

Chapter 4: Swallow

This chapter contains death, abuse, slight adult themes, and graphic depictions of violence. Read at your own risk.

Several years ago, a couple brought a set of twin girls into the world. It hadn't been their first time, as they had a son beforehand. But twins were a whole new experience. As for the twins, they were a strange pair. They were semi-identical, which was very rare. They looked nearly exactly the same, save for their hair and eye color. The first one to come out had dark black hair and scarlet red eyes, while the second had white hair and blue eyes. They were named Kijo Shimizu and Aiko Shimizu respectively. The couple adored their new children and so did their son, which was 6 at the time. However, it would soon become apparent that there was something slightly off.

Despite being twins, the two girls couldn't have been more different. Aiko was as sweet as a person could be. She was usually shy around anyone who wasn't her immediate family. She always enjoyed reading, drawing, and helping her parents at their flower shop. Even though she was very timid in nature, she was kind to anyone she met. I'm sorry to say the same could not be said for Kijo.

Kijo was reckless, rowdy, and all around just a really weird kid. Unlike Aiko, she was anything but shy. She didn't particularly like her timid sister and was rather rude to her from time to time. She often played with her older brother. She also got punished just as often for playing too roughly and making her older brother cry. Kijo was fascinated by hero movies and comics, but not for the heroes. It was the villains that interested her. Her parents were worried for her already but the real shift only began on one particular day.

The day seemed like any other. Kijo came barging into the room she and Aiko shared. “Aiko, I ate your cookies in the fridge so don’t go lo–”

She paused. Aiko was sitting in the middle of the room, staring at something in her hand. “Whatcha looking at?” said Kijo, walking closer. Her eyes nearly popped out at what she saw. In Aiko’s hand was a small flower, a daisy to be specific. It wasn’t just in her hand either, it seemed...a part of it. “Where’d that come from?”

Aiko stared back up at her twin. “I-I don’t know. It just sprouted from my hand.”

“Don’t be stupid, flowers don’t just grow on hands,”

“I-I’m not stupid,” Aiko protested. “It just grew from me, honest!”

Their parents soon walked in. Alarmed at seeing their daughter producing flowers for her hands, they immediately rushed to the doctor, where they would get some interesting news.

“Well, it looks like little Aiko has herself a quirk,” the doctor announced. “It’s called ‘Greenhouse’. She apparently has the power to grow flowers and vines from her palms and fingertips.”

“Really? Well that’s wonderful!” said Mr Shimizu. “Are there any complications?”

“Not to that we can find, no. As long as she’s well looked after and trains her quirk as she gets older, it can turn out to be a very impressive power. Kijo on the other hand still hasn’t shown any signs of a quirk as of recently. Unfortunately, if she hasn’t got one by now, it’s highly unlikely that she’ll develop one.”

“Oh dear...Is there anything that can be done about it or is she just like this?” Mrs Shimizu. “I’m already worried about her behavior. I shudder to think about how her being quirkless will affect her.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s not much that we can do. We’ll monitor her closely for 3 months, as there are a few cases where children gained quirks a little later than usual. But I can’t promise anything.” I’m sorry to say that the doctor was correct. After some time, it became painfully apparent that Kijo was simply quirkless. And unfortunately, her mother was right to be concerned. However, Kijo wasn’t mad at them or society as expected. Her anger turned to Aiko instead.

But the problems began to rear their ugly heads when the two started school, specifically middle school. The twins were 12 at the time, and their brother 17. Despite being quirkless, Kijo was strangely popular in school. She wasn’t exactly the nicest kid in the class, but she was funny and charismatic. People tried to bully her in elementary school, but, to put it mildly, they soon realized messing with her was a mistake. Aiko, on the other hand, wasn’t so lucky. Her social anxiety never really got better, making her an easier target for bullies. Kijo sometimes came across her sister in these incidents. But she didn’t help. In fact, sometimes she’d just join in harassing the poor girl.

Aiko mostly kept to herself, but she excelled in academics, one of the few things she had in common with her sister. She didn’t have many friends but she did have one, Hiyori Suzuki. She too was a nerdy girl, but she was far more social. Outside her family, she was the only person Aiko felt comfortable talking to.

The day was like any other. The twins were second years at the time. Aiko sat in the back of her homeroom classroom with her face in a book one February morning when Hiyori

came in. “Good morning, Aiko!” she said loudly. “How are you this lovely morning?” Aiko jumped, slamming the book shut. “Ah!...uh...hi Suzuki...you’re here early...”

Hiyori rubbed her chin, suspicious. “That book you’re reading...looks weirdly thick, huh?”

“Well...you k-know me,” Aiko shuttered, “I like reading...I just thought–” Hiyori reached over and opened the book to find...another book? She was reasonably confused, until she read what was on the cover. “How to Make Anyone Fall in Love with You?” she read, trying desperately not to laugh. “Dear oh dear, what’s gotten into you?”

“Shhhh! Keep your voice down,” Aiko yelped. “It’s nothing, I...I just found it interesting.”

“Hey right, you’re in love, girl”

“No I’m not...”

“Aiko’s in looovvvee~” Hiyori giggled, sitting down next to her. “Now tell me all the details. Who’s this guy who stole your heart?” Aiko’s face went beet red. She knew Hiyori wasn’t going to let it go. She explained how she had a small crush on a boy in her science class, Ejiki Giseisha. He was popular with everyone and did pretty well in school. Unlike most other popular kids at school, he was a genuinely nice person. One example of his kindness was when Aiko fell and scraped her knee in PE about a month ago. Kijo scoffed and ran right past her with no regard. Ejiki stayed back and helped her to the bleachers. Ever since, Aiko had been infatuated with him.

“You gotta tell him how you feel!” Hiyori gushed. “Especially with valentines day come up. You should get him chocolate or something!”

“I can’t do that,” said Aiko, still feeling flustered. “He probably doesn’t even like me back...”

“Of course he does! Here, tell ya what. How about I talk to him about you and see if he likes you or not? Then you won’t have to feel embarrassed.” Aiko perked up.

“You...you’d do that for me?”

“Of course!” said Hiyori cheerfully. “What are friends for? Just promise you’ll stop reading these love books.”

“Thank you, Suzuki,” said Aiko. “I just hope Aiko doesn’t find out.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell her,” said Hiyori. “That little demon hasn’t been bothering you lately, has she.”

“Come on, Suzuki.” Aiko muttered. “You know how I feel about that nickname.”

“I don’t get why you always stick up for her. She harasses you constantly and shows no remorse for it.”

“She just...troubled, is all. I’m sure she’ll come around some day.”

Hiyori sighed. She knew Aiko well, and knew too that she wanted to see the best in everyone. But some people were just truly beyond saving. “In any case, you know you can call me by my first name.”

“Right...thank you, Hiyori.”

It was quite unfortunate that Kijo had been walking by the classroom while the two were talking. She had heard everything. She was well aware of Ejiki. In fairness, he did like her back, which Kijo only knew because he wouldn't stop pestering her with questions about her. She had never given him the time of day...until now.

Still bitter towards her sister, Kijo made a decision. *If Suzuki wants to have a chat with him*, she thought to herself, *I guess I should too...*

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It was time for lunch. Ejiki sat alone in the science lab as he usually did when the door opened. Ejiki looked up to see Kijo walking towards him.

“Oh hey, Kijo!” He smiled and stood up. “Did you ask your sister about me? I've been—”

“She doesn't like you.”

Ejiki stared. “I'm sorry, what?”

“I said she doesn't like you,” Kijo said bluntly as she came closer. “She finds you revolting, and frankly so do I. Is that what you wanted to hear? Well there, you have your answer. Now stay away from me and my sister. She doesn't need you and I'm tired of you always bugging me about her!”

Ejiki was at a loss for words. That couldn't be true. That didn't sound like Aiko at all. Even if she did feel that way, she'd probably let him off easy instead of calling him “revolting”. “Are you sure? She seems really nice...maybe I should just—”

Before he could say another word, Aiko spun round, grabbed him by the shoulders, and forced him against the shelf.

“W...what are y-you doing? Let me go!” He tried to break free from her grip, but Kijo was surprisingly strong.

“Listen to me,” Aiko said darkly. “Stay away from Aiko. If I ever see you around her again, I’ll do something even worse. And don’t you think for a second that I’m bluffing either.” Ejiki stared horrified into Kijo’s scarlet red eyes. Her hatred was so potent he could almost smell it. But he could also tell it wasn’t directed towards him in particular.

At last, Kijo released him. She backed away and smirked. “How unfortunate,” she said. “I thought you were tougher. But you’re such a coward. Tsk, you look like you’re about to cry!” She turned away and headed for the door, but then stopped. She turned back towards him. “And for the record, you–”

Kijo paused. She stared at the shelf where she shoved Ejiki. It looked like it was...tilting. Before anything could be said and before Ejiki could move, the shelf came crashing down....

Kijo stared wide-eyed at the wreckage. “Ejiki?” she said. The only sound that could be heard was the faint noise of liquid trickling on the floor. Kijo watched as a pool of crimson appeared under the fallen shelf. She knew in an instant what had happened. She stared at the horrific sight before her, contemplating what to do next. But then, something strange happened.

As she stared, Kijo began to feel a new feeling. Her thunderstruck face suddenly twisted into a small but sinister smile. Her shock transformed into a sick sense of satisfaction and pleasure. She quietly began to giggle to herself.

“Oh my God,” she chuckled manically. “Just look at what I’ve done!”

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The following days in school were less than pleasant. Teachers came to investigate the noise. Once they arrived, Kijo said Ejiki bumped into the shelf, causing it to collapse on top of him. The rescue operation was equally grim. They made the shelf safe and pulled the boy’s bloody body out from the wreckage. He was rushed to the hospital, but it was already too late. Ejiki Giseisha was dead.

As if the situation wasn’t bad enough, the fallout just made it worse. Some people were suspicious of Kijo, but Ejiki’s family blamed the school. The shelf was very old and the science teacher reported that it often creaked and groaned when he opened it or even just randomly in class. As such, Kijo was free from any suspicion of wrong-doing and this incident was labeled as negligence on the school’s part.

Many people were sad about Ejiki’s death, and a lot of the students didn’t really feel comfortable going into the room anymore. The principal made a plan to move the science lab to a different room across the school, which took about 3 days to do. The only thing that remained in the original room was the damaged shelf, which the students worked together to turn the tragic sight into a memorial for Ejiki.

It took a while for Aiko to build up enough courage to visit the memorial, but she managed to bring herself to walk inside the room on the 14th of February. When she

did, she spotted a boy with red hair standing there, staring at the candles and flowers. She walked up to the memorial and placed down a small sealed bag of chocolate. She then sprouted a flower from her palm and put it next to the photo of Ejiki. She then stood next to the boy, but was still too shy to say anything. The two stood there in silence for a bit

“So..” the boy said at last, “You’re the girl he always talked about, huh...”

Aiko shuddered, disarmed by being addressed by him and confused about what he said.

“Uh—I...I’m sorry?”

The boy turned to Aiko, his hazel eyes twinkling. “You didn’t know? He liked you since he helped you in PE. He always talked about how cute you were, how kind you were, how much of a jerk your sister was to you, stuff like that.” Aiko stammered. *So he did like me back*, she thought. “I’m s-sorry, I didn’t c..catch your n-name.”

“Oh, my bad,” he smiled weakly. “I’m Ikenie Hakano. Pleased to finally properly meet you, Aiko. I just wished it was under better circumstances,” he said, coughing as he finished. “Are you sick?” Aiko asked.

“No, I’m just getting over a cold I had recently,” he explained. “I’ll be alright.” At that moment, the bell rang. “I...I should get going....” Aiko murmured. And without another word, Aiko quickly scurried out the door, leaving Ikenie standing there alone.

“Huh,” he said to himself. “She really is cute.”

As for Kijo, her life continued like normal...except it really didn’t. Ejiki’s death affected her, but not in the same way it did everyone else. It was like something dark had

awakened inside her. Seeing his lifeless broken body and the knowledge that she just killed someone (intentionally or not) filled her with a twisted sense of happiness, the same you'd get if you won the lottery or something. Now that high was gone, she wanted more. Everyone's suspicions about her had faded, all except for one student.

"This doesn't add up," Hiyori remarked.

"Hiyori..." Aiko muttered. "You know how I feel about that type of talk..."

Hiyori scoffed. "Come on Aiko, really think about it. Don't you find it sketchy that Ejiki died on the same day we were talking about him and that Kijo was in the same room as him when it happened?"

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Aiko considered. "Kijo may be brash, I don't think she'd resort to killing someone," she said, finishing with a slight sneeze. "Coming down with something?" Hiyori asked.

"I really hope not. Exams are coming up."

It should probably go without saying that Aiko was coming down with something, a cold from Ikenie to be specific. It got to the point where Kijo had to stay home for a series of days. The first day of which, Aiko was alone. Her parents didn't want to leave her alone when she was sick, but they were busy at work, and believed that Aiko was responsible enough to take care of herself for a few hours.

Aiko was in her room studying when she heard the doorbell ring. *Kijo must be home*, she thought to herself as she walked sluggishly to the door, still in her PJs. One could

imagine her surprise, then, when she opened the door and saw Ikenie, standing in the doorway with a textbook and folders in his hands.

“Ah!” Kijo yelped. “What are you doing at my house??”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you Aiko,” he replied. “I asked Hiyori where you live so I can give you this.” He handed her the textbook and folders, leaving her puzzled. “What’s all this?” she questioned.

“Well I knew you wanted to be ready for exams, so I brought you today’s homework.” Aiko was stunned. Not knowing what else to say, she simply said... “Thank you...” as she received the homework. “I...I was actually studying yesterday’s work before you came, so this is a big help.”

“You’re studying?” Ikenie perked up. “I’ve been looking for someone to help me study. Would you mind helping me?” Gee, it really was a day for surprises for Aiko. “I...I-I don’t know...I’m sick right now...I’d hate to get you—”

“It’s alright,” Ikenie replied. “It’s most likely me who got you sick anyway. So if I get sick again, it probably serves me right!” he laughed. Aiko stared at the red-haired boy before her. A part of her wanted to turn her away, but she just couldn’t for a reason she couldn’t quite. She was usually very shy, but she swallowed her timid nature and said “S-sure...come in.”

Despite her previous nervousness, Aiko got on quite well with Ikenie. Despite what he said, he was actually pretty smart. They enjoyed each other’s company so much, Ikenie promised to come by with the homework everyday until she was well enough to come to school. Aiko was still shy, but looked forward to his visits. However, something else

caught her attention for those few days. Kijo had been coming home later and later everyday. She would sometimes come home with scrapes and scratches and sometimes she'd come home with red stains on her palms. One day, she snuck in and immediately threw her clothes in the washing machine before anyone could see her, and on another, she came home with less clothes than she left with. She explained that time that she got attacked by some thugs. All the while, Aiko was hearing less from Hiyori over the phone and Ikenie started to look more and more nervous. Whenever she asked if something was wrong, he'd always said it was fine and not to worry about it. Even so, he always made sure to be gone before Kijo came home. Aiko said no more, but she had a sinking feeling something was not right.

Aiko finally came back to school seven days later. But the sight that awaited her was far from normal. All the students were acting very strange. It looked like they were all on edge, but definitely not about exams. Even the teachers seemed distracted.

But what was really strange was her homeroom class. Two of the most regular students appeared to be absent, along with Hiyori. When she walked in, she was equally surprised to see that the room of people who usually didn't give her the time of day seemed almost relieved to see her, maybe even glad.

Later, Aiko built up the courage to ask Ikenie. "E-Excuse me," she muttered, "is s-something the matter? Everyone seems so...worried."

"That's right...you were sick so you haven't heard," he said somberly. "Six students from our school have...gone missing. They just vanished on their way home. Nobody's found them yet. That's why I was so nervous when I visited."

Aiko was alarmed, glancing over at Hiyori's empty seat. "Please...please tell me Hiyori's not one of them..." The other student faltered. "No, no, she's fine. But...well, she told us yesterday she's changing schools."

Aiko went blank, trying to process what had just been said. "What?"

"Her parents said they didn't think the school's safe anymore, given everything that's happened. She wanted to tell you but didn't know how." Aiko's face fell. Admittedly, it wasn't all bad. Hiyori did live close to her, so she could see her after school. But she was going to miss seeing her frequently. "I...I see..." she murmured sadly.

"I'm sorry, I know how close you two were," Ikenie comforted. "But look on the bright side. At least ya still got me. And I ain't going anywhere!" Aiko cracked a small weak smile. She knew Ikenie was trying to cheer her up. "You...you promise?"

Ikenie smiled warmly. "Promise."

While Aiko now wasn't as upset about Hiyori leaving now, she was still conflicted about everything else. The mystery of the six students lingered in everyone's mind for the rest of the semester.

Things didn't necessarily improve over time. Before the twins graduated, thirteen more students went missing. Only two of them were ever found, one bloodied and mangled in a dumpster with one of his arms missing, the other traumatized into stunned silence with soot and burn marks all over her body. An investigation was launched into the disappearances, but unfortunately nothing came of it. Whoever did it was very skilled at covering their tracks.

As for the twins, they made it through high school, but only just. Their old middle school was miraculously cured of its “vanishing student” issue after their class graduated and the problem was strangely transferred to their new high school, although the incidents were slightly fewer and far in between. Aiko, Hiyori, and Ikenie stayed relatively close. None of them really had interest in becoming heroes. Both Hiyori and Aiko were focused on becoming daycare workers and Ikenie had his sights on being a physician. Kijo was also thinking but not the way everyone else was. Her behavior hadn't improved at all over the years, and the staff and even the students quickly became fed up. This of course didn't bother Kijo. She had a different plan for her future.

It all came to a head in their 3rd year of high school, close to the end of the term.

Aiko was coming home after quite a tiring day. Her body felt sluggish and crooked, begging for rest as she reached her house. Upon entering, the strangest sight greeted her. There was Kijo, standing in front of the sofa where her parents sat. She glared at Aiko as she walked and stormed furiously to her room, slamming the door behind the door behind her. Aiko, who had gotten used to that particular look, turned to her parents. “What happened this time?” she questioned.

Her father sighed. “After heavy consideration,” he faltered, “me and your mother have come to the decision to send your sister to boarding school.”

“Boarding school??” Aiko gasped. “What brought that on?”

“Well it's not exactly a secret that Kijo's behavior hasn't been the best,” her mother added. “We should've addressed it ages ago. Her grades might be good but her teachers tell us her behavioral track record is too damning. This really was the last resort.”