

Chapter 1.5

--

Occurring Seven Days/Swinging Seven Days

--

vol. 1

Mornings in the city were early in a slow way.

Perhaps to think of morning would be far from one's mind, no matter where in the city one would wake.

"....."

Still unused to hearing it, he was awoken by a piercing sound like tumbling rocks.

The mysterious sound's identity was the roaring engine of a motorcycle. As it happened, his neighbor Yoshida had just left for work.

Morning in this town was ambiguous, and night was just as ambiguous.

Apparently, being mechanical had similar meaning to sleeplessness.

"I don't believe it.....the sun hasn't even risen yet.....where's Yoshida-san going at this hour.....?"

He sluggishly lifted his body from the floor.

With his recent habit of simply loitering about in effect, realizing the unnecessary of such, he turned towards the showering area.

Using a glass to fetch water from the double-faucet sink, he eased the water down his throat.

Not too long ago, Soujuurou had taken to drawing water from a well, so this convenience was a joy to him.

A joy, he supposed, was correct.

Looking closely at civilization's complexity and improvement, the need for manual labor as part of one's livelihood had decreased, while the needs of humans have increased in complexity, according to the enlightenment of Kouga-san.

One way or another, you grew up in the circumstances of the former, he had said that to him as well.

Soujuurou's father's distant relative from the Kouga family was, to some extent, an acquaintance close to Soujuurou who had looked after him as a benefactor.

His living arrangements and his acceptance into the school were handled in his stead via the efforts of the Kouga family.

For his part, the trouble of providing a copy of his certificate of residence and filling out a report for his relocation were two matters he got scolded into taking care of on his own.

Despite Soujuurou's struggle to treat legal processes as relevant being far from his forte,

he and the city were going to get along from this point onward, and on the bright side of things, he was past getting caught unawares by this place.

"Personally, I find all of this red tape to be a pain."

Since Soujuurou's life began in this town, he had been learning new things from the get-go.

Soujuurou had been here for two weeks since he left his hometown.

Despite his apprehension of having to live on his own, he was willing to take that chance.

In terms of being a natural at communication as well as being a natural at conversation, as the Kouga family had told him, the city was firm in having norms that made practical sense.

Honestly, he was astonished at how easy walking was while walking down the street. With time to spare before his part-time job started, he took a jog through the park. To Soujuurou, this exercise alone was a valuable experience.

Among the passersby whom each he had never met, there was an old man he exchanged greetings with, a young man in his twenties with his head down as he walked, and a girl sitting on a bench while surrounded by birds. For Soujuurou, it was a hard-to-come-by scene.

He was not yet used to this town, and him not putting in more effort at understanding its ways was simply not good enough.

At times complex and at times straightforward, sometimes there was significance while other times there was none.

Compared to life in the mountains, to which dealing with it just came naturally, life in town was too numerous in its choices.

Speaking for himself, Soujuurou had even called it poison to his current state of mind.

So far, the feeling of uneasiness was the one occurrence.

If only since, from the bottom of his heart, he also held respect for these norms.

The vacillating profit-and-loss arithmetic of mixed consent was what circulated in the city, however.

In the first place, having enough money mainly for spending was, indeed, not lacking when one lived in the city, thought Soujuurou.

"Nah, it ain't that simple.

The problem with money is that, as a notation that sticks around, its true worth is a separate issue.

The stream o' coupons for massages ain't changed, a ten-thousand yen bill ain't enough to get ya by..... Man, it's like all this trouble for money ain't worth anythin', right?"

"Umm."

"Don't 'umm' me! Quit pullin' my chain, ya make me sad, Pete's sake!

The other day, you were willin' to do honest work earnin' a measly 4000 yen, and for some lousy dishwashin' you're like, 'Well, I'm earning it'. Don't be a scatterbrain, dammit."

"Not at all, I just think the currency system is impeccable. If you ask me, there are limitations when it comes to bartering.

By the way, Kinomi, you'd better put down those dishes you're messing with."

"Huh? Ah, whoooa whoa whoa, next thing to get cracked'll be my head if I don't watch out! Thanks for the heads-up. So, where were we? It's money we're talkin' about, right?"

"That's right. To start with, what with money being so important, I've come to realize that you can never have too much of it. That is, it makes me want to work harder to earn it."

"Gawd, are you kiddin' me!? I wish ya wouldn't say that on the basis o' carryin' through with machine-like dishwashin'!

I weren't just talkin' about earnin' your keep. There ain't no love in that. Also, you don't want anythin' to do with 'water cooling', d'ya? Nothin' compares to washin' dishes during the winter season, y'know?"

"That would be cold, but that's nothing to me.

Cold mountain water's a lot more severe than you think."

"Only a wild child like you'd use ice water as a comparison.But there it is, see? Runnin' outta patience with somethin', refusin' to endure somethin'? Y'know?

Newbies can't touch the register, and it takes four days to completely turn you into this stingy restaurant's corporate slave..... That's how it is these days with makin' money, yeah? Capitalism reeks, yo."

"Shut your fuggin' mouth, part-timer! If you have complaints then quit your damn job! I don't have shekels to give to deadbeats like you!!"

In a split second, jeers followed by kitchen chopsticks were hurled.

The manager who put minors to work at his shoddy Chinese food restaurant happened to have learned to wield an iron fist since infancy from watching the next-door neighbor's son, thus having become a strong-willed character.

It was called being Spartan, and Soujuurou was impressed by it.

"There, you made him mad. You're not doing your job properly is all."

"Pfft, stinkin' honor student. We're at that rebellious phase at our age, y'know. Ah, well. Let's talk about somethin' else. Shizuki, are you the type to go out at night? Or ride your bike when you go places? That is, whatever you like doin' is fine."

".....? I come home after work mostly by nightfall, but I guess there's not much to tell from that. Walking at night and walking a long distance aren't hobbies, are they?"

"No sir, they ain't! Shizuki, it's 'cuz you're new to town. The rest of us say it a lot, but public safety don't count for nothin' down here, see? Things're bad enough as they are. At least ten people a year get knifed by a slasher, see? It happens around here too."

".....What's a...slasher?"

"It's exactly as y'heard it!

.....Agh, look! It ain't the same as purse snatchin'. It's more like testin' a new sword on someone just walkin' by. It always happens in that part of the residential area near what's left of the forest there; it's messed up.

That's why stayin' out too late is outta the question. Misaki Hill's park's most known for weird things happenin' there.

Y'ever heard o' the slasher legend of Slit-Mouth Woman?"

"Sorry, I don't even know what a Slit-Mouth Woman is."

"It's a ghost story. She's a ghost whose mouth is split from ear to ear.

It's a legend that goes way back, see."

"It's like this: on the road really late at night, a shrouded figure of a woman'll come up to you askin', 'Am I pretty?' an' stuff.

Don't matter how you answer her. Either way, she'll chase ya all the way back to your house tryin' to kill ya. Women and their emotions are freaky, man. Like the enigmas in comic books, man."

".....That's a seriously frightening matter, still.

Can she get into the house?"

"She can climb through your window, man.

Creepin' in, all cockroach-li----- ack!?"

"Y'damn kid!! Say the c-word in the kitchen again and I'll kill ya!"

Like so, the manager's frying pan/full length attack explosively struck Kinomi at the back of his head.

'I understand now, danger is everywhere in this town,' thought the twice-impressed Soujuurou.

"What is it with his death threats!? Censorin' violent words is a thing we do, don't we!? This here's a restaurant, Pete's sake! Even if it is a poorly handled one!"

"Kinomi, is your head OK?"

"Huh? Ah, hm, it's no big deal. I'm known for bein' sturdy. 'Specially where my head's at.

Anyhow, it's important for ya to watch your back at night. Shizuki, always stay alert."

"Thank you.

By the way, about those 'ten people a year' you mentioned---- is that a lot?"

"Beats me. While it obviously ain't a small number, it also ain't a lot, innit?

Hey, comparin' Misaki's slasher to that problem, we still ain't found the culprit yet!"

Hahahaha, he laughed jovially.

Kinomi's intention to tell an ominous story and end it on a humorous note was, naturally, something that went over Soujuurou's head.

His kind warning, too, was meant for nothing.

'I see, so this is a time to laugh?' Once again, Soujuurou was earnestly impressed.

On his return home.

With no living soul behind him, with just the electric lights lighting up the dark residential district, Soujuurou very suddenly,

".....?"

What's that?, turned his head at an unlikely sound.

"----Ouch!?"

Something hit him on the head, and fell at his feet with a plunk.

What bad luck, he furrowed his brows.

A small bird had collided with the telephone pole and plummeted straight onto his head while he was walking.

The starling preened itself on the road, and took to the air in a flurry after.

A plummeting bird,

afterwards, hurriedly flying away,

and his way of life at this point, still made no sense to him.

Townsfolk believed that "being hit by a falling bird" brought bad luck, and by coincidence, he felt an ominous something. Soujuurou nodded at his insight and continued on his way.

----Truly.

When it came to having first-time experiences, the city was undoubtedly often the case.

vol. 2

"I'm baaack! Alice, are you around?
I bought something from the shopping district after going to the church!
Iseya rice crackers! Let's eat them!"

Her voice echoed in the sunset-dyed lobby.
The uniformed Aoko had just cheerfully arrived home after 5 o'clock.
Conferring with the church once a month was one of her duties at the student council,
and she came home upon finishing.

".....Welcome back.
Seems that matter was settled without incident, Aoko."

The greeting voice came from upstairs.
Differing from Aoko's brimming exuberance, the girl who was serenity personified
appeared at the stairwell.

"We took the blame for it, but it went smoothly otherwise.
Since the problem's ours exclusively, they're opting to stay out of our affairs this time.
.....That's no big deal, right, Alice?"
".....Right. Getting help from others right now would be appreciated, but those people
can't be trusted with their type of help. Like always, we'll only ask them to handle the
after-treatment."

"Agreed. It's more than likely that we'd suffer a swift kick from behind. To start with,
neither of us two pretends at being good at focusing on watching our own backs."
".....I'm good at that.
Concerning yourself, you're still not at that level of versatility, are you?"
"Err."

Tap, tap.
Gracefully coming down the stairs, Alice Kuonji entered the lobby.
.....In that time, Aoko saw something she had missed while looking at the skylight.

"The glass is all fogged up."
"I was going to talk to you about that. Once we're done for the day, however.
.....Aoko, are you feeling alright? Why don't you go take a rest if you're feeling tired?"
"What? Hey, that's uncalled for. I told you there's nothing to worry about. Today was a
day like all the others. Do I look tired to you?"

True. If she were to venture an opinion, a favorable wind was at its pique during her
time at school today.
Having a rough bird's eye view of her usually harmonious school life,

the subtle annoyance she had felt today caused her to rethink that a lot, and while further inquiry meant some mental strain on her part, Aoko wanted to eschew from any more anguish on her consciousness.

".....Enough. When I'm home, I put those matters to the back of my mind.

Wish

In any case, today we're tackling the basics of hypnosis, aren't we?
That's no problem for me, let's start right now. I have a feeling my spirit will carry me through today!"

Anger may be what often emerged from stress release.

Aoko was prepared, and she resolutely turned towards the staircase.

"Alice, what's the matter? Aren't we doing this in your room?"

"-----"

The girl was certainly dressed for the evening. Nodding with a hint of displeasure,

"So. Today, it's Iseya rice crackers, is it?"

her piercing gaze rounded on the simple, ready-to-eat Japanese sweets that Aoko had in her hand.

At the end, Alice's instruction, as part of their daily lesson plan, took place after light tea was had.

Being the fledgling apprentice Aoko was, Alice Kuonji rotated between being a housemate and a hard-to-come-by instructor.

Judging her for the pitying care she gave Aoko's well-being, there was only submissive obedience.

Ending the lesson after two hours, the two finished their separately prepared meals. With time to while away after dinner at the day's closure, they moved to another room.

In the sunroom that adjoined the sitting room, a beautiful garden overlooked the east side of the mansion.

Just as lavish as the sitting room, the attention to detail and the sophisticated furnishings made this sunroom the pride of the adorned Kuonji residence. However.

"It'll be a jungle by next summer, at this rate."

Lacking the willingness to do yardwork arose from the negligence of the inhabitants, so much of it had come to ruin.

"Say, Alice. How about a Ploy that does all your gardening for you?"

Entering the sunroom ahead of Alice, Aoko brewed black tea from the teapot.

"Maybe I should look for one, but I'd rather not."

Brushing off her housemate's pleasantries, Alice moved to sit in her own chair, and frowned girlishly as she eyed the box of chocolates placed on the table.

"Wh-what's wrong with you? Look, isn't today's screwup half your fault, Alice? I bet the ricecrackers relaxed you too much and got you beaten. But then, the hypnosis turning into a Gandr must have been on account of myself having been too pushy....."

"I'm missing six of these."

"Huh? What do you have there?"

Aoko moved in for a closer look at the box.

No matter where in the world one would search, there was nothing quite like the deluxe confectionery that this European-style building of this town possessed. By name, it was branded Song of Sixpence.

"So, this is about the looking-glass, then. Oh, it's currently switched to Misaki mode, isn't it?"

"Yes. Governance here is offhand, but I have it aimed only at Misaki City.It's gotten cloudy since yesterday.

It's only gradual, but they're moving in on us without question."

"Moving in'? Did their numbers increase?"

"I most certainly caught one, then another pair of suspicious figures were spotted. One is in the urban area, and two are in the outskirts of the forest."

"*sigh*. I think I'll take your word for it.

So, which of them's making a disturbance?"

".....Those in the forest. I'm still moving to take them in, but I think they've sensed me watching them from here. I can't just let them come here."

"I see. Then tonight, how about we make a stand?"

'How about we make a stand?'

It was a life-defining moment -- a huge event that would change the way she lived forever.

Without exaggeration, free falling with devil-may-care resolution into adventure with a hole in her parachute, this was a fight that would determine on a gamble whether or not she had the moxie to adapt to her new life.

Aoko eagerly swallowed her black tea down, along with her fear and hesitance. Since her firm declaration to carry through on the night of her school's Foundation Day, Aoko had completely changed in mind and body.

With downcast eyes, Alice accepted her housemate's strength of will.

"....."

Looking at the way her housemate was, it was reassuring that they both had the same objectives in mind.

No, rather than reassuring, it was pleasing.

This far into the year, she had finally come to stand on the same stage as Alice.

destiny

Their neighbor had acquired an oddly similar resolution.

But she made for a terrible companion.

Other people had a hard time understanding her, afterall.

Sooner or later, they will jointly participate in killing each other in order to inherit the legacy, but for there to be no fairness between them was irrelevant.

As of now thusly, Alice had to applaud her growth into adulthood.

".....It pains me to say, but I can do this on my own tonight.

In the meantime, practice some more on your hypnosis. The park is your jurisdiction, so I'm going to have to put you to work until that time."

Avoiding Aoko's gaze, Alice left her these instructions in a dry tone of voice.

This night's scale of threats.

Their arrangements from this moment forth.

Aoko Aozaki's **new** day of birth was promisingly close to two days from now.

"Yes, yes. I'll get right to it."

Having finished her black tea, Aoko rose from her seat.

"I'll do as you say, and practice on my hypnosis.

Soooo, how does the starting verse go again? '*Light, weak. Smoothly, swiftly. Tic-tac-tic-tic hurry on, hurry on*'. Right?"

Light, weak Smoothly, swiftly Hurry on, hurry on Tic-tac-tic-tic

".....*sigh*. It's '*Weight of the air, tremor of the heart. Light is behind, shadow is at the helm*.'"

Please take care. And be at your utmost calm for a change."

"You betcha, you betcha! Well then, excuse this one time!"

She picked out a piece of chocolate and popped it into her mouth.

"....."

As Aoko left the sunroom waving her hand, Alice saw her out in silence.

After briefly collecting herself, seemingly finding fault in her housemate's misappropriation, she slammed the box of chocolates shut with a clink.

vol. 3

---GOOD MORNING.

MIDNIGHT IS CONFIRMED.

LAST SESSION UPDATE 24 HOURS PROGRESS.

BACKUP

RECORD

SAFETY REGULATION, START. BEHAVIOR REPORT, TRANSMISSION.

SCAN

SURROUNDING TERRAIN IS BEING REAFFIRMED.

ATMOSPHERE COMPOSITION----

NITROGEN, NO ABNORMALITIES.

OXYGEN, NO ABNORMALITIES.

ARGON, NO ABNORMALITIES.

CARBON DIOXIDE, NO ABNORMALITIES.

THE FIFTH THEORETICAL ELEMENT----

ABNORMAL/ABNORMAL/ABNORMAL/PRESENT.

SURROUNDING AREA'S DIVERGENCE IN SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM
CONFIRMATION.

DECISION TO MEET WITH TYPE I DANGEROUS GOODS.

PERCEPTION DOMAIN IS SUBJECTIVITY --> CHANGE TO OBJECT.

AUTONOMY CIRCUIT CHARGING WITH ELECTRICAL POWER,
MEASUREMENT CIRCUIT CHANGE TO CHARGING WITH MAIN ELECTRICAL
POWER.

CAMERA

VISUAL PERCEPTION FROM INFRARED LINE MEASUREMENT
CHANGE TO IMAGINARY NUMBER LINE MEASUREMENT.

---DONE.

FROM HERE DESCRIPTION OF COMBAT ACTION IS BEING INITIATED.

GOD. I ASK FOR YOUR PROTECTION.

There were plenty of forests in Misaki City.

With the city growing of its own volition, thick nature still drew breath in the outskirts.

Even as the well-grounded trees fell victim to deforestation,
even as the warm humus broke up,

and even as the birds vanished as they tilted their heads in confusion, the green persevered with unquestionable might.

In the light of civilization, the people's cultivated years turned their strength over towards invasion, while domains of supernatural mystery carried on alongside it.

.....This forest was also one of them.

This unspoiled part of the outskirts that was left alone served as the border of Misaki Town and Misaki Hill.

normal

It was completely average that, in this day and age, animals driven out of their habitats survived by a very small margin, anywhere else was a provincial town. These were forests to which return was impossible.

*High diddle diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,*

In the forest, the late winter closed in. **razor**

The cold air cut through one's skin like a thin blade.

The presence of ice crept up to one's knee.

Exposed cheeks would stiffen, a long breath would disappear into a white cloud.

The temperature was 1°C.

The cold wave spread throughout the entire forest, touching the ground, the trees, and the animals.

*The cow jump'd over the moon;
The little dog laugh'd*

People did not enter the forest during the day.

Even animals were put to sleep by the wintry forest.

The drifting night air held the breath of dead souls themselves.

Drinking the moonlight, hiding the cliff that loomed ahead, would destroy the pitiful sacrifice that wandered its way in.

The faint sound of the wind could be heard along with the murmuring of the river.

The endless gloom here cut off all sense of life.

The animals were foolish, not one living soul would be around.

However,

entering that place were discernibly black garments.

The very small, slender silhouette was like a boat adrift in the sea fog.

Dubious footfalls echoed.

Emerging from the veil of trees, without question, was a young human girl.

*To see such craft,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

"They've come, they've come."

"They're here, they're here!"

"Who is that, who is that?"

"A who and a who!"

"Is your tummy hungry?"

"My tummy's grumbling!"

"Which will you eat?"

"Whichever I'll eat!"

"You are the left hand,"

"You're the right hand!"

"We weren't expecting them,"

"We aren't impressed by them!"

" "At long last, nevertheless -- here we have amusing guests!" "

"Chancing upon the stomach and the shinbone,"

"Don't chew thoroughly on these alone!"

"----"

The shadows of the various trees eerily cackled.

An auditory hallucination? An illusion? Or perhaps **the genuine article**?

Matching the girl's pace, the huddling shadows scuttled about in high spirits.

"Now then, now then." "Going further in, going further in!"

"Were the dice prepared, by the by?"

"Loaded with the belly's weight."

"Edgework with bitten edges!"

"Not to be bothered by it, but I hope that only the pivotal six stays out of this!"

"----"

The girl's brows were slightly contorted.

Hearing the unexpected voices,

perhaps she became frightened of the unanticipated animals' presence here?

Impossible.

No sign of worry lined her firm, pressed lips.

The girl's stride was powered by her own will.
Overwhelmed with fear, her feet would not have carried her forward at all.
Deep among the trees.
The girl was keenly aware of the two watchful figures hidden by the night.

"Here they are, here they are."

"Here they come, here they come!"

"Surrender now."

"Can't go back now!"

"We've given you fair warning."

"Staying here's your undoing!"

The girl ceased walking.
The two squirming voices also ceased.
The brook's murmuring could be likened to the popping of a bonfire.

And then.

In the direction of the ankle-deep streamlet, there appeared what the town foolishly thought would not be found in the forest.

a person

"Good evening. Is your master here for me to speak to?"

The girl calmly spoke.
The two Slit-Mouth Men crept slowly forward at a snail's pace.

".....Right. Standard grave keepers, surveillance being their only job.
This was a mistake. Aoko could have taken care of this.
Ah, but----"

One of the Slit-Mouth Men straightened up.
Purely unable to withhold his patience, the other Slit-Mouth Man began to shake violently as he leaned his body forward.

"This would still be too much for Aoko to handle.
Despite your appearances, you two are more like full-fledged magi."

Her black attire stirred.
In the girl's right hand, was a glass cat that was thick with night.

'.....?'

What surged, with small precaution, was an irrational fear.

will

In that instant, the two Slit-Mouth Men, showing emotion unique to themselves at the very last,

"Goodbye, my visitors.
Since this will be very brief, I only bid you farewell."

plainly trembled with fear at those words.

They had no ears, mouths, or brains from the beginning. So words themselves were unnecessary.

All that they took away was 'the moment'.
Fear and expectation included, these heartless men took away an unobtainable 'future' and nothing furthermore.

But still, they had a premonition.
As of now, from this point on, and as a phenomenon that made the hair on their bodies stand on end, they had brought DISORDER upon themselves----

"Now then---- let's play a game of pretend, puppets."

song

In the white forest, a bell-like night echoed.
The girl's voice extinguished the chilled forest's cold wave.
And,

*"Oh dear oh my, we waited longer than we should!"
"And now---- I present to you, Little Red Riding Hood!"*

Diddle Diddle

the curtain rose on the Evening Banquet.
One of the Slit-Mouth Men charged at the girl creating the disturbance.

rear

The other Slit-Mouth Man started to run for the forest out of dread.

Sending up a spray of water, the deformed human figure sprung at the girl.
The girl knew.

The Slit-Mouth Man, with hands that were SCISSORS, had the heart of a gremlin.
It was a devil that seized children and ruthlessly cut their bodies into two.

"Tweedle."
"We got this, we got this!"
"Finally we're up, and we're off!"

The airborne piglets resembled a pair of Japanese hand balls.
The meter-long stuffed toys swiftly darted among the trees.

Even with such madness before him, the Slit-Mouth Man gave no pause.
The man raised his arms. What he drew from the sleeves of his long coat were not human arms. pointed edge sword
Exceeding the length of fifty centimeters, was a pair of fiendish, Japanese-style kitchen carvers.
Having torn many of his PREY to pieces with his arms up to this point, he cleaved the flying piglets from the front.

'----!?'

The Slit-Mouth Man's limbs froze in place.
The cloven piglet's body had split in two.
Clank!

Turning into an enormous CROCODILE mouth from head to tail, the impeded piglet crunched down on the Slit-Mouth Man's arm.

It was literally swallowed up to the tip of his shoulder.
From simply that, the freedom of the man's entire body disappeared.
'----, ----!'

A running fear.
THESE piglets were not familiars.
The Slit-Mouth Man understood instantly -- these things, dressed in the FORM of piglets, were stationery apparitions.

"Dum was the one who caught you!"
"No, Dee was the one who caught you!"

"Oh but it's a shame, our master's indifference born from her cruelty born from her taciturnity!"
"In the end, one achievement's as good as the other!"

***London Bridge is broken down,
Broken down, broken down.***

'----, gh.'

Unthinkable. Again and again, the Slit-Mouth Man showed signs of muttering.
What was this. What was this. What was this?

Talking piglets, was nothing.
His arm bitten all the way up to his shoulder, was also nothing.
Obscuring the forest with an excessively dense wave of magic energy in the blink of an eye, was horrible as it was impressive.

Still, none of those things were worthy of astonishment.
Odd familiars, bizarre attacks, and naturally inherited magic energy that overwhelmed others.

All of the above were already part of the men's experience.
Their employer was a foreigner of that sort, at any rate.

Still----

"What now, what now, when are you fighting back?"

"Your hands and feet are still a glinting luxury!"

"We demand payment -- we would like a pound, please!"

What, was THIS.

They were not containers.

They were not living organisms.

They were not even creatures that used Magic Circuits to move.

Just from having both of his arms bitten on, the man's whole body was rendered immobile.

It was altogether different from being bound and being weakened.

As if he had fully turned into a **written alphabetical character** in a book, his senses could no longer go anywhere.

Even the Slit-Mouth Man, in demonstrating his deformity, had won many times against monsters.

Glamor, Enchantment, Compulsion.

Freezing, Grave Wax, all the way up to the deepest level of Mystic Eyes -- Petrification.

When it came to magecraft produced by drugs, he had screamed at the innumerable amount of penalties experienced.

This was different. So much, different.

The penalty that bound him now was,
a law separate from blood, muscle, oxygen, and heat capacity.
An unheard-of restraint that applied to none of the rules.

.....Oh, it was a horrid thing to speak of.

It deviated entirely from the rest of the world.

*London Bridge is broken down,
Broken down, broken down,
London Bridge is broken down,
My fair lady.*

'Gh----'

The fangs ate into the control of his shoulder.

will

Since his birth into FORM, he learned the emotion of anger for the first time.

.....A standard must be absolute.

There were laws for every mystery and every strangeness.

THESE were exactly that. The men's dignity was being shrugged off.

"Now, in three days you'll be crippled!"

"In four days, you'll drown to death!"

"Half a year's length will turn you into an unhappy skeleton!"

"But we're so very truly sorry -- the role she gave is to take you to an early grave!" "

'UrrrrrrrrgggGGHHHHH!!!!!!'

He howled.

His mouthless self let out an indignant scream.

"Augh!"

"A-Augh!!"

"How convenient, a mechanism to deinstall your own arms!"

"Oh, you truly are the greatest serviceman to ever live, my lord!"

The talkative piglets fell into the brook.

sound

With an enraged voice, his shoulders were shattered with an exploding sound.

Even after losing both arms, the Slit-Mouth Man sped on towards the girl.

".....Those two are useless. A punishment is in order after this."

Without an arm to chop with, what remained was his greatest ill will.

Mystic Eyes that shot dead the heart of any person he glared at.

A Magic Circuit that specialized only in the act of stopping up the cardiac muscle.

simple

shotgun

In its simplicity, for this reason, it was deadly buckshot in which avoidance was impossible once thrown at point-blank range.

'----?'

And yet.

Misfortune only had eyes for him.

*Build it up with wood and clay,
Wood and clay, Wood and clay,
Build it up with wood and clay,
My fair lady.*

The difference in the girl's song escaped his notice up to the very end.

Causing the ground to shake with one hit, THAT did nothing more than clear away an insect.

Green veins that suddenly appeared as they sprang up.
Dryness having ate at it for a hundred years or so, the bark of the evergreen oak repelled the electric rotating blade.
The letters for "emeth" were scrawled onto its forehead with multicolored painting tools.With mistakes here and there, the spelling was only a fixture on its existence.

Thames Troll was the form it took.
Perhaps Falling Down.
Also known as the Great Bridge.
Praised for a great number of variants, this was the fourth wonder's starting point.

"Thames. Take the other one, too."

The giant responded to the girl's words.
With its roots protruding from the ground, the green giant stayed in place and lifted its left arm up towards the sky----

'----, ----'

Meanwhile.
The Slit-Mouth Man who fled during the battle, was running at full speed into the night's forest.

He recorded and described his partner.

order

That is, he imposed the mission upon himself.

He ran with all of the energy from adjusting to life in the forest.
In an emergency, their strategy was to send one into battle with the enemy, while the other withdrew to report back to their employer.
He raced through the forest.
The Slit-Mouth Man's specialty was only the running feature. Even while bound by terror, he was convinced of his own victory.

There was no way to catch up to him while in the forest.

Even wolves would find it hard to stay in close pursuit of him.

Tap, tap! His bird-like legs kicked the ground.

Regarding his creator's personal hobby, his legs were modified to fit a situation where he was to specialize in nothing but travel.

His maximum speed was 70 km/h.

The Slit-Mouth Man went into the forest while going over the limits of two-legged creatures.

After crossing the distance of several kilometers, he confirmed his safety from behind.

.....Nothing was after him.

His crescent-shaped mouth---- no, more like his eye, let its guard down in relief.

And then.

'----?'

Upon turning his body to the front, he looked up to his own death.

London Bridge is broken down,

Broken down, broken down----

Mother Goose

From far away he heard the Dark Fairy Tale.

From the ground's surface grew countless numbers of vines.

arch

The apparition that made him think of a bridge was, almost like, the resemblance of a giant's arm----

London Bridge is broken down,

My fair lady.

FINAL REPORT.

RETURNING ALIVE IS DIFFICULT.

ANALYSIS IS DIFFICULT.

TRANSMISSION IS DIFFICULT.

SITUATION IS BEING TERMINATED.

Aaaaa. GOD. I ASK, FOR YOUR----

".....We're finished here. That's enough for today. Go on back, Thames.

A high-priced location would suit you better next time."

The girl turned on her heel.

The invaders who built a workshop in this forest were eliminated.

The number of victims the men had built up from their ideas of right and wrong were of no concern to the girl.

She possessed no interest in the fetters of human society.

She was a pure-blooded witch, the way Meinster ought to be.

"Wai-- What about us!? Heeey, what about us!?"

"The arm, the arm won't come off!"

"We can't move while biting down like this, afterall."

"This is bad! Flightless piggies don't do anything for you, then!?"

"Next time! For sure next time we'll be of use to you! But for as long as we live, we'll always make mistakes!"

"Yeah, we want to be praised at least once until we break!"

"....."

The girl sighed as she carried her feet over to the streamlet and, with a black gloved hand, dipped her thin fingers into the icy waters.

"Six isn't what you want. But six is all you two seem to get."

No voice answered to her unhappy murmuring.

As the noisy piglets disappeared without a trace, only a humble pair of black dice sat in the girl's hand.

The girl was about to call out to the scattered debris, then she put a hand to her mouth.

".....The goodbyes are over.

Should I have heard the rough inscription, I wonder?"

She reluctantly traced her lips with a finger as pale as an icfish.

The girl sighed for a second time. Then leaving the same way she came, she calmly left the gloomy forest.

vol. 4

Taking the camera back in time for just a moment.

Going to the date of early December, we return for a bit to the main story.

homeroom

With the lesson for third period coming to an end, HR only remained for them before going home before noon on a Saturday.

In the complete absence of their homeroom teacher Kazuki Yamashiro, the two students of class 2-C, Soujuurou Shizuki and Housuke Kinomi, stayed even though they wanted to go home. With those circumstances floating in the air, they gazed out at the rest of the schoolyard from the veranda.

Their classmates chatted inside the classroom below.

Next to the two was Tobimaru Tsukiji from class A, who tagged along for the purpose of killing time.

Earnestly lowered while leaning on the veranda's railing, the three of them discussed their plans and whatnot for the weekend.

"Kinomi, are you going to be at Bear?"

"Ya moron, who works all the way up till Sunday?"

Even the kids over at class B are gonna go out tomorrow.....so much for plans, though. None o' us are sorta up for that."

"Err. So in other words, you were given the cold shoulder again."

"Guaah, right where it hurts, too!? I can't believe you just said that straight out, Shizuki-kun!"

"Seeing that stupid look on your face everyday, it's no wonder Hiyoko insists on turning you down. Ruining yourself is your business, just quit giving Sou-ji ideas about weird distractions."

"Man, that pompous attitude of yours sucks.

Watch yourself, Shizuki. Tsukiji's bein' a callous jerk.

He's got a dump site notice on his mind. That's what it's made him into. The guy's got all his usable and non-usable junk all sorted up."

"Ah, I know about that.

---Come to think of it, how are you helping Tobimaru with that, Kinomi?"

"Oh riiight. Bulky waste collection isn't based on proportion and taken off your hands even with downpayment, is it? To think sooner or later, the country's going to put an end to collection being free of charge."

"Huh? What're ya talkin' about? Nobody's gonna pay through the nose for a worn out chest o' drawers! I'm a 'break the seal, instant use' sorta guy, sorta fella who stays on top

o' the trends, y'know? Like those disposable cameras becomin' a popular sell at the convenience store? The fad's finally catchin' up with my consumption civilization an'--"

"So Kinomi's going to work, then. How about Tobimaru?"

"--we're gettin' there, this bein' my era's a cinch!"

"Got a personal errand to run. My old man's got a guest coming over so I have to be there when they arrive. Someone's got to be their guide around town."

"Yo! Hear out a fella when he's talkin'!"

Honestly, I'm just gonna be hangin' out with my kid sister. It beats bein' bossed around at that stinkin' Chinese restaurant."

"Sou-ji, you have work tomorrow?"

"No, that's my day off. I have part-time at the amusement park today, though."

"Ugh, ain't that the evil KitsyLand?"

That'll kill ya, Shizuki. Word's that even the judo club bunch've all thrown in the towel from workin' there."

".....What?! You mean to say it's a strain just from hauling Cat Black's goods?"

"Hmm. Nah, it's more'n that.

And what's holdin' up that crazy Yamashiro anyway? Look, even class B next door's bein' let out."

"Seems that way. No use grumbling about it, we'll have to go look for him. There's no reason to make Sou-ji late."

Tobimaru Tsukiji tiredly lifted himself off the veranda's railing when, right on queue, the broadcast within the school rang out in three chimes.

"Soujuurou Shizuki-kun of year 2 class C. Yamashiro-sensei would like to see you. Please come to the staff room at once. I repeat, Soujuurou Shizuki-kun of--"

The three lapsed into an uneasy silence.

After staring off into space for five seconds, Soujuurou excused himself, and left the veranda with the other two staying back.

"Man, is this scene dead or what? Nobody's makin' crop circles in the schoolyard neither."

Remaining listless, Kinomi grumbled while taking a stance of absolute boredom.

"Don't rely on peoples' fevered imaginations. You want things to get exciting 'round here? Get it done yourself. The classification announcement'd be the right opportunity; Aozaki'd be an easy target for a fight."

"Aagh, trauma trigger! Forget it, a scrap with the prez is a scare that goes past bein' a treat, man! For behavin' male students, cute girls changin' schools alone ain't worth cryin' over, man.

Ah, well, average kids are borin' all the same, like Hollywood producers an' UK divas."

"Way to sum that up. See if you can point out the princess of planet Mars down there."

"Attention, to all students of year 2 class C. A message from Yamashiro-sensei.

'In the unspecified absence of Yamashiro-sensei from HR, please go your own separate ways. Off you go now!'

That is all from the broadcasting room."

".....I don't get it. Ain't his freedom chicken feed after buyin' a new car? My 10-yen coins are screechin' at that brand new Serbia o' his."

"Get as much gum as you can from Kagiroku. A teacher's low wages is worthy of some honest-to-God sympathy, afterall."

The two terrible friends went back to their classrooms while complaining.

Neither of them worried even a little for their friend who had been called to the staff room.

"I disagree. I give my approval of the student's part-time job.

As a place of work that was given clearance by the school, it's recommended as an integrated communal experience as per the regulations that were set by this school."

"I have to say that's true. His situation is a problem that's being blown out of proportion. For argument's sake, supposing that it doesn't get approved, the reason would be that both him and the school would face serious trouble for letting him work in such a way that kind of violates the Labor Standards Act."

In the agitated staff room before lunch on Saturday, the air between the cloven-footed student council president and the long-suffering teacher who taught Modern Japanese smacked of peril.

The other teachers ran in haste to the conference room with prayers to dispel the evil.

Before Yamashiro realized it, the only ones in the staff room were himself, and the student council president that was Aoko Aozaki.

".....They all ran away? You guys are terrible, forcing this on me out of fright."

"As I was saying, Sensei.

We can say that his acquisition of a part-time job that sits outside of what's been specified, is mainly due to the school's unresponsiveness to his request."

"In the absence of a claim to his boarding house rent being covered by his scholarship, in his willingness to work for as much as his time would let him, consideration should be given to his request if that's the case.

If misgivings arise at the unnaturalness of his work, 'A student is limited to only one

place of employment' to begin with. Please let us amend the rules if that's the case."

Yamashiro hung his head at the student council president's steady narration, thinking, 'I have no choice but to deal with this.'

It was a case that should have gone over smoothly.

He had plans to take his lunch, putting out of his mind the inclination to ask about the circumstances that would send for the student, whose "multiple part-time jobs" had set rumors afloat, and the attention directed at the problem should they be true.

It was odd that as soon as word of it reached the student council president's ears, she came barging into the staff room in order to deal with the matter swiftly.

Yamashiro, personally in favor of the student council president's stance on it, was sympathetic towards the circumstances of the student in question.

He was inclined to help him out in secret, but he, too, was a pitiful newcomer as a teacher.

Testing the patience of the deputy vice principal could cost him his job, and despite the pay he was earning, he was not open to that.

".....That's not enough to go on. Bringing this to the personal attention of the deputy vice principal is also something I can't help you with."

"Well then, how about finding a point of compromise?"

"Hm?"

The student council president pulled out a sheet of document paper from her bag.

It was the cause of all the migraines that erupted among the teachers upon being picked up at the staff meeting earlier that morning.

"Aozaki-kun, is that...?"

"Yes. The Aida Church's volunteer participation report.

The number of applicants for this month is zero. The deputy vice principal is a devout Christian, and I have no doubt he was offended by this.

The main source of his grievance this morning was the shortage of faith among our school's students, wasn't it?"

".....That's true. But I'm curious as to how you know what went on during the staff meeting, really."

Scratching his head, Yamashiro looked at her while smiling amusedly.

He had a better idea of what the student council president was up to.

"Do a favor for someone, get a favor done in return, so the saying goes.

The church alone asks for volunteers to take part in wageless work, but there's a certain reward that comes from it. It's an undertaking that can be taken as a social studies trip

that's properly authorized by the school.

The deputy vice principal would be ecstatic over a willing participant, and furthermore,"

"those who were willing to participate have already taken other part-time jobs, which will lead to two authorizations from the school.

Putting these matters forward, I believe we'll reach a point of compromise."

Yamashiro threw up his hand as a gesture of surrender.

There was no longer an issue to charge, thanks to the student who came up with an exact solution.

Being able to rely on this female student in all her formidability, was perhaps due to her caring instincts as a woman.

"Alright, let's take the plunge with this course of action. Pray that things go well, OK?"

"I dislike relying on others to achieve my goals. If you're taking part in an evil scheme, please make yourself useful, Yamashiro-sensei."

Excusing herself with a bow, the student council president made to leave the staff room.

"Oh, hold up! You stay back, too. I'm going to call Shizuki-kun here now, and he's got no one to watch him."

"----Huh?"

The girl's cool eyes narrowed into slits.

Scowling at Yamashiro, she was unable to make sense for herself the words she heard spoken by him right now.

"Well, two willing participants is a better arrangement compared to just the one.

Your participation would grant me peace of mind, Aozaki-kun."

"Um, excuse me, Sensei?"

"Broadcasting room? Please ask Soujuurou Shizuki-kun of year 2 class C to come see me in the staff room right away, thank you."

"That is, you see, Sensei!"

"Wow, what a conclusion! Even the migraine went away, this really is a lucky day! You know, Aozaki-kun, you've been surprisingly thoughtful, all things considered. So, is that what your type is? Ah, broadcasting room-san, please take the opportunity to add that the student council president is looking forward a lot to seeing hi--"

"Y-Yamashiroooo----!"

The following day was a peaceful Sunday.

Soujuurou woke two hours ahead of the meet-up time.

From there, he went for a stroll that also fell into a jogging pace for the sake of calming himself down. He had meant to head back after thirty minutes. Upon realizing that an hour went by while he was weighing a number of things on his mind, he went back home in a panic.

After a lot of deliberation over what to wear, in the end, he appeared dressed in his school uniform.

'We'll meet at the east entrance of Misaki Central Park at 10 o'clock in the morning.'

In the staffroom yesterday.

Like she was coming down with a touch of the cold, Aoko Aozaki told him this with a look that made her appear to be fighting back a headache.

"Still, shouldn't Aozaki's cold be taken care of?"

While looking at the course of the day after tomorrow, Soujuurou concerned himself with the day after tomorrow amidst muttered worries.

Either way, he waited like that for about five minutes.

At 10 o'clock sharp, the student council president made her appearance.

"Morning.

It's a usual thing, but time is all that you get right."

"____"

"You look awful. Are you feeling sick, maybe?"

"No, I'm fine, I think."

Soujuurou lightly brushed off her concern.

"It's just that...you're in your uniform, Aozaki."

"Yes. It goes with the functions held by the school, doesn't it?"

"____"

Soujuurou felt like dropping his shoulders with an emphasis.

His two hours of getting foolishly worked up all morning were ruthlessly crushed just like that.

The girl and the boy went past the station's front in their uniforms on a weekend.

Though it was Aoko's first time to politely show someone around town, she kept the descriptions at a necessary minimum for now.

Soujuurou became well-informed on a lot of things in this unexpected town:

the rice that was made here was tasty,

this way was a shortcut if in a rush, the specialty store yonder was preferable to the

department store in front of the station for buying a bicycle----
in the peace that touched down during their conversation, she became aware of how a third party saw them.

"Sorry to change the subject, but I wouldn't mind hearing the details of the work we'll be doing."

Being in service to the local church, Soujuurou was being wide-eyed at getting to have more than one part-time job from now on.

Although he had nodded along to the vague invitation, he must have let their sort of work slip his mind, as per usual.

".....Well, I was prepared for this.

Is this your first time going to the Aida Church?"

"This will be my second time seeing it. When I went near such a curious building, though, I saw sweets being passed out by someone in the middle....."

Soujuurou became absorbed in his own thoughts, wondering what an arrangement like that lead to.

He hung his head sagely, thinking,

'Maybe they'll be accepting money this time?'

and became concerned with that.

".....Normally, the church only does that for the kids."

Aoko sighed, looking at a very lost lamb.

"So, what sort of person did you see? A priest, or maybe a nun?"

"Yes, that was her! She was a very pretty female person."

"Then that's Yuika-san. Today we're giving thanks for.....it's, nothing. This concerns you, so that's exactly what we're acting on."

"?"

"We're simply doing a job. Doing this for the school hasn't changed at all. The church doesn't have as many people as it should."

Aoko briskly headed for the church.

Soujuurou's brows drew together, weighed with the unsettling idea that he was watching a stouthearted general plow straight into hostile territory.

The Aida Church was a church steeped in history.

Standing separate from the station, it was white consecrated ground located in the gap

between the office street and the residential area.

As far as Aoko knew, an overly large cathedral stood in this rural part of town after its remodelling approximately eight years ago.

Incidentally, adjacent to it was the general hospital of Misaki.

According to Aoko, the church's shrewd placement next to the place with the most deaths in town made its trustworthiness a farce---- while Alice Kuonji, her housemate, kept that impression reserved for the priest who lived there.

"Are you connected in some way to the church, Aozaki?"

"Me? Not a chance. I'm not tempted to go back in time and tamper with the history, but my father and grandfather have known each other for a long time.

As for the help here, they were a nuisance to deal with everyday when I was in elementary."

With every word she spoke, the viciousness in Aoko's countenance became more and more noticeable.

Facing off with the unforgettable trauma, she grabbed it by the lapels, slammed it head-first to the ground with a bold one-armed shoulder throw, and delivered a swift low kick to its unguarded torso.

Treating the so-called trauma like an actual person, carrying out her idea of revenge with a light five-set was something she bragged to dreadful extremes for.

"----"

Soujuurou wisely chose to take caution against Aoko's surly mood.

As if drawn to the crows that assembled in a flurry of feathers high over the church, a woman dressed like a nun appeared at the main entrance.

"Forgive me, visitors.

The church humbly forgoes any affiliation with the crime syndicate, so let us amend the day. First, become repentant of the life you lead. Second, pass through this gate to be absolved of your social crimes----"

"Sister Yuika. It's me, Aoko Aozaki."

"Ah---- so it's you, Aoko-san.

I'm surprised. It's been too long since you came to us during the day."

"Yes, it is. I always come calling here at night to speak only with the Father. With you, though.....

Well. This wasn't anticipated. We haven't spoken **directly** to each other like this for almost a year now. But, that chance won't come again after today."

"Yes. It's disheartening, how you now seem so accomplished in your own right. Chiefly, one could never expect unsavoriness to manifest in a virtuous young girl."

On the surface, the two exchanged pleasant greetings.
Vastly unable to read into the prickly atmosphere, Soujuurou thought they were on good terms as he stood there, watching them.

"This fellow here and I are the volunteers for this month.
We come on behalf of our beloved Aida Church. From 10 to 3 without a minute missed, we'll do what needs to be done for you."
"My. I welcome the end for us all.
The house of God is open to each and every one. On this occasion, let us awaken the hidden part of your inner self, dear."

The nun's smile was gracious yet cold-blooded.
Not concerned for outward appearances, she was overjoyed at acquiring a labor force.

The nun introduced herself as Yuika Suse. She thanked Soujuurou for his willingness to do voluntary work.
Soujuurou took note of the nun's closed eyes, and for Aoko's sake included, he decided not to ask on the premise that it would probably be rude of him to.

"You said your name was Shizuki-san.
That name is as calm as your voice."
"Oh. Thank you."

Soujuurou's vague indifference to having his name praised caused the nun's visage to cloud over slightly.

"Forgive me, you must dislike being addressed with your surname.
Should I call you Soujuurou-san?"
"Oh, no, either is, fine with me."

"Then it will be as you wish.How you do suffer."

While her tone of voice was gentle, the nun's words were cold in some way.
Though her field of vision was closed off, she led them with a sure gait.

"Now then. About the details of your service."
"Understood. You have some cleaning that needs to be done before Christmas, from what we understand.
It's no problem, that's a strong point of ours."

Not for Aoko. Mainly for her companion, Soujuurou.

"..... . Then, Aoko-san is assigned to the kitchen range, where we have the communion wafers prepared in advance.

As for Shizuki-san. I must ask you to clean in the areas that are difficult to reach."
"Wait a minute. Ritsuka's not in the kitchen too, is she?
It's going to be a sorry state if by chance we bump into each other."
"Ritsuka is not here. There's no need to hesitate."

With a wave of her hand, Aoko went for the door leading further into the chapel.
Just as she said before, she was quite familiar with the church.

"Shizuki-san, follow me.
We'll take you first to the storeroom where we keep our cleaning tools."

The chore given to Soujuurou was extremely ordinary window cleaning, which could be done with a unique skill of no unique mention.

"Can I trust that you'll wipe all the windows?"
"Wipe them down with the damp cloth first, then apply the coat spray. Is the ladder's height sufficient?"
"Oh my. It seems a little too short for the job."
"Then as far as you can reach will do. I thank you for your assistance."

Having that brief exchange, the nun returned inside the church.
Maybe she placed a lot of trust in Soujuurou. Maybe her personality was dry from the start.
He failed to live up to her expectations at their first meeting. To start with, she was unwilling to ask more about Soujuurou personally.
With nothing lost even after being left to himself, Soujuurou started to clean the windows.

Even the weather today was disappointing.
It was clear weather that had little chance of rainfall and the sun was nowhere to be seen.
Sitting high up on the ladder, he cleaned the windows calmly at a height that was close to five meters.
Not one to be bothered by physical labor, Soujuurou thought to himself that maybe the weekend would brighten if only the sky were a bright blue.

Polishing off the third and fourth window, he whistled as he went while letting his mind wander.
While he was nervous about being five meters off the ground, he had a scenic view at the same time.
Catching a glimpse of the town, he felt like a newcomer all over again as he stared at the green hill in wonder.

"It's like I thought, there seems to be a house in the woods there....."

In the outskirts of the town of Misaki were a forest and a hill. The forest commanded a view of the sleepless town, and it looked as if a stronghold of foreign origins could be seen from here.

"Why, hello there! I spy with my little eye, a thief in the sky!"
"?"

---Then.

While he was lost in his own thoughts and tirelessly working his arm at the same time, someone below Soujuurou had approached with brisk, small steps.

A downward glance told him it was a person whose appearance was quite comely. To put it precisely, he saw a woman.

"Hm, but the flavor of someone who goes at their own pace doesn't go with being a mystery thief. It's a question of which. But that sounds like the saint that pops out of the fireplace and deliberately forces innocent toys on you.

Oh, ugghhh.....I can't stand those whiskers of his.....he's a trespasser no matter which way you turn it!"

She was probably in her late twenties.

She was without a jacket in the chilly weather, and her bag was nowhere to be seen.

Though Soujuurou still had things to learn, an adult woman and a bag were a one-set existence.

Disregarding that one detail, he had to assume that this woman was the freewheeling type. Careless, he added.

"Oh! It just hit me!

Are you a part-timer from Misa High? That's great, senior highschoolers nowadays are about as good to have as people in the trading industry!"

Looking up at Soujuurou sitting at the topmost rung, the woman was moved deeply by him.

"Right on! I'll give you a hand right this minute!

Is there an extra ladder around? How about another dust cloth? Oh! Why don't we hose all the windows down instead? With a whoosh, kick and go! While screaming! We'll get in trouble for sure, but we'll get a bit of fun out of that, won't we?"

The woman laughed with heartfelt amusement.

As light that spilled forth, her grin made him think of a cactus running about on its own. It was a grin that spelled trouble.

Just as Soujuurou pictured her, the woman waved it off before he could answer, and joined him in cleaning the windows.

"Well, if you scaled the front side of the church, people would see someone latching onto a window. A thief who's braving the daytime is bound to get a little attention. But they'll just find a cute kid seriously doing his work. It's kind of attractive of you to look masterful at cleaning windows. Isn't it natural to offer to help based on that reason?"

Next to Soujuurou, his neighbor cheerfully talked to him while she polished.
Now that he thought about it, Soujuurou earnestly agreed and nodded along to this exceptional woman and her mysterious ways.
So that's it, his instinct told him.
Seeing as this woman was like him, then she was often forced into simple work like this just like he was----!

"Miss, are you a church person yourself?"
"Me? No, I'm just someone who was walking by.
And there's no need to treat me like a stranger. We always see each other at the shopping district."
"No, do we?"

"We do! You're the kid working for Uotatsu-san, right?
I was there once or twice this past week.
I'm---- hmmm, right, you can call me Hanasawa. What's your name?"

Hanasawa-san was quick to look at the flowerbed below them mid-speech before smiling amiably.
Soujuurou introduced himself in his usual timid way.

"Soujuurou-san.....yeah, that's a good name. It has an antiquated feel to it.
It seems very Japanese to have a number in your name.
You know the priest and the nun here? There's a foreign tinge to names like Eiri and Yuika, I think."
"Aside from Eiri-san, is Yuika-san the beautiful female person with black hair?"

"Oh, you haven't met the Father yet.
The pretty-faced Father and the beautiful sisters at the Aida Church are famous around here, though.....oh, I get it! You've just moved here recently, haven't you? I bet you're living by yourself, too!"
"Yes, I am.....that was incredible, Hanasawa-san. Your guess was very spot-on just now."

"Not at all, I was being rational there.
For a kid of your caliber to be so diligent, the town's attractions don't have much charm to them. Fun money comes from your earnings, and you don't strike me as the

materialistic type.

With the way things are, it's healthier to think about your living expenses for now, isn't it?Hmm, oh my. It's not healthy for a student to handle his living expenses and his tuition all by himself, though."

"I can't agree with you there.

'He who does not work does not eat'."

"So I see! You're impressive for someone so young.

I was caught up in my work too when I was a student, so I sort of get what you mean by that."

"Oh! Hanasawa-san, you used to live on your own, too?"

"Yeah. Against my parents' better wishes, I went to study abroad. It was no problem finding a place to stay; I had friends who took care of that. But like it was expected, I couldn't afford to pay for food.

But still, I'm the type who doesn't flinch at seeing physical labor. That makes my memories of being at the institute and my part-timing enjoyable."

"----"

Again, Soujuurou nodded earnestly.

The kinship he felt just welled up inside him beyond his control.

"He-he-he. This could be fate, and we have Uotatsu-san to thank for that. I'm not much use, but go ahead and ask me if there's anything you want to know. I'm helpful at being enlightening."

"Thank you so much.

If I may ask right now, though. What is being done here?"

Soujuurou pointed to the church.

"Er, whuh?"

She was understandably confused.

Unaware that Soujuurou was a vintage example of a person from the countryside, Hanasawa-san's trusty wit made her take his question to be heavily sarcastic.

"Riiight, OK.

I guess you could say they guarantee the spirit's security. Or, more like they armor it than secure it? Improvise a barricade? Well, they're the same thing when the person in question has no discipline at all.

Right, then they break the bread and wine afterwards."

"Is it for free?"

"Of course it is. They say the rich like to keep it this way for their own benefit. After that is---- oh, right. This is the biggest one, but taxes aren't charged on their revenue. It's hard to hold a service for the spirit's security, but it's 'no risk, high-return' if they deliver on what they're selling."

".....Huh. I really don't understand, but running to this place during a crisis is fine, right?"

"Hmmm, I don't recommend that.

I think coming here once a month for encouragement at least would do you better."

The windows squeaked as they were wiped.

Having the same habit of whistling as the other one, the two of them cheerfully whistled for one round, and for one more round as they polished the church's windows.

"That's right, another thing.

What is that forest we can see from here?"

"Forest? You mean the one on that mountain?"

"That, yes, but I would say that's a hill and not a mountain."

As one born and raised in the countryside, it seemed offensive for that slight elevation to take pride in being called a mountain.

"Yeah? You have to work your body to hike up such an easy slope, though..... well, there's more to how that hill **seems** than what it shows."

There was a hint of masochism in the woman's friendly smile.

She was a natural, exquisitely-faced beauty.

Just a little too late, Soujuurou noticed the cruelty that three-sixtyed when she broke into a smile, and the facial expression that intimidated those caught in her gaze.

Of course,

"That's a hill. Over there, you can see what looks like a chimney from here. What is that?"

being decidedly polite about it, Soujuurou took it to be unsuspecting.

"That's a chimney, alright.

That whole forested area is private land, and in there is a huge European-style building. No one in town goes in there because it's private land, I guess.

The Spooky House of Kuonji, is what we call it. All of the neighborhood's frightened of it and would rather stay away. I think it's for the best, though? It's a little forest, but it's involved in one too many unhappy incidents: like people getting lost when they go in, and stray dogs coming out of there."

"Strays? Stray dogs are also in the city?"

"We get plenty of them here, yeahhh. They're still in the empty lots at the back part of the city. But when the Father here hands out something like bread on a whim, the doggies would go on their patrol route."

"?"

"That said, 'a wise man keeps away from danger', right? The rule of this town is to not go into that forest.

That's private land, afterall. They'll call Mr. Policeman if you set foot in there, and that police box is where you'll spend Lecture Time! It doesn't sound fun at all, no?"

Understanding it, he sat on the ladder and gazed out at the chimney in the distance. Just a little, just a little only, the hill reminded him of the forest in his hometown. Somehow coming to grips with what felt like the absence of an association to himself, Soujuurou continued to clean the windows.

By combining forces with Hanasawa-san, the window cleaning went well. The two of them finished a chore that used time and energy, however simple it was.

"Alright, good work!

Yep, the windows are a lot less dusty compared to before!

So, how about having tea at a good teahouse now that we're done here? As my way of expressing admiration for Soujuurou-san's work ethic, it'll be my tr--"

"Yes? Were you saying something, Hanasawa-sa--"

"Ahem, sorry, just remembered urgent business.

Hanasawa-san will be on her way now. Ciao!!!!!"

Turning his head as he took the ladder down, Soujuurou saw the woman flee to the main street at breakneck speed.

The time was eventually 3 o'clock.

More than three hours had gone by since Hanasawa-san had offered to help him.

"Hmm."

The sudden change in her face caused Soujuurou to watch after her.

Though she had him thinking she was out for a walk, Hanasawa-san whiled away only this much time with him.

She could have been reminded of a chore she was suited for in a way similar to this one.

"Are you out here, Shizuki-kun?"

Then. The student council president came around the corner of the church.

"Oh, sorry to startle you. It's not bad to get caught up in your work--"

Aoko seemed mystified at the sight of Soujuurou putting away a ladder taller than himself.

In that instant, she rolled up her sleeves and made her way towards him.

"?"

Compared to her sudden arrival, Aoko's behavior seemed more astonishing for Soujuurou.

Paying no mind to his bewilderment, Aoko was quick to give instructions.

"Come set the ladder down on its side.

I'll take the bottom end while you hold the top end."

Since that was the most natural thing to do, and before he could make a show of ably lifting the ladder on his own, Soujuurou set the ladder down on its side.

As their part-time work ended, the nun gave them compensation as her way of expressing thanks, and the two left the church.

Aoko had an errand at the station, so they travelled down the same road for now.

"Still, you really are practiced at doing part-time work."

Twilight soon peeked over the horizon.

More than likely to be speaking her mind instead of starting a conversation, Aoko said those words.

"I see. Coming from you, Aozaki, that makes me a bit happy."

Soujuurou smiled profusely.

Truth be told, earning wages always made him look happy with himself, but what made him happy from it was a mystery.

"L-Listen, now. I'd like it if you didn't get ahead of yourself when everyday's always a hurdle for you. Zero cutbacks as far as I can see, so there are no reductions to your dilemma as of yet."

"Oh. Talking about school saddens me."

Soujuurou dejectedly hung his head.

Even if he could handle part-time work, he was always out of his depth when it came to lessons at school. Exams were out of the question, since catching up with daily lessons within the span of one day was next to impossible for him.

"Aozaki, do you dislike those with poor grades?"

"..... . Well, hearing about someone who's slow all the time can be tiring, obviously. But going way back with you, I had nothing to do with any of this from the start. Dealing with a huge handicap falls directly under our teachers' line of work, so it's your responsibility to answer to it. Part-timing is no big deal, but when you're home just for lesson preparation, please make sure you come through."

"Absolutely. The people in school are good people on the whole."

"Great. That's good to know, but---- they're all good to you?"

At the exchange, Aoko tilted her head and wondered why those words were reflected back onto her.

She decided that maybe it was Soujuurou's way of showing his appreciation.

"----That reminds me. Just so I'm aware, what other kind of part-time jobs do you have?"

"In terms of where, I have plenty at the shopping district. Like the fish market and the flower shop. Ah, but I went as far as the neighboring town yesterday. I work at the amusement park."

She was afraid he would have an answer like that. The school authorities only gave him permission to work at the shopping district in Misaki.

There was one thing mentioned at the end that had little or nothing to do with Soujuurou Shizuki, however.

"You mean Yashirogi's amusement park!?"

"That's it. I carry out demolished signs and thingamajigs that aren't in use anymore. It really tires me out, that."

"Wow.....yeah, that would be a test of your strength, wouldn't it?"

This time, Aoko was seriously impressed.

It was rare for a student to make casual work out of transporting machines being used for the amusement park.

"But that's not bad at all. I never once went to KitsyLand myself. I live here in Misaki."

Aoko looked in the direction of the neighboring town.

They could barely make out only the Ferris wheel from here.

The round, steel-framed mechanism shined upon by the setting sun seemed like a forgotten grave-marker.

".....I see. Is that for financial reasons?"

"Hrmfff----"

At that, Aoko stifled a giggle.

Though knowing it would be rude to him, Soujuurou seemed to have caused her to

laugh.

"Not at all, don't get the wrong idea.

To put it simply, I just never had the free time to go there since it was full of people after its grand opening. If it's an issue that can be solved with money, I can just go there now."

Aoko showed him the envelope with the money they earned from part-timing at the church.

As a gesture that had promise but without actually saying she was going, Soujuurou frowned angrily.

"Then there's nothing stopping you from going there right now, is there?"

"Thanks. But it's no use telling me that. I guess you haven't noticed, being what you are. But that place has gone bankrupt. It's been more than two years now since their gardens became dry, isn't it?"

"----What?"

The fact that there were never any visitors dawned on Soujuurou.

The student council president was disbelieving, and she also felt a small bit of delight. Normally, she berated him for not thinking things through therefore he was always clueless. But just for this evening, she seemed to see it as somewhat smile-provoking.

Parting ways with Aoko Aozaki, he buried himself in his lesson preparation for school upon coming back to his apartment. In the blink of an eye, it was already time for work. While the differences between the mountain and the city were that incalculable, the most significant point was the value of time.

Aside from here, time just went by without warning.

Putting away the reference book that he had trouble understanding, Soujuurou went out that night into town, thereby simply summing up his day.

Crossing the International Date Line, the night fell further into deep sleep.

Turning up his collar and protecting his neck from the winter air as it got colder, Soujuurou made his way home.

Looking around, there were no dogs searching for food scraps, and no one out for a quick shopping trip.

Even the lone convenience store nearby closed at around 11 o'clock, so none of the residents would be out purchasing goods.

"----Phew."

His energy spent, he took a noticeably deep breath.

There were no signs of people. The streets were littered with artificial objects. Brighter than the starlight, the blue fluorescent light lit up the darkness.

Without knowing it, such a thing set off an uneasiness in Soujuurou.

".....This is pitiful. It's not unusual for the night to be scary, is it?"

His back hunched against the cold air while shivering, he put bravery into his words.

'Stay away from the dark.'

'Stay away from places where there are no people.'

Either out of ill luck, or just the pitiful expression he made. All the people that Soujuurou had met with so far had all given him those warnings.

"Even so, there's not a lot of point to them."

No matter how it was said, to 'stay away from the dark' was not getting through to him.

here

There was nowhere in the city that was not illuminated.

To say nothing of the main street, electric light filled the residential area, which stood apart from the hustle and bustle of the station's front.

Frightened of the frightful. The nature of frights on the mountain was different in the city.

He worried that the difference was that of the rules acting as the source.

The system of reward and punishment continued being nothing but gently systematized.

If he had to speak of what frightened him, the way he still had no complete understanding of the rules was what made his country-bred self afraid.

Back on the mountain, those who went against the rules paid the penalty **at that point in time**.

For instance, animal trails. Once a person encroached upon their territory without recognizing them, naturally, they would bear the brunt of the resident animal's assault. In this way or manner, the gaffe committed by Soujuurou would come right back onto him immediately.

In the absence of a case where who punishes whom, once a rule had been violated, it would fall to the person's mishap to take punishment's form.

He thought the city was just a little vague in that area.

And so, just what was right and what was wrong---- he had yet to know the deadly conclusion.

".....But, inherently the same, maybe."

The effect of simple reward and punishment was just slow.

For further comparison, no one was put in charge of the village's maintenance of public

peace in his hometown.

Instead of employing kindness to human beings, the city installed someone to mete out punishment to humans who broke the rules.

Crime and punishment had the same meaning back on the mountain. With the two being treated separately for the town, it seemed there would be other people waiting for punishment after they had committed crimes.

Places that must not be entered.

Incidents that must not be seen.

When the rules were broken, the rule of society was that someone must come to deliver punishment.

On those grounds---- to live in safety here in town meant to not interfere with the circumstances of other people.

The people concerned for Soujuurou have all unanimously told him to 'stay away', since 'no one will come help you if you don't'.

".....Uh. Oops, I almost took another shortcut."

And so, climbing over the fence of someone's house when they meant to keep intruders away, going directly to his apartment just on the opposite side posed a risk for him. The person inside would call for the police if he woke them up by accident, and no one would most certainly come to help him.

Often with a misdirected view of the city, this day also peacefully ended for Soujuurou Shizuki.

Without falling asleep right away, he went to bed gazing at the sky through his window.

His arrival to the city initially had him trembling at the sight.

Nearly all things were conveniences that provided the solution with a single switch.

Living next to his wall, people that he only knew by face were fresh to live with.

It all vanished when he looked up towards the night sky.

'.....Is a sky like that there, too?'

Without paying attention, he remembered the words that barely came out.

Such dark stars.

Such a cramped sky.

A night in which the stars were visible was not found here.

To struggle with whether or not he stood any chance of surviving this place----

Even now, the uneasiness that gripped him on that night never changed.

"----"

His eyelids drifted shut.

Unlike his feeble problems, his body's tiredness from his work and his studies was simple, and he slipped into a deep, quiet sleep.

--End of Chapter--