted move. I hazard about 5 seconds have passed.

Just like how I realized this fact, it seems the one left over also realized that his opponent wasn't ordinary.

"Ooowah!", he screamed while beginning to flee.

The girl kicked the head of the one who turned his back to flee. The clean roundhouse kick didn't even make noise and knocked out the last one.

"Hmph, he was a rockhead, what an idiot."

Muttering, the girl fixes up her wrinkled kimono.

I'm speechless as I just stare at her.

-in this trash-filled back alley where no streetlight or moonlight shines. Just above her head it looked like a silver sparkle was pouring out.

"Hey, you."

The girl looks in my direction. I tried to say something, but with my mouth all cut up I decided to keep my mouth shut.

The girl reached inside a pocket in her leather jacket, pulled out a key, and threw it towards me. A worn key falls in front of me as I sit on the floor.

"I picked it up. It's yours, right?"

It sounded like it was coming from inside my brain.

.....key. Ah, maybe I dropped it while getting hit a while ago.

The home key for which I have absolutely no use anymore. Did this girl come here just to give it to me.

Just then, the girl turned around as if she was all done here.

There were no words of goodbye, no words of acknowledgement.

Just like when she found us she walks out as if she's out taking a walk. ....as if she has no interest in me.

"---wait."

I say, and my hand moves.

To grab what? Why am I trying to catch her? I definitely---Enjou Tomoe definitely have no interest in a scary woman like her.

But---but, I couldn't stand her leaving me like this. I didn't care who it was, I didn't want to be thrown away. I couldn't stand the feeling of being told that I had no redeeming qualities, that I was really nothing more than a fake.

"Hey you, wait!"

Yelling, I get up. ....no, I tried to get up, but I couldn't stand up properly. Because my joints had no strength, all I could do was grab the wall and keep myself up in an unstable position.

The girl in a kimono stopped, and looked at me with a vision so cold that it would make anyone scream out.

"What is it? I didn't pick up anything else."

She speaks calmly.

Even though five people were lying at her feet, it seemed that this person felt nothing.

"Hey, you weren't thinking of just leaving like this?"

After I spoke while gasping for breath, she finally looked around herself.

Among the fallen ones there are two whom I injured and are now bleeding. They are the result of a very crude form of violence.

After saying hm, she looked up at me.

"Don't worry, that guy might not be able to use his eye, but that's not enough to kill him. The one who comes to first will probably do something. But do you still think they need help right now?"

Even though the thin and high voice could only belong to a woman, the way of speaking is that of a man.

Yes, I reply and nod.

"Really? But in that case, which do we need to call? The police? Or the hospital?"

She asks sincerely, although something was a little strange.

I was only thinking about the hospital, but if I want to claim self defense, calling the police might be faster. But---

"The police, are out of the question."

Why? The girl asks with her eyes.

Why is that. It was a secret that I definitely shouldn't tell anyone, but considering it like using an emergency card, I spoke.

"I killed someone."

For a moment, it was as if time had stopped.

After coming towards me as if taking interest, the girl began to carefully inspect me, who was leaning against the wall, with her eyes.

"It doesn't look like it."

She says as if she doesn't believe me. But, by the way she put her finger to her mouth and thought to herself, it seemed that she wasn't quite sure.

I continue my masochistic confession.

"It's true. I came after killing awhile ago. I stabbed the stomach with a kitchen knife and I cut the throat. How can someone stay alive after that. ...heh heh, right now the cops are probably at my house looking for me frantically. Yes, by dawn, I'll probably be famous---!"



When I realized what I was doing, I was laughing at myself. "Kukuk," I hear my laughter. ....for some reason, it sounded like crying.

"Alright. In that case I believe you. Then don't bother calling the hospital either. You'll be put into jail right there. ...ah, is it that why you threw your shirt away because you got blood on it? I just thought it was a fad nowadays."

Cold hands rub against my chest.

"---look."

I swallowed my breath. As this girl said the clothing I was wearing had been covered with blood. I had run away after just putting on a pair of pants and pulling a blazer over my shoulders.

...I know. That even though this girl knows that I am a murderer, she feels no surprise. That's making me feel even more uncomfortable.

"Aren't you scared? I killed someone. Killing one person, killing two people, they're the same. Do you think I'll let you go when you know the truth?"

"---killing one person and killing two people are different."

Squinting as if dissatisfied, the girl in a kimono put her face up close.

.....even though I am taller by a head, I feel like I'm looking up at her who is looking up at me.

Captivated by her black eyes, I swallowed my saliva.

The reason I swallowed is not that our roles were reversed.

It's just that, I was enraptured.

Until now I have never fallen for another human being. Having lived for 17 years I have never been captivated like this. Not once did I forget myself and was this moved.

---that's right. This much.

I have never felt that a human was beautiful.

"Really---I'm a murderer."

I can't say anything but that.

The girl lowered her head and started laughing.

"I know. Because I'm one too."

The clothes make noise as they rub against each other.

As she finally lost interest with this, she begins to leave.

She leaves, making only the noise clatter clatter.

...I did not want to lose sight of her back.

"Wait, you said you were one too!"

Trying to run after her, I fall to the floor again. Still, I barely managed to get up and looked at the girl who was looking back.

"Then help me. We're in the same circumstance, after all."

I was yelling with such audacity that I couldn't even think straight. Being desperate, I throw shame to the wind. Listening to my words that lack logic and reason, the girl looks at me with her eyes open wide in surprise.

"Same circumstance....hm, you're definitely completely empty. But, asking for help, what are you talking about? About the sin of killing a human? Or to fix the injuries on your body? I'm sorry, but neither are my specialties."

---ah, that's right.

What kind of help did I want?

I wanted help, but I was only thinking vaguely and I didn't know what kind of help I wanted. ....even though it's something supremely important written in Enjou Tomoe's mind.

"----People will see this soon. Hide me before that."

That's the very first thing.

The girl entered thought with a very human movement, completely opposite from how she acted until now.

"Hide you, are you asking me to offer a hiding place?"

"I just need you to lend me a hand until I get to a place where no one can see me."

"There's no such place in this city. The only place where no one get to you is your own home.

She speaks with an awkward expression. I know at least that much.

Maybe my mind became impatient due to the pain of getting beat, but I wanted to yell.

"That's why I'm asking for help! Are you going to let me stay at your house, you stupid bitch?! "

Shit, I swear. With that, the girl nods as if understanding.

"Alright. If where I'm staying is fine with you, use it as you please."

---what?"

"What a simpleton, to ask for help with something like that."

She starts to walk. Without holding a hand out for me or offering a shoulder.

Even so, her back told me to follow.

I---with a strength I find strange for me to possess, followed behind her.

By doing that I could cleanly forget the injuries on my beaten body, the injuries on my mind from stabbing a person.

I just keep following that unconcerned person walking back.

Does this girl live alone, I haven't even asked for her name, even though there are many things I have to ask her, I can't think.

.....that's right, probably. I have never believed anything until now, but this might be what they call fate.

Already my eyes couldn't see anything but her.

#### TL NOTE :

You'll notice that I switch from present to past tense a lot in this. This is done by me to preserve the way it was written in the Korean translation. It's definitely a bit odd, so if anyone's editing, I don't think it would be bad to change everything to past or everything to present tense in order to keep consistent. I'm guessing that this strange way of mixing past and present tense was in the original Japanese, because there is no reason for the translator to do this.

## 2 (Paradox Spiral, 2)

Click, a noise. It's the room beside mine.

Is it getting around 10 o'clock? Only a few minutes have passed since and I'm tired from work, I entrusted my body to my bedsheets. Woken from my shallow sleep I was suddenly dozing off again.

The noise from the other side of the door only came once.

The door opens. It connects to the room next door. A square light enters my dark room with its switched off light.

Is it mother? I sneak a peek in that direction with half closed eyes.

At this point I always have a thought.

That, this kind of scene, it would have been better had I not seen it.

The one who opened the door is my mother. Because of the light coming from behind her I can't tell anything about her except that she's standing there. That image isn't important as my eyes see nothing but the dreadful image visible though the open door.

The image of my dad lying slumped over the dinner table.

The cheap table, which should be brown, is dyed red and my fallen father keeps dripping red blood onto the floor. ... It just seemed like a broken tap.

"Tomoe, please die," says the standing shadow.

I only knew that the shadow was my mother after I had been stabbed in the chest.

My mother stabs me over and over with the kitchen knife, lastly she slits her own throat with it.

Its a nightmare to end all nightmares.

My nights, always finish in this manner.



Click, click, click.

... When I woke up to the sound in my ears, Ryougi had already gone out.

Lifting up my body, which is bruised all over from the beating I got, I look around the room.

Stuck in the corner of the second floor in a four storey apartment, this is the house of the kimono girl. Or, would it be more appropriate to call it a room than a house. The hallway stretches 1m from the front door to the lounge, and on the way is a door leading to the bathroom.

As if the lounge doubles as a bedroom, the bed upon which the woman was sleeping till a moment ago is there. There's another room next to the lounge but it seems that it is not being used.

--- Last night.

After following her for an hour, the place I arrived at was this room. Seeing as the mailbox at the apartment entrance bore the name Ryougi, it seems that the woman's last name is Ryougi.

That woman --- even after Ryougi brought me into the room she didn't say anything but instead stripped off her leather jacket and crawled into bed.

Even indifference should have a limit. I started to get angry and honestly thought about assaulting her. But, if I did so and caused a commotion a crowd would gather and I would be in trouble. After pondering what to do for a long time I used a cushion that was rolling around on the floor as a pillow and just decided to sleep.

And, this morning, when I opened my eyes, that woman was nowhere to be seen.

"--- What the hell is she thinking," I mumble absent-mindedly.

Thinking back after regaining my cool, Ryougi appears to be the same age as me. It seems more suitable to call her a girl than a woman.

If she's seventeen she's a student. In that case has she gone to school? I don't think that's correct, this room is too bleak to accept that. The only things in this room are a bed, fridge, phone, four leather jackets hanging on the coat hanger and a wardrobe, which feels like it would contain clothing. There's no TV or even a radio. There are no magazines that were carelessly dropped after being read and there isn't even a table.

All of a sudden, I remember her words from last night.

When I said that I had killed someone Ryougi had replied that she had done the same. ... Ryougi's words didn't seemed real back then, but they might be true after all. Because this room is a fugitive's room. The sense that someone lives here is lacking to the point of morbidity. At that moment I got a chilling sensation. I thought I had picked up an ace of spades but had I picked up a joker instead? ... Whatever the case I didn't intend to stay long. I wanted to at least say goodbye but since the person in question isn't here there's no helping it.

Walking carefully like a thief who has broken in, I decided to leave the unfamiliar girl's room.

Coming outside I wandered aimlessly.

At first I hesitantly went around the road beside the mansion, but regardless of my situation the world was no different from usual. Like a hand on a clock going round and round it was just repeating its daily routine with no change at all.

So its like this in the end. Depressed, I came out to the main road.

The road is the same as always. There are no police looking for Enjoh Tomoe, and there are no looks holding me in contempt for being a murderer.

For some reason it seems the bodies haven't been found yet. Yes, there's no way the world could change so much due to something a half-wit like me did. I don't seem to be a fugitive yet. Even so I didn't feel like going back home.

Past noon and I've come to the plaza with the bronze statue of a dog. Draping myself onto a suitable bench I look up at the big neon sign set up on a near-by building.

In that state I spent a few blank hours.

Even though its a weekday this place is booming with people. The side-walks are overflowing with people and when the pedestrian lights turn green, a tide of humanity flows out with a force that seems set to knock the cars out of the way.

The majority of the crowd are humans that aren't so different in age from me. On the whole they walk foward with smiling faces or iron visages. There's no hesitation there. No --- they've probably never even thought of hesitating. On their faces there isn't even the letter 'life', I can't see these faces as living for a hope-filled future or a dream they wish to fulfil. Everyone walks on with faces that say they know everything about the world. But amongst all that, how much truth is there?

Is it everyone, or is it just a portion.

Real and fake.

I kept looking from within the crowds, unable to be reconciled, to try and find a real one, but couldn't distinguish them at all.

Is it obvious? --- As originally the only one who would know such a thing is yourself.

I turned my eyes from the crowds of humanity up towards the sky.

Yes --- to that point I wasn't real. I may have thought I was real but then I hopelessly revealed my true nature.

... Until I entered high school Enjoh Tomoe was a well known name in the track and field world. Hating to lose, I didn't once see the backs of other athletes during junior high. I was confident of shortening my record still further, and there was no reason to suspect my intelligence either.

Besides, I liked to run more than anything else.

In that I at least was genuine. I even had a conviction that I wouldn't let any obstacle get in my way.

But I stopped running.

Our family was never rich. My father lost his job when I was in elementary school so our household was always barren. My mother was born in a distinguished family and it was said that she broke off all ties with her family to marry my father. My dad who lost his job and didn't work, and my mother who grew up ignorant of the world and didn't know how to do anything.

In that crumbling family I think I grew up faster than other children. I lied about my age to do part-time work and I was at least earning my school fees in any way I could.

I don't know anything of what was going on with our family. I was too busy just living my life.

I went to school with the money I earned, and entered high school through my efforts alone. My parents whom I already could not think of as parents and the problem of money with which to live on. To me who bore those two burdens, running was my unique salvation.

So no matter how tired I was I continued club activities and was able to enter high school as well.

But then My dad caused an accident. He hit a person with a car. That wasn't the only problem. Dad didn't even have a driver's license ---.

I think mother obtained the indemnity for the victim's family by borrowing money from her relations with her head bowed. At that time I was depressed and didn't want to think about anything so I can't be sure.

Waiting for me, after all the strife was over, was the change in my surroundings. There was no longer any connection between me and my parents, but for just the reason that I was their child there was a sudden change in the school community's attitude towards me.

The track team coaches, who had always been helpful, then began to openly ignore me. The seniors who had supported me saying that a prodigy had joined the club pressured me to quit the track team.

But I was already used to that sort of thing so it wasn't really a problem.

My problem was my family. Because of the accident, my dad lost the little income he had and no longer had the strength to support a family. My mother started doing unfamiliar part-time work, but that kind of thing could only cover the heating and lighting bills.

Already unable to obtain a proper job from a few years back, to make us more miserable my dad killed a person while driving without a license. That rumour spread and spread until my dad could no longer go outside. My mother braved the insults to go and find work but she could never stay in one place for long. It got so bad that if I just took a walk somebody would throw a rock at me.

... The criticism from those around us got worse daily, but I didn't feel any anger about it. What my father did was real. I thought of the persecution and contempt as a natural reaction. After all the one at fault wasn't the world but my dad.

And yet, it wasn't as if the object of my anger was my parents either.

At that time I hated everything. Everything that surrounded me became annoying.

No matter what you did or how hard you tried, the result would be the same. No matter how fast you ran, if that annoying thing called family followed along the future was as clear as a flame at night.

It was definitely then that I stopped fighting.

We chase after the so-called natural life and undergo painful experiences as a result. If I accept that my life is like this anyway, there's no reason to think myself unfortunate.

It's just like when we are young. Exchanging reality for a fantasy, I decided to live on by myself.

Everything seemed to be of no import after I made that choice and school was the first thing I quit.

No, if I didn't work all day I couldn't support my family. If you are young there are plenty of jobs available regardless of experience.

Awkwardly for me I possessed that useless thing called a conscience, and I couldn't throw away my family. Yet I did not talk to them at all after I quit school.

Acting in this manner --- I woke up one day to find that I had clean forgotten about the running I had liked so much.

It was something I had enjoyed so much. Something that had been such a source of relief. It became something I gave up because of a trifling misfortune occurred, that realisation shocked even me.

The people who had praised me disappeared, and I didn't have time to run anymore. How could such excuse-like things break me of my enjoyment.



If I was real --- if running was something that I could never have exchanged for anything else, if running was the heart of the human called Enjoh Tomoe, things wouldn't have turned out like that.

... When I was young, I followed my parents to a ranch and saw a horse. Seeing that horse that I didn't even know the name of, I broke down and cried. Seeing that being whose only act in life was to run, I couldn't stop my tears from pouring out. If there were such things as past lives I would have been one of them. That was how strong my belief was, that was how much I admired the very act of running itself.

But I was a fake.

Yes. It was only that I had a firm belief of my reality, I was actually nothing more than a fake ---.

"--- You even killed a person in the end."

Heehee, I laugh. To be laughing when I'm not happy at all, humans are so flawed.

Even looking at the sky gets tedious, so I look around the street.

... The flood of humanity doesn't cease at all.

Those people going on by with smiling or cold faces can't be real. If they were living with some goal in mind there's no way they would be in a pleasure area like this. Or rather, if you were to say that their objective in life was to play --- that kind of 'real' I can't accept.

... Clickclickclick.

Suddenly, I came back to my senses from there onwards. For me --- as self-righteous as my thoughts are, there's nothing like a meaning in my position.

Looking at the clock, it was becoming night time without me having noticed.

I can't stay here for hours on end. I left the overflowing tide of humanity behind and left that place.



The light from a weak streetlight is illuminating the street by an unfamiliar residence.

After the autumn sun fell I walked for three hours.

While pondering where to spend the night, I recollected my wits and found that I was close to Ryougi's apartment.

Humans, if we crash once do we become so unable to act like men?

I was always prideful of the fact that the merit of the guy called Enjoh Tomoe was the rapidity with which my feelings changed. But if I'm like this its not fast or slow. Am I still unable to cut those lingering attachments after all?

When I look up I don't see a light on in Ryougi's room. It seems that she is absent.

"--- Fine. Since I've come here I may as well look."

I go up the stairs. Let's confront the harsh reality, the reason for my actions was that I wanted to guide that part of me that still clung to a unique salvation.

Going up the iron stairway that clanged with every step, I arrived at the room on the end of the second floor.

The paper that was here when I came out this morning isn't there. It looks like Ryougi came back once. There's no response even when I knock on the door.

"See, she's not there."

After I just wait for a bit I try turning the handle.

--- It moves.

The door opens easily.

The inside is dark. With the handle in my hand I froze. My mind is blank.

How long am I going to stand here like this? The moment I thought that --- I shoved my body through the opening and went inside.

"---."

Gulp, I swallow my saliva.

I can't believe this, I can't believe this, I can't believe I would do something like this.

Of course I am playing the part of the criminal now, but I always hated anything resembling crime. Since I was young I disliked cowardly acts. Yet, after committing murder I am now trespassing. --- No, this is force majeure. Anyway, that girl said so as well, that I could use this place as I liked.

Clickclickclick.

Repeating incoherent excuses in the bottom of my heart I walk in. From the front door to the corridor, from the corridor to the lounge.

The light's aren't on so the room's dark. Within the darkness, I gasp for breath and kill the noise of my footsteps.

--- Damn it, under these circumstance I may as well be a thief. Lights, I have to turn on the lights. You get suspicious if it's dark. Ah, but where's the switch ---? I pat the wall looking for the light switch for the fluorescent light.

At that moment I hear the door open.

Ryougi's come back, before I could think to explain myself, the owner of the house turned on the light and opened the door.

She opens it, and stares at my trespassing self with blank eyes.

"--- What, you came today as well? What are you doing, not even turning the lights on."

Speaking coldly as if berating a classmate, Ryougi closes the door to the room and sheds her leather jacket.

Straddling the edge of the bed in that state, she put her hand into the convenience store plastic bag she was holding in one hand and rustled around.

"Do you want it? I hate cold things."

Hwik, she throws me a cup of ice-cream. The label says Haagen-Daaz's strawberry. The fact that she doesn't care about an invader like me isn't the only puzzling thing about her, buying something she doesn't like is a riddle as well.

Holding the cold cup in both hands, I fully mobilise my reasoning power.

This girl doesn't care about me at all. Even though she knows ... well I can't be sure how sincerely she takes it... that I'm a murderer. Does the fact that she still offered her room as a refuge mean that this girl is someone the police is after too ... ?

"... Hey. You. You are a suspicious person aren't you?"

When I asked such a thing ignoring all the things I had done, the kimono girl started laughing, "Ahahahaha!" loudly.

"You are a weird one, you are. Oho --- suspicious, you say I'm suspicious! That's a really good expression, it really captures the feel, really!"

Ryougi was earnestly laughing. As the black hair that she had cut as she liked became scattered, I couldn't see her anything but a suspicious person.

"Haha, ahahahaha, ha --- Mmm, yeah. There's no one in this area who kicks up a fuss like me. But didn't you kick up quite a fuss yourself? In that case it shouldn't matter what's happened, should it? For that sort of thing? Is that all you have to say?"

Wearing a meaningful smile, the kimono girl looks up at me. .... That pose with its air of somewhat fragile tranquility, it was similar to a child holding a new toy.

"No.... just one more question. Why, are you helping me?"

"You asked me to help you. I helped you since I didn't have anything else to do. You don't have a place to sleep do you? You can use this place for a while. It's not as if Mikiya is coming anytime soon anyway."

... You helped because you had nothing better to do? What the hell is that, however relaxed you may be, what kind of stupid reason is that? My mind may be upside down, but its not mangled so badly as to blindly accept that. With this as evidence I can at least figure out if this girl is lying or not.

I glare at the girl in the kimono. She doesn't pay any attention at all. It's different from disregard, but it's not imposing indifference either. ... What is this paradox. Distressingly, there is no reason to suspect that Ryougi is not speaking sincerely.

If it's not that, could it be that this person does not need a beneficial reason. If you took it as granted that this girl didn't think of easy to understand reasons like, because you are a friend or, because I can get money.

But, even then ---.

"Are you for real? You are going to hide a suspicious guy like me without wanting anything in return? You haven't taken any drugs have you?"

"What a rude guy. I hate drugs, and I'm extremely normal. I don't even report anything to the police. Although I will if you tell me to."

Ah, I also do not worry about such a thing. Who could picture this girl contacting the police. What I worried about was something more basic than that.

"Look. I'm a guy and you are a girl. Letting someone you don't even know sleep over is a bit... I'm asking if it's still okay, that's what I'm saying!"

"What? Don't guys go somewhere different if they want to hug a girl?"

At this reply spoken with a preposterous face, I didn't know what to say.

"No, I'm saying since ---."

"Ah, just shut up. If this place isn't to your liking you can just find another place to stay. Why are you stubbornly sounding out what I think?"

Harshly cutting off my words the girl puts her hand back into the plastic bag. What she took out was a triangular tomato sandwich.

... It really seems like there's no one like me in her vicinity.

"In that case I will use this place as my sleeping place. Is that okay?"

Although I shouted because of my frustration the other party didn't bat an eyelid and nodded assent.

"Fine. I'll tell you its annoying if it gets annoying," Ryougi says while chewing the sandwich.

With that my strength left me and I sat myself down plumply onto the floor.

And time flowed by.

However it was, I decided to go along boldly. As if to try and regain that conceit that the merit of Enjoh Tomoe is the quick change in feelings, I think about my days to come.

I've obtained a sleeping place for now. As for meals the 30000 yen I've got on me should last me for a month. In that time I have to find a way to live without being caught by the police.

"--- Eh?"

All of a sudden, a question formed. Why was it that tonight the front door hadn't been locked?

"Hey, why didn't you lock the door?"

"Isn't it obvious, I don't have a key so I don't lock it."

"--- What?"

Hearing that I almost fainted.

This girl Ryougi, apparently she didn't have a key to the house. The only time she locked the door was when she slept, when she went out she just closed the door. The position of the person in question being, even if a thief was to come in while she was away, there would be no harm done to her.

So the reason I was able to trespass wasn't a coincidence or anything. It could be that the reason for the absence of any household items in this room is because a burglar broke in.

"You idiot, at least take a key around! Normally, you go and borrow a spare key from the owner if you don't have one."

"I lost the spare too. So what? It's nothing that would trouble you, and if you stole these kind of things it would just weigh you down."

... Damn it, if I talk one way she's the type to rebut my words in that manner. Even so I can't relax if she doesn't have a key. There's a sense of self-preservation that's always on your mind, but is that instinct missing in Ryougi's life.

I put aside the undescrivable repulsion I had been holding towards Ryougi until a moment ago, and truly worried about this immature kid.

"Don't say something so stupid. What kind of house doesn't have a key. Wait... Since it's become like this, I'll replace the whole thing with a new one for you."

"... That's fine but, do you have the money?"

"Don't think so lowly of me. I can do this much at least. I'll do it all tonight, so from tomorrow on carry a key with you properly!"

And, I stood up.

I worked at a moving company. I learnt enough about repairing things around a house that I can easily repair something like an apartment door. At the storage facility of the company I had worked at until 2 days ago there should at least be something like a stock door handle.

With a vigor I could scarcely credit, I was running out into the night-time streets.

How do I secretly enter the building when the police could catch me at any moment, I earnestly wonder, I realise that I'm on an extremely dangerous adventure.

Really, I can't say anything about Ryougi.

To be breaking into the company I had worked at for a girl I didn't even properly know the name of, I'm a pretty crazy person too.

### 3 (Paradox Spiral, 3)

Close to a week has passed since I started staying in Ryougi's room.

With both me and Ryougi going out during the day, a strange state of affairs continues where we only see each other when we go to sleep at night. Even so it was inconvenient not knowing each other's names after a week or so had passed, so we told each other our names.

Her name is Ryougi Shiki. Surprisingly enough she really is a high school student. I don't know anything more than that.

Ryougi calls me Enjou. Maybe because of that, I call Ryougi Shiki by the name of Ryougi. Ryougi herself dislikes being called by her family name, but I can't bring myself to call her Shiki.

The reason is simple. Quite simply, I don't have that strong a resolve. I don't want to become friendlier than necessary with someone I will one day part from forever. If I come to call her Shiki, it will definitely become more difficult to leave this girl. I thought that such a relationship would only be a hindrance to someone like me, who might be caught at any time by the police.



"Enjou, don't you have a girl?"

On a night no different from any other, sitting on the bed with the gabuza (!) on, Ryougi threw an unexpected question at me without any warning.

Ryougi's questions, they always begin abruptly like this.

"A girl... Well, if I had one I wouldn't come rolling into a place like this."

"Oh. You look like you would be popular."

"Hearing such an empty compliment doesn't make me happy at all. I'm sick of girls anyway."

"--- Oho, how come?"

Ryougi must have felt some interest in the story as she pushed her head out towards me rolling around on the floor. From my position lying right beside the bed it looks like only the head is popping out and it's somehow cute.

"Are you gay?"

... What I said before, forget it. That this brat could be cute, I must have briefly been out of mind.

"There's no particular reason. To put it simply, it was just annoying. I tried dating for real, and it wasn't very fun."

I never really liked those of the opposite sex. There was a time in high school when I went out with a girl for 3 months, but that isn't a sweet memory and I think all we did was fight a lot.

Before I knew it I was haltingly telling her about my recollections.

"It wasn't that I wanted very much. But she wanted too much from me. At first I thought 'well I guess that's how it goes' and I put up with it."

Yeah. I bought her anything she wanted and if she wanted to be fancy I paid for it. Probably, there wasn't an instance when I couldn't meet her high expectations.

She was happy every time, but on the other hand I was cooling off towards her. Sex wasn't as great as everyone thought either.

... It felt like Ryougi was listening properly to my soliloquy.

"After a while I started getting sick of her. It's not just the surrounding environment. Time, money, even emotions, it felt like a waste to give them to her. I did kind of like her, but satisfying your sexual appetite is something you can do alone (!)

--- If I was a normal student, I would have had too much time on my hands. But I didn't have any free time. The more time I spent with her the less sleep I got. For someone like me, without even a minute to spare, something like a girlfriend was an impossibility from the start."

However I didn't try to break up.

She looked happy, and I didn't want to put her in tears by issuing an absolute statement like 'let's break up'. ... I didn't want to inflict any wounds, and I didn't like receiving a wound either.

"But you still broke up. How did you dump her?"

"You know, you should stop treating me like the bad guy. I was the one that got dumped. She told me suddenly after we did everything to do at a hotel. That 'you never looked at me. You just looked at my body and never saw my mind'. Honestly, saying it was a bit of a shock."

As I told the story's conclusion with a shrug, Ryougi rudely burst into laughter.

"Amazing, you don't look at my mind! Haha, you got caught by some fussy woman, didn't ya Enjou!"

The springs in the bed creak in protest. This brat, she's rolling around on top of the bed laughing.



"What, was there something strange about my story? It's my bitter memories of youth you know."

I get angry and bolt upright. Ryougi then stopped laughing and stared at me.

"It's weird. The only thing humans can see is the outward appearance. But that girl said that you only looked at the body that she thought was insignificant, to say that you don't like someone because they can't see something invisible like the mind, that kind of girl isn't normal. Not being normal means you are abnormal. See, it's funny. That girl, if she wanted you to see her mind she could have written a letter. Enjoh, you did well to break up with that girl."

Coldly making fun of me, Ryougi lay back on the bed.

Like a cat she stared at me blankly from that position, then Ryougi opened her mouth as if it was difficult for her to say what followed.

"... Well, it's not something for me to say, but. If you speak out loud about an uneasiness that 'cannot be seen' it becomes a lie. I can't know myself but love is believing in something. The blindness of love, isn't that its meaning?"

It's something I heard from someone else though, Ryougi added and fell asleep.

Ending the conversation as usual in an abrupt manner like splitting bamboo, I also went to bed with a troubled mind.

Turning off the light, I thought as I fell into sleep. I'm a complete dunderhead when it comes to those people that I have feelings for called 'women' but, I think that if it was this girl, there wouldn't be any such unilateral demands. No, if it was Ryougi, wouldn't I be able to take even such annoying things with a smile on my face?



A night of the second week.

When I opened the door with my key and went inside Ryougi was already asleep. ... As if she thinks of me as some sort of cat she doesn't show any signs of waking up even when she hears me rambling around.

But today that's fortunate.

Hiding my pummeled cheek, I plonk myself down on the floor.

Ticktickticktick.

The bedside clock goes around. Both the hands are pointing to the 12.

... For some reason, I hate clock faces. Digital displays are my preference. A feeling comes to me that there's no place for me inside the spinning clock and I get afraid.

"Ow."

My bruised leg suddenly throbbed with pain and I screamed before I could stop myself.

Ryougi is sleeping like the dead. There's no signs that she will wake up.

That profile of her face, I unthinkingly stared at it.

--- In the two weeks that we've lived together, I've come to know only one thing.

This girl, really is a doll.

She's always asleep on the bed like a corpse. This girl doesn't wake up in the morning; instead she is resurrected from death to life when she has something to do.

At first I thought it was to go to school, but I don't think that's the reason. Because whenever she receives a phone call from somewhere, Ryougi regains her vitality.

It goes without saying that I sense that the subject matter of those calls is suspicious.

However, Ryougi is waiting for that. In its absence, this girl remains here like some doll.

Ticktickticktick.

That image was too beautiful. There was nothing as inconsequential as sadness. Ryougi delights only in the things she must do and comes back to life.

This is perfection without fault. For the first time, I met the 'genuine item' that I had concluded I would never see. That which I had believed was like that. That which I wanted to be. That pure strength, which took no notice of what others did as long as you had yourself.

"--- Shiki."

From my mouth, Ryougi's name leaked out.

Quieter than a whisper, an utterance that was like an expelled breath.

But Ryougi's eyes snapped wide open.

"--- What the, you're bruised all over again?"

As soon as she opened her eyes, Ryougi wrinkled her brow.

"I couldn't help it. The other side kept provoking me for no reason."

I tell her how it happened. While coming back today, I got tangled up with two people I didn't know and we beat each other up. Of course I laid them out, but I'm also unskilled at fighting and got a lot of wounds.

"You did something, didn't you? To be so weak even with just two people. Do you like being hit?"

Ryougi says as she sits up on the bed.

You did something, does that mean something like martial arts or judo?

"Don't draw any unquantified conclusions. I don't know anything about martial arts. Although if it's just fighting, I can do it as well as the next guy."

"Oh? I definitely thought you would, since you used your palm when fighting. -- Then how did you know to use the palm of your hand?"

Ah, I should have guessed. Now that I think about it, I was once congratulated about that. When hitting someone, a person who hasn't trained his fist will just hurt his hand, and after a few hits their own bones get damaged. So it's better for half-baked amateurs like me to use our palms to hit with. No, there are martial arts where the palm is more effective and is used instead.

Of course, I don't know anything like that.

"Your palm is harder. Doesn't everyone use their palms to crush cans? There probably aren't many who would do it with their fists."

"That's because it's easier with the palm of your hand."

Although Ryougi replied coldly, it seemed like she was admiring me in truth.

She cautiously looks at my face. Getting embarrassed by her scrutiny, I struggled and kept talking.

"So what did you do, Ryougi? Some Aikido?"

"Aikido is just for fun. There's only one thing I've done since I was young."

"Since you were young, eh. I thought you were strong. It was you who let loose a high kick at the back of a fleeing opponent's head. I thought how you acted was different. It was because of that. So do you have anything like a finishing move?"

I ask the lamest questions. But Ryougi goes mmm, and falls into serious thought.

"I suppose I have something along those lines. I train by taking down everything using that as my premise, so if you call it a finishing move, it is one. But we aren't of that school. And it's originally a self-created style as well." (This part could be reworked).

The thing you train is your mindset, Ryougi adds.

"You remake your body. From your breathing to the placement of your feet, awareness, thoughts, to be able to remake all of them for combat. Even the way of using your muscles changes, so it might feel like you become a different

person.

I suppose tensing your body and mind as a fight starts, and while you are fighting, is the foundation of all martial arts. However, we followed only that too much, and as a result our path went too far."

In response to this dialogue that seemed to scorn oneself, I couldn't do anything but cock my head.

"What, if you are strong then that's that. There won't be any instances where you go around getting bashed up like me. And you finished off those three guys in an instant. That's an incredible self-created style right there."

When I spoke, remembering that refreshing instant of when I met this girl, Ryougi seems a bit surprised.

"That's different. I only copied what I had seen. More than that, there's never been an instance where I've used our house's school of fighting."

She nonchalantly spat out that frightening statement, then Ryougi collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep.



... Steam is rising from somewhere.

Sheek, sheek, and a noise that seems like something from a picture book can be heard.

There's no light, and the room is dark.

This place... is hot.

Only the sound of the burning iron plate and that magma-like light were my unique supports.

On the walls around me, huge bottles are lined up neatly.

There are long, thin cords scattered all over the floor.

There's no one.

Only the sound of steam, and the noise of the water boiling. ....

It was night, and I suddenly opened my eyes.

Because, I had a bad dream.

Ticktickticktick.

The clock said it was still 3 AM, dawn; there was still a while to go before it was time to wake up.

When I turned to look at the bed, Ryougi wasn't there. ... As it so happens, that girl occasionally takes walks at night. Even so, to go and wander about at dawn when even the vegetation is asleep...

Should I go out and greet her? --- Although I knew that not getting involved in each other's private lives under any circumstances was an unspoken condition for using this place as an abode, I had that thought.

I hesitated for a while then thought, fine, and got straight up.

No matter how strong she is, it doesn't change the fact that Ryougi is a girl of the same age as me. On top of that, her appearance is more than enough for those idiots who go around in packs at night to fall for her.

Just when I made up my mind and went out into the corridor, the front door opened noiselessly to admit the girl in her normal attire of a red jacket over a kimono.

As expected, Ryougi closes the door without making a sound.

"What, you've come back?"

I felt like I had taken a blow for some reason, and that remark popped out of my mouth.

A glance, and Ryougi turned to look at me ---.

At that instant, I thought that I was going to be killed.

The lights are off and the corridor is dark. In that darkness, only Ryougi's eyes are shining with a blue light.

I can't do anything. Can't breath, can't think properly, I can only stand there like a post.

"--- you too, won't do."

I heard a noise. When I regained my wits, Ryougi had breezed past me and angrily thrown her leather jacket on the bed as if she was in a temper.

Ryougi sat down on the bed, then leaned back on the wall to stare at the ceiling.

Withstanding the chill that still ran down my back, I came back into the room, and sat down on the floor.

A period of silence passes that makes me wonder if we won't drift off to sleep.

Suddenly, the girl started talking.

"I... went out to kill a person."

Those words, how am I supposed to respond to them? All I could do was go, oh is that so?, and nod.

"But it was all for nothing. Since I couldn't find anyone I wanted to kill today either. A moment ago, when you were in the corridor, I thought I might be

satisfied if it was you, but as expected it wasn't to be. Even if I did it, there's no meaning to it."

"... I thought I was totally dead."

I speak honestly, and Ryougi replies, that's why it wouldn't work.

"I want to feel that I'm alive. But there's no meaning to just killing people. I am wandering around at night without even an objective. That's no different from being a ghost. Someday --- I will meaninglessly kill someone."

It may seem like Ryougi is speaking to Enjou Tomoe, but in fact she isn't talking to anyone. ... She's as blank as a drug addict suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

The sort of thing had never happened until now. The Ryougi from around that time when I first met her may have wandered about at night, but there had never been an instance when she returned with such murderous intent.

"Oi, what's wrong with you, Ryougi? It's unlike you. Wake up!"

Funnily enough --- I was grabbing onto her shoulder, which I hadn't even brushed against before.

I can't believe it. That this, the shoulder of the girl who seemed so detached... was so, slender.

"... My mind's fine. I had this kind of feeling during summer too. At that time as well ---."

As if she remembered something unpleasant, Ryougi stopped talking.

I take my hand off Ryougi and come down from the bed.

Ryougi gives up leaning on the wall and lies back on the bed.

"Hey, Ryougi."

I try calling her name, but there's no response. That brat said it before. That the mind is something that cannot be seen. Therefore, a problem that is invisible is something that must never be confessed to another person.

That's right --- Ryougi is a loner.

I am also like that, but I at least have a few friends that I meet casually for a change of mood.

That's me, but this girl probably doesn't have any such person. Since this girl, who is perfect even in the smallest details unlike me, doesn't have the need for something like that.

"--- Hey, Ryougi. Do you have any friends?"

I tried not to look at the girl's face and asked the question with my back facing the bed. Ryougi thought briefly, and then replied, I have one.

"What? You have one? You? A friend?"

In complete opposition to the surprised me, Ryougi calmly said, yes, and nodded.

"In that case, the story's simple. When you feel down, it doesn't matter if it's pointless, just try hanging out with them. Just changing the scenery will ease your mind. Forgetting things like your problems and talking about insignificant things will make you feel better."

"--- I don't have one right now. That creep's gone far away."

I became unable to say anything at her words. Because Ryougi's voice sounded so lonely.

Maybe that was just my opinion, as Ryougi started to slam the bed with her fists as she worked herself up into a rage.

"That creep just does freely does whatever on a whim! Coming over to our house whenever the fancy strikes and giving me nothing but a phone number. Getting sick for a month in summer, too -- Why do I have to be anxious about a creep like that?!"

Phwock, phwock, there were some violent sounds.

This time I really can't trust my eyes.

The indomitable Ryougi is waving her arms and legs around on the bed and throwing a tantrum.

No, the reality might not be something so simple. She could be stabbing the pillow with her knife. Whatever it was, the sound is changing from a whacking noise to a ripping noise.

I was afraid to check out the situation, so I didn't turn around to look at Ryougi.

She continued to cause a commotion for a time, then Ryougi went quiet.

In any case, I envy that friend or whatever who can drive Ryougi so crazy.

I found I wanted to know more about that person.

"Hey, Ryougi."

"---."

As if she's still upset, Ryougi doesn't answer. I ignore the silence and continue.

"That person you said is a friend. What's your relationship with them? A friend from high school?"

"--- Yeah, he's a high school friend, but he's like a poet."

What's 'like a poet'? If their age is similar, if he's a guy or a girl, I decide to leave for another day. There's not much point to me knowing anyhow.

"Okay, so your wandering around at night, is that person the cause?"

Ryougi thinks briefly.

"Nah. Walking at night is my hobby, and my murder impulse is mine alone. No one else is involved. The problem is mine, so I know what kind of state I'm in right now. ... Hmm, in short, I'm so unbalanced right now that I make even you feel uneasy around me."

Ryougi speaks serenely, as if describing someone else's affairs.

"Uneasy --- I'm not particularly uneasy."

"When you told me that you felt like you were going to be murdered by me?"

A pretty voice comes flying at my throat.

... A feeling like a cold snake coiling itself around my neck comes to me. Very briefly, I questioned if the thing rolling around behind me was really human.

"See, you thought that again now as well. But that's a misplaced uneasiness. The reason I kill is because I can't feel that I'm alive. You can't be a target."

... What does that mean? Is Ryougi saying that even if she kills me --- Enjou Tomoe, she won't enjoy it?

"But --- okay. You still need to find another place to stay, Enjou. I only can't feel that I'm alive --- but Ryougi Shiki definitely likes to kill."

Abruptly, Ryougi murmurs that, as if confessing something.

The subdued tone of her voice. That voice that seems about to break, as if laying bare the troubles of her heart. ... Damn it. A woman who is already far away seems even further off.

With that, I realized. That as much as I feared this girl --- no, I was even more strongly attracted to her.

"--- Idiot, where in the world is that kind of thing?"

At any rate, I continue the conversation because I want to refute Ryougi's words.

"All it is is that your heart's uneasy. Quickly call in that friend or whatever of yours and let out everything, even if you don't feel like it. Friends are there for that reason; if you don't you drift far off from each other ---."

Pouring out everything in my heart up to that point I cut off my words. In the same way as Ryougi did before, swept up by my emotions, I talked as I liked and only realized after the fact that I did something wrong.

"--- That's all I'm trying to say. Good night."

I spat out those words as if chewing bugs, and lay down to sleep.



Ryougi said something, but I ignore and decide to sleep.

Tonight, I'm not confident of being able to speak any further normally with Ryougi.

The reason is simple. I pricked my heart with the words I had poured out.

Yeah, no matter what I do.

That friend's role will never come around to me.

## 4 (Paradox Spiral, 4)

That day, I was at the back alley where I first met Ryougi.

Even in these daylight hours there's no one about, and not even the myriad noises of the streets can be heard. Exhaling clouds of vapor into the cold air (!), I was standing in that place from which the bloodstains of that time had neatly disappeared.

Clickclickclickclick.

October's drawing to an end too. It's approaching one month since I ran away casting aside home, work, and everything else in my life.

However there's no sign that the police are looking for me. Not only that but on the TV news that I diligently go to check everyday at the mall, nothing about the murder I had committed was being said. I've been reading newspapers too whenever I felt like it, but as expected no such story appeared.

That affair, it's in a whole different dimension from the street homicides going on right now. There's no doubt that it's the sort of thing that the TV audiences would lap up. So there's no way it would have been handled as a simple accident.

"--- Impossible --- Could it be that they haven't discovered it yet?"

Hearing my mumbling voice, I want to throw up the contents of my stomach.

It's not as if it matters what happens to people like that but --- just thinking about what those bodies would look like after they had been left there for a month wraps me up in gloom.

Should I go take a look --- no, that's not possible. I don't have the courage to do so, and there could be police watching the scene.

In any case all I can do is keep a watch on the situation from outside like this.

--- Just once.

Just once is fine so if it was reported on TV as a crime, I could harden my mind and disappear from Ryougi's life. If Enjoh Tomoe becomes known to the world as a murderer it would be an inconvenience to Ryougi --- and I could leave this street with no regrets.

"Damn it, what is up with that. You bastard called me---."

Does that mean I can't leave Ryougi.

Clickclickclickclick.

The wind's picked up. I came walking out of the back alley as if I was being chased by the cold north wind. I was walking through the downtown area when I saw Ryougi at a far-off pedestrian crossing. A red jacket over a kimono - it couldn't be anyone but her.

Looking at that figure from far away --- I spotted a familiar face.

It's a guy from that night Ryougi and I first met, one of the ones who were the cause of that meeting. With practiced footsteps he's acting natural while he follows Ryougi.

Click, clickclick, click.

--- Hey, that's dangerous.

Mixing into the crowd I stalk the guy stalking Ryougi.

After stalking Ryougi for a long time the guy goes off somewhere. Shortly afterward, another guy from that time replaced him and continued to stalk Ryougi.

It seems that they don't actually plan to do anything to Ryougi but simply stalk her. Even so --- for them their movements are too faultless and well-organized to be not suspicious.

I kept watch them for an hour, and then decided that I needed to know where the one that had trailed off had gone. Fortunately the one that fainted after eating Ryougi's high kick finishes his shadowing and starts to head back.

When I hurried after him he ----- went into the alleyway that I had been in till just a little before.

--- It's a trap.

It's not for me to know what this is all for. But... this whole thing definitely has an ominous feeling to it.

Stopping at the entrance of that string-like path leading into the back alley, I looked inwards. Wouldn't it be possible to find out what they were doing from here?

Looking carefully, I see someone standing there.

It's a wine-red long coat.

That slim-figured shadow, is it a guy? His long hair is the color of gold, and even when I'm looking from a distance I can tell his is an annoying face that looks as if its owner is looking down on someone ---.

But --- who is that guy?

"□ □ □ □ □ ---."

A fluent intonation flows past my ears.

Surprised, I look back, but no one is there.

When I quickly turned back around to look at the alley, the man in the coat had disappeared.

A cold north wind blows through the street.

Brrrr, my body's shivering.

Hugging my body, which is still shaking oblivious to Enjou Tomoe's will,  
Resisting an urge to cry for no reason with all my might.

I was feeling the end of autumn and the end of my existence.



Night fell, and I told Ryougi about the fact that she was being stalked. That the creeps from that night were actively keeping watch on her. (!)

But Ryougi's reply was brief as usual.

"Oh, really?"

"So?", she asks, with her flawlessly clear eyes.

Even I lost my grip on reason this time around.

"It's not something you go 'so?' to! It's not just those jerks watching you! Do you have any memories of a foreigner wearing a red coat?"

"I don't have any delightful friends like that."

That was it for Ryougi, and she didn't respond to this story any longer.

What happened was that she lost interest. No matter what effect an incident will have on Ryougi Shiki, if Ryougi Shiki herself thinks it's unimportant, this brat will ignore it. Even if she was to be disgraced and treated like a murderer, she probably wouldn't care. Since what's important isn't what the world thinks, but how she feels.

... Yeah, I was expecting her to be like that too, and I thought that Ryougi, for whom that was natural, was proudly lonely; but this time, at least, is an exception.

Those creeps --- no, that guy is real.

Me and those jerks are either fake, or have no possibility of being imitations. Unlike us, Ryougi has pure impulses.

"Listen to me! This isn't somebody else's business. It involves none other than yourself! At least spare some thought for my worried mind!"

My shouting may have annoyed her, as the kimono girl nimbly turned the gabuza (!) on the bed around and looked up at me.

At that time, I think I was wearing a very serious face.

It isn't even because Ryougi is so preposterously unworried. The reason is a bit simpler. That is ---

"Mm, it definitely is my business and not someone else's. But why are you worrying about my problem, Enjou?"

Well, that's ---

"Idiot, of course I'm worried. I don't want you to die. Because --- I've fallen for you."

The taut air suddenly freezes.

... I said it. I, who must leave soon, said what must not be said.

Those words --- above everything else for myself, they were something that should not have been said.

Ryougi's looking at me as if she's seeing something strange.

A few seconds pass and the kimono girl bursts into laughter.

"Hahaha, what are you saying, Enjou?! You've fallen for me? Did that guy in the red coat hypnotize you or something? Try going through your memory, there will definitely be a weird noise mixed up in there!"

Ryougi --- Shiki... laughs it off and will not face me.

I don't know what proof she may have, but she definitely concluded that it couldn't be real.

As for me, obviously --- I can't accept that.

"It's not like that! I'm being sincere. Seeing you, for the first time I felt that a human was beautiful, and I thought I had finally found someone like me. You are real. If it's for you, I can do anything ---."

Grabbing Ryougi's shoulders, I glare at Ryougi.

Ryougi stopped laughing and turned around to look at me.

"Hmm, is that so?"

A dry tone.

Ryougi's hand grabs my sleeve. All of a sudden, I spin lightly around as if I had become a piece of paper, and end up lying flat on the bed.

Ryougi is on top of me, holding a knife ---.

"Then, can you die for me?"

The knife blade touches my neck.

The light in Ryougi's eyes doesn't change much.

Stabbing down the knife as usual, she will flippantly kill me.

Ryougi isn't asking if I can die doing something for her. She's saying, I'm going to kill you for my enjoyment. That's what the question means.

--- This girl can't feel affection except through something like that.

Dying is scary. Even now, I'm so scared that I can't even tremble. But... this life of mine won't be long. Having killed someone, I'm bound to be caught by the police and never be able to return to this place again. In that case ---

"All right. I'll die for you."

I said it.

Ryougi's eyes, they regain a humane light.

"Do as you like, I haven't got long left anyway. Since I killed my parents. It will probably be an execution. If that's the case --- I think dying by your hand is better than the gallows."

"You killed your parents?"

With her knife pressed against my throat, Ryougi asks me again. I decided then to reveal the memories I had hidden, and tell the story just before I died. That was probably because I wanted to at least pretend to be at a confession at least once before I died.

"Yeah. I killed my parents. Because they were bad parents, they borrowed money behind my back and went around having fun. I couldn't handle cleaning up their mess so, time after time --- so that I wouldn't screw up and have it end at attempted murder --- I wildly stabbed them in the gut with a kitchen knife. Our house doesn't even have heating. That night was cold too, right? My breath was steaming white, but a human's intestines were warm. Steam coming from a human's stomach, that was a sight that you might see once in your life!

Heh heh, rats --- everything was paralyzed and I became an idiot. I hadn't put the knife down, and my hands kept digging into those guts. Eventually, it got to the stage where you couldn't tell whether I had stabbed them to kill them or to dig into their guts, and you could no longer tell that those things had once been human."

Shall I cry? I thought that, but the tears wouldn't come.

Instead, I felt strangely refreshed. By the fact that I had killed those awful parents and was really free.

"--- Tomoe. You... why did you kill them?" asks the girl in front of my eyes.

I think. Why did I kill them? Did I hate them? Or were they annoying? No, it wasn't such a clean emotion.

In that case, was I --- afraid?

"I... was afraid. I had --- a dream.

I come home from work and go to bed. Shortly afterward, I hear my mom and dad arguing in the room beside mine, and the door opens. My father's covered in blood and my mother is standing there. Just like that, she stabs me to death, then cuts her own throat and dies.

At first I thought, I'm going to die like this, but it wasn't like that. When I woke up in the morning, no such thing had happened. I must have had dreams like that because I definitely wanted to kill my parents but couldn't. Also --- I had that dream every day. Every, single, day, that dream repeated itself. I call it a dream, but every day? I couldn't stand it anymore. I... was more afraid of the night, when I got murdered. I didn't want to have dreams like that anymore. So -- all that happened was that I killed them before I was murdered, in order that I might never have a dream like that again."

Yeah, that night. My mother, who opened the door because she had something to talk about, I stabbed her over and over again with the knife I had hidden. In my dreams, I lost count of the number of times I had been killed. I tried my hardest to kill her, as if I was pouring out all the frustration that had been building up inside of me until now.

I'm free. There's no reason for me to be chained down by such awful parents, or such unpleasant dreams.

Damn it, what a befouled freedom.

"--- You are an idiot."

Ryoudi speaks solemnly. Her cold tone conversely makes me feel refreshed.

It really did. I'm stupid, so I couldn't think of any other way to run away, but I don't regret it. Even if I'm bound to be caught by the police, I will still feel better that I did in those nightmare-filled days.

... But, one little thing. It's something I realized as I told my story.

Until now, I've lived thinking that only I was important. Even supposing such a person was serious, to say that they've fallen for someone isn't something they could do. ... They don't have the right to do that. It's natural that Ryoudi would just laugh it off. Still ... the fact that I want to protect this girl at least is real. It's the only real thing to this false me. But in the hands of a dirty murderer like me, even that thought becomes polluted. --- If I had any regrets, that is what I regret most right now.

The moment I understood that. The fever that had been driving me towards a violent outburst rapidly cooled off, like an old TV that has been replaced and thrown out.

"Still ---."

I... don't regret that murder.

Tomoe is saying in my head that the murder was not something he should have done.

Ryougi is looking at me with a far-off look in her eyes. An unblinking stare, as if it's piercing the heart of Enjou Tomoe's being.

"--- A drastic error. Enduring was your forte, but in the end, you chose the painful path. When we first met, you weren't you. Having lost your future, did the empty you want to die like just before?"

... The girl who tried to kill me for a change of mood (!).

... The girl who I thought I would be happy to be killed by.

The two throw the question at me.

... Let's see.

That night, I was handling myself recklessly. I thought it perfectly fine to beat someone to death, and on the other hand, I thought it would be perfectly fine to be beaten to death. But... I didn't want to die. At the time, yeah... simply living had become exhausting. I hated myself, a fake living without any goals in life. This self of mine that thought it wanted to die but couldn't even kill itself was so loathsome that I couldn't take it.

Even now, when I've confessed all my sins to Ryougi like this, I don't want to die. --- But nevertheless, humans will ultimately die. For me it will just be a little quicker, a little shabbier, and less meaningful than another person's.

... Is that it? That's probably what I couldn't stand.

A worthless, stale death.

If I'm going to die like that, I would rather ---

"--- dying for you, it seems much more real so I prefer it."

"No thanks. A life like yours, I don't need it."

The knife drops.

Like a cat that's lost interest in its prey, Ryougi distances herself from me. Is she going out somewhere? Ryougi picks up her leather jacket and prepares to go out.

I can only watch her.

"Hey, Enjou. Where's your house?"

Ryougi's voice is cold like the time when I first met her.

... My family went from rent to rent. We were chased around either because after half a year we wouldn't be able to pay the rent, or the harassment of the



debt collectors would be too much to take. I hated that --- I hated it from when I was young, so I envied a normal household.

"What are you going to do with the answer? It's number 405 in some mansion."

"I'm not talking about that. I mean the home you want to return to. If you don't know, that's that."

Ryougi opens the door.

As she went out, the girl spoke without even looking back.

"Well, I'm going. If you feel like it you can use this place again."

Ryougi disappears.

Finding myself left behind alone, this place seemed to become so bleak that it looked like the only colors were white and black.

While I looked at the room that had become totally black and white, the room where I had stayed for a month with my rusty mind, I decided to leave.

## 5 (Spiral Paradox, 1)

Winter's arrived.

Like my summer, the autumn that came to these streets seems to have been short as well.

Looking out from the office window, the streets are overcast by a cold sky that threatens to snow at any time. Day by day the traces of autumn disappear to the point where one begins to think the abnormal weather has erased the word autumn from the list of seasons.

That's right. In the short period from the end of September to this day of November 7, I ran through life like a prized racehorse.

To speak of my life during that time, from the start of October I was at a driving school ran by one of my relatives. This school is like a boarding school where students stay for 3 weeks and finish a normal course in a shorter space of time.

Leaving this street for nearly a month didn't appeal to me, but I couldn't turn down my relative's offer and Touko-san - my boss at work - approved the trip, so I ended up having no choice but to go. And so my 3 weeks in the school, which felt like a concentration camp in some ways, finished and I came back to this place, where I was born and grew up.

"... Mmm, name: Kokutou Mikiya."

For no reason at all, I read the contents on the license in my hand.

My name is clearly printed on the small license. Apart from that, my registration location, my birth date, current address, and a photo of my face are on it. There's really only a minimal amount of personal information entered on it, but among all the proofs of identity an individual can possess it is the one with the greatest range of uses. --- That point was just so strange that I couldn't stand it.

"What kind of qualification would this thing called a license be, Touko-san?"

I address Touko-san, who is sleeping on the bed in one corner of the same room. Of course, I don't expect anything like a response.

"--- It's a contract, that thing."

However, Touko-san kindly responded.

This person caught a horrible cold and has already spent nearly a week lying in bed. She was sleeping till a moment ago with a 38 degree fever, but it seems she just woke up.

The reason --- she's probably hungry.

It's reasonable, the time is already past noon.

Right now, I'm at the company office.

To be accurate, this is Touko-san's personal room, which is on the fourth floor of the building where the office is; this room is a place I don't normally frequent. Having moved the chair to be by the window, I'm looking at the license I got only a short time ago while Touko-san is lying in bed.

... Nevertheless it wasn't an ero-material situation. It was simply that Touko-san is lying in bed with a cold. What awaited me when I got back from the boarding school was a Shiki who silently condemned me for something, and my boss who was in bed with a cold.

These two people claimed to have become friendlier in the time I was away, but Shiki flatly refused to nurse Touko-san, and I think she even went so far as to say something along the lines of, 'I hope your brain melts away'. ... Shiki, who displayed the same coldness as ever, is a friend of mine from high school. Full name, Ryougi Shiki. Sex, female. Her manner of speaking is rough so now and then there are people who confuse her gender.

On the other hand, the woman in front of me who has a cold towel upon her head is called Aozaki Touko and is the boss of the company where I work. I am the only employee, so it is a little awkward to call it a company.

This person has a genius's nature and, as those kinds of people sometimes do, has few acquaintances. Even after catching a cold, she said that she didn't do anything and laid in bed for the whole day. The person in question was saying that it couldn't be helped since she didn't have an immunity to this cold at the current time or some nonsense like that.

... Personally, I think that if you don't have any immunity it's really not the time to be sleeping, but as a magus Touko-san probably doesn't feel like seeing a doctor. No doubt the thing called pride is stopping her.

Due to those circumstances, I couldn't really meet up with Shiki after a month away and ended up nursing Touko-san for the whole day.

A contract. Weakly uttering her reply, Touko-san picked up the glasses on the bedside table.

Normally, she seems so sinister that one doesn't quite notice that she is a beautiful woman, but the current Touko-san, who was suffering from a cold, was so gentle and pretty that you could think she was someone else.

In order to clear her still drowsy consciousness, Touko-san keeps talking.

"That, you see, is a contract saying you have mastered driving. It says that you have learnt something important, but the objective has changed. In this country, it's no longer a matter of getting a qualification as a result of learning, but learning in order to get the qualification. When you obtain the qualification, what you learnt loses its meaning. A qualification which has degraded to merely being evidence saying 'I have learnt this much' is like a contract."

Touko-san raised herself up and added, does the chicken come first, or the egg?.

"But isn't a qualification something like that? After all, everyone studies with a goal in mind."

"Of course, there are always opposites. It's a topic with no conclusion because goals and results, behaviours and processes are dissociated things (Translator note: uhh what the heck does this mean Touko? Stop speaking in professor mode!) . There will be people who start driving because they got a license, just as there will be those who, while they get their driver's license, skip any instruction and take the exam right away."

She normally speaks gently when she has her glasses on, she's even gentler than usual today, maybe because she's sick.

I digress, but when this person went to take the test, she got such flawless results in the written and practical tests that she apparently got her license while being glared at by the examiner.

"I did hear about people getting a license without going to a driving school, and I see Touko-san was such a case. ... Speaking of which, the image of you going to a driving school is just ---."

--- So scary, I can't imagine it.

Apparently unamused by my hastily swallowed comment, Touko-san frowns and looks sharply in this direction. "Isn't that a discourtesy Mikiya-kun? In those days I was still a student, so there would have been nothing strange about me going to a driving school if I chose to. I was no different from any ordinary university student."

Touko-san talks with her eyes closed as if she's complaining.

"... That's right. Now that I think about it, Touko-san was once a teen too." Imagining what she would have looked like as a lovable young girl still in her studies, I couldn't help but swallow my breath, because that was a mental attack strong enough to squeeze my heart.

"... That picture seems a whole lot more abnormal ma'am."

"--- You are slowly revealing your true sentiments while the other party is a patient, aren't you?"

Of course. Usually I'm the one that keeps getting picked on, so if I don't at least retaliate at a time like this, things don't balance out.

When I stood up to replace the towel for her, Touko-san said she was hungry, revealing a very frank craving. Distressingly, the porridge that was made for her ran out this morning.

"Shall I go and buy something from the store? Say, udon with eggs."

"No ~, that's all soggy. Hey, Mikiya-kun, won't you make something for me? You live alone, so you know how to cook right?"

The idea that if you live alone you know how to cook, just who spread that groundless rumour? Letting my shoulders fall (Translator's note: There a phrase that would fit in to replace that but I can't think of it) under Touko-san's anticipatory gaze, I firmly declared to her the harsh truth.

"Sorry, the only things I can make are noodles. The lowest rank consisting of pouring hot water into a cup of instant noodles, and the highest rank being pasta. If that's okay I will use the kitchen for a bit."

As expected, Touko-san wore a bluntly disgusted face.

"Then where did you get this morning's porridge from? It was a taste that couldn't have come from a convenience store."

"That was Shiki's. She says that she doesn't cook very often, but it turns out she's pretty skilled when it comes to Japanese food."

Oho, Touko-san goes and blinks as if she's surprised. I was of that opinion too, but really, Shiki has cooked well enough to shame a chef. Shiki comes from a distinguished family and because of that, her sense of taste is extraordinarily high class. For herself, she will eat anything, but I think that's because she didn't make it so any taste can be forgiven. Shiki cooking meant preparing something that she herself could tolerate, so it's really no wonder that her cooking skills went up as a result.

"--- How surprising, Shiki doing something for me. But well, that fits. Since that kid is adept at using a knife. ... I suppose it can't be helped. There are some bottles of pills on the desk, so can you get them for me?"

Realising she can't get a meal off of me, Touko-san lies back on the bed.

When I went to get the three medicine bottles on Touko-san's desk --- one photo caught my attention.

It looks like a scene from a foreign land. A brick road and a clock tower that looks as if it could come from a movie. Beneath a grey sky that looks as if it will start snowing at any moment, three people are standing next to each other.

Two men and a girl.

Both men are of tall stature and one seems Japanese. The other person looks native to that land and fits in so well with the scenery that there is no sense of incongruity about him. No --- it's actually that the presence of the Japanese man is so strong. The sense of existence that flows off that Japanese man standing there with a dark expression is so powerful, it rises up from the picture. ... A heaviness so strong it becomes hard to breathe. I once felt it close up.

That was, yeah. Could it have just been a sensation from that unforgettable time. While I gazed at the photo to try and confirm that, something even more striking caught my eye.

The Japanese man is wearing a coat reminiscent of a black kimono, and the handsome blond man with blue eyes is in a red coat.

There is a girl standing between those two.

Ebon black hair which makes the black coat of the Japanese man look pale. The hair that flows down below her waist; rather than hair it seems like some wonderfully beautiful decoration.

A calm face that still tinged with the innocence of childhood; in one word I could describe it as radiant. The girl is so excessively beautiful that it feels like she will snatch away my soul through the photo. --- One is provoked into wondering if mixing a Japanese ghost with the beauty of a flower blooming in the shadows and a fairy from a western fairy tale wouldn't result in a human like this.

"Touko-san, this photo ---."

Without even realising it, I was mumbling those words.

Touko-san takes off her glasses as she replies.

"Oh? Ah, those are my old friends. I couldn't remember what they looked like, so I took that out of my album. --- Around the time I was in London, it was a unique mistake."

When Touko-san takes off her glasses, her manner of speaking is the first thing to change. Previously, my friend Ryougi Shiki had a somewhat obscure dual personality, but this person called Aozaki Touko really changes identities as if flicking a switch. She says that it's actually her personality and not her identity that changes, but from my perspective it doesn't really matter what it is.

To sum up the Touko-san who has taken off her glasses in one phrase, she's a cold person.

A cold mode of behaviour and speech, a cold ideology, a cold reason --- an image of humanity formed from those sorts of things, that is the Touko-san without glasses.

"I guess it's a few years back now. Around the time when my little sister was entering high school, roughly eight years ago now. Remembering people's faces is my specialty, but for some reason I'm poor at recalling those memories. And I don't feel like tidying it up into a nice shape either since it's a pointless exercise."

Still lying on the bed, Touko-san keeps talking as if she's absorbed in thought. ... For Touko-san to be talking about her past, it's not something you see very often. I think it was true when she said that this was her first time catching a cold. I guess sick people do act differently. (TN: this is a very rough translation, it does have something to do concern sick people acting weird)

"London --- that's the capital of England right?"

Putting the three medicine bottles at the head of Touko-san's bed, I pull up a nearby chair and sit down next to the bed. Touko-san takes out some pills from the bottles and swallows them, then lies down and starts talking.

"Yes. At the time, having run away from my grandfather, there was nowhere for me to go. I calculated that there was nothing else for an amateur mage, who didn't even have the skills or the resources to make an atelier, to do but go under the wing of a large organisation. It's like an university. The equipment is worn, defaced, and failing, but there's nothing wrong with the establishment itself. In the shadows of a large museum, there was a western-eastern ancient and modern age research department. Of course it was actually the association that nourished so many of today's mages. That was also a treasury beyond my wildest hopes."

Soliloquising as if dazed by the fever, Touko-san's complexion kept getting paler. When I got worried thinking that those pills might have been poison instead of medicine, Touko-san assured me that it wasn't poison.

"It's a good opportunity, so just let me talk a little longer.

... It was difficult for a girl not yet twenty to study abroad, especially since an Aozaki gets treated like a heretic. In order to enter that place I decided to specialise in rune sorcery. At the time rune wasn't popular, and there were few people studying it. The association side needed a researcher too, so stabilising the rune characters from that side took me 2 years, and another few years to approach the originals in the Tule association, so it may have been about the time I just got my own workroom.

One day, while I was absorbed in making the doll that was my goal, I met that man. Someone who possessed a unique personal history, like originally being a Tamil priest. He was a hellish man. His strong will and tempered shell, it was like an eternally burning drive for achievement.

... Hellish. What I mean by saying that, Kokuto, is that if the idea of Hell was to gain a will and take the form of a man, my hypothesis is that it would be something like him. To the degree that he couldn't accept others, he was just absorbing misery. His ability as a mage was full of flaws, but his strong ego surpassed everything.

--- It was a coarse guy like that who I fell for."

As if she's looking at the man in her memories, Touko-san thinly opens her eyes. Her look is an undecipherable one that looked of either hatred or compassion.

Without even really knowing the contents of the story very well, I say, "Oh, that's how it was," and agree with her. Not annoying the patient is the main point behind nursing.

"Oho, so Touko-san's doll making is a foreign art?"

To that question which was perfectly unsuited to the mood, Touko-san says, yes it is, and nods seriously (TN: awful phrasing here I know | "Yes it is", Touko-san nods seriously to this question entirely unsuited to her mood.) .

Listening to Touko-san's mutterings is fine, but not being able to understand what it means makes me feel sorry as a listener. That's why I would prefer that she tells this kind of story to Shiki or Azaka, but the fever-addled Touko-san raised the gear on the story's incomprehensibility.

"The reason I got into doll making you see, was to reach 「out for the perfect」 through the perfect human body.

Adversely he chose to try and reach 「out for the」 through the soul, or in other words, an existence that is 「there」 but 「not there」 , like a cat inside an unfathomable box. The box has a definite form, so you can't see inside it, but the formless soul can be seen into.

It's similar to the collective subconsciousness some psychologist proposed. He probably thought that if he felt his way along that chain, he would eventually reach the heart.

Ah, but you see, we both were trying for the original work. The one original, you could call it, humanity's individuality . Modern humans have become so divided that their lineages and attributes are already impossible to divine. Therefore it's impossible to reach the origin. Lineages and attributes, or in other words fate. It's like a number form, so a life only achieves a certain result if this ability and that role is poured in. A life that can only achieve this result. It's natural, since the genes have only been granted those abilities. If you call that fate then it will be fate.



The pinnacle of creation has become too complicated. Probably as a result of being invested with too many abilities after pursuing omnipotence. The genes that are the data which form a human are nothing more than four different bases, but the simple spiral formed by stacking those four types of bases has fallen into the paradox that, by being piled up till it was impossible to measure, it really has become impossible to measure.

So --- I decided that the only thing to do was to make it myself, although the result was cruel. No matter how hard I tried, the only thing I could make was a perfect me."

The medicine must have started working as the colour returns to Touko-san's cheeks.

The eyes that stare into the air too, their focus gets steadily blurred.

"But --- that person will still be going on.

The guy that looked toward humanity's 'origin', he said that he got expelled by his teacher while searching for the form of the soul. ... There must be some sort of karma, for him to be getting involved in this kind of thing at this point. Do you understand, Kokuto? I'll warn you beforehand: no matter what happens, do not approach the man in the photo."

Touko-san spoke as if squeezing out the last dregs of her strength, then she fell asleep straight away.

Her slight chest moves up and down, repeating quiet breaths. The medicine had definitely taken effect, and she has fallen asleep.

Changing the wet towel on Touko-san's forehead, I left the room so as not to wake her.

There's no one in the office next door.

Only a high toned noise can be heard from the factories around the building.

Feeling that trailing noise on my skin I muttered to myself.

"--- Don't approach him? I can't, Touko-san. You see, I knew that guy two years ago."

But what significance that fact has, I can't know. No, I'm not even sure if the person who helped me then is the guy in the photo.

Inside me, that person in the photo is unidentifiable, and the fever-ridden Touko-san's words are scattered around like puzzle pieces.

Uncertain things call out uncertain words. It's only that, but the air that was calm till just now thins out, and it feels like I'll run out of oxygen.

An uneasiness I can't express with words sends a shiver down my spine.

## 6 (Spiral Paradox, 2)

One night has passed, and it is now noon on the eighth of November.

The cloudy sky is no different from yesterday, so the lightless office was dark like an abandoned ruin.

This office is too big for just two people, me and Touko-san, to use. There are enough desks for ten people, and there's a sofa to receive clients too. With a floor of concrete as bare as it was on the day it was poured, and walls that haven't even been papered over, it's not much, but nevertheless, if the numbers were met it would look like a proper workplace.

But, at this moment, there are only three people here including me.

Touko-san cannot be seen at the chief's desk beside the window. The medicine she took yesterday must have been effective, because as soon as she woke to find the cold had gone she went out somewhere.

Inside this office without a director, I was ordering materials with which to decorate the hall where the art exhibition would be starting next month while comparing prices and doing other such things. While holding Touko-san's specifications in one hand, I was doing this in order to obtain the materials needed for her craft at low prices. That person is the type to say, 'It's all right as long as I make it', so she doesn't put in this kind of annoying and bothersome effort. The result is that as her employee, I can't help but do it for her.

Peering at the list of material suppliers, I ring up this place for that and negotiate, then I move onto yet another shop. Apart from me, who can't decide whether I'm busy or just dedicated, there are two other people here.

One is the kimono girl sitting blankly on the guest sofa. Needless to say, it's Ryougi Shiki, and while it's not as if she is doing anything, she is sitting there in a polite manner.

The other person is sitting facing me at the desk furthest away from my own, doing... something. A schoolgirl in a black uniform. The girl with the long hair which is the polar opposite of Shiki's slung over her back, she's called Kokutou Azaka.

Needless to say, the fact that our last names are the same means we are blood relatives, and as my little sister, Azaka is a first-year high school student. She has a weak constitution, so she was given over to a relative's house around the time she was ten, for the reason that the city air was not good for her body; after that, we only met a few times. I think the last time I saw her was New Year's Day the year I entered high school. At the time she was still a child, but when I saw the Azaka who returned this summer, I was quite surprised. The little sister

I faced for the first time in ages had grown into a lady with such a noble air about her as to make me wonder if her genes came from our family.

As expected, I think that with just a change of environment from the house where one was born, that thing called a human grows up beautifully.

Her actions have become spirited, too, so there's no trace of her former frailty. The fact that I wasn't with her during that period of growth from the age of ten to fifteen might be a factor, but for a while I couldn't accept the fact that this girl was my little sister Azaka.

I steal a glance at Azaka, sitting at the far-off desk.

With a number of books thicker than a dictionary stacked up beside her, she is studiously and quietly copying down the contents. ... It's the study material Touko-san left for Azaka as she went out.

The heavy conversation yesterday with Touko-san put me in a gloomy mood as well, but my current greatest worry might be this.

"Nii-san. I'm going to become Touko-san's apprentice."

Whatever she was thinking, one month ago Azaka said such a thing. Of course I protested, but my little sister was determined and would not listen to my opinion.

...Ah, geez. Why does a weird thing like a magician have to come out of an exceedingly normal family like ours?

"Azaka."

The phone orders put aside for now, I called to my little sister who was sitting in front of me.

Azaka finishes writing the sentence she was copying, and then with her black hair rippling about her head, raised her face towards me. Her eyes which are calm and dignified in spite of being full of a proud temper politely look this way as if asking, 'what is it?'

"I know that it's a holiday since it's your school's foundation day. But even so, is it okay for you to be in a place like this?"

"Nii-san, please visit the house once in a while. There was a fire in the school dormitory, so right now it's in ruins. Mother knows that there was a request from the school for students with homes nearby to leave the dormitories if possible for now."

With eyes and a voice that remind me of the school president from my high school days, she knocks aside my question.

"A fire --- one big enough for the whole dorm to burn?"

"Only on the east wing. Half of the first and second year dorms were burnt to ashes. Although it didn't appear on the news because the school hushed it up."

Azaka says something shocking in a firm tone.

A fire breaking out at a famous girls' school like Reien is definitely something that could turn into a scandal, regardless of the truth behind the matter.

However, if we are talking about Reien, which takes pride in the affection its powerful alumnae feel for the school, they might be able to take care of a fire in secret.

But for a fire to occur at a school dormitory, it's a horrible thought. It's also easy to imagine from what Azaka said it that it was arson --- by a student, at that.

"--- Nii-san. You aren't getting any strange ideas, are you?"

Azaka glares at me as if she read my mind.

... Because of that event over the summer, my little sister doesn't like Kokutou Mikiya sticking his head into suspicious events. A silent argument always occurs following a conversation like this, so I decided to try and change the Subject.

"That aside. What are you doing right now?"

"It's nothing to do with you, Nii-san."

As if she knows what I want to say, Azaka's reply is chilly.

"It does have something to do with me. I mean, my sister wants to be a wizard! What am I supposed to say to Father?"

"Oh, you are planning to drop by the house?"

... Ugh. Little rascal, she knows perfectly well that our parents and I cut our ties after we argued.

"Speaking of which, Nii-san. A wizard and a mage are different things. How can you not know about that when you work for Touko-san?"

Now that I think about it, Touko-san does sometimes say something like that. Something along the lines of how it's convenient to advertise yourself as a wizard rather than a magician as it presents the kind of image that you want, but that those are the titles of two completely different things, or something like that.

"Ah, I did hear that before. But there wasn't much difference that I could see. They both use suspicious magic."

"Magic and sorcery are different.

The art we call sorcery, it's definitely something outside our everyday reality. In the end, though, it's still nothing more than making something that is possible

normally happen under extraordinary circumstances. Should I give you an example?”

Azaka walked over to Touko-san's desk, then picked up a letter opener that was lying there. A piece of silverware of excellent craftsmanship, it's one of Touko-san's most frequently handled items.

Taking out an unneeded document, Azaka writes something on it with the knife. Suddenly --- spewing thick clouds of smoke, the document begins to burn away.

“....”

Unable to speak, I just stared at the scene. Touko-san had done something of the like (although on a larger scale) before, but I didn't know what to say at seeing my little sister do that sort of thing.

“--- Stop that. That, is there some kind of trick to it?”

“Of course there is. It might look amazing to someone who didn't know about it, but it's really nothing special. What I did just now doesn't even qualify as an ability. If you are going to set something on fire, a disposable lighter will do the trick. Whether you do it with a lighter or a finger, the fact that you are setting an object on fire is the same. That kind of thing, it's not miraculous at all, is it? Do you understand, Nii-san? Sorcery is like that.”

Azaka continues on confidently.

In short, magic seems to be equivalent to a substitute good for civilization. No, from what Azaka said, it may be more accurate to say it has been overtaken by civilization.

“Take making it rain, for example. Whether it's through science or magic, the result is indistinguishable. It's just that the method is different; the amount of effort that goes into it is nearly the same. Sorcery may appear to be the work of an instant, but the preparatory steps required are extensive. If you take the time and money spent, it's nearly equivalent to making the rainclouds with science. In the past, that really was something close to a miracle. By today's standards, however, it's not a miracle or anything of the sort. Previously, any mage that could turn a whole village to ashes was hailed as a wizard, but these days if you have money, that's something anyone can do. All that is required is to throw one missile.”

That method would actually be much faster and more effective, Azaka adds.

**TN: Next paragraph was VERY weird so translation was a bit difficult, I'll rework it when I do the final version.**

“Sorcery is nothing more than making possible through your own strength what can be done now after spending a mind-boggling amount of time on the problem. It might be so even if you look at it academically. Rather than

looking/thinking for decades in order to obtain the truth, it might be faster to go to the moon and look/think there. It's frustrating, but sorcery is of the 'taboo ritual'(秘儀 禁忌) type, so it cannot achieve miracles. --- A miracle is something beyond the powers of humanity, isn't it? Something currently unachievable in this world no matter how much money you throw at it. The ones who can make those things are called wizards, and their art, magic."

Something humans can't do yet. That is magic, is what Azaka said.

"Then, wouldn't there have been more wizards than mages in the past? Since people in those days wouldn't have had lighters or missiles."

"You are right. That is why a wizard was a feared figure in the past, and why being one could even be called a job. These days, though, it's different, isn't it? Strictly speaking, they aren't needed, the things called mages. These days, magic itself is disappearing. After all, you can count on your fingers the number of things that are impossible for humanity, can't you? Whatever the case, they say that there are only about five wizards in the world today."

... Sure enough. With those meanings there would be a difference between mages and wizards. If we are talking about things that humanity can't do currently, the only things would be the control of time and space. Seeing the future or the past isn't reliable, but this is a time when such things are becoming possible, so impossibilities really are able to be counted on one hand.

Someday --- humanity will eliminate the very existence of magic. Kind of like how a child, who became a scientist because he was intrigued by a number of events he thought miraculous, loses that sense of wonder as he comes to think of those events as simple phenomena in the course of his research.

"Hmm. In that case, wouldn't the last magic be something like the power to make everyone happy?"

Umm. I can't say I know much about all this.

"----."

For some reason, Azaka has shut herself up.

She appeared to look this way, with a face as if she was looking at something unexpected, but suddenly turns away.

"... Magic is something that can't be reached. And I never wanted to be a wizard. Learning sorcery is just for the purpose of achieving my goals."

"Really? So magic is out, but if it's sorcery you will learn it? That sounds like what you just said, Azaka."

When I summed up the talk by coming to that conclusion, Azaka shakes her head, and says no.

"What have you been listening to, Nii-san?"

Sorcery was magic too, in the past. All that happened was that humanity caught up to it, so its learning and use has become possible with effort.

... It's frustrating, but I don't have any built-up history like a mage's family heritage. Those people we call mages are families who build up their blood and history. The first of them would have been simple academics too. The mysteries that they have learned, and the strength they built up, they pass those on to the next generation. Their descendants continue their work, and pass it on to their own descendants. --- In this way, they repeat an endless cycle as they try to approach the bounds of magic. Touko-san seems to be the sixth generation, but apparently the third generation heir of their family was an incredible genius and discovered some amazing things. I think Touko-san's gifts are a result of carrying that thick blood as well. People like me who are just starting to learn magic now can't become mages that easily."

"Hmm. Sounds like you are going to find it tough, for many reasons."

Mmm, I suddenly understood something.

Thick blood --- the power of your bloodline.

That's true for any family. To us it may be our many relatives, or the wealth you have inherited.

But, in the end, that ---

"Oii, then what are you doing? Ours is a normal family. Never mind magic, we've never even dipped into Buddhism. Wouldn't it be that we can't learn things like magic?"

"That's correct, but apparently we have the potential. According to Sensei, the delicacy shown when I ignite something isn't very common."

Azaka speaks as if she's sulking.

... Ah, geez, what good is being able to set things on fire going to do her? It could even be that this brat was the one responsible for the fire in the student dormitory.

"Hey, you said it yourself that an ability that ends with one generation is useless. Then whatever you do is pointless. Even if you try to become a mage instead of a wizard, it will end up no different in the end. If you don't come back to a normal path quickly, you won't even be able to find a job."

It's hard finding jobs these days as it is.

Azaka immediately tried to refute that statement.

Before that could happen --- an even more offensive piece of dialogue came leaping into the office with the sound of footsteps.

"No, getting a job won't be a problem. With that level of skill at her age, in just two years' time she'll be getting offers left and right. She could even be hired as a first-class curator."

With a loud whuffing noise, the door opens and Touko-san enters the room.



Having shed her cold, Touko-san walks over to the chief's desk so briskly that you wonder if she was ever sick.

Sitting down after hanging her coat on the chair, she looked at her desk and frowned. Probably because the location of the letter opener was different from before.

"Azaka, I told you not to use someone else's things. A person becomes dull if they rely upon tools. I suppose it was because you didn't want to fail in front of Kokutou, right?"

"--- yes, you are right."

Upon being reprimanded by Touko-san, Azaka replies clearly even as her cheeks become red with embarrassment. ... It's those things about her that deserve to be admired, even if she is my little sister.

"Well, you were having a pretty interesting talk. Weren't you disinterested in sorcery before, Kokutou?"

"Of course I was, but... Oh, by the way, Touko-san. Do you remember yesterday?"

"Eh?" Having taken off her glasses, Touko-san cocks her head in confusion.

...That already mysterious conversation from last night, the one who began it doesn't remember talking about it.

Touko-san pulls out a cigarette and takes a puff as she holds it in her mouth.

"Anyway, Azaka. Why are you telling such things to Kokutou? Concealment and secrecy are the greatest prerequisites for sorcery. ... Although, I suppose there wouldn't be any problems if the person you are talking to is Kokutou."

"What's okay if it's me?"

"You won't understand even if we tell you. There's no reason for the secret to escape either. Since you are the type that knows how to choose the topic depending on the person. You wouldn't talk about that kind of thing with a normal human."

"That may be so, but --- Is it really not good for a sorcerer to be exposed to others?"



"Indeed, it's bad. Although it wouldn't really matter socially, the power of your sorcery falls. Do you know the origin of the word 'mystery', Kokutou?"

Touko-san asked that as she brought her body forward on the desk.

"When you say mystery, do you mean the sort of mystery in mystery novels?"

"In a way. Not the detective novel sort, but mystery in the mystical sense."

"Yeah, I do. It's originally Greek, not English."

"... Well, that's true. In Greek it means to close something. Signifying stagnation, concealment, and self-completion. You see, a mystery has meaning in the fact that it is a mystery. Keeping it hidden is a nature of the technique. A sorcery that has had its nature revealed can't become a mystery, no matter what kind of supernatural methods it uses. It's nothing more than another method. Once that happens, that sorcery instantly becomes weaker.

Sorcery was originally magic too. In short, there was no question that the strength was pulled out from the origin that was its source. Should we imagine for a moment that there was something along the lines of a 'mystery that makes you rich'? Let's say that this has a strength of 10. If only one person knows it, they can use the entire force of 10 of its power. But if two people know it, that it gets halved into two units of 5 and gets used like that. See, it's gotten weaker, hasn't it? The way of expressing it may be different, but I think that this is a fundamental rule in regards to everything in this universe."

I can't understand all of what Touko-san is saying, but I think I get the point she is trying to convey.

If concealment and obscurement is the law of existence that thing called sorcery exists by, I understand why mages would be reluctant to reveal their sorcery in front of others.

"In that case, you must do as you please where others can't see you, Touko-san."

"Nope, I don't."

Zkk, Touko-san started talking as she stubbed out the cigarette in her ashtray.

"I wouldn't have a choice in a battle between mages, but otherwise I don't use it even if I'm alone. The only time I use sorcerous techniques is when it's required for a ritual, or in a ceremony in order to proceed to the next level.

Some time around the medieval era or so, an organization called the Association was formed. Because of their excessive regulation of sorcery, the Association foresaw the degeneration of mages. So they took the power of their organization and turned sorcery itself into something that is never revealed. What they did was to take a mystery that was visible and turn it into a mystery that no one knew about. As a result, mystery began to disappear from society.

In order to strictly enforce this, the Association made some pretty byzantine rules.

For example, if a mage pulls a civilian into a magical phenomenon, the association will dispatch an assassin to kill that mage. This is done to destroy the entity that is harming the larger community of mages. ... That's probably where the myth that a mage that reveals himself to people loses his power came from.

The Association tried to stop the degeneration of sorcery by reinforcing the attribute of concealment, and as a result, those mages that belonged to the Association came to not throw their sorcery around with abandon.

There were mages who resented those restrictions and retreated into the countryside, but the Association holds enormous amounts of academic works and lands. Most of what a mage requires to live as a mage is monopolized by the Association. To not belong to the Association was to be the same as being the outcast in a village. If you wanted to do an experiment, all the territories where the node lines met were owned by the Association, and if you tried to learn sorcery, you couldn't obtain any texts, so you couldn't learn anything. Therefore, a mage who was not a member of the Association could not practice sorcery even if they wanted to. That's the power of a multitude. In that respect, it's very impressive."

"Uh, Touko-san. In that case, does that mean I would have to join the Association too...?"

Azaka's hesitantly interrupting voice somehow held a note of unease.

"You don't have to, but doing so would be more convenient. It's not as if you can't come out once you go in. You are free to leave that place when you wish. Since they regard the fact that they aren't rulers very seriously."

"But in that case there's no meaning to their extraordinary levels of concealment. Sorcery would spread if those who have learned magic enter the outside world."

Upon hearing Azaka's reasonable opinion, Touko-san goes, Ahhh, and nods.

"That's true. Actually, there are a lot of people who plan to study at the Association and gain power, then leave for the countryside. Such thoughts tend to disappear after about ten years, though. Because the Association is the optimal environment for leaning sorcery. To go down to the countryside when everything a mage needs is already around you, no one does that kind of stupid thing (TN: Lol. Look who's talking, although I suppose most mages don't have seal orders upon their persons). Studying sorcery is the foremost objective of a mage. They don't think about using their power and the things they've learned. If they have that kind of time to spare, they use it to approach

an even higher level of mystery. But since Azaka has a fundamentally different objective from us, you don't need to worry about being infected with the Association's poison even if you decide to join. If you are interested in reaching higher levels, it's a place that might be worth looking into."

Azaka knits her eyebrows together as if that's troublesome. In the end, it appears as though Azaka herself has no interest in doing something like that. To me, who doesn't like the idea of his little sister studying abroad in a suspicious place like that, Azaka's pondering comes as a welcome relief.

"... I'll just ask one thing. What do you mean when you say that secrets are kept even within that Association?"

Unexpectedly, I hear something from the sofa.

Over there is Shiki, who has been sitting there since before without a word. She's the type of person who doesn't get involved in a conversation that she's not interested in, so until now she had been staring at the scenery outside the window.

"--- There is that. A mage won't reveal the results of his experiments even within the Association. What the person next to them is researching, what their goals are, and what they have obtained are all a mystery. The only time a mage will reveal the results of their work is when they are passing it on to their descendants just before they die."

"Studying for their benefit alone, yet not using that power for their own sake? What purpose is there in a life like that, Touko? Is it that the goal is to learn, and the process is to learn too? If the only things you have are the beginning and the end, that's the same as having a zero."

... As usual, Shiki talks like a guy with that fine and clear feminine voice of hers.

Touko-san appeared to have a faint bitter smile on her face, as if Shiki's biting remarks had hit a nerve somewhere.

"There is a goal. However, what you said is correct too. A mage is pursuing a zero. His life is pointing towards something that never existed in the first place.

A mage's ultimate goal, you see, is to reach the 'maelstrom of origins'. It's also called the Akashic Record, but it may be better to just regard the edge of the maelstrom as having such properties attached to it.

The thing called the maelstrom of origins, it is probably the birthplace of everything. All phenomena flow out from it. If you know the origin, the results are naturally produced. To describe it as it is, you could say that it is the 'perfect knowledge'. By creating a standard like perfection or the like, we are ultimately limiting the concept, so even that description is incorrect. But since that the easiest way of defining it, the name stuck.

Essentially, all the branches of magic that have spread throughout this world are nothing more than one branch of a small river flowing out from this maelstrom. This is the reason that every country has their own traditions and legends. The core is the same, but what decorates the exterior is the background of the one who understood that 'river'. Astrology, alchemy, kabbala, spiritualism, rune, the innumerable researchers. Their origins are the same, so in the end they hold the same final destination in mind. Because, they who have touched the tip of the stream that split off from the maelstrom of origins called magic, they have imagined what lay before --- the shape of the beginning.

To reach the truth is the ultimate goal of all mages. They don't have any desire for petty things like the meaning of life. All they want is to know the shape of pure truth. They are that collective of people. Those who abandon self in order that they may gaze upon their souls --- the multitude who can never be rewarded for their efforts. The world calls them mages."

Speaking with a clear voice, Touko-san's gaze is sharper than ever. Her amber eyes flicker as if they are on fire.

... That may be so, but unfortunately, I can't understand even half of what was just said.

I only understood one thing from that speech, so I decided to ask her about it.

"Uh, can I ask something? If there is an objective, wouldn't studying have a meaning as well? Not being able to be compensated ...., Uhm, is it like that? No one has managed to reach it, have they?"

"Someone did. We know that it exists because somebody managed to get there. Those magics that still exist today are things left behind by the ones who got there.

But --- Those ones who got to that side never came back. Mages who were great enough to leave their names behind in history were lost at the very moment they got to that point. Whether that place is such a wonderful world, or if it's a world you cannot escape once you get to it. Those are things no one knows. Without getting there themselves, that is. However, reaching it with the efforts of one generation is impossible. The reason mages shed blood during their research, and pass the results of their work to their descendants, is to amplify their magic power. It's nothing but a way of creating a descendant who can reach the maelstrom of origins. You see, many generations of mages have already dreamed of the maelstrom of origins, died, and passed on their work to their children, who in turn added to it and passed it onto their children. There's no end to it. They can never be compensated for it, either. Even if a family that has reached that point were to appear, it would probably be impossible --- because there are meddlers."

In contrast with her words, which suggest hatred, Touko-san lets loose a dry laugh. In a manner that makes it seem that she thinks it good that there is such a meddler in this world.

"Well, what I am saying is that it is simply not possible no matter which side you are on. Today's mages can't reach the maelstrom and impose a new system -- a new branch of magic."

Touko-san says this with a shrug, as if saying 'that's the end of this long story'.

With that Azaka and I were unable to say anything, but Shiki alone points out the contradiction in Touko-san's story.

"What strange people. Why do you people continue, even though you know it's beyond you?"

"Who knows? Maybe all those people who call themselves 'mages' are those who were born without the ability to grasp the concept of 'impossible', or idiots who can't give up."

Touko-san cleanly acknowledges the statement with a shrug.

Seeing that, Shiki went, 'What, you already knew', as if she was surprised.



When an hour or so had passed after the end of the conversation, the office had regained its usual tranquility.

It was getting to be about three in the afternoon, so as a break from work I brewed some coffee for everyone in the room. After getting some Japanese tea for Azaka, I sat back down at my desk.

As for my work, the overall schedule was set, and my paycheck for the month looked to be safe. The thought relaxed me as I drank the coffee.

The sound of people sipping tea could be heard echoing through the quiet office.

Suddenly, as if she was trying to break the peaceful silence permeating the room, Azaka aimed a preposterous question at Shiki.

"--- Excuse me. Shiki-san is a guy, isn't he?"

... Enough to almost make me drop my cup, that was truly a hellish question.

"---."

That was true for Shiki, too. Taking her lips off the cup of coffee in her hands, she makes a face which suggests she is offended, but at a loss for words at the same time. In her current state, she has no rebuttal for my idiotic little sister.

Seeing that as a sign of victory, Azaka continues.

"Since you aren't denying it, you must be acknowledging the fact. You are definitely a guy, Shiki-san."

"Azaka!"

Dear lord. Unable to contain myself, I ended up jumping in.

These kind of questions need to be ignored, but in this particular case I wasn't in my right mind.

I got up confidently enough, but no suitable words come to mind. Without another word, I sat down again. ... I felt like a soldier from some defeated army.

"Don't fuss over unimportant details, you."

In a very angry voice, Shiki gives Azaka a reply. Seeing as how she's rubbing her temple with one hand, it could be that she's trying contain her temper.

"Really? But this is a very important matter."

Like Shiki, who is always outwardly cool, Azaka responds coolly as well. With her elbows upon the desk and her fingers laced, Azaka's appearance is that of a chairman conducting a meeting.

"An important matter, you say. There's not much difference whether I'm a boy or a girl. It doesn't have anything to do with you, Azaka. Or are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

"Something like that would have been decided from our very first meeting."

It feels like the two are glaring at each other, even though neither is looking at the other person.

... As for me, I would like to know what had been decided, but this isn't the sort of mood in which I should ask that question.

"... Azaka. I don't know why you feel you must bring this up again after all this time, but in the hopes that it will be the last time I will say it again. Shiki is a girl, definitely."

First, I just said that.

That one statement, which could be wrapped around Azaka's rudeness while restraining Shiki's displeasure - for some reason, it felt like it scraped their nerves even rawer than before.

"I know something like that. Keep quiet for a second, Nii-san."

If you know, then why are you asking, you?!

"What I want to ask isn't her physical sex. All I want to confirm is what side her psychological sex leans towards. Although, superficially at least, Shiki-san seems like a man."

Stressing the word 'seems', Azaka looks at Shiki out of the corner of her eyes.

Shiki gets more and more disgruntled.

"If my body's a girl's, it doesn't matter what side my personality is. What will you do if I am a guy, brat?"

"I wonder, do you want me to introduce you to a girl from Reien?"

--- Ah.

Hearing Azaka's words that are no longer dancing around the issue and have become a straight-out challenge, I finally understood.

That Azaka, is she still not letting go of what happened on that night two years ago?

The Chinese New Year during my first year of high school. There was a time when I invited Shiki over to my house as we went home after visiting the temple together. Azaka had been at home for once for the winter holidays, and being confronted with Shiki, she fell into a mildly shocked state. That wasn't unexpected, either. At the time, Shiki still had another personality called SHIKI. Coming face to face with Shiki's voice and way of acting, which had been even closer to the picture of a healthy young man, Azaka had fallen ill for a whole day.

Even so, she had gone too far just now. I can't help her even if she gets beaten up by Shiki.

"You know, Azaka..."

At exactly the same time as I stood up again to glare at Azaka, Shiki got up from the sofa.

"I'll pass. Those Reien bitches, there's not a proper one among them."

Hn, Shiki snorted, and then she just left the office.

The navy kimono swishes as it disappears from my field of vision.

I thought about running after her, but that could all too easily have the effect of pouring oil upon the fire of Shiki's displeasure instead.

Thanking the gods for the miracle that nothing had happened, I sat down and drained the now-cool coffee in one shot.

"Pity. In the end, I may have taken a blow instead."

Tch. Clicking her tongue, Azaka loosens her posture, stretching her arms as she leans her body on the backrest of her chair, as if she had been in a ready-to-fight state until now as well.

... I've always thought this, but why does Azaka's personality take a turn for the worse whenever she talks with Shiki?

This time, though, I feel that I can't let things pass without saying something to her.

"Azaka. What was that just now?"

"What do you mean, what? It's all because the relationship between Nii-san and Shiki-san isn't clear. Haven't you ever had any thoughts like that? Whether Ryougi Shiki is befriending Nii-san as a girl, or as a guy?"

While her manner of speech is stern, Azaka's blushing as she talks. Because of that imbalance, I realised the point my little sister was trying to make.

"Azaka, we call that an idiot's conjecture. Whether Shiki is a girl or a boy, it's not something for us to use as a conversation topic. And furthermore, Shiki is originally a girl, so even if her way of thinking is that of a guy, it doesn't make much difference, does it?"

Azaka narrows her eyes and glares at me.

"--- Okay then. So what Nii-san is saying is that as long as she's a girl there aren't any real problems. In other words, you think that relationships between the same sex are wrong. In that case, answer me this.

Let's say that here we have a man who has become a woman through a sex change and a woman who has become a man by the same method. In the event that both these people truly love Nii-san, who would you choose? The one whose appearance is that of a woman but is really a man inside, or the one whose body is that of a man but whose mind is a woman's? Now, give me an answer."

...Azaka's question is... difficult.

The more you think about it, the more it becomes evident that it is a situation in which you cannot choose either side.

If you just think about it casually, of course you would choose the person whose sex is female over the one who was originally a woman but now has the body of a man. But that person's mind is still that of a man, so it leads on to mean that she likes Kokutou Mikiya as a man.

I couldn't trivialize the matter to the point where I was able to think that a person's sex didn't matter in love. In that case, however, it means that I recognize men and women only by their outward appearance, so I start to feel that I'm an ugly person inside. On top of that, relationships between the same sex are prohibited from the beginning, so a situation in which a man loves Kokutou Mikiya as a man isn't acceptable either. Then the one I choose would be the one who likes me as a woman, but that person's sex is male --- Ahah, why do I have to hurt my head over a question like this?!



... Wait a second. This, isn't there something paradoxical about it from the start? Although you don't accept a relationship between people of the same sex, either choice has the trap of being a same-sex relationship.

When I realized that and lifted my head, Touko-san was holding in a laugh as if she found the whole matter amusing.

"--- That's unfair, Azaka. This is the famous question in which 「Truth and Lies co-exist」 !"

"Yes, you are right. It's the famous Euphemenide's Paradox."

"True, to Kokutou it's a source of a devastating paradox. You guys really don't let things get boring for me. Is the Kokutou family all like this, Azaka?"

In stark contrast to the still laughing Touko-san, Azaka is looking this way with an earnest expression on her face. ... So that was it. This girl was worrying about me in her own fashion. In that case, since Shiki herself wasn't clear on the subject, I at least have to clearly state my opinion on the subject.

"... Yeah, I think I understand what you're trying to say, Azaka. It's just that I don't particularly mind which way Shiki leans. Even if you were to say that Shiki was SHIKI, I don't think I would feel any different."

When I said that while scratching my cheek to hide my embarrassment, Azaka got angry and jumped up from her seat.

"--- So are you saying it's okay even if you are going out with SHIKI?"

"... Uhm. Well, yeah."

Suddenly, something bulky slammed into my face.

"That's too filthy --- !"

Dadadada, the sound of someone running out.

By the time I thought, 'Ah, that book Azaka was reading until just now was what came flying', I was alone in the office with Touko-san.

Shiki had left after getting angry with Azaka, and Azaka had just run out.

As for me, I was glaring at Touko-san, who was still laughing as I gingerly felt my aching face.



And so, two hours passed and the time came to go home.

Neither Shiki nor Azaka came back, so I thought about dropping by Shiki's apartment while brewing the coffee that had become a ritual before leaving work.

"Oh, that's right. Sorry Kokutou, but I need you to do some extra work for me."

Those kind of worries disappear at the one statement Touko-san throws my way as we drink the coffee.

"Extra work? Did you take up some new task?"

"No, it's not something related to that side. It isn't anything that will get you money. I went out this morning for this, you see, and I heard an interesting story from a detective that I'm indebted to. Kokutou, do you know about Kayamahama's Ogawa [Mansion](#)?"

"By Kayamahama, you must mean that apartment complex that they built on the reclaimed land. The one they say is a futuristic model or something."

"Yes, that one. Was it thirty minutes by subway from here? It's a neighborhood that uses land in a posh manner that's unthinkable to us living here in the city. Well, you see, back when they were developing that place, there was one mansion that I briefly checked out. It seems that there was an uncanny incident there.

At about ten o'clock last night, an office worker in her twenties got mugged in the street. The victim was a woman, so it was probably a rape attempt.

Unfortunately, the victim got stabbed with a knife. The criminal fled down the street, but the victim couldn't do that. The victim, who was stabbed in the abdomen didn't even have a cell phone. The crime scene was the apartment complex, too. Which meant there wasn't any reason to expect there to be any shops nearby, and if it's ten at night there are hardly any people going by. So as she bled out, she went into the nearest apartment to ask for help.

But that apartment building's first and second floors weren't in use. They say that it's only from the third floor up that the mansion is inhabited. By the time the woman got to the third floor using the elevator, she knew her body had reached its limit. She screamed for someone to help her from that location for about ten minutes, but none of the apartment residents heard her, and at 11 PM she died."

... It's a tragic story.

These days, as apartment buildings get larger and larger, there is increasingly less contact between neighbors. Or rather, it seems that there is an unspoken rule in the city now that ignoring others is polite.

I remember hearing a story similar to the one just now from a friend of mine. That one night, screams could be heard from the apartment a floor below, but not one person went to help, and when morning came they found that the child of that family had been killed by the parents. Apparently the other apartment residents had heard but ignored it, thinking that it was someone playing around.

"The problem starts from there. They say that the victim's cries for help could be heard even from the apartment building next door. Not screams, but the sound of a human asking for help. The people in the building next door say that they ignored it, thinking that since it was so loud, the people in that building would obviously run over to see what was wrong."

"What? --- Are you saying that the people in that apartment building didn't know?"

"Yeah, that's what they're saying. Without exception, they are all saying that it was a quiet night as usual. Well, if that was all, there wouldn't be anything too strange about it, but previously in that mansion there was one more case just like this one. I didn't hear many details, but that detective came asking for advice since there is something suspicious about something so weird happening twice."

"... So, you are telling me to investigate the place, boss."

"No, we will go to the actual location together. What you can do is find a real estate agent and get a list of residents so that you can quickly investigate where they all lived previously. Seeing as it's not something you can earn any money from, you can take your time. The deadline is December."

Replying that I understood, I put my cup of coffee to my lips.

... For some reason, I got the feeling that I was stepping into another weird situation.

"But you know, Kokutou."

"Yes?"

"Are you... really fine if Shiki is a guy?"

... If I was talking to Gakuto right now, I would have sprayed out the coffee I was holding in mouth without hesitation.

"... Probably not. I do like Shiki, but if I were to express my desires, I prefer her as a girl."

"Eh, what is that? So boring. In that case, there's no problem."

What a disappointment, Touko-san shrugs, and lifts the cup of coffee to her mouth.

... There's, no, problem?

"Wait a minute. What do you mean by 'there's no problem'? That's something that ---."

"Yeah. Shiki's definitely a girl mentally too. There's no way she wouldn't be a girl when the yang-aligned SHIKI's already disappeared."

That's --- But, in that case, what's with that manner of speech of hers? Didn't the Shiki from before use a girl's way of talking?

"Look here, the one that took the male as being the yang side and the female as the yin side in the first place is Shiki, wasn't it? In that case, the story's simple. The idea of yin and yang comes from the Taegukdo. Do you know about Korea's Taegeuk? It's a circle shape."

**TN: I have no idea what Taegukdo would be in English so if someone knows pm me with the English equivalent. Or post in the translation notes thread in the forums.**

If you say a circle shape... She may be talking about that picture where you take a circle and divide it into two with a wavy line in the middle. That's not a simple half-moon shape, but a twisted half-circle that looks as if two souls are trying to grab each other's tails. If we were to describe it as a word the 'O' character is close to that nuance.

"If you talk about a Taegeukdo, one half is white, the other half black. And whichever side you look at, there is a small hole of the other color punched into it. A black spot in the white whorl, a white spot in the black whorl.

You understand right. The black side is the yin; in other words, the woman. This picture is one of halves that are intertwined yet incompatible --- A black and white paradigm."

"An incompatible --- Paradigm?"

Those words, I've heard them before.

"Yeah. It would also be okay to call it yin-yang, light and darkness, right and wrong. It refers to a state where something derived from one original object has been split into two. This, in yin and yang terms, is sometimes known as Ryougi [兩儀]."

"--- Ryougi, that's -"

"Correct, Shiki's family name. Her dual personality, it was something decided from the remote past. Did she obtain a dual personality because she was a member of the Ryougi family, or was it that they knew a Shiki would be born sometime and took the name Ryougi? It's probably the latter.

The Ryougi clan is a dynasty, just like the Asagami and the Fujou clans. They are families who are trying to create humans who are beyond human, and used various methods to ensure the birth of an heir. All so that they could pass on their family's 'inheritance'.

The Ryougi clan is especially interesting. They knew that if they had a supernatural ability, they would one day be destroyed by the civilized world. So they thought up a supernatural ability that would let them appear as normal

human beings. --- Hey, Kokutou. Those people we call professionals, why is it that they can only reach the top in one area?"

Caught off guard by the sudden question, I was unable to give her an answer.

Today was a very long day, and the information coming into my head was exceeding my limits. On top of which --- To think that Ryougi was born into such a family, just why ---.

"That's because no matter how perfect a body, or how high the amount of natural aptitude you are born with, you can only put one talent into one person. The higher you climb, the more you are restricted as to what other peaks you can go up, until in the end you cannot climb any others.

The Ryougi clan solved that problem. By imbuing one body with a countless number of personalities. It's the same as a computer. If you put hundreds upon hundreds of pieces of software into one piece of hardware called Shiki, a professional in all areas is created. That's why their name is Shiki [式]. The Shiki [式] in Shikigami [式神]. The Shiki [式] when you talk about a numerical formula [數式]. A program that fulfils any task required of it perfectly. An empty doll that possesses countless numbers of identities, and can be modified by putting in another personality with different morals, thought patterns, even senses ---."

Did Shiki already know this?

...Ahah, she definitely knew. That's why she stubbornly avoided becoming friendlier. Accepting the fact that she wasn't an average person, the fact that she had not been born into a normal family, she had just been trying to live a quiet life ---.

"This is a continuation on the subject of the Taegukdo, but the division of the chaotic 「 」 into two is [兩儀]. In order to further stabilise this, and in order to increase the number of classes available, they divide it into four phenomena [四象]. They then further increase the complexity by cutting it into eight trigrams [八卦]. Like this, they keep dividing by a base of two. This, too, could symbolise Shiki's ability.

But that no longer exists. A bug appeared in the perfect program, you see. The Shiki you see now, well, there may be slight problems, but she is a perfectly normal human with self-awareness."

Click. The lighter's flame springs up.

At Touko-san's words, I'm going 'Eh?' and asking a question again.

"Why are you making a face like that? The one that broke it was you. A mentally disturbed person, you see, doesn't break down because they don't even dream that they may be mentally disturbed. Shiki was like that before, too.

Yeah, but a human called Kokutou Mikiya made her aware of the fact. That the existence of the one called Ryougi Shiki was strange.

Ah --- That's right. If you were to say it was a rescue, you already saved Shiki two years ago, didn't you?"

Here, and Touko-san pushed a cigarette at me.

I don't smoke, but I accepted it and lit up.

...The first cigarette of my whole life, it had a very indistinct taste.

"Ugh, the point of the conversation got twisted. And I didn't really feel like talking about Shiki, either. Recently it seems like I keep feeling rushed. My lips are getting loose without me even realising it. Who knows? You might happen to die tomorrow, Kokutou."

"--- That's a little scary coming from you, Touko-san. I'll be watching out for cars, then."

"Yeah, that might be good. Anyway, about that Taeguekdo.

I told you how each side in it has a spot, right? The black in the white, the white in the black. They call this the yin in the yang, and the yang in the yin.

In short, this is referring to those parts in a male that are feminine and those parts in a woman that are masculine. Saying that someone is yang-aligned just because they use a man's manner of speech is a rash judgement. No matter who it is, every human has some traits of the other sex. Men who like to dress up as women are a prominent example. There's no doubt in my mind that the Shiki right now is the yin-aligned Shiki. The reason she uses a masculine manner of speech is unconscious compensatory behaviour on her part to the dead SHIKI. Maybe because she wants for you at least to remember SHIKI. Kiki, isn't it so cute of her?"

"---."

... Ah, now that it's spelled out for me I understand.

Shiki may talk like a guy now, but she never acts like a guy like she did two years ago. No matter how you look at it, her movements and actions are those of a girl.

Having lost the half of her called SHIKI, she is still in a very weak and vulnerable state.

Realizing that, I felt like my heart was being squeezed.

The Shiki that came out of her sleep of two years was more stable than before, so I had been thinking she was okay. But Shiki was still lonely, no different from back then when it seemed like she could be hurt at any moment.

I haven't changed either. Even today, I feel that I can't leave Shiki alone like that.

... That's right. Although I couldn't do anything two years ago.

If something were to happen again, then this time at least I must save her.

## 7 (Spiral Paradox, 3)

When I opened my eyes the next morning, it was getting past nine.

I am totally late.

When I arrived at the office holding a bundle too heavy to be called luggage, Touko-san and Shiki were waiting for me.

"Sorry I'm late."

Only after I leaned the [shinai](#) bag-shaped bundle against the wall did I sigh in relief.

Breathing hard like I just ran a marathon, I calm my breathing.

The bundle isn't even one meter long, but is heavy as if it were made of steel, so that while it didn't seem like a very bulky bundle when I left my house, my arm had gone numb after walking a hundred meters.

While I limbered up the muscles in both my arms, Shiki came plodding over.

"Oi. Hey Shiki, nice weather today."

"Yeah, they say it will be fine for a while."

Unusually, Shiki is wearing a white kimono as if she is going out somewhere today. When put together with the red leather jacket on the sofa, it seems like there will be a clean and clear contrast between the white and the red. Normally she doesn't like obi with patterns on them, but today she's sporting an obi with a leaf-like pattern across it. Looking closer, even her kimono's sleeves have three or so red leaves scattered across the ends.

"Mikiya, whose business is that?"

Pointing with a white finger, Shiki asks me a question.

Her finger is pointed at the object leaning against the wall.

"Ahh, Akitaka-san sent that. Shiki, you went out yesterday, didn't you? When I dropped by after work, you weren't there, and Akitaka-san was waiting for you in front of the door. It had been a while since I saw him and I talked with him for an hour or so, but it didn't feel like you would be coming back anytime soon so we parted ways. At the time, he entrusted me with this. He said that it may be a [Kanesada](#), but since there's no maker's mark he couldn't be sure of its origins."

"When you say Kanesada, do you mean the Kanesada with a [Kuji](#) in it?"

Showing a rare bright face, Shiki lifts the bundle leaning against the wall. Holding the package that was heavy even for me with just one hand, Shiki began to loosen the string that held the bag shut.



Like a banana being peeled, whoosh, and the cloth gets stripped away. What was presently revealed was a long, thin metal plate. No, rather than saying it was metal, it felt more like rusty iron or copper. Only the cloth from the top of the bundle had been taken off, so only a tenth of the object could be seen, but it's definite that the thing is something like a stick.

The iron inside the shinai bag is wrapped in another layer of pure cotton-like cloth. The iron is in the form of a plate that looks like someone took a ruler and made it about two times bigger, and has two small holes drilled into it. There are some kanji carved into the worn surface. ... Curious.

"Man, Akitaka, bringing out something like this ... ."

Shiki speaks as if she's troubled, but her eyes can't stop smiling. For some reason I couldn't express, it was depressing to see Shiki, who didn't even smile at any day-to-day things, suddenly start snickering as she held that unidentifiable metal plate.

"Shiki, what is that?"

Shiki was acting too strange, so I asked her about it.

When I did, Shiki spun around to face me and gave me a huge grin.

"Want to see? This is the kind of sword you can't typically see these days."

Shiki, who happily started to bring the contents of the shinai bag out. Touko-san, who had been watching silently until now, stopped her.

"Shiki, I see that is a ancient blade you have there. You can't take out something like a five hundred-year-old sword in here. What will you do if the ward gets cut apart?"

Hearing that, Shiki freezes.

Touko-san says it's a sword, but is that blunt metal plate that looks like an enlarged iron ruler that couldn't cut anything really a sword ... ?

"On top of that, there's even a Kuji on it. Is it 'May those who preside over all warriors be my vanguard' (TN: **I don't think this is an accurate translation but it's the best I could do from what I had**)? I'm sorry, but my wards can't stand up to a famous five hundred-year-old sword. If you take that out here, all the things in the lower floors will come tumbling down."

Taken back by Touko-san's unusually threatening words, Shiki began packing the shinai bag away again. ... These two, I think it's true that they talked about a lot of strange and wonderful topics while I was away.

"--- You are right, showing Mikiya a Japanese sword with only the blade will be boring anyway. To think that he didn't prepare a hilt. Is Akitaka getting to be an old dotard too?"

Shiki mumbles absently.

...Calling Akitaka-san, who had raised her since she was ten years old, an old dotard is a bit harsh. Moreover, Akitaka-san is still in his early thirties, which means his usefulness is still maturing.

Reluctantly, Shiki lays the bundle on the sofa.

...This is something I found out later, but in those days, a hilt didn't come attached to a sword. A Japanese sword like those you see in historic dramas already has its hilt attached, but a hiltless sword has no decorations like some cutter blade. Apparently those two holes punched into the bottom are so that you can put a hilt on. And just for your information, an ancient sword refers to swords from the middle of the Heian era to the Keichio (1596-1614) era, without doubt an important cultural fact.

"Do you know, Shiki? Just by building up a history, a weapon becomes a mystical thing that can stand up to magecraft. From now on, don't bring anything like that into this building even by accident. I won't take the blame for what happens if you do."

Handling a precious item that could even become a national treasure like that, Touko-san went, whew, and sighed.

"By the way, Kokutou. What's the reason for you coming in late this morning?"

"I apologise, it's just that investigating proved a bit difficult. Anyway I've managed to get the names and collect some general information on the residents of the Ogawa Mansion."

--- That's right, I started investigating the apartment building in question last night, and when I woke up the day had already passed me by.

Lately, the spread of the internet has meant that it's become possible to carry out investigations even during the night. Distinctions such as resting at night since everyone else is sleeping have disappeared. As a result, I heard the story from Daisuke-niisan, collected some random facts here and there while web surfing, sorted what I found, and before I knew it the job had expanded to the state it was currently in.

"...I told you that you had until December to do it. You sure like to buy the hardships you go through, Kokutou. Well, let's hear it then."

"Yes ma'am. The Ogawa Mansion is a high-class building even for a posh apartment complex like Kayamahama. It has a unique design too, so please have a look later. The construction period was from '96 to '97, with the work being done together by 3 companies. You took care of the eastern building lobbies, Touko-san. For now, I've put the names of those involved in the construction on the list. There's a detailed construction schedule attached too, so have a look."

Taking out the freshly-printed resources, I spread them out on Touko-san's desk. For some reason Touko-san is blinking a lot and sitting there quiescently.

"As you can see, what we are referring to as the apartment building is actually two apartment buildings right next to each other.

Built in a nice half-moon shape there are two ten-story buildings facing each other. If you look at an aerial photo, it's enough to surprise you. They really are forming a circle. Originally, they built it thinking of a company dormitory, so the first and second floors are set out as recreational facilities, but they aren't currently in use. I suppose that you can't waste power on such frivolous things with the economy as bad as it is.

Each building is ten stories high, with five rooms per floor. Between the east and west buildings, there are ten rooms altogether. Every room is a [3LDK](#) that mixes western and Japanese styles. The layout of the waterworks was somewhat complex, so in about ten years' time the lower floors might start developing some leaks. As for parking, there are forty spaces in front of the apartment building, and forty spaces underground. Compared to the number of residents it's a bit lacking, but for now there's enough with just the parking space out front.

When the company that originally intended to use it as a company dormitory started having trouble, there was a change of ownership. Apparently, the new owner's policies meant that the building was opened to private use. The residents entered in 1998 - in other words, this year. They said that they had advertised for three months, but only about half the apartments were filled. There were even some rumors going around that they were going to rebuild the western building in the near future. Oh, and here's a copy of the blueprints."

Saying that, I laid the next resource on the desk.

Touko-san made an even more disgruntled face, and furrowed her forehead.

"The apartment is divided into a western building and an eastern building, but the first floor lobby is shared. There is only one elevator as well. For a project using this much land, the construction was actually pretty shabby. They probably focused more on outside opinion than utility when they were planning the building. The elevator alone was fraught with breakdowns at the beginning. In fact, the caretaker confessed to me that they couldn't even use the elevator until May.

The room count is five rooms per building; going counterclockwise from the six o'clock position, they are numbered 1, 2, and so on. The eastern building is numbered from 1 to 5. Numbers 6 to 10 are in the western building. The roof is a no-access area.

The third floor residents are: Sonoda, empty room, Watanabe, empty room, Itsuki, Takemoto, empty room, Haido, empty room, Toenchi.

The fourth floor residents are: empty room, empty room, Sasatani, Mochitsuki, Aratani, empty room, empty room, Tsujinomiya, Kamiyama, Enjou.

The fifth floor residents are: Narushima, Tennoji, empty room, empty room, Shirazumi, Naito, Enomoto, empty room, empty room, Inugami. The sixth floor -."

"Enough, I realize already. How much you go overboard when you are let off your leash, I realize it already."

In the midst of going through the list, Touko-san sighs and stops me.

"Here, show me the list. Since I won't be surprised even if it has the company they belong to and their former address on top of their family composition."

"Okay. Reading everything is a bit hard for me as well."

So I handed over the list, and when Touko-san saw it she went 'Whoa', letting out an exclamation that didn't suit her image.

"Dear lord, to think you really did investigate it all. Kokutou, are you sure you don't want to try being a detective? You'd be popular, definitely."

"No I wouldn't. You see, I only got information for half the residents this time, too."

Yes, if I had any regrets, that was it.

In the end, out of the fifty or so residents, I was only able to follow up thirty of them, which is about half that number. Other than that, I was only able to find out the names of the residents and the makeup of their families.

Touko-san is wordlessly flipping through the list.

When I glanced at Shiki for no reason, she had on a serious face and was lost in thought. That frowning expression she had on as though she were glaring, it was grim, but rather than being scary, it was beautiful.

"Touko, pass me that list for a second."

Walking over to behind Touko-san, Shiki casts her eyes upon the list.

"...As I thought. Such a rare name, there wouldn't be two of them."

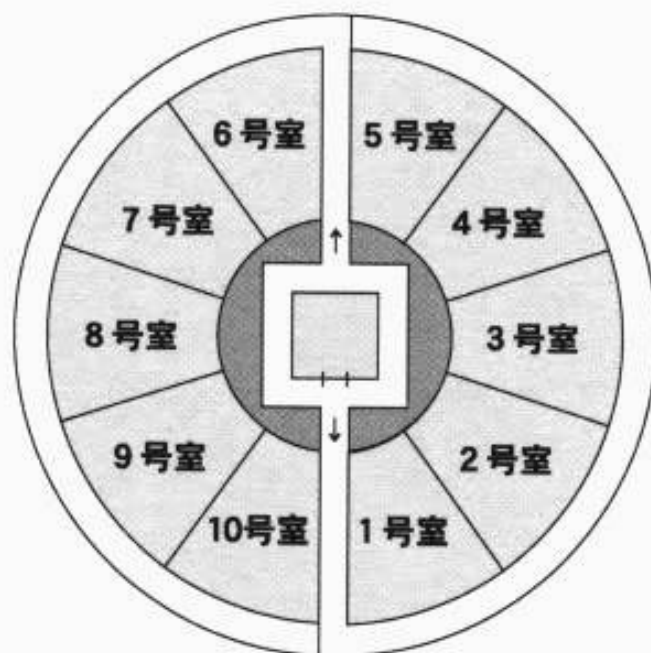
Tch. Shiki clicks her tongue.

"I'll go on ahead first. Touko, is there anything I could use as transport?"

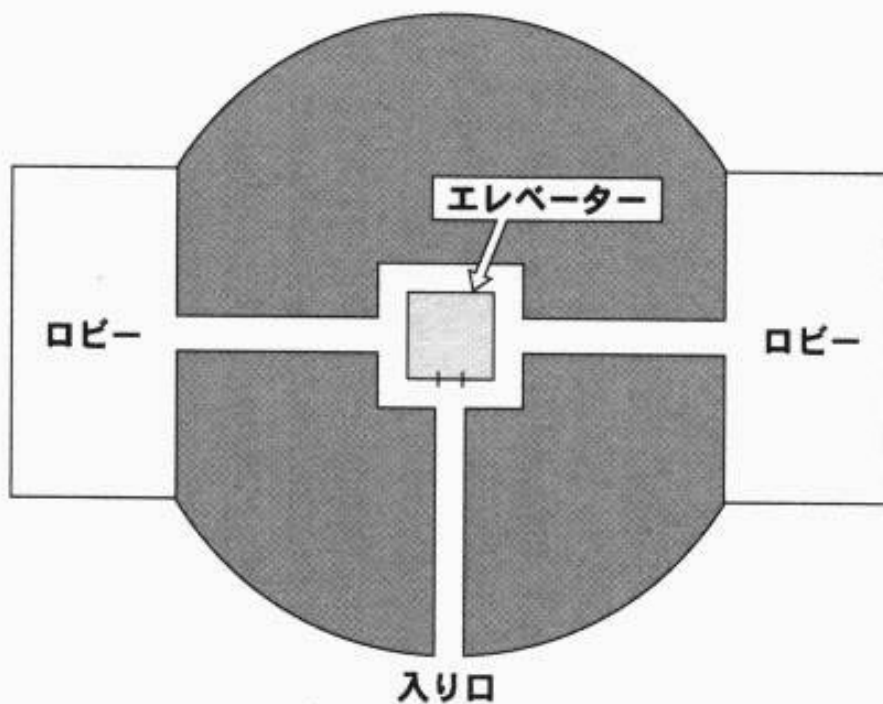
"There's a 200hp motorbike in the corner of the warehouse."

# 小川マンション 見取図

N  
4  
+



3 F ~ 10 F (共通)



1 F ~ 2 F

"Are you telling me to ride a motorbike while wearing a kimono?"

"There should be some women's clothing in the wardrobe. They're mine, so they might be a little big, but they should be better than a kimono."

"Yeah," Shiki nodded. Putting on her leather jacket she picked up the Japanese sword that was packed inside the shinai bag and left the office behind her.

Like some snake, the white kimono makes an inauspicious slithering noise.

"--- Shiki!"

... How should I say this? Feeling some indescribable uneasiness, I called after Shiki to stop her.

Showing me the back of the leather jacket, Shiki just turns her face towards me. Eyes full of naive questioning, as if she had been warned about some prank she didn't remember and thought it weird.

"What is it, Mikiya? Does it seem like I've lost myself to some bad thing or something?"

Really, what am I supposed to say to her when she's so carefree, as if she's just popping out to do some shopping --- I couldn't figure out what I had to say.

"No ...It's nothing. I'll come over tonight, so let's leave talking 'til later."

"What? What a weirdo. But --- okay. Tonight, you said? If it's at that time, I should be in my room."

Okay then, she said, and Shiki left, holding one hand up in farewell.

Around one hour after Shiki left on the motorbike she had uncharacteristically borrowed from Touko-san, Touko-san and I decided to go and check out the building for ourselves.

Thirty minutes after leaving the city center on Touko-san's treasured mini-coupe-like Miner 1000 or something similar. Before long, we came to an immaculately maintained portside district.

That place called Kayamahama was certainly wide, at any rate. Whether it was because they had land to spare or not, only a few multi-story buildings dotted the landscape, and so it brought to mind the field in a polygon game that had been popular ages ago. With a name like Bro-Ken or Dra-Ken, it was a game where four people oversaw a huge landmass.

The apartment in question was really in the middle of a chaotic jungle of apartments. Surrounded by buildings that all looked the same, the circular tower was visible from miles away but took a while to get to.

Whereas most of the other buildings are square tofu blocks, that round apartment building alone breaks that rule as it stands there...

For a ten-story building, it's pretty high. There definitely were advantages to piling blocks on top of each other to form a circular apartment on this land. The lone path from the grounds to the apartment building is almost like the road leading to the Taj Mahal, stretching straight to the apartment's lobby.

"What's this? There isn't even an underground parking lot."

Muttering in the driver's seat, Touko-san parked the car on the roadside.

"Well, shall we?"

Lighting up another cigarette, Touko-san starts walking.

Sticking close to her, I had just stepped onto the apartment grounds when a sudden dizziness struck me.

It may be because the sun's stronger today. Since I was staring up at a apartment bulding that shoots up like a tower, getting briefly dizzy isn't so unreasonable.

Pursuing Touko-san, who was striding off ahead of me, I entered the apartment.

--- At that moment, I felt like vomiting.

The walls of the apartment's lobby are united in a cream color and are spotlessly clean. Yet I felt so unnerved looking at it that I thought I would faint if I stopped clenching my teeth.

No, this is already close to disgust.

My insides were twisting around so much that I thought I would go crazy.

Although the air outside is so cold, the air inside the apartment building is lukewarm. It's probably only due to the internal heating being set too high, but this is like I'm feeling somebody's steaming breath. The tepid atmosphere that wraps around my skin, it's somewhat --- similar to being inside a living body.

"Kokutou, that's only because you're thinking of it that way."

Hearing Touko-san's voice whispering by my ear barely managed to bring me out of that weird mood.

Steadying my mind, I looked at my surroundings.

The lobby is the one space that connects the two buildings.

This apartment building looks as if someone took a circle and cut it in half before arranging the two halves to face each other. The two buildings are connected only by the space in the center, so it is not possible to go directly from the east building to the west building from the second floor or above. In other words, you must return to the central space and go across the lobby.

There's no caretaker's office in the lobby.

In the center of that circular space is a huge column that could be called the building's spine. This is the elevator that can move anywhere between the first and tenth floors, and running beside it there is a stairway. Having put walls around the elevator and stairway, it became a column. Having that kind of feeling, the column gives me a very gloomy impression.

"--- This, is a very unpleasant building."

"It feels like a haunted house. There's a lot of bad energy floating about which can't be hidden. But on the whole, there are quite a few buildings like this one. It's actually quite simple to make a building that drives people mad, you see. Just by changing the wall color, or the location of the stairs, you can change somebody's condition for the worse. If it's a resident who lives here every day, the effect would be much worse.

Touko-san got on the elevator first.

"Which floor would be good, Kokutou?"

"Ah, any floor's good. ...Although if you were to ask, I would say the fourth floor."

"Then let's go to the fourth floor." Touko-san said this as she slowly looked around the inside of the elevator.

The elevator is of a strange design that looks like a twisted white cylinder. Of the buttons numbered from **B** to **10**, I press the one marked 4.

Brrrrrr-----rrmmm.

There was a moving noise of an unnaturalness that overwhelmed everything else.

We are definitely going up, but it feels like my body is falling towards the floor. Finally the elevator doors opened.

The fourth floor lobby is a circle too. When we come out of the elevator, the corridor leading to the east building is in front of our eyes. The apartment entrance faced south, so it means that there is a corridor in the 6 o'clock direction.

This corridor goes all the way to the outside, so that when you get to the wall on the other end, it turns around in a 3 o'clock direction and goes around the wall of the west building. As expected, the doorways to all the rooms are on the outer side.



"Let's see, we're on the fourth floor right now, so that would be number 401. Then it goes to number 405, before we come to a dead end. How do we get to the west building?"

"You have to go around the back of the elevator. The southern corridor you see when you get out of the elevator leads to the east building, and the northern corridor, which is behind the elevator, is connected to the west building. This apartment building really is divided into two."

"They sure built it strangely. If they connected the outer sides, it wouldn't be like that."

"That wouldn't be as fitting. They built this so poshly, so they had to at least divide black and white properly. Anyway, Kokutou. Did you have something to do on the fourth floor? Are you going to visit that place where the family was dead or something?"

When Touko-san said that, I jumped in surprise.

Touko-san's voice echoes through the cream-colored lobby.

The light shines off the well-polished floor of the lobby, making me think that it's nighttime.

Yes, why hadn't I realized?

...Since we got to this apartment building, we haven't met one person. No, never mind meeting people --- there isn't even the sense that there are people living here.

"Boss, where did you hear that story?"

"From a detective I keep owing debts to. You're talking about that story where the thief went to rob an empty house and found the whole family dead, aren't you? I didn't hear the apartment number or name of the family, but I thought that if it was you, you would have investigated those."

Ah, she's right. My phone call to Daisuke-niisan last night was too confirm that too.

"What should we do? Do you want to check it, Kokutou?"

"I was planning to, but now..."

To be honest I'm scared. Until I got here, I was thinking that it was an interesting but not very special story, but seeing this place made me realize that it was real. Just being here is making me tremble. Embarrassingly, visiting the house of the family involved was a scary thought even during the daytime.

"Let's go. I want to use the elevator by myself. That's right, let's meet upstairs. Come up those stairs over there. It may be a spiraling stairway, but it might be a good idea to close your eyes."

Then, saying that, Touko-san got on the elevator again and went to the upper floors.

The lamp shows the elevator's climb to the tenth floor.

--- While I was staring blankly at that, I realized only then that I was now alone.

In the lobby, there is only me.

A world where only your own breathing can be heard.

A secret chamber where you can't tell if it is day or night.

A heavy and stuffy oppressiveness, as if the whole room is one big vacuum pack.

I never knew... That an apartment could be such a gloomy dimension, cut off from the outside world.

"Damn, she would never come down to me would she? That Touko-san."

By talking to myself, I tried to regain my vitality, but it had the opposite effect.

The echoes of my voice return to me, coming to my ears as the voice of another.

...Even a cemetery at night wouldn't be as scary as this place.

Whatever. As long as I am in the lobby, the pressure of being in a hidden room looms over me. Steeling my mind, I went towards the corridor that leads to the east building.

Coming outside, there wasn't such a heavy feeling to the atmosphere as in the lobby. The view in the corridor that went around the outside was actually quite boring. Everywhere you looked, it was just more of the same apartment building.

Looking at that from the corner of my eye, I walked towards the dead end. Walking to the end of the east building, I arrived at the number 5 residence on the fourth floor.

--- Nine days ago. The robber that snuck into this house discovered several corpses and fled.

When the terrified thief went to report the finding to the police, he was even more shocked to come face to face with the family going about their daily routine when he returned.

Had the thief seen some kind of hallucination? Or was there some kind of mistake?

It would have been fine to stop there, but by dredging up all that remained of the enthusiasm that had brought me this far, I rang the doorbell.

Ding-dong, came the clear tone.

A little later --- making a creaking noise, the apartment doorway opened outwards.

The darkness inside the room spilled out.

Something came out of there.

First, a person's arm.

Then, a head.

"Eh, this is Enjou, but... Who are you?"

Opening the door, that's what the rough-faced teenage boy said to me, as if he were annoyed.

--- In the end, that story was just another stupid wild tale.

There wasn't much wrong with the Enjou family of the number 5 residence who were supposed to have been involved in the incident.

When I came back to the lobby, the elevator was still up on the tenth floor. Pressing the button would make it come down, but inside that thing is Touko-san. It goes without saying that she would disparage me for being too scared to use the stairs.

With no other options, I directed my feet towards the nearby stairway.

The lobby is still full of heavy air, but the normal state of the Enjou family had given me back some confidence.

I started climbing the dark staircase lit only by a spinning red light located somewhere I couldn't see.

The stairs turn in right angles, winding around the elevator shaft like some snake as they stretch up and up. As Touko-san had said, it was a spiraling stairway. Every time you reached a floor, there was a small hole in the stairwell so that you could go out into the lobby.

... That cream-colored wall which the red light was shining on, I thought it looked like the stairway of some medieval castle. Something about the red light made me think of a flickering torch. The light was dim, and it couldn't reach to the end of the stairs, so every time I went up one step it made me a little more melancholy.

The end of the twisting stairs. Fighting the scary illusion that there was something crouching on the far wall, I climbed all the stairs, and ended up on the fifth floor lobby. ...Or would it be more accurate to say that I escaped?

The fifth floor lobby is laid out in the same manner as the fourth floor lobby. It's an apartment building, so like a department store it's expected that there will be no great differences between floors. Even with that said, though, this place is so similar that it's scary.

"So you came. Let's go down, then."

Touko-san was waiting for me in the lobby.

I followed her, who got onto the elevator without another word.

When we got into the elevator, Touko-san stood in front of the panel with all the buttons corresponding to each floor, and spoke without turning.

"Kokuto, look down at the floor. It's a quiz."

"Eh? All I have to do is look down?"

The elevator doors shut. Again there is a loud mechanical noise.

The time taken to go down would not have been more than three seconds. Inside the vast airtight enclosure called an apartment, the smallest airtight container stops.

"Now, here's the question. What floor is this?"

Only then did I lift my head. The elevator is open and I can see the lobby. On the wall that looked identical to the one just before, there is a small plastic plate with the number 5 on it embedded in the wall.

"Uh ...We are still on the fifth floor."

But... the elevator had definitely moved. In that case, the one that was wrong was me.

After thinking about it for a moment, I came to the obvious conclusion.

"In that case, it was the sixth floor we were on just before, wasn't it?"

"Correct. Kokutou intended to go up one floor, but ended up coming up two. It's a stairway design that makes it easy to make such mistakes, but, well that's how it is.

But you know, these things called apartments are strange, aren't they? The fact that the only way you can tell the floor you live on is those small numbers on the lobby walls. The higher up you live, the more your senses get dulled within the elevator. If you were to work on the elevator switch so that all the floor numbers were changed, someone who wasn't used to it wouldn't be able to tell if they were on the fourth floor or the fifth. When I have the opportunity, it might be nice to experiment in a nearby apartment building. Would midnight be best? I feel happy all of a sudden."

Saying those things, Touko-san shut the elevator doors.

Before I knew it, we were on the first floor, and we came out into the lobby.

"I know. Shall we go over to the east building for a minute? No matter which building you're in, the first floor should have a lobby, right?"

"Yes. The place is set out so that it connects directly to the second floor facilities. Kinda like a lobby in some decent size hotel. ...Eh? Touko-san, weren't you the one who designed the east building's lobby?"

Was I? Touko-san replies vaguely as she walks away.

The first floor lobby could be regarded as the circle's center.

Stretching out from this center like some thin line are the east and west corridors, which lead to each building's first floor lobby. You could almost say that the lobbies of each building are close to lounges.

We shortly arrived at the east building lobby.

In that quite wide space was an empty plaza. The place was open to the second floor, so a long staircase stretches straight up to the second floor balcony.

Should I say it felt like the lounge of one of those Western villas that you often see in movies? In the middle of the semicircle lounge is a clumsy staircase. The surroundings are just more of the cream-colored walls, and the floor is made up of marble-like stone.

"If you were to put a mechanism in, let's see, would it be about here? Just in case, let's make an escape route, shall we?"

And Touko-san went to her knees on the stone floor, then began sweeping the floor with her hands like some academic looking for fossils.

"--- Uh. What the heck are you doing, boss?"

"A precautionary measure. But you know, didn't you realise when you used the stairs? There were signs of movement, weren't there?"

"?"

The stairs, move...?

To say that the stairs inside that box-like structure move... means that the entire central column moves as well.

That kind of idiotic thing, how-

"It's not the column. Just the stairs. Didn't you see, on the corner of the walls? There were scrape marks. Ah, was that it? You were too scared to think of looking at something like that."

Patting the floor with her hands, Touko-san says that without even turning around.

... My thoughts truly hadn't stretched that far. No, since the stairway was so dark that the light couldn't reach the ends, could I say that I didn't have the leisure to think of it?

"... But it's impossible to move the stairs. Moving that column, isn't it the same as demolishing this building?"

"That's why I said it was just the stairs. A rocket pencil, to describe it otherwise."

"Rocket pencil? What's that?"

Twitch, Touko-san's hand freezes in mid-motion.

And she hurried to her feet.

"You don't know? Those pencils that have ten or so leads in one case. Small missile-like things are stacked inside like pistol rounds. They are layered in rows inside the pencil, and when one lead gets worn away, you take out the missile and push the end of the pencil in. Then a new missile comes out, and you can keep writing without going to the bother of sharpening your pencil. ...Would they still be selling them? Image-wise, they're like ???."

I can't understand what Touko-san says.

The rocket pencil she talks about isn't something I know of, but that expression of hers comparing this to a ??? touched me. So, does that mean they are pushing up the stairs alone from below?

"Are you saying they lifted up the spiral stairway from below? Like a piston?"

"That's right. They would have left about half a floor's worth of room from the start. At the same time, as they started being able to use the elevator, they pushed it up from below. Not in order to increase the amount per floor, but in order to skew the exits of the spiral. By doing so, you reverse north and south."

Now, let's go home, Touko-san says, and starts walking again.

Returning to the central lobby, the boss who was leaving this circular apartment building muttered something as if she really couldn't understand.

"...Does he really not know about rocket pencils? They were quite a fad when I was student, those."

The last decoration of the day: a red parking violation sticker stuck on the windshield of the car that had been parked on the curb.

The road in front of the apartment building was wide, but there was almost no traffic. On top of that, the only car parked there was Touko-san's, so it must have stood out.

## ／ 8 (Spiral Paradox, 4)

That night.

After all my investigations and work were completed, I headed towards Shiki's mansion.

November ninth, a little after 8 PM.

But even when the calender had flipped over to the next day, Shiki hadn't come back.

## ／ 9 (Paradox Spiral, 5)

... Click, click, click, click.

When I woke up, I found myself in Ryougi's room.

In that desolate room that I hadn't set foot in after that night when I confessed to her about killing my parents.

Outside the sun is setting. That clock that still grates on my ears, it's pointing towards six o'clock.

--- My head hurts.

Has it been 9 days or so since I cut relations with Ryougi. I've been living like a hobo on the streets that have just greeted November. Skipping meals, I've just been looking out for the news that my parents' bodies have been discovered.

Maybe it was because I've been living as the lowest grade of human, but my headache got worse day by day. Not only that but my body's started creaking. It could be because I haven't been paying much attention to my health, but every joint that could be called a joint was heavy.

"... What the hell am I doing?"

I mumble as I hug my knees.

It had been my intention to never set foot in this place again.

But right now --- I wanted to hear Ryougi's voice.

Clatter clatter, my teeth were trembling.

As if I had gotten terrified and was asking for help, before I knew it I was here.

How long did I stay in the darkness like that.

Suddenly, the world was filled with light.

"What the heck are you doing Enjoh? Do you like lurking in the dark like that or something?"

So speaks the girl in the white kimono and red leather jacket.

She doesn't even think it strange that I am here.

From her shoulder length black hair, those deep black eyes, to her boyish way of speaking.

Exactly the same in every respect as before, Ryougi came into the room as if it was a natural thing to do.

"Even so your timing is too good, it's perfect."

Mumbling something like that Ryougi puts the bundle in her hands on the bed. Going straight into the unused room, she brings out a long and thin wooden box.

"Just a minute, I have to fit this on somehow."

Ryougi unwraps the bundle. Inside there is only a long sword.

The kimono girl opens the wooden box with practiced hands and takes out a scabbard and a hilt, a big coin like thing that she puts onto the sword.

"Eh? The habaki (Habaki: A little metal piece you put on the top and bottom of the hilt to hold the blade in place) is too small. Ah damn it, why doesn't it fit. ... What a nuisance, this is the only habaki I have."

Grumbling discontentedly, Ryougi chucks the sword that has transformed from a simple blade to a magnificent katana onto the bed, and looks in my direction.

"Done. You have something to say right?"

In contrast to her words Ryougi's face is still indifferent.

I --- couldn't think of what to say or how to say it. I only knew that I had been wanting to ask someone for help.

... Nothing's changed.

From the first time I met Ryougi, I didn't even know what kind of help I wanted to receive from her.

"--- I don't know. I think something's happened to me. I can't have any confidence in myself."

Ryougi doesn't say anything, and stares at me with fixed eyes.

All I can do is keep talking like I have been.



"Today, I saw my mother on the street. At first I thought it was someone who resembled her. But ... It was definitely my mother. I followed her you see and... It doesn't make any sense --- she returned to the mansion ---."

Not knowing what to do with my trembling body, I kept rattling on.

--- And then.

Ryougi said, Is that so, and stood up.

"So you are saying your parents are still alive. It didn't get reported in the news either, so it could be so."

"There's no way that could be right! I definitely killed my mother. I killed my father too. That is an absolute fact. The ones who are wrong are the ones who are still alive!"

That's right, so how is it that they are still living as usual.

How is it that they are going home as always.

To that, blood-spattered home which has become a scene out of hell, how ---.

"Ho, it's wrong is it? Then let's go check."

"--- Wha, what?"

"I'm saying, all we have to do is go to that mansion and check. Whether Enjoh's parents are dead or alive. We would know for sure then."

As if it was all decided, Ryougi starts moving again.

She puts a long knife in the inner pocket of her leather jacket and hides a second knife in the belt of her kimono.

Even though she goes through such grand preparations, as lightly if she's just going out to buy a pack of cigarettes, the white kimono girl starts walking.

It seems Ryougi is prepared to go by herself at least.

I didn't feel like being around her, but I couldn't let this brat go off by herself so I decided to tag along.

"Enjoh, do you know how to ride a motorbike?"

"... As much as anyone else."

"Then, let's do it like that. The one I just rode back on is still there so let's take it."

Ryougi moves to the underground parking lot.

The fact that a small apartment like this has an underground parking lot is amazing in itself, but the motorbike Ryougi had prepared was amazing too.

A sidecar is attached to a huge Harley-level motorbike. Without hesitating Ryougi got into the sidecar.

Having already abandoned myself to the flow I got on the oversized motorbike and headed to the port-district mansion I had lived in until just 1 month ago.

Because of the unfamiliar huge motorbike it was past seven at night when we arrived at the mansion.

Under a sky so cold it was impossible to think of it as November, rises the round building that seems like it could scrape the moon. The building that stands out clearly from its box-like neighbours. This strange building has a peculiar structure, and is divided into an East building and a West building. Our house was number 4 of the East building. No, the West building never had any inhabitants. There weren't many residents so it is not used.

From what I've heard there were a lot of people who hoped to get rooms, but the owner of the mansion was picky so he only filled about half of the total number.

... The reason my house is in such a fancy mansion is because my father and the owner were acquaintances.

"We are here."

I say to Ryougi who is sitting in the sidecar.

Ryougi is staring at the mansion as if she's seen a ghost.

"What, is that" that one question, is the only thing she utters.

I left the motorbike on the side of the road and entered the mansion grounds.

Surrounded by brick walls the grounds are about the size of a fairly big primary school. The building itself is round so it doesn't take up much space, but the size of the garden around it is staggering.

Like a slash cutting that garden in two, a sealed path stretches to the mansion.

I entered the lobby with Ryougi who had shut herself up.

Walking into the lobby, we arrive at the huge column dominating the centre of the mansion. Inside the column is an elevator, and beside it is a rarely used spiral staircase.

I summoned the elevator.

Click, click, click, click.

... It's an unpleasant feeling.

My heart is beating faster than usual, I can't breathe properly.

Is it only to be expected? Since we are about to go into the room where the corpses of those I have killed are lying.

The elevator arrives.

I go inside it. Ryougi follows as well. The door closes.

Buu-----ooong.

With a running noise that's quite familiar to my ears the elevator goes up.

"--- It's twisted."

Out of nowhere, Ryougi mumbles that.

The elevator arrived at the fourth floor. Getting off the elevator I started walking through the corridor that faced us as we got off, going in a South direction.

When I walked out towards the outer side of the mansion, the path bent diagonally. The corridor goes around the East building. On the left are the individual residences, and on the right is the outside. There is a chest height steel railing so that no one falls 4 floors to the ground.

"That's my house on the dead end over there."

We walk there. The mansion is quiet as usual, and while you can hear people inside the rooms it's rare to meet them in the corridors.

Coming to the room at the end of the corridor I stopped.

--- Am I, really going inside?

My arm doesn't move. My eyesight gets hazy so I can't grasp the door handle. Oh wait, before that I have to ring the doorbell.

Even if I do have the key, if I go in without ringing the doorbell my mother would get scared. There was once an incident where some debt collectors came charging into our house, after that time she would get scared whenever I came in without ringing the bell.

My finger drifts over to the bell.

Ryougi's hand stops me.

"Don't bother with the bell. Let's go inside Enjoh."

"--- What are you saying. Are you planning to just go in there as you please?"

"Who cares, it's your house originally isn't it? It would be better to avoid hitting any switches anyway. We won't be able to see what kind of design it is then. You have a key don't you? Give it here for a sec."

Ryougi received the key to our house from me then, with a click, turned the key.

The door opens. ... Inside, the sound of a television.

There's, someone here.

Empty of emotion, the forms of a family conversation can be heard.

The voice of my dad who blames the way we are living upon my mother and the world.

The voice of my mom who listens without replying, just nodding to the words.

"---."

That is without doubt the daily life of Enjoh Tomoe.

Ryougi slips inside without a sound. I too --- followed in her footsteps.

Past the corridor, we open the door to the lounge.

A cheap table and television that doesn't suit this excellent room. The dirty room that is filthy because it never gets cleaned properly.

The people sitting there were without a doubt my parents.

"Oi. Is Tomoe still not back? It's 8 o'clock already, one whole hour since he finished work. What the hell is he doing out there, that good for nothing!"

"I wonder, who knows."

"The reason that kid doesn't think of his parents as parents is all because you are too soft on him. Goddamnit, he thinks he doesn't have to pay his debts, not one coin comes my way. Just who does he think feeds and shelters him, that brat!"

"I wonder, who knows."

--- What.

What, is this.

My parents are here. My dad who firmly believes he is a bigshot in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, and my mother who plays along with him.

Two people who should definitely be dead, they are still alive and living as if nothing has happened.

Or, aren't they.

These people, why aren't they looking around at us who just came in --- ?!

"What time do you usually come home Enjoh?"

Ryougi asks from beside my ear. I reply that it's around nine.

"So one more hour is it. Let's wait until then."

"What? This, Just what's going on Ryougi!"

When I got angry at her too laid back attitude, Ryougi cast me a contemptuous glare as if to say I was annoying her.

"All that's happening is that we didn't ring the doorbell or knock on the door, so they aren't meeting the guests. We didn't press the switch that let's them respond to an event outside the set pattern. So the situation is that there aren't guests, Enjoh's parents are just living as they normally do."

Once she finishes talking, Ryougi confidently cut across the lounge to the small room beside it. ... That is, my room.

After torturing myself with indecision for a moment I went into my room while avoiding my parents' eyes.

I stand there like a tree. Ryougi too is leaning on a wall and waiting for the time to pass.

Inside the unlit room, Ryougi and I just keep waiting.

For what?

Hu, isn't it obvious. Something like that, what else is there but the normal return of Enjoh Tomoe.

At the place where I had committed murder before, I waited for myself.

That was a strange time.

Agony that felt like it lasted for an eternity and an instant. That which we call our sense of realism melted down, and the clock was turning backwards.

In the end, I came back.

I finally came back. I already came back.

In the middle of those two conflicting emotions, Tomoe came into the room without speaking a word to his parents.

The slightly curly red hair. The frail body. The delicate face that got him treated as a girl until middle school. This Tomoe who looked like he resented the world, took one deep breath.

... It's a bit like meditating.

As if I believed that by doing that all the difficult things I had encountered that day could be erased, that was my own little ritual.

That Tomoe too, doesn't recognise this Tomoe.

It's as if Ryougi and I have become ghosts.

Soon, Tomoe lays out the futons and goes to bed.

For a long time, with no thoughts on the matter although I knew what would happen next, I was watching Enjoh Tomoe.

I could hear the sounds of a fight coming from the lounge.

My dad's voice, and the passionate voice of my mother that I am hearing for the first time.

My mother is attacking my father while letting out a harsh metallic screech.

That was a barking dog, not a human.

Or maybe it was some mysterious being from Venus.

... For the first time I realised that a woman's hysteria was similar to the convulsions of a drug addict.

This is some ridiculous first-hand experience I'm getting.

Thud, an unpleasant sound.

A rough breathing that I think belongs to mother can be heard through the door.

Click, click, click, click.

"... Stop it."

Even if I murmur that, nothing changes.

This is, of course.

Click, click, click, click.

The door opens. Tomoe opens his eyes. My mother stops in the doorway with a big kitchen knife in her hands.

"Tomoe, die."

A woman's voice, void of emotion as if something has snapped.

Click, click, click, click.

Tomoe would have been looking into the glare.

Mother, she's really.

Crying, in apparent sadness.

Cli, ck.

Mother is wildly stabbing Tomoe. Stomach, chest, neck, arm, leg, thigh, finger, ear, nose, eye, and lastly the forehead as well.

The kitchen knife breaks there, and with the broken blade mother cuts her own throat.

--- Echoing through that room, pock, a dull noise.

Clickclick, clickclick.

Clickclick, clickclick.

Clickeli, ck. Cli, ck. Click, cli, ckclick.

..... Clickclickclickclickclickclick!

Ahah, just what ---

"--- It's a horrible dream."

My nightmare which has become reality.

But I'm fine with any explanation about how it's come to pass.

Except, it's too real so I can't suppress my urge to vomit.

Srrrk, the white kimono moves.

Ryougi is planning to leave the room.

"If your curiosity is satisfied let's go. We have no more business here."

"... No more business, what! There are people --- I'm, lying dead here."

"What nonsense are you spouting. Hey, pay attention now. There's not one drop of blood. When morning comes around they will open their eyes. This is a 「loop」 where they are born in the morning and die at night. The one lying over there isn't Enjoh. The one who is alive like this is you."

Ryougi's words woke me up and I looked around the terrible scene.

... Really, although there was such an awful event there is not one drop of blood.

"Hu, how ---."

"I don't know. I don't know why anyone would do something like this. Anyway we are done here. Now, let's go to the next one."

Tocktock, Ryougi walks out.

Unable to stand it, I ask her back.

"What do you mean the next one --- Where are you going now, Ryougi!"

"Isn't it obvious? To your real house, Enjoh."

To make it a clean break --- Ryougi tells me as if to drive out the ghost called confusion that has covered me.

When we returned to the central lobby, Ryougi did not get on the elevator but instead went around the back of it. The back of the elevator... To the north is the corridor leading to the West building.

The East and West buildings have the same structure.

By the (unspoken rule? personality?) of this mansion, the people of the East building did not go into the West building. I lived here for half a year, but I only realised this obvious fact now.

We walk through the connecting corridor.

The time is past 10 o'clock, and the wind was cold enough to bite the skin.

Winter darkness, where the moonlight was the only thing we could depend on.

Ryongi charges confidently along that uninhabited corridor. Number 6, number 7, number 8, number 9. ... When she got to number 10 which lies at a dead end, she stopped.

"What I thought was a bit strange, to tell the truth it was a small thing."

Suddenly, while glaring at the door Ryongi starts telling a story.

"You said you were in number 405 didn't you? But Mikiya said your name last. A meticulous guy like him wouldn't have changed the order for no reason. In that case, it would be weird if the Enjoh family weren't in the last room of the fourth floor, namely number 410."

"--- What?"

"That elevator didn't work for a while did it? It only began moving about the time the resident had moved in and started to get used to the mansion. That was the signal for everything to begin. It was a mechanism to reverse North and South. The reason the elevator is round, and has such a loud running noise, it's all one great disguise. That's also the reason the second floor isn't used. They would have needed at least one floor's worth of room to half-turn the people inside without them noticing."

North and South --- get reversed. ... ?

Is she saying there really is such a childish toy-like mechanism. But what would I do if there was?

The corridor that faces you as you get off the elevator leads to the East building. That fact is so obvious that it's unthinkable to suspect it.

In that case --- if you didn't notice that the elevator had turned 180 degrees, going down the corridor that faces you when you get off the elevator is the normal thing to do.

Supposing that the elevator really had turned without you noticing it so that South had become North, then that would mean that all this time I've been heading to the West building. The structure of this lobby's Northern and Southern end are exactly the same. The corridors that lead to each building both turn to the left at a right angle as well, so there's no way you could notice anything was wrong.

"Then --- are you saying that this is my house?"

"Yeah. To be precise, the house you were in for a month after you came in. After the elevator started working it would have been that place from before. Without a doubt they would have skewed the stairs around to match the operation of the elevator too. It wouldn't make sense if they didn't reverse the staircase exits too. The stairs in this place, they are a spiral aren't they?"



Ahh, they really are. I can't even give her a nod.

"But that must be a lie. You would normally notice something like this!"

I rebutted because I didn't want to accept it all, but as expected Ryougi negated my statement while keeping up that unworried pose of hers.

"This place isn't normal. It's a twisted dimension. The surroundings are full of boxy mansions so there's not much difference in the view, and walls cut off the inside of the mansion. There are suspicious patterns embedded into the cream coloured walls here and there, they are putting an unconscious burden upon the retina. --- It's not Touko's. But this is one meticulous ward. There aren't any small abnormalities, so you can't perceive the great abnormality."

Ryougi puts a hand upon the door handle.

"I'm opening it. Enjoh, you are coming home for the first time in half a year."

Ryougi says that as if she's happy.

I --- had a thought that we shouldn't open that door.

Inside number 10, was a sticky darkness.

There's nothing but darkness.

Clickclickclick.

Inside my ears I can hear a noise like that.

My, joints, are heavy.

"The light --- is it this one?"

In the darkness I can hear Ryougi's voice.

Click, the light comes on.

"-----" I swallow my breath.

But, I wasn't surprised. Since I knew that was there ages ago.

"It's been about half a year since they died huh," Ryougi's steady voice.

It would be about that long.

There are two human corpses in the lounge that we entered.

Dirty skeletons and a lightly attached skin-like substance. The watery, rotting flesh is lying piled on the floor, so it's become a rubbish heap that you can't know the contents of.

Enjoh Takauchi and Enjoh Kaede --- the corpses of my mother and father.

The corpses of the parents I killed one month ago, all because I didn't want to see the nightmare of my murder anymore. But the corpses are from half a year

ago. And then there's the Enjoh family in the East building who are still alive ---

.

I can no longer think on the paradox those things represent.

Like Ryougi who is just standing there blankly, I'm not surprised, and am looking down at the corpses with a blank mind as if I'm looking at the sand in a hourglass fall.

The scene from before --- compared to the playback of the nightmare I saw every night, a finished corpse like this is merely disgusting. There isn't even much of a shock.

Human corpses that were done away with a long time ago.

A pile of bones, from which it is no longer possible to distinguish who was who.

The part that housed the eyes are now dark, cave-like holes, staring into the air.

... There's no worth to this. Dying so pointlessly, without any recompense, these people who died like idiots are my parents.

Unable to stand the persecution from those around her, as well as being unable to deny her husband who stubbornly insisted that it wasn't his fault, finally driven to murder my father by the suffering that was repeated everyday, my mother who died in the end as well.

"---."

That's all there is, but, I can't take my eyes off it.

What is this.

What's happened to me.

--- Saying that I didn't need my father or my mother.

It's just that those people I so loathed are dead, so why have I become like some wooden doll --- ?

At that moment, the sound of an opening door came from the entrance.

"Hou, are they saying they want to go for it?"

Ryougi spoke as if smiling and pulls a knife out from inside her jumper.

Someone slowly came into the lounge.

The lightly treading shadow that appeared without making a sound, it was a middle-aged man who would have belonged anywhere. His blank face and empty eyes paradoxically let us sense that this is a dangerous person.

That man who I thought I had seen somewhere tried to attack us straight away. Like some puppet being controlled by its strings, without any warning.

But Ryougi easily kills him.

One person. Two people. Three people. Four people. She kills the mansion residents who are flooding in through the front door with an easy grace that makes it look like she is dancing. There were no useless motions in that dance.

Before long the lounge was full of corpses.

Ryougi grabs my hand and starts running.

"It's not good to be in this place for long, let's go."

Ryougi is Ryougi.

I --- had become a little unsteady after seeing my parents' corpses, but even then I couldn't forgive this situation.

Why --- why is this brat killing people for no reason?

"Ryougi, you --- !"

"Let's talk later. By the way, those things aren't human. Even I can't tell how many times they've died. Things like those, they aren't humans or even corpses but mere dolls. This one and that one, they all want to die so I'm feeling sick."

For the first time --- With a face full of hatred Ryougi runs.

I hesitated for a second, then stepped over the corpses of the crowd Ryougi had murdered and came out into the corridor.

When I came out to the corridor, there were already five or so people on the ground. In the time that I spent looking from one to another, Ryougi was cutting down a somethingeth human in front of number 8.

--- Strong.

It's overwhelming. For some reason these don't seem like they came from the east building, but they don't move slowly like the zombies you see in movies. With a human-like quickness they leap towards us.

Regardless, Ryougi doesn't bat an eyelash and easily takes care of them. Is there a reason they aren't bleeding because they aren't human, like Ryougi said?

Killing people without spilling a drop of blood, Ryougi looked like a white god of death as she opened a path to the central lobby.

I look towards the end of the pack of people Ryougi is cutting down.

The light of a lamp leaks out from the lobby. In the lightless West building's lobby a black shadow stands with his back to the corridor entrance from which the light is coming.

It's different from these will-less residents.

That mass that I almost mistook for a black monolith, it was a man in a black coat.

The moment I saw that, my consciousness froze and I became unable to move a finger like some puppet whose strings had been cut.

I shouldn't have seen him. No, that's wrong. I shouldn't have come to this place. In that case I wouldn't have met him.

I wouldn't have met that thing that fitted in so well with this quiet and terrible event, that devil-like black shadow ---.

The man was waiting at the end of the black corridor.

Standing in a way as to block off the one narrow path to the central lobby.

This man in a black coat rejects even the moonlight, appearing to my eyes as a shadow deeper than the night.

Without any thoughts this dark-coloured man watches as the white girl dispatches the mansion's residents.

She must have felt those eyes upon her, because as soon as she killed the last resident charging her Ryougi stopped her feet.

The girl --- Shiki, only became aware of this man's existence after coming this close. The distance between them is not even five metres. She herself can't believe that she didn't perceive an "enemy" until he got so close to her.

No --- that wasn't all. She can't feel this man's presence although she is looking right at him, that fact steals away all of the composure she had maintained till then.

"... This is an amusing turn of events. If all had gone according to plan this meeting should have come after this side was completed."

Heavy, the mage speaks with a voice that sounds like it could bring a listener to their knees.

One step, the man comes forward.

Shiki didn't respond to his trivial and hugely vulnerable advance.

Although she knows that the man in front of her is an 'enemy', and that he wishes to kill both her and Enjoh, she can't make herself rush in as usual.

--- This bastard, I can't see him... !

Hiding her inner surprise, Shiki coldly looked the man over.

The death she could see on people if she merely wished to, this man doesn't have any.

If you felt along a human's body there were lines that put an end to the part they belonged to if they were cut. Whether those were the seams of life, or a weakness in the bonds between the molecules, Shiki didn't know. It just was that she could see them.

Without exception everyone she had seen until now had possessed those 'lines of death'.

But, upon this man, those lines were too faint.

Strongly, harder than she had ever done before, Shiki glares at the man. Her brain may have overheated, because she observed the opponent till a portion of her consciousness went white, only then could she see it.

... In the centre of his body, she can see a hole in the middle of his chest.

The line went round and round like a child's doodling, tracing a circle at the same place. The result was what looked like a hole.

"--- I know you, you bastard."

Shiki knows this opponent who has such an uncanny life force.

... She remembers.

The distant memory that the Shiki of today cannot remember.

A fragment of the events from that rain occluded night of two years ago.

The man replies.

"That's right. In fact it's been two years since we met like this."

A heavy voice that almost seizes the listener's brain.

The man leisurely put a hand to the temple of his head. There, on the side of his head, a straight scar that stretches left from his forehead. The deep wound Ryougi Shiki inflicted, two years ago.

"You are ---."

"Araya Soren. The one who kills Shiki."

Without batting an eyelash, the mage makes that declaration.

The man's coat really did look like that of a mage.

Hanging down from his shoulders, the black cloth is similar to the cape of a wizard in a fairytale.

Beneath that cape, one of the man's arms stretched out. Slowly, as if to take hold of Shiki's distant neck.

Shiki widens the gap between her legs as she takes a stance. Even the knife she had held in one hand until now is clenched in both hands.

"How vulgar. What meaning is there to this mansion?"

In order to control her nervousness, and maybe --- the fear she was experiencing for the first time in her life, Shiki shouted.

The mage replies. As if to indicate that Shiki has the right to ask that.

"There's no grand reason. However you look at it, it's my personal desire."

"Then is the repetition your hobby too?"

Twitch, Shiki glares at the man with eyes full of hostility.

Repetition --- like that Enjoh family, the paranormal phenomenon where they die at night and come back to life in the morning.

"It not effective but.

I have created a world within which a day is completed. However it can't become a Yangyi just because life and death are next to each other. If it isn't the life and death of the same people, it is lacking as a place to sacrifice you. It's incomplete as a spiral where you come to life after you die. If the condition is for them to be incompatible while mixing with each other, there's no solution but to connect the two. Therefore, in the Yin I prepared their corpses, and in the Yang I prepared their daily lives."

"Ha, then this side is the corpse storage, and that side is their daily life? You are sure taking a lot of care with useless things, there's no meaning to something like that."

"--- I believe I already said that there was meaning.

And then the man spotted the youth standing like a block of wood behind Shiki. Enjoh Tomoe is still frozen after hearing the name Araya Soren.

"Yes, nothing like a reason exists. Even from the beginning it's impossible for a human to exist with two attributes at once. The dead and the living cannot exist together. In this paradoxical world there is no meaning that an individual can grasp."

The mage returns his gaze from the boy to the girl.

As if he was saying that someone like Enjoh Tomoe had no meaning.

"This is just an experiment. I wanted to find out if a human could indeed meet an end other than their own. A human must die. But for every human there is only a foreordained death. The death that one person meets, there is only one kind.

One who dies in a fire will die by fire no matter what form their death takes, and one who is murdered by their family is murdered by their family no matter how hard they struggle. Even if they confront the first death and run away from it, the second, and the third death will come only through the foreordained method.

This limited death, we call it our lifespan.

A human has even his way of dying decided for him. However if you were to repeat the same end a couple of thousand times, even that spiral would develop errors. It doesn't matter if the error is a trivial one. Just being unlucky enough to be hit by a car on the way home from work is sufficient.

--- but. As of now the result is the same. It appears that one's destiny does not change with only around two hundred repetitions."

The man speaks dispassionately, as if the matter was insignificant.

With just that --- Shiki intuitively felt that she had to kill this man here and now.

She doesn't know by what method, or what process the man has come to do this sort of thing.

All she knows, the one certain thing, is that the man is making Enjoh Tomoe's family kill each other every day, for an experiment that he himself doesn't care about ---.

"For that you are making them suffer the same death... the same final day, over and over again? By preparing a morning that begins with the same conditions and a family that lives with the same conditions? So is the only family that dies at night the Enjoh family?"

"If that was the case there wouldn't be any meaning to this twisted dimension. All the families who were called to this place had already collapsed. Relationships that were already mangled arrive easily at their final destination if you just remove some personal space. A road to an end that takes decades is nothing but self-mortification. These people merely reached the end they would eventually have reached in less than one month."

... Not a boast, not a lamentation, it's just a mage's soliloquy.

Shiki narrows her black eyes and peers at the black man.

"... In the end you are saying that you broke the brakes and egged them on. Without doubt, this building has stress piled inside it. Everywhere you go it's warped. The floor is slanted everywhere like some ocean so you lose your sense of balance, and because of the use of lighting and paints that put a burden on the eyes you become tired without even noticing it. To make people so crazy without even using any sorcerous effects, you are a very good architect, you."

"Sorry. I handed the designing of this place to Aozaki. If you wish to congratulate someone you should congratulate her."

The man comes one step closer.

It seems that the time to talk is over.

Shiki decided to aim for the man's neck --- and lastly asked the question that had really been on her mind.

"Araya. Why do you try to kill me?"

The man doesn't respond.

Instead, he says something strange.



"Neither Fujoh Kirie nor Asagami Fujino were effective."

"--- What?"

Shiki swallows her words upon hearing those unexpected names.

Piercing that opening --- the man steps goes forward one more step.

"Unable to live without being close to death, Fujoh Kirie was someone similar yet different to you."

... Fujoh Kirie who had been confined to a bed with a disease that meant she could die at any moment. A woman who had only been able to feel that she was alive through death. A human who had only been able to feel that they were alive through death. ... An ability possessor with one mind and two bodies.

And.

Ryoudgi Shiki, who could only realise the fact she was alive by approaching death and defying it. ... An ability possessor with two minds and one body.

"Then there was Asagami Fujino who could only find joy by coming into contact with death, again someone similar yet different to you."

... Asagami Fujino, she who had no sense of pain and so could not accept feelings from the outside world. A girl who could only find pleasure in the extreme act of killing a person. A human who could only feel that they were alive by observing the pain her victims went through as she killed them, and the sense of superiority that brought. ... The scion of an old bloodline that sealed off the abilities they were born with through physical means.

And.

Ryoudgi Shiki who could only feel herself and others by coming into contact with death and trying to kill each other. ... The scion of an old bloodline that artificially developed their abilities.

"When death came near she chose death, and you chose life."

Throwing your lives before yourselves she enjoyed killing, and you enjoyed trying to kill each other.

You would have felt it. That those girls were comrades, yet murderers whose natures conflicted with Ryoudgi Shiki."

Shocked to the core, Shiki --- was watching the approaching darkness as it talked to her.

Watching, was all she could do.

"I failed 2 years ago. That person was too different. What was needed were those who had diverged from the same 'origin'.

That's right. Be happy, Ryougi Shiki. Those two were sacrifices that I prepared for you."

The man's voice is excited like that of someone who cannot hold in their laughter. But his expression doesn't change. Unchanged, the face of a philosopher who is full of troubles.

"There's still one more piece left to play, but Aozaki has noticed so I suppose there is no helping it. Enjoh Tomoe was an unexpected fortune. Since from a place where my will had no power, you came here by your own volition."

"You bastard ---."

Shiki puts strength into the two hands holding the knife.

The man stops, and points towards the space behind her.

What is there is, only the piled remains of those she dispatched.

That, overwhelming materialization of sin and darkness.

"Nothingness is itself your murder impulse, your origin.

--- Look upon that darkness. And remember your name."

An order tinged with sorcerous suggestion echoes through the corridor.

With her mind being stolen by that Shiki desperately shook her head and shouted.

"---(Source of evil)... !"

Shouting like she was spitting that out, Shiki leaped towards the mage. With the speed of an arrow let loose from a drawn back bow, and with the speed and murderous intent of a wild beast.

There was only about 3 metres separating the two.

Shiki and the mage, confronting each other in that narrow corridor, there is nowhere to run. Something like retreat --- neither of them are even considering the option.

Shiki's body comes ricocheting off.

With this distance it doesn't even take a few seconds to approach the enemy. She quickly stabbed at the bastard's chest with the knife.

The white kimono flows in the darkness.

Before that, the mage intoned.

**"Cripple."**

The air changes.

Shiki's body suddenly stops.

**"Adamantine."**

Piercing the air with one hand, the mage shouts while facing Shiki.

Shiki found a line coming up from the floor.

**"Malignance."**

All movement is being cut off around the mage.

Shiki saw it.

The three circular shapes stretching out from under the black man's feet.

--- Her body, was heavy... ?

The three circles that protected the mage, they resembled a diagram displaying the orbital path of a star. Three thin and long circles are overlapping each other as they rise up from the floor to the air.

As soon as she stepped over the outermost line of that circle, Shiki's body lost all of its momentum. Like a jeopardised butterfly caught a spider's web.

"That body, I Araya Soren will be taking it."

The mage moves.

If Shiki left an afterimage of a white kimono in the darkness of the night as she ran, the man melted into the night as he approached his prey.

A demon-like speed that didn't even let you grasp the process of him approaching.

He stops, next to the immobile Shiki the mage's black coat flaps in the air.

Shiki was unable to respond to the mage's unfelt approach. She had been looking --- she had been looking at the man advance towards her, but she can't perceive that the man is standing right next to her ---.

A cold sweat runs down her back.

Only now, she barely understands that her 'enemy' is a true monster.

The mage stretches out his left hand.

He stretches out a vice-like palm, open as if to crush Shiki's face.

"Get ... Away... From me!"

The chilling feeling that beats upon her back, it has the effect of reviving her from her frozen state.

At the moment the tips of the mage's fingers touch her face, Shiki twisted her head as if recoiling from them. Just like that she shifts her body to the side and stabs the mage's arm with her knife.

Tung, the knife made a dull noise as it severed the mage's left wrist.

**"(insert here)."**

The mage pronounces.

The knife blade definitely passed through the mage's wrist, but it doesn't fall from the arm.

The edge passed through it cleanly as if cutting a turnip, but the mage's hand doesn't even have a wound upon it.

**"(insert here - sutra?)."**

His right hand moves.

The right hand that he pushed forward in anticipation of Shiki's movements after she escaped his left hand, it has a solid grasp upon her.

Grabbing the girl's face with one hand, the mage lifts Shiki's body into the air. Even if Shiki was a girl he looked like a ghost or a monster as he lifted up a human with one arm.

"Ah ---."

Shiki's voice was shaking.

There is no awareness in that moan-like sound.

All that can be felt from this man's hand is a crushing despair. That lanced through her flesh to reach her brain, and from there it rode down her spine to invade her whole body.

For the first time in her life.

She knew, that she would die here, just like this.

"--- Still inexperienced. I've embedded a Buddha's remains in this left hand. There are no places where you can easily kill it, not even with the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception. A simple act like cutting it, Araya Soren will not be hurt by such things."

The mage squeezes hard with the hand grasping the girl's face as he speaks.

Shiki doesn't reply.

The pressure on her face is so strong that she doesn't even have any energy to talk.

... This man's hand, it was a machine designed to grab a human's head and crush it. There was no way to remove the five fingers embedded in her face by force. If she was to rashly shake her body and retaliate, this machine would ruthlessly crush her head.

The mage's discourse continues.

"As a reference, I do not die. My origin is 'suspension'. Someone who has woken to their origin becomes ruled by that origin itself. Someone who has already stopped - how can you kill him?"

Shiki doesn't reply.

She threw away all her emotions, and bent all her energies to finding those faint lines upon the man's body.

Ignoring both the paralysing despair running riot in her body and the pain crushing her face, she tries to find that one breach.

But before she could.

The mage looked over the girl he was holding in the air, and made a decision.

"--- That's right. The face is useless."

An emotionless voice. The mage puts strength into his arm for the first time.

Crackle, the sound of bone breaking can be heard.

In that instant ---

The right arm that attempted to pulverise the face of the girl called Ryougi Shiki, this time it really does get cut off.

"--- Mmm."

The mage retreats a bit.

Having cut off the mage's arm at the elbow while still in that floating position, Shiki pulled off the hand clinging to her face and quickly pulled back.

Thwock. The black arm falls to the floor.

Narrowly escaping to a place untouched by the triple circle around the mage, Shiki kneels with one leg on the floor.

Whether it was because of the pain from having her face squeezed, or because she had focused her awareness to look for the mage's faint lines of death. Shiki's breathing is ragged as she looks at the floor she is kneeling upon.

The distance between the two, once again it has widened.

"... Indeed, I was foolish. I should have had all the proof I needed after the events at the hospital. Whether it is dead or alive, if it moves you cut off the root of that motion. That is your ability. Even if I am a stopped organism, as

long I exist like this there is a thread that permits my existence. If that is cut I would definitely die. The unique exception is this left arm, but even that can't be hidden forever. No matter which saint's bone it is as long as it functions there will always be a cause for that movement."

Ignoring the severed arm the mage talks on.

"As expected I don't need those eyes. As a component of Ryougi Shiki they are too dangerous. But before I destroy them --- I may need to anesthetise you."

Maintaining the three fold wards the mage came forward one step.

Shiki keeps staring at that triple circle.

"... It is unfortunate, but you should have given up just now."

Shiki says that with the knife reversed in her grip.

"I know wards too. At a testing ground you lay out a ward to prevent a woman from entering holy ground. There are stories of how women who enter turn to stone, but a ward is only a boundary. The inside of the circle isn't the ward. That boundary is a sorcerous wall that stops others.

In that case --- if the line disappears, that power is lost."

And with that she planted her knife in the floor.

Out of the three circles the mage possessed, she had just 'killed' the outermost circle.

"--- Ignorance."

In an anxious manner the mage came forward.

Another step, even though he approaches Shiki there is no change in Shiki.

... The man's talismans have just shrunk from three to two.

The mage clicks his tongue in exasperation. He hadn't considered the possibility that Shiki's Mystic Eyes of Death Perception would be so powerful. To think that she could kill a concept like a ward which had no form, or life, that kind of absolute power ---.

Having lost **cripple**, the circumference of the triple wards that ruled over outside invaders of the boundary, the mage starts running to kill Shiki.

"There are still two left."

"--- Even that, is too slow."

Still in that crouched position, Shiki puts her hand behind her.

Inside the belt that tightens the kimono is the second knife.

As soon as she pulled the knife out to the side from her belt, she immediately threw it at the mage.

The knife blade penetrates the two-fold ward.

Like a stone skimming the water the knife bounced twice off the top of the circle, and flew towards the mage's forehead. At the speed of a bullet.

"---?!"

The mage nimbly evades. The knife nicks the edge of his ear and disappears into the corridor, and the ear which had appeared to have evaded the attack has been carved off. Flesh, blood, broken bone. Brain fluid leaks out of the wound.

"--- Ugh."

The mage lets out a groan.

Faster than that however --- he felt an impact that skewered his body.

Thud, and a white darkness lands upon the mage's body.

By the time the mage grasped that this was Shiki, who had charged straight at him after throwing the knife, the outcome of the fight had already been decided.

Driving into his body shoulder first, Shiki's single blow had the same force as a cannon shell. Just that alone would have broken a few bones, but Shiki is clenching a silver knife in her hands.

The knife is perfectly penetrating the centre of the mage's chest.

"Ug --- gh."

The mage coughs out blood. His blood was a sand-like powder.

When Shiki removed the knife she straight away thrusts it towards the mage's neck. With all the strength in her two hands. The fight has already been decided, but she is desperately trying to deliver another critical blow.

Because ---

"You don't know when to resign yourself to your fate. At that rate you will wander in hell, Shiki."

--- Her foe isn't yet dead.

"Goddamnit, why... !"

Shiki shouts as if casting a spell. Why --- why don't you die.

Upon the mage's unmoving face that shows no emotion, just his eyes are bright with mirth.

"I realise that spot is my weakness. But just that is not enough. Even if it's the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception, you cannot instantly kill this two hundred year old life of mine. This body will die one day, but I was prepared for this happening. It's quite fitting that the price I pay for capturing Ryougi is my death."

The mage's left hand comes racing in.

... The outcome of the fight had already been decided.

His tightly clenched fist drives into Shiki's stomach.

Receiving a blow that could break through a large tree, Shiki's body rises up into the air. With just that one attack Shiki spews out just as much blood as the mage who has had his chest and neck stabbed.

With a grating noise, her insides and the bones that were protecting them break.

"---."

Shiki faints. No matter how great a physique she had, her body is still that of a young girl. Even if half the power had been held back, there was no way she could withstand Araya's attack which could break concrete walls.

Grabbing hold of her belly with one hand the mage lifts the girl up, and throws her at the mansion wall.

It was a brutal action that looked like it should break every bone in Shiki's body, but that too turned into an unnatural event. ... Having been thrown onto the wall Shiki's body was sucked in as if she was sinking into water.

Only when the mansion wall had finishing gulping Shiki down, did the mage lower his arm.

... Shiki's knife is still buried in his neck, and his eyes hold none of the oppressive light they showed until now.

Although a long time goes by without anything happening the black coat does not budge.

That's only to be expected if anything is.

The mage's body, is totally dead.



## ／ 8 (Paradox Spiral, 5)

Even when the date changed to November tenth, Shiki didn't come home.

Shiki had a bad habit of wandering around without locking the door to her apartment, but these days she properly locks up before she goes out. Because of that, I was unable to even go inside as I waited out there for hours.

...Come to think of it, Akitaka-san had been waiting outside before as well, but in the end never got to go inside and left after handing me a package to give to Shiki.

If Shiki goes for a nighttime walk, it's not uncommon for her to stay out until the sun rises. On a normal day this would have been nothing to worry about, but when Shiki left the office yesterday, I had felt something was off. I hung around for a long while because that stuck in my mind, but even when morning arrived, she hadn't come back.

## ／11 (Paradox Spiral, 6)

While I waited for Shiki who never returned, the streets had already greeted the morning.

A depressingly cloudy sky sets the tone of the weather.

Holding an unexplainable uneasiness within my heart I headed towards work. The time was a little past 8. Touko-san was sitting at her desk but there wasn't even a shadow of anyone else, so even my last hope that Shiki would be here was pitifully betrayed.

Saying hello as usual I sit down at my desk, getting on with the work from yesterday. ... No matter how gloomy the apprehension that had come over me was, my body was functioning fine. It may have been because it was a job I had repeated over and over again, but regardless of how shadowed the mind of Kokuto Mikiya himself was, the power of normal routine was such that it made me live out a normal day.

"Kokuto, about yesterday."

From the boss's desk in front of the window Touko-san's voice can be heard.

I replied stupidly with a "yes?".

"It's about the residents of the mansion in question. You were annoyed that you were only able to investigate thirty three of the fifty residents, but that was the extent of the investigation. It wasn't that you weren't able to dig anything up, those records didn't exist in the first place.

Those other twenty residents who you were only able to obtain the names and family structures of were fake families. I looked into it afterwards, but I got the same result for the first four cases so I gave up. They had taken the family register and personal history of people who had been dead for years to fabricate residents who weren't even there."

Once again I half-heartedly replied, yes.

"All the bogus families were residents in the East building. What is going on with ---."

In the middle of the sentence Touko-san frowns.

She made a displeased expression as if there was a line of ants crawling over her body, then mumbled, "A trespasser".

Getting a ring made of grass out from inside her desk she tosses it this way.

"Take that and stand by the window. Don't put it on your finger. A guest will be coming soon so thoroughly ignore him. Don't even make a sound. If you do that the guest will leave without noticing you."

Touko-san speaks with a very displeased expression. An acute tension underlies her words, saying 'don't ask anything else', so I decided to just do as she said.

Holding tight to the haphazardly made grass ring, I stand next to the wall behind the sofa that Shiki is always using.

Then, I immediately heard someone's footsteps.

The sound of someone's boots, theatrically ringing off the concrete floor of this building that was neglected before construction finished, where the steel reinforcing rods are exposed.

Without stopping once, that noise came straight over to this room where the office was.

A red shadow appears in the doorless entrance of the office.

Blue eyes under a dark gold scalp, a sharp face and overly refined behaviour. A German who looked to be in his early 20's.

This handsome red-coated man who looked as he had been painted by some artist, raised his hand cheerfully as soon as he came into the office.

"Oi, Aozaki! Long time no see. How are you?"

He lets show a smile filled with friendliness. But to me it only looked like the malicious face of a snake.

The red-coated young man stops in front of Touko-san's desk.

Touko-san remains seated in her chair, and is giving him a cold glare which is frankly unwelcoming.

"Cornelius Alba. What brings the present director of the Suponheim monastery to this remote region?"

"Haha, that's obvious! It's all to meet you. Since I owed you so much from London, I came to give you a warning as an old colleague. By any chance is my kindness a nuisance to you?"

Spreading his arms out wide, the young man lets loose a smile full of goodwill. With an impression more like that of some French prince than a German, he was the exact opposite of Touko-san.

Touko-san's cold expression doesn't change a bit. Even confronted with that glare, the young man is smiling broadly.

"On top of that Japan is such an excellent country. You say it's a backwater, but because of that the Association's surveillance is poor. A dictatorial mage family exists in this country, so the relationship between here and our organisation is like fire and water. It was a Yin-Yang teaching derived from the continent or something. I can really differentiate between that and Shinto, but well it isn't really a problem.

Their good point is that they don't act first unless you encroach upon their sovereignty. Unlike the Association they are reclusive, so apparently they don't act before something happens but after the fact. They are masters of cleaning up the mess. It turns out all Japanese are like that. Ah, I'm not saying that in a bad way. Instead this is a good thing for me. Since not having any disturbances occur during a plan is something which is unthinkable in my country. For those mages who leave the Association this country is perfect."

Of course that does not have anything to do with me since I'm a member of the Association, after adding something like that on the young man laughs.

He only sees Touko-san. It really seems like he doesn't see me, or even notice me.

Staring intently out of one eye at the young man who was chattering on like a machine gun, Touko-san finally opens her mouth.

"If you came to spout gibberish please leave. You entered another's work area without invitation, so it's not like you can complain if you leave feet first."

"What, you came uninvited into my work area too. It seemed like you had some company so I left off greeting you, but it's you that I could pour insults on for being unmannered and still not be satisfied."

"Ho, that mansion was your work area? If that useless ward is your work I'll have to revise my opinions of you."

Kik kik, she sniggers spitefully.

The young man frowned slightly.

"At this time our working areas are twisted dimensions by just existing within this era.

The mob ignores those irregularities that exist outside it, but they try to root out any irregularities that exist within it as if it were some kind of disease. In order to avoid that happening a mage sets out a ward that hide him within the mob. By doing that the mage is twisting his twisted dimension even further. However if you strengthen the ward that isolates the twisted dimension, the Association detects it. --- In the end you can't make a ward in human society that can avoid being detected by anyone.

The ultimate ward would be a ward that can't be detected by civilisation or the Association. That mansion is just that. Should we call it a complete unison of purpose and action, it's the opposite of a thaumaturgical experiment, and it holds a mechanism to prevent the abnormality from getting out. That's a conclusion that mages that couldn't become mages could never reach. In my knowledge I thought there was only one person who could achieve something like this. Hmm, is it like that, you finally decided to follow him. Congratulations, Cornelius Alba."

"Don't regard me so cheaply Aozaki. Someone like Araya isn't even within my consideration. The skill of preparing the bodies of dolls, and preserving the brain is something that belongs only to me. That twisted dimension is one that couldn't be realised without me."

The youthfulness that was in his voice until now has disappeared, and the young man's voice gets rough like some ominous old man's.

"Dear me. Fine, what did you come here for Alba? Surely it wasn't in order to praise yourself?

I might have understood back in our student years, but at this stage we are both people who have stepped out of the Association. If it's your experiment results just hand it down to those disciples that you could leave to rot since you have so many."

"Hmph. You haven't changed, I understand. Let's chat next time. Before long we will be talking within my world. As expected I can't relax in your home grounds. Pleasant conversation is for pleasant locations. --- Aozaki, I will be taking care of the Taeguk."

Upon hearing his laid-back words, Touko-san's eyes flashed a little.

"--- Trapping a Taeguk inside a Taeguk? I truly understand your desire to get closer to the origin, but Opposing Power will come into play. The world or mankind, I don't know which one will move. But in the past there hasn't been even one mage who has been able to defeat it. Are you planning to destroy yourself Alba?"

Touko-san looks sharply at the young man in the red coat.

However he just smirked as if saying that everything would go along according to his plans.

"Opposing Power? Ahhh, that meddler won't be moving. Since we aren't making a road of our own, but instead treading a path that was open in the first place. There's no reason for a reaction to occur. Nevertheless we plan to move carefully. The sample called Ryougi, I will be sure to handle it respectfully."

--- Ryou, gi?

"What the hell have you done with Shiki?"

Before I knew it, I was suddenly shouting.

As one the two of them turn their attention this way.

Touko-san who is scowling as if to say, you idiot, and the young man who is staring blankly at me.

Oops, I berated myself, but the bus had already left.

The red-coated young man found me, then --- smiled broadly as if he didn't know what to do because he was so happy.

"It's the young man from yesterday. Oh, is it like that, I had heard you didn't accept apprentices, but here's one standing in front of me. How delightful, one more thing to be happy about, Aozaki." He says while turning back to look at Touko-san.

Talking with his arms spread out like some opera singer, I couldn't think of him as someone in their right mind.

"He's not an apprentice or anything. ... Although it would be pointless to explain."

Touko-san sighs while rubbing her temples with her fingers as if to suppress a headache.

"Is that all? I'm grateful that you came here on purpose to give me the information, but did you think that I wouldn't tell the Association?"

"Hmph, you wouldn't do something like that. Even if you did by some off chance it would take at least a few days for them to get here. Some negotiations need to take place with the organisation here for a group from the Association to step foot in Japan so two more days from there. See, for a god from some book that time is more than enough to create a world!

Ahahahaha, the young man bends down and laughs.

After laughing for an age he seemed contented, and with a smooth motion the young man had begun to leave when he turned around again.

"Well, that's all for now. You will need to prepare as well, but I'll be hoping to see you again as soon as possible."

Speaking in a bright tone till the last he left behind a farewell, and then the young man left, the red coat flaring out behind him like a cape.

"Touko-san, what's going on?"

"Mmm, he's saying that Shiki has been kidnapped and locked up."

Once the red-coated young man left, I had hurried over to the boss's desk and Touko-san had given me this smooth answer. Even though I was perplexed by that overly calm attitude, I ask a question that I know the answer to.

"Locked up? Where?"

"Ogawa mansion. Probably on the uppermost floor. Since there wasn't a deck there. In that case it would be the 10th floor of some building. Would it be the West building since Shiki has a Yin nature?"

No matter how you looked at her Touko-san was calm. She's even composed enough to light up a cigarette and take a puff while she stares up at the ceiling.

I wasn't optimistic enough to go along with her. The fact that Shiki had been captured was something I couldn't quite believe, but even if that was a lie I had to run out to confirm it.

And so, at the moment I was about to run out, Touko san told me to stop.

"--- What is it? Your policy will be that you won't be involved, isn't it boss?"

When I annoyedly said as such, Touko-san nodded with a stiff expression upon her face.

"You are fundamentally correct. But this time it isn't someone else's business. For some reason I think it has something to do with me as well. Although I predicted things would go like this from the moment I handed the matter over to Shiki."

Really, what did I do to deserve this, Touko-san repeats the she let out once before.

"On top of that Kokuto. Going to a mage's home ground means that you are going to battle. Whether it's this work area of mine, or Alba's mansion --- to a mage a castle isn't something which is for defence. Rather it's for attacking with. It's something with which to wipe out any invaders. I don't know about myself, but if Kokuto goes, you may get turned into duck roast at the front door."

When I heard that, I finally realised that the red-coated young man was the same kind of person as Touko-san.

... Although, I had been thinking that something hadn't been normal about that eccentric appearance of his.

"But didn't nothing happen yesterday?"

"That's because you looked like a civilian. I told you before. A mage doesn't use magecraft except against another mage. If they rashly take action and cause trouble all their efforts until then become pointless. The fact that mansion is weird isn't something Alba wants known widely."

She says that, but a mage should be able to take care of someone like me easily. Hypnosis can make someone's memory hazy. If you have something which is called magic I think it would be able to go even further than that.

When I expressed such a question, Touko-san nods and then goes no, giving me a paradoxical answer.

"Let's see now, if it's just someone's memories you can do almost anything. In rune there's even a specific carving called oblivion just for that.

But the time when that worked is past. In the old days it didn't matter if there was one or two people who lost their memories. They just said, 'Oh, they've been possessed by ghosts' and passed the matter over. But it's different now right? If there's something wrong with a person's memory they do a thorough investigation. The one they investigate isn't the person who has had their memory erased, but rather the people around them. Their friends and family, there's a chance the senior detective will be doubtful and not do it, but it's impossible to erase someone's memories so thoroughly.

It's the same as a ward. If you manipulate someone's memories in order to conceal an abnormality. Then the abnormality of the memory being manipulated gets revealed. The possibility that they will seek the source from there and get to the mansion isn't zero. Then there's also the fact that you can't rule out the possibility of the person whose memory has been erased regaining his memory."

Touko-san speaks while bitterly puffing on a cigarette.

... Indeed, now that it's spelled out for me I understand. There are a few cases where it's just someone's excessive worrying, but in the modern world even the smallest mysteries aren't ignored and are tracked down. No, now that everything has an explanation, things that don't have an explanation are being made to stand out.

In that case, instead of memory, how about deleting the people themselves? Either by destroying their mind and turning them into vegetables, or by destroying their life and turning them into the dead. The dead can't talk, so there wouldn't be any way for the secret to get out.

... Ah. That's right. Either way the end result is the same.

The people around would definitely notice that hole. In the present day where the flow of information threatens to swamp us, following the footsteps of one person who has disappeared isn't so hard. As a result you would end up at that mansion.

That's why --- normal people who visit that mansion don't notice anything strange. The weird layout of that building is set up to get rid of such outside intrusions while giving the appearance that nothing was going on.



Even if that Alba guy was a mage, and even if he was planning something bad (was that even a question, what he had said earlier could only be taken that way), he can only watch silently. Whether it be the ridiculous coincidence of the thief who broke in to rob an empty house, or the woman who had fled there after being molested, although he knew that they would bring the police he hadn't touched them. Because by manipulating their memories, or killing them, he would actually be bringing more attention to those events.

That's right --- in order to remain a normal mansion, he could only accept the events those unlucky people had caused.

I remember the paradox Azaka brought up the other day in this office.

The phenomenon caused in order to erase a phenomenon, in the end it becomes an action to drive yourself into a corner. But nevertheless if you leave the first phenomenon as it is the fact that you are driven into a corner does not change. No matter how you struggle the thing called a 'phenomenon' doesn't disappear --  
-.

The question itself drives the question into a corner.

A phenomenon that has already occurred can only be hidden by slapping another meaning upon it. Since the phenomenon itself can never return to nothingness.

"It's like that. There were no flaws in that ward. If not for those two incidents, if Shiki had disappeared all of a sudden, we couldn't have picked that place out for special attention. The lesson to be learned from this Kokuto, is that a meddler will get involved in everything, so there can't be anything that is perfect."

Touko-san says something which gets to the heart of the matter.

... The unpredictable meddler from the outside that visits even if the self is perfect. If you were to name the meddler that had visited that mansion, you would be talking about the two events that had overlapped by chance.

"Uhm, is that Opposing Power that person talked about before referring to that?"

As expected, when I recalled that conversation and asked such a thing, Touko-san nods with a bitter expression on her face.

"--- You may be right.

You see, that Opposing Power refers to the 'Restorer of Direction' which is at once our greatest ally, and our greatest enemy.

We don't want to kill humans. We want to live in peace.

This planet that we live on doesn't want to die either, it wants to live for a long time.

The Opposing Power is like that. The collective unconsciousness of all those who belong to the whole of the dominant species, their desire to see that the world continues to exist. It is the fundamental wish of the human species that has gathered and taken form, the Counter Guardian that we call the Opposing Power.

Okay, let's take an example and say an extraordinary person A has conquered the world. He is a just person, and his rule has been exemplary. Within the limits of human morals that is. But in the case that you don't look from one person's point of view, and person A's actions are taken as evil by the whole of the dominant species, in short a cause for extinction, the Opposing Power will be realised.

This is the collective body of the unconscious desire of all members of the dominant species including A to keep the world as it is in existence. To protect the race this existence that composes the species appears without anyone realising, and without anyone noticing, destroys the existence called A. The representative created by the maelstrom of humanity's unconscious mind is also a part of that unconsciousness and is not picked up.

Even so, it's not to say that a formless consciousness becomes a curse and kills A. The Opposing Power generally hides within a human who can become a link, then drives out A who is the enemy. The person who has become the link has enough power to topple A, but no more, in order that they cannot replace A.

Receivers who can accept the Opposing Power comprised of the whole of the dominant race's will, humans with special channels like that are few and far between. History calls them heroes and praises them.

But in modern times that title isn't being used. Civilisations progressed to the point where it has become quite simple for humanity to destroy itself. If some company's chairman invested all his money into expanding the amount of logging in the Amazon rainforest, the world could end in a year. See, the Earth is in danger wherever and whenever. There are countless numbers of people who are being incited by the Opposing Power that save the planet without anyone knowing it. There is one hero per age. Such a thing as saving the world is no longer enough to get you called a hero.

Also, in the case that A is too powerful to topple with a human's power, the Opposing Power becomes a natural force and destroys the area including A. Long, long ago, the sinking of that continent was due to this bastard too.

If you talk about it like this it seems like some guardian of humanity, but this thing has no human emotions. There are times when it blocks acts that would make everyone happier. The aggravating thing is that in the end this nuisance is the representation of humanity itself. Although we can't comprehend it the Opposing Power is the ultimate form of the dominant race. Time and time again

in the past, this thing appeared in front of mages who attempted a particular experiment, and the mages were all massacred."

... Touko-san's story, it's really long.

But I remember hearing something similar during a class in high school. What topic was it, in what subject. It was something along the lines that all humans are different, but connected in some way.

... Separate from that, in this story just now I imagined the Saint of Orleans. The old story of how a common farmer's daughter received the command of God to fight. They say that in reality all that happened was that she used tactics that the knights of that time didn't use out of contempt and honour, but wouldn't that also be because she was instigated by something.

Someone who acts like they have suddenly become a different person. Someone who only turns different for that moment to fight with some evildoer. That this was the guardian of the human race that they called the Opposing Power.

"... Thanks for telling me all this. So does that experiment you mentioned have something to do with Shiki?"

After spending so much time with Touko-san, I can read the flow of this person's conversations. This person doesn't say anything that has no meaning. Even something she says in a joking fashion has something relevant within it that is revealed later. So --- I realised that that experiment or something was the reason Shiki had been caught.

Touko-san rubbed out the cigarette flame then, apparently happy, looked this way.

"--- I don't know what Alba plans to do with Shiki.

Only that the bastard's objective is to reach the Maelstrom of Origins. In that case he would open up Shiki's body, but thankfully that rat doesn't have the guts for something like that. He will probably think it over until time runs out. He was always like that. It was fine for him to be happy about capturing a Redcap alive, but he didn't know how to dissect it properly so it eventually rotted. Well, even the person himself said as much, but Shiki's body will probably be fine for another 7 days, of course this is in the case that she was captured safely."

Touko-san says something very disturbing.

"--- Shiki's fine. That guy, he said he was keeping her. That phrase includes the meaning that she's alive."

Me who is rebutting her words, without realising it I was glaring at Touko-san. Because, while my mouth was saying this --- I had imagined Shiki getting murdered.

"--- And so, if we don't rescue her quickly."

I mutter. But how? At times like this, I don't have any options. The only thing I can do is call the Police and investigate that mansion.

But something like that won't have any effect.

The enemy is someone who made such a diabolic contraption. If the Police fully mobilises it's certain that they will disappear without any regrets.

To save Shiki there are only two or so options.

Either get rid of the red-coated man, or secretly extract Shiki.

--- If there's one that I can do it's the latter.

... Mmm, let's look over the blueprints of that mansion again. Somewhere, there might be a way in that even the ones who built the place don't know about.

I was deep in those private thoughts, but Touko-san butted in as if the whole thing was preposterous.

"Wait a second, wait a second. If it's anything to do with Shiki you lost your mind. I told you at the hospital too didn't I. For Kokuto to stay put because it's dangerous. This time it's not your turn to step out.

... Since a mage's opponent should be a mage."

And, saying that, she stood up.

On top of the business clothes she wears everyday as her casual outfit she throws on a long coat. Brown, thick, and heavy, the leather coat looked like it wouldn't be cut with something as simple as a knife.

"--- Alba said all those things, but there's no reason to spend 2 or 3 days preparing to challenge his castle. If he wants I'll go right now.

Kokuto, in the wardrobe in my room there's a bag so can you bring it here for me? The orange one."

There's no emotion in Touko-san's words.

Obeying her mage-like words I move to the room next door and open the wardrobe. ... Inside there are bags instead of clothes. An orange bag that looks like a bulked up briefcase and a large bag that looks like you could just lift it as it was and go for a trip.

As ordered I lift the orange bag. It's unexpectedly heavy. The bag has an elegant design, and on the outside there are sticker-like things stuck on.

When I returned to the office and handed the bag over, Touko-san took out a packet of cigarettes from her chest pocket and handed them to me.

"Keep those for me. They are some awful cigarettes from Taiwan but I only have those now. Of course there isn't any company that made them, it's a

famous item that some eccentric master made only one box of. Yeah, out of all my possessions that is the second most valuable thing I have."

Leaving behind some strange words, she turned around and walked out.

... Perhaps her most valuable possession is herself, that kind of thought popped into my mind so I asked her, but she only turned back her head and answered.

"That's rather rude. I know it's me but even I don't treat people like possessions."

Like herself when she has her glasses on, she pouts as if she's sulking.

And then, returning to her usual cool expression Touko-san continued talking.

"Kokuto. Those people called mages, with an apprentice or other people they are close to they feel like parents. Since they are something like their offspring, they often fight desperately to protect them as well. ... Well, it's like that so relax and wait here. I'll bring Shiki back tonight."

Thock thock, the sound of her walking away.

Unable to say anything to her back, I let the brown-coated magician go.

The red sun lights up the spiral tower.

Within the orange world confronted by the approach of sunset, Aozaki Touko set foot on the grounds of the apartment building.

The brown-dyed lizardskin longcoat doesn't suit her thin body. It looked more like armor than clothing.

She looked up at the building once, then lifted up the orange bag in one hand and started to walk.

Passing the lawn covered in green grass, she enters the mansion.

Constructed of glass, the lobby has been dyed a deep red by the light of the setting sun.

The floor, the wall, and even the column that holds the elevator leading upstairs, they are all as red as if they were inside the sun.

After thinking for a brief moment, she changes her destination.

And so she walks to the side that doesn't face the elevator, the east side of the lobby.

...Divided in two, this building has separate lobbies on the east and west sides.

She goes to one of those, the lobby on the first floor of the east building.

The lobby is a wide semicircular space.

The second-floor ceiling is clearly visible, so it feels like some huge reception hall. Here inside the building, there is no orange light from the setting sun. Only the yellow illumination of the overheads shines off the marble floor.

"How surprising. You are very impatient, aren't you."

High-pitched for one of his sex, a man's voice echoes through the lobby.

Touko doesn't say anything in response, and wordlessly lifts her gaze.

The stairway that connects to the second floor by way of its gentle incline. In the center stands a man in a red coat.

"But that's a delightful thing, too. Hurry on in, to my [Gehenna](#). I welcome you, greatest of doll-makers."

Laughing joyfully, the mage Cornelius Alba greets her with an overdramatic gesture as if he were an actor on a stage.

"Gehenna (Hell)?"

"Of course. This is the recreation of the altar of fire that was in the Valley of Hinnom. It's a tool within which we've gathered the concepts from burning, killing, and torturing people (**I think my translation of this is a little off**). Although unfortunately, Moloch, who is the owner of this God's Palace (?), is away at the moment. How splendid is it? A twisted dimension of this level should be completely separated from the physical laws of the outside world. Preparations for opening the path were finished long ago, Aozaki."

The red mage looks down at Touko and speaks confidently.

Contrary to the energetic young man, she keeps her emotions locked away as she replies.

"How amusing for Agrippa's direct descendant to be wallowing in the religion of the Jews. That's why you still haven't understood the true nature of this place. Hell? That kind of thing exists somewhere on this Earth at this very moment. If you want to see murder on a scale that the human mind cannot comprehend, go to a battlefield. If you wish to see humans dying on a scale you could never believe, just go to any starving nation. Something like this isn't hell. It's merely purgatory, this."

And she puts her bag down upon the floor.

Tock. A dry sound.

"A place where eternally tormented souls who committed small crimes and cannot go to heaven or hell reside. That is the true identity of this place. A closed loop where the torture isn't carried out to fulfill some purpose, but where the whole purpose is to torture. In something like this, there isn't any thaumaturgical effect --- or at least, not for a outsider like you."

The piercing words cause the red mage to twitch, and a spasm to run across his face.

She narrows her eyes, as if she was facing the building instead of the youth on the stairway.

"This Taeguekdo structure isn't of your doing is it? That's enough, so bring Araya out. You aren't competent enough, and there isn't anything that would benefit you in the events that will occur now. I'm not sure what your objectives are, but there aren't any values here that are easy enough for you to understand. I'll say that at least, in return for your warning last time."

Touko looks around as if saying, that's all. Without giving the red mage who is standing right in front of her another glance, she looks for someone who isn't even there.

The mage keeps looking at her acting like that.

With eyes full of hatred that looks as if tears could come out at any moment.

"You... were always like that."

That mutter was something that flowed out because he couldn't take it any longer.

"Yes. You were always like that. You always underestimated me like that. I specialized in Rune before you. I was also the one who was famed as a dollmaker, I alone. But those feeble-minded idiots were fooled by that attitude of yours. Your condescending attitude, it gave them the impression that I was inferior to you. It's obvious if you think about it! I'm the director of Suponheim, aren't I? I have spent over forty years as a mage. So why was it that I had to be below a little girl who had just entered her twenties...?!"

His muttering, growing steadily louder, now filled the lobby.

Touko-san stares disinterestedly at this person, who has now abandoned all pretense of friendliness and pours abuse upon her.

"Age isn't important when it comes to academics. It's all right to make yourself look young, Cornelius. But it's because you are so concerned with your outward appearance that the contents don't match up."

That one cold statement, it was a provocative insult like no other to the other mage.

The face of the handsome young man whose age has passed fifty contorts with hatred.

"--- Haven't I explained my objective yet?"

With a strained sense of calm, the red mage changes the flow of the conversation.

"You know, I don't care what happens to an useless thing like Araya's experiment. To tell you the truth, I don't have any interest in the Maelstrom of Origins. Chasing after something that may or may not exist, it's nonsense. If you wish to intrude upon the domain of God, all you have to do is devote yourself to [gnosis](#). There's no reason to go upstream."

He falls back one step. As if to get to the second floor, little by little, he climbs the stairs.

"It was my own decision to tell you about Ryougi Shiki. Araya lost his life while capturing Ryougi Shiki. That fight was a draw. Following that, this ward became mine. But you know, I have no intention of continuing his experiment. It's obvious as to why. You see, Aozaki, the only reason I came to a godforsaken country like this was because I thought I could kill you!"

Laughing so wildly as to make one worry that he might hurt his throat, the mage leaps up the stairs.

She can only watch calmly as the mage goes up to the second floor.



Because... the first-floor lobby was already full of things that could have been the realization of the mage's ill will.

At that time, her words contained more scorn and hatred than ever before as she spoke.

"--- Slimes, is it?"

Aozaki quickly described the plasmous forms that were filling the space around her.

But the things that were spreading out from the lobby walls weren't as simple as that. The cream-colored mucus dripped down from the wall and quickly took on a shape.

Some took a human shape, others took the shapes of beasts.

Their faces looked like [keloid](#) and kept melting away, but these things that kept rebuilding themselves looked very real. If you were to take an example they were like real animals and humans who had rotted away for eternity, existences that were both disgusting and elaborate at the same time.

"To think that you could only realize these sort of things in a place like this. Alba, it would be better for you to switch to being a film director rather than continue as a mage. If it was you, there would be no reason to worry about the budget for preparing special effects. Of course, you would have to specialize in cheap horror movies, but it would still be a much more suitable job for you than director."

Surrounded by the objects that had filled the lobby, she muttered.

Certainly, this scene was reminiscent of a horror movie. If you were to point out a difference, it would only be that crosses and holy bullets had no effect against these things.

And so, although the slime-like objects had surrounded her on all sides but for a one-meter gap around her, she didn't bat a eyelash as she reached for the pocket inside her suit.

...Tch. She clicks her tongue. Now that she thought about it, she had entrusted Mikiya with her cigarettes. Touko was slightly regretful. If she had known things were going to turn out like this she would have bought some Japanese brands at least, she muttered to herself.

She hadn't expected such a boring outcome in her wildest dreams. How could she withstand this without smoking one cigarette at least ---.

"No, you couldn't even be a director. Your presentation is too clumsy. Audiences these days won't be satisfied with just this. I suppose there's no helping it; I'll give you an example. Alba, if you're going to put forward a mystery, you will have to maintain this level at least."

Tock. She kicked the bag beside her feet with the toe of her shoe.

"--- Come out."

An order full of authority, disallowing refusal.

In response to that, the bag opens. Clunk, and the bag opens up like a tulip, but there is nothing inside.

At the same time --- some black thing starts spinning around the mage called Aozaki Touko.

The black thing was a hurricane with a body.

With Touko as the eye of the storm, it spins round and round and round at a high speed.

That was a force which could drive one crazy.

Within a few seconds there is nothing in the lobby. Not a body or a shadow remained of the things that had flowed out of the walls. The only things there were Aozaki Touko and her closed bag. And the cat sitting in front of her.

"--- What."

Stunned, Alba could only look upon all this.

The cat is bigger than Touko. Its body is night black, but does not possess any depth. A flat black cat made from shadow. No, he can't even tell if it is a cat. A shadow that resembled a cat. About where its head would be, there is a eye that looks like an Egyptian hieroglyph.

"What, is that --- ?"

From the second floor, he looked down at the cat.

His gaze meets the cat's drawing-like eyes. When it does --- erasing the space where its mouth should have been, the cat gives him a broad smile.

Was he having a nightmare? Alba swallows his breath.

Touko doesn't say anything.

The only noise is a scratchy chkchkchk noise coming from somewhere.

"That's not right! Was the story that you lost your familiar to your sister only a lie...?!"

As if he couldn't stand the silence, Alba shouts.

She only replied with an 'I wonder' before shifting her glance to the black cat.

"--- I fed you some nasty things. But this next one should taste a bit better. Real human flesh instead of these chunks of [ether](#). It should also have plenty of spiritual nutritional value. There's no need to go easy because he's my old schoolmate. I always told you, didn't I? That enemies are for eating."

Instantly, the black cat starts running.

Crossing the marble floor as if it were sliding along, it runs up the stairs. ...Even so, the cat's feet do not move. Only its eye moves as its sitting shadow races towards the red coated human.

To get from the first-floor lobby where Touko was to the second-floor stairwell where Alba was, it probably hadn't taken ten seconds.

But Alba wasn't some normal person to allow such a thing.

He was a mage.

***"Go away, shadow.***

***It is impossible to touch things which are not visible.***

***Forget the darkness.***

***It is impossible to see things which are not touched.***

***The question is prohibited.***

***The answer is simple.***

***I have the flame in the left hand.***

***And I have everything in the right hand ---."***

Carefully, but with a speed which approached human limits, Alba chants his spell.

--- Spells. Within the realm of mages, they were nothing more than suggestions aimed at oneself.

There is a magecraft for causing wind to blow. Just like a certain type of weapon, this was a power which had an ability that was determined from the start. No matter what mage used it, its effect would not change. Only the incantation was different.

The incantations called spells were for the purpose of activating the magecraft that one's body had become familiar with. Its contents showed the nature of the mage. That was because as long as you kept the necessary meanings and keywords for the activation of that particular piece of magecraft, the details of the incantation could be changed to suit the user's fancy.

The incantations of a narcissistic and pompous mage who easily got infatuated with themselves was long. But it was also true that the more meaning you put into the spell, the more powerful the final effect. This was because the stronger the suggestion you put upon yourself, the stronger the ability you pulled out from yourself would be.

Taken in that light, Alba's incantation could be said to be outstanding. Not too long, holding the minimum required contents, and putting a phrase to fix his mind on top of that, the speaking of the incantation itself doesn't even take two seconds.

At that fact Touko let out an exclamation of surprise, and admired the performance.

The younger Alba had liked to use incantations that had been wasteful and longer then necessary, but it seemed that in the last few years he had definitely developed.

His method and speed of forming the incantation, and his way of connecting his circuits in order to manipulate the physical world is remarkably precise.

This incantation, in the realm of magecrafts that were designed to purely destroy things, was definitely first class.

***"I am the order. Therefore,  
'you will be defeated securely --- !"***

Alba puts forward one arm.

The instant that the black cat stepped onto the first of the steps, the air wavered faintly --- then the stairway erupted into flame.

Like a wavering mirage rising up into the sky, a sea of blue flames fills the stairway.

In a matter of seconds, the top of the flames that emerged from the stairs themselves have burned through the second floor and disappear into the ceiling.

It looked like a geyser in some geothermal hotspot.

Sucking dry all the oxygen in the lobby in an instant, the sea of flame instantly erased the black cat from the world. That was only to be expected, too. These thaumatergical flames that were well over a 1000 degrees Celsius. Any animal that entered them would soon be melted like butter and turn from a solid to a gas. Passing through the liquid stage wouldn't have taken the time required for a comma.

But Alba saw it.

The impossible shape of the black cat, suddenly appearing once all the flames had burned themselves out.

"--- That can't be right."

Blue eyes stare at the stairs.

The black cat licked its thin black body as if it that last spell had been unsatisfactory, then shifted its gaze to the red mage.

The black monster resumes its charge.

Alba didn't even have the time to try and puzzle out the cat's nature.

***"Repeat ... !"***

With a tearing sharpness, Alba repeated his spell.

The stairs erupted into flames. But this time the cat didn't even stop. It raced straight towards the mage as if saying it had already gotten used to this kind of fire.

***"Repeat!"***

Once again the sea of flame roars up, and disappears.

The cat was already nearing the top of the stairs.

***"Repeat!"***

The fourth conflagration ended meaninglessly as well.

Once the black cat reached the second floor, it went up to Alba and opened up its mouth. The body of the cat, which was as big as a man, opened up from head to toe. As if opening a treasure chest with the crown of its head as a lid.

Inside of the flat, planar cat, the corpses of the protoplasmic creatures it had swallowed earlier are pasted like mud.

Alba realized only then. That this thing was only taking the shape of a cat, and that it was an organism that had only a mouth.

***"Repeat --- !"***

With death in front of his eyes, terror makes him repeat his final spell.

But before that, the shark's mouth in the body of a cat closes down upon the mage. When it swallowed him whole with his red coat, Alba lost consciousness.

***"[Insert here]."***

Suddenly a brief word was spoken.

The cat that was in the process of biting Alba's body stopped moving.

Even Touko, who had been just standing there watching like a spectator, responds to that sound.

There is a man behind Alba.

With fierce eyes full of an endless suffering, the man is wearing a black coat.

There was no sign of his appearance, as if he had been there this whole time.

The black man grabbed Alba, then pulled him out of the cat and threw him to the floor. Caught in one of the threefold circles the man carries about him, the cat cannot move.

The man looks at the woman below him. With just that, the air in the lobby changed dramatically.

Was this what they meant when they said "the air froze over"?

The tranquil atmosphere disappears. As if the building itself was getting tense after welcoming its true owner.

"--- Long time no see, Aozaki."

"Yeah, although we probably didn't want to see each other."

The first floor and the second floor --- divided between heaven and earth, Touko confronted the one called Araya Souren, who was the source of this disturbance.

"It looks like Alba leapt about too much. I originally intended to finish this without your noticing. Well, it can't be helped. I could not prepare 64 bodies by myself. The fact that you are here in this city is probably coincidence as well as misfortune."

"I don't know which side dragged the other in. But coincidence is the jargon for mystery. In order to disguise a law we can't figure out, we bring out the word coincidence."

Giving that reply, Touko retreated towards the wall.

This opponent is on a completely different level than Alba. Ability-wise they may have been similar, but in this building Araya Souren was greater than anyone else. If she does not put her back to the wall and concentrate on the enemy before her, she is bound to leave herself wide open.

"--- So. What kind of mechanism is this mansion? It couldn't be that it is a box where the paradox of those who are dead being alive is made real, could it? It was concluded hundreds of years ago that fabricating a world where a day is complete and gathering the souls at the moment they die isn't effective. No matter how many hundreds of deaths you gather, you can't achieve your objective.

"Of course. But there is a fact that you don't know.

It's true that I was only pursuing the number of deaths. I was certain that if I experienced tens of thousands of different deaths among different people, I would be able to find a spiritual diffusion that led to the origin. However, with just that alone, I cannot reach the origin. The only thing that you can come close to with that is humanity's 'origin'. You cannot reach the origin of that totality known as the dominant organism.

The important thing is not the amount of deaths. It's the quality of the deaths. If you approach the origin, the ways of dying become surprisingly well-defined. By dissecting the road to death, I determined that there are 64 different methods of dying. The ones who are gathered here are people who die in everyone of those 64 ways. In other words, they are a miniature copy of the world. I experience their suffering, and engrave it into my heart. In order that I may soon simplify that from [insert here] ([insert here]: Eight divination tools drawn in the Chinese Book of Divination [insert here 8 types]. It is said that the first

emperor of China created them after observing the heavens) to [insert here] ([insert here]: The four symbols of Yin-Yang. Formed by the merging of Yin and Yang there are four the manifestations called [insert here 4]), so that I may reach Yangyi."

"Hmph. Do you like things that are one that much, Araya? Light and darkness weren't divided because they had to oppose each other, but because that had the potential for containing the greatest number of things. Everything is lonely if it's by itself. That is everything tries to multiply. You were never able to forgive that. Investigating the various deaths of humans, and making that your own by researching those lives. You would probably take even my death and make it into a piece of knowledge about the life and death of a human called Aozaki Touko to be stored away in the corner of your brain. You mean to figure out the value of a human that way, but doing that is the role of [Yanma](#). As a human yourself, all you can do is to continue existing in a hell that keeps sucking in deaths."

"--- I'm perfectly content with that. Whether it's heaven or hell, the fact that it is close to the floor doesn't change."

Araya's words contain not a hint of hesitation or regret.

His ridiculously powerful will that concludes that he is alone in this world.

Touko thinks.

Within this building that repeats the spiral of daily life, the original form of all the deaths that humans experience is swirling around. The records that the physical body called Araya Souren contained until now, this building has succeeded him as their container. This place was him, his will itself.

... So, that meant that she was inside his body.

Touko observed the atmosphere filling the lobby as she muttered to herself. The strained air wasn't for Araya's benefit. Rather, it was the soundless hatred of all the residents who had been murdered by this building.

This amount of hatred that threatens to crush even her, day by day, Araya keeps expanding it. To borrow his words it wasn't the amount he was increasing but the quality. Since in the end, all those hundreds of deaths were but one identical way of dying.

Murder born from love, in other words family, lover, mother, father, child.

Murder born of hatred, in other words family, lover, friend, upperclassman, stranger.

Various ways of dying for various reasons.

Repeated everyday, a conclusion that keeps getting clearer.

--- Death, becoming denser.

This building is a spell. An altar constructed to solidify Araya Soren's will. In order to carry out magecraft of a grand scale you needed not only an incantation and your own prana, but also the sacrifice of other lives and the strength of the land itself.

By constructing a magical temple in the present day, Araya is attempting to carry out magecraft of an even greater scale.

No, it wasn't magecraft. A mystery that used a twisted dimension of this level was already no longer on the level of magecraft.

This was --- that was right, a mystery of a province unreachable with today's knowledge.

There was no doubt that this was an act of absolute power that human hands could not reach, magic.

"--- Are you trying to open the road to the origin?

But, how? Even if you don't set out a magical ward to testify that you aren't a mage, you can't fool the will of the dominant race. The only ones you can fool by using a technological ward are other mages. If you use this building a path will definitely open. Since it's the realization of the Taegukdo, a hole would certainly appear. But the first thing to come out of that hole will be a Counter Guardian. As long as we are who we are, there is no way we can stand up to that."

"--- The Counter Force is already acting. The fact that you are in this city. The man who came to rob an empty house for no reason, as if he was possessed by something. The woman who was assaulted and killed on this road that has never known such things in the past. I tried this hard to hide my activities, but the Counter Force has already acted three times.

But that is all. I will not be going any closer to the origin. The many failures I have experienced will not go to waste. There was a time when I didn't know of the power called the Counter Force and tried to open a path, but I couldn't fool its eyes. One time I attempted this with a way to overthrow the Counter Force itself, but it always appeared with strength greater than any I could bring to bear.

There is only one conclusion. I do not have the ability."

For the first time --- the voice carries a sound which is close to emotion.

The black-clad man contains the mage beneath his eyes within his field of vision.

"The Counter Force interferes with any attempt to reach enlightenment to this extent. Because that is an act which leads to the power which humans cannot be allowed to attain, a return to nothingness. If the individual called a human becomes completed, all meaning of life disappears. In spite of that these rank



and file humans unconsciously reject completion because of their desire to just keep on living. All humans from the point where they realise they are human, becoming things lower than animals. They exist in order to be completed, but in order to exist they reject completion. Humanity's beginning starts from that paradox.

In that case, why are there those who reached the origin? The answer is simple. There is no way of reaching it. There are just humans who have reached it. No matter what branch you study, magecraft is nothing but a descendant that was attached later on. Ability is like that. You have it from the moment that you are born. It is the difference between being chosen and not being chosen. A humans who is connected to the origin from the moment they are born. We are a dominant organism that has digressed too far from the first great element that was our origin by becoming complicated and diversified, but there are rarely people who are born from the origin. Colourless souls who are born connected to 「        」。 That is probably the only existence that can reach the original source. In that case all that remains is to find it. In finding it, I spent ten years of my life."

"Is that so? So that's how you concluded that you had to destroy Ryougi Shiki."

She narrows her two eyes.

Ryougi Shiki. The Ryougi clan was a family who had toiled over the ages to give birth to one with an empty body who could act as a vessel, all in order to create a human with maximum uses. To be empty was 「        」。 Without realising what a dangerous thing they were doing, they had given birth to a body called Shiki who was connected to 「        」.

"--- Is that why you used Fujoh Kirie and Asagami Fujino?

If you moved yourself you would get found out by the Counter Force. So you had to always be at arms length while you destroy Shiki without allowing it to notice your existence. Right? By making Shiki confront murderers who held concepts totally opposite to her own, you made Shiki realise her own nature. If you are trying to make someone realise an idea I guess it is faster to let them experience it than to teach them.

So, what was it that you wanted, Araya? For Shiki and SHIKI to tear each other apart and leave behind an empty shell? Or did you just want to meet Ryougi Shiki?"

"Two years ago was to draw 'her' out. But it's different now. I told you the conclusion was already out. Shiki does not require that body. That body which is connected to the origin, I shall be taking it and making it my own."

Upon hearing that undisguised statement, Touko went Huh, and her mouth hung open. Her mind that had instantly understood what Araya was saying had gone white with shock.

"It couldn't be, that you plan to move your brain to Shiki's body... ?!"

Araya does not reply to Touko's disbelieving remark. Seeing his stare that implied he had nothing to say, Touko mumbled something about him really having bad tastes.

"But still, the fact that you are still in that body must mean that Shiki is still unharmed. I'm just asking, but is there any chance of you returning Shiki?"

"If you want her do as you will."

"Oho. Does that mean I have no choice but to fight. Geez, I never was a combat specialist. It looks like I'm going to suffer a bit for the sin of knowing that person."

"I'll just ask as well but, Aozaki. Will you not join me?"

His hostile gaze or his determined will never changed, but amidst the tension Araya Soren asked that of her.

Touko replied.

Saying, not a chance, with pumpkin-colored eyes that glared at him in the same manner.

"... Is that so. How disappointing. I always thought you were better than that. We once fought in order to reach the origin. To tell the truth I was interested in you."

Thump, Araya's feet made noise as he came forward.

As if he meant to get close to the stairway leading to the first floor.

"In that academy you at least weren't a part of the collective. I aimed for the original form of the soul, and you aimed for the original form of the body. I was certain that you would be the one to reach our goal first.

But --- you gave up. Why? The you right now has even thrown away the fact that you are a mage.

What did you study for, and what did you build up your power for?

What was it that your pilgrimage was meant to save, what was it meant to achieve?"

The black mage growls.

Quietly, with a voice no different from any other time, his two eyes alone are burning with rage.

Seeing that light in his eyes Touko replied.

"There was no great reason. I just became tired of creating more paradoxes every time I tried for the fundamental truth. The more we studied, the further away we got. It's the same as the Maelstrom of Origins. You can't approach it without the innocence we call emptiness, but in an empty state you aren't aware of it, so there's no point. --- It's the same as you. I accepted that, and you haven't. Just that, but it's a decisive difference."

Araya listened to the confession that was tinged with sadness without blinking an eyelash.

The gazes of the two collide.

Touko says to Araya. A mage's true nature, the paradox of becoming dumber the more wise you got.

Araya says to Touko. A mage's true quality, the fact of reaching higher and higher places the more you studied.

"You, have degenerated."

Briefly, he speaks with all his feelings.

"In that case what are you aiming for? Why do you stand there?"

"... Who knows. The reason I'm here, there really isn't much. I'm not even that interested in Shiki. Her body is full of black boxes so I can't even make anything similar."

That was right, she has no definite reason.

It could be that without her realising it she had been pushed into the act by some unidentifiable thing like the Counter Force.

However, that was alright even if that was the case. She had accepted the life she now led under the name of Aozaki Touko. She knew that this was something that had been built up through miracles and coincidence, and could never be formed again. Even supposing she was to repeat everything from the beginning like this paradoxical mansion, she would not be able to obtain a life like the one she had now.

So --- all that had happened was that she had decided to protect it if it could be protected.

"... Really, it's an incredible degeneration. I'm steadily getting weaker.

Araya. What I regard as the idealistic transcendent being is a hermit. Staying by themselves alone in a mountain, doing nothing even though they possess immense power and knowledge ---. I always admired such a way of existing. But when I realised what had happened I could no longer go back. A day when I can reach that state will never come to someone so full of greed like me. That, is what I believe.

You see, Araya. A mage always lives hurriedly. What for? If it was for themselves alone they wouldn't bother with the outside world. So why do they intrude upon the rest of the world? Why do they rely upon it? What will they achieve with that power? What will they save with the Ars Magna (Ars Magna: Meaning 'great secret technique', it stands not for a technique that is not learnt through study but for a mystery that is secretly passed down)? If that was the case it would have been better for them to become a king instead of a mage.

You think people live foully, but you yourself would not be able to live like that. You would not be able to live while accepting the fact that you know that everything is worthless and base. You would not be able to live without the pride of knowing that you alone are special, and that you alone can save this crumbling world. Of course, I was like that too. But that sort of thing has no meaning.

--- Accept it, Araya. We chose the path of transcendence called magecraft because we are weaker than everybody else."

The mage does not reply.

Taking one step after another, he approaches the stairs.

"... I have already obtained the road to the origin. With but a few steps more my hopes will come to fruition. Those who interfere, no matter who it is I will acknowledge as the Counter Force. Aozaki, you too were nothing more than human in the end."

The air in the lobby becomes tense.

A pressure that makes you wonder if space itself is not responding to the mage's killing intent and crumpling into itself.

Inside there, she gazed at her former comrade from a distance.

The long questioning in order to fill in the years they were apart ends here.

Lastly --- As a mage called Aozaki, she asks of Araya a few questions.

"Araya, what do you wish for?"

"True wisdom."

"Araya, where will you look for it?"

"Only, in myself."

The man answers without any hesitation.

The footsteps stopped at the end of the stairs.

In order to erase each other's existence from the world, both of them initiated their actions.