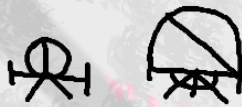


testing... testing...

Welcome  are you prepared?

Kyousei Satsujin (KSSJ) Volume 1

Prologue: Shinkiro



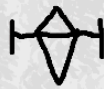
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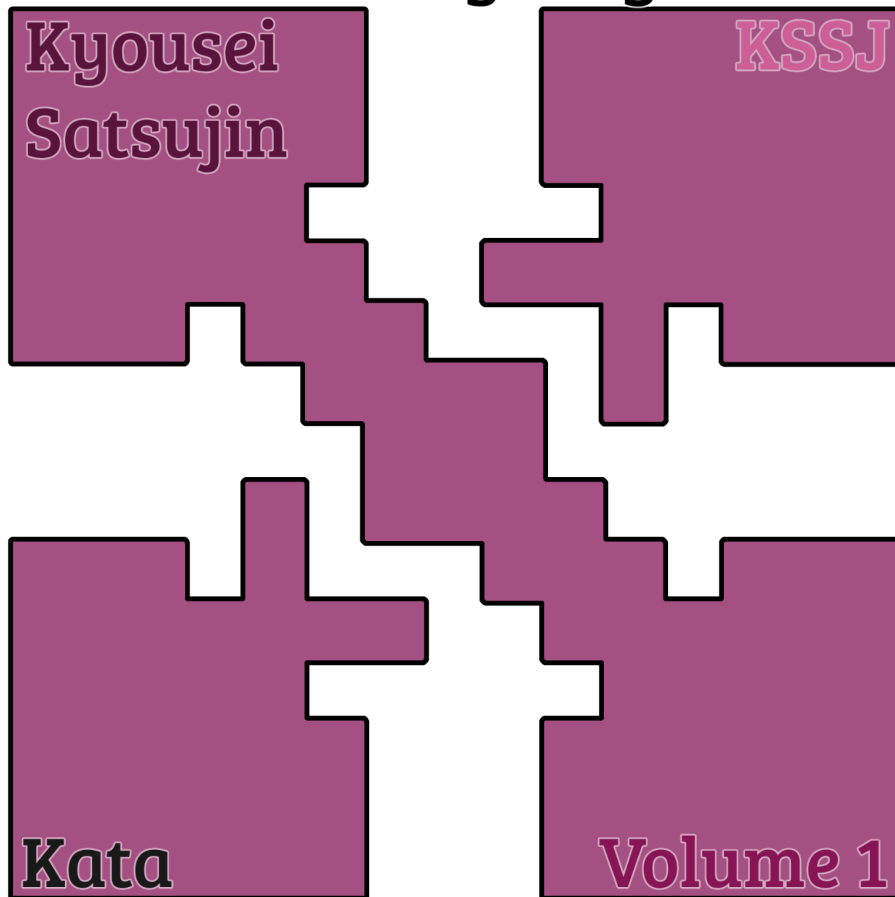
97 Wishes you luck. Have fun.

強制殺人

(Kyousei Satsujin, Kata)

Written by Temmie. With help editing from multiple proofreaders.

Missing Ling



Prologue: Shinkiro

The Turritopsis Dohrnii—more commonly known as the **Immortal Jellyfish**—has the unique ability to never perish on its own terms.

Once it gets to a certain stage in its life, it can rebirth itself, over and over and over, therefore letting it live for all eternity.

A fitting name, the Immortal Jellyfish.

Humans, on the other hand, aren't so lucky.

The average lifespan for a regular human is around 80 years.

In comparison to the Turritopsis Dohrnii, this is nothing.

We are so insignificant as humans, no matter what we do.

Whether it be life changing, or simply choosing what to eat, it will all be forgotten when the time comes.



"Are they all gone?"

"Everything from the past year, yes."

"Give her a bit more than the others... She needs a handicap."

"..."

"Is it done?"

"Yes. Everything is muddy. They won't remember you for now..."

"Get her to wake up in exactly six hours."

"Sure..."

"We'll wake the others in four. Then we can start the game..."

"..."

Chapter 1: Contrast

I remember when I was a child.

I would look out of our residence at the sea.

I always found it so fascinating.

The smell of the sea.

The bright blue sky.

The way the waves would rise so high just to crash down.

Whether they be big or small.

Whether the tide be up or down.

Whether they be still or chaotic.

I would always watch them in my free time—of which I didn't have much.

It may have been because I was jealous of them, I was almost always busy, but they had all that time to themselves.

They had all the free time they could ever wish for.

Now when I look back on those times, it reminds me—well...

Of me.

Specifically the way they start off small, grow up, and end with a dramatic crash...

Although, my life wasn't exactly as majestic.

But there's one thing that always happens with waves.

They come back, just to start all over again.



These were some of the first things that flashed through my mind—along with much more—as I found myself conscious.

I woke up to find myself, not in my bed or the couch—I wasn't even in my house.

Many more thoughts, mainly questions, flooded my head as I sat up wearily.

Where am I?

What happened?
What's that smell?
But most important of all...
I thought I had died.
I shook my head and tried to relax.
I was in a grassy field.
The grass felt and smelt real.
My ears were a bit clogged from something or other, but I
shook my head some more and they unclogged pretty quickly.
I looked to the sky.
It was currently night time.
I looked to the stars.
There were no constellations that I recognised, so I couldn't
figure out where I was from that alone.
I didn't really know many constellations in the first place, but
it was worth a shot.
As I continued to look at the sky, I felt somewhat tranquil.
It was strange, I should be panicking about my situation,
shouldn't I?
There were no animals nearby, not even a single bird.
Which, on one hand, is lucky.
I'm allergic to most animals which have fur.
Specifically dogs.
Cats too, but less so.
I held my hand out to the sky.
That was when I heard a voice from behind me.
I accidentally let out a small high pitched noise in response.
I sat up instantly and looked to where the voice came from.
Standing over me was a girl with a messy, yet happy aura.
She had mid-length bright, purple hair.
Staring into me were two piercing, yet pretty yellow eyes.
She lent out a hand to help me up.
I grabbed on and pulled myself up.
"My name's Kyoki!" She exclaimed with a grin. "Your name's

Minami, isn't it?" She tilted her head.

"Huh? Wait, slow down, h—how do you know my name?"

She chuckled. "Don't worry about it! You seem like a fun one." She pulled my hand and started to wander. "We have somewhere we need to go."

I was told not to trust strangers, but for some reason, I felt at peace when I was with her.

I was still holding her hand.

I didn't pull back.

If anything, I gripped tighter.

She was wearing what looked like a tan school uniform.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen before in terms of school uniforms.

No buttons, just a sweater.

It had what seemed to look like writing scattered across it.

The sweater itself was a very plain, brownish colour, and the writing was only slightly darker.

Were they Kanji?

If they were, I wasn't able to make them out as they were overlapping.

The sleeves were cuffed, but one of them was rolled up slightly more.

Below the rolled up cuff was a decently fancy digital watch.

I couldn't see much of the details from where I was standing, but what I could see was what looked to be a timer counting down.

It read 4:37:20, then 4:37:19, and so on.

"Whatcha looking at?" Kyoki smiled.

"You startled me a bit! I was just looking at your clothes."

"Pretty neat isn't it?" She tugged at her sweater. "I designed it myself!" She grinned.

So it wasn't a school uniform?

This whole time she was leading me through the grass plain.

There were rocks here and there, along with some hills.

I looked back once we reached the peak of a hill.

It was like a crater.

All of the hills sloped down to where I had just woken up.

We began to make our way down the hill, as where we had been went out of view.

We weren't moving very fast, just a casual stroll.

I didn't know where we were going, but I trusted Kyoki.

I don't know why I trust this stranger so much.

It just feels natural.

"Oh hey! Look at that!" Kyoki pointed down and in front of us.

It was an offering box.

It looked like it was begging.

It clearly hadn't been attended to in a long time—practically eroding at this point.

It was sat atop a rock, with what seemed like the remains of a fully melted candle along with it.

"Do you have anything on you to donate?" Kyoki dug into her pocket.

"Um..." The large pocket on the front of my hoodie was strangely empty considering how much it can hold.

Kyoki dropped a five yen coin into the box.

I dug deeper, even checking the small chest pocket on my shirt.

Aha!

The only thing in there was a five yen coin.

Perfect!

Well...

Now the pocket is empty too.

The offering box is ten yen richer.

I smiled as we waved it goodbye.



Before not too long we reached an area of dense forest.

I was weary, but Kyoki led me in.

She followed a path through the forest.
A path clearly made by people traversing it.
It makes you wonder how these paths form.
Were there enough people choosing this exact path for some reason or another before it was made clear?
Maybe it was made over years and years of one person with a routine.

Where does the path lead?
What's so important that it leads to?
Possibly the offering box?
Are we starting at the end?
Where is the beginning?
Is this Kyoki's path?
Is she taking me to her home?
She let go of my hand before descending a ladder leading down a cliff to a lower part of the forest.

I hadn't realised we had been holding hands that whole time.
It just sort of became the norm.
My hand feels lonely now...
Either way, I followed her down.
She didn't reoffer to hold my hand.
It's alright.
This forest feels...
Peaceful.
Tranquil.
Familiar even.
The humidity is dense, completely in contrast to the field where I just was.

I thought I could see a stream up ahead.
As we got closer I smiled.
My eyesight seems to be as good as ever.
"This way this way!"
Kyoki gracefully hopped around some foliage and across some stones sticking out of the water.

Oh.

I don't think I can do that.

"C'mon Minami! This is nothing!"

...

I don't want to get wet.

I just unclogged my ears.

I doubt I'll have a change of clothes anywhere nearby either...

Oh well...

I clenched my teeth and wobbled across the stones, making it to the other side as Kyoki cheered.

"Yippee~!" She grabbed me by the hand once more and began to run with me flailing behind her like a helium balloon on the back of a speeding car. "We're almost there! Just a little longer!"

I didn't really want to leave the forest just yet.

I made a mental note to remember where it was.

There wasn't really much point at the moment, as it wasn't too far from anywhere I had been.

Just in case.



After a little more stumbling, we emerged from the forest.

I rubbed my eyes as a harsh clash of colours—especially when compared to the dullish forest—flooded my eyes.

There was a smooth, tiled floor.

Each tile looked to be about a metre squared.

They were chequered with a harsh bright pink, and a pitch black.

They really just looked like they melded with the floor of the forest, emerging from beneath the grass, as if they were always there.

"Ah, you're back Kyoki! You found her too! That's great!" There was a man sitting atop a throne, high up on a pillar. How did he get up there? "There are only a few left before we can properly start the

game!"

He wore a mask, covering his entire face, and was high up on that pillar, yet I could hear him perfectly clear.

Did he say start the game?

We're going to play a game?

I wanted to ask the man, but his presence was far too overwhelming.

He was wearing a jumble of mix-and-match clothes, as if you randomised every clothing option in your character customiser.

He has a circular white—maybe grey—mask hiding his face, however there was a dripping pink smiling face painted on it.

If it was meant to come off as friendly it's not working...

There were brown belts wrapping around his head, holding the mask in place.

He had shaggy purple hair, with one notable strand sticking up from under one of the belts.

Among other things, he wore an orange scarf, cyan skirt, blue gloves and bandages.

He did have fairly normal looking sneakers though.

Everything below his clothes was a pitch black void.

Like a skinsuit of some kind, but completely dark.

Despite looking like the result of a decades old lost and found bin, his aura felt familiar.

Was he actually following an old fashion trend I had since forgotten about?

I poked Kyoki's side with my elbow, "Who is that guy?" She glanced up at him.

"His name's Tokumei."

Tokumei? "Is that an alias or something?"

Kyoki held her finger on her chin. "That would make sense."

Did she really just accept his name as Tokumei?

That's possibly one of the clearest aliases, just behind Yamada Tarou and Nanashi-no Gonbee.

Aside from Tokumei, there seemed to be a total of eight people

here.

Me, Kyoki, two kids, one with a duck on their shirt and another with a big witch-like hat, an old man who looked straight out of western noir crossover movie, a girl who looked about my age with brown hair and a big red bow, and a pair of two boys with similar messy hair.

One of the boys had blond hair, the other...

It was pure white.

Sure, I'm aware people can be albino, but that wasn't all.

He didn't have an aura either...

Usually things stand out by existing in a place where other things don't.

This was the opposite.

Standing out by not existing, in a place where other things do.

Is the lack of something considered a thing on its own?

No, that doesn't make sense.

I don't want to be thinking about philosophy so soon after I've woken up.

I've never, **never** met someone lacking an aura.

For the first time since I arrived here, I felt scared.

I took a step towards this auraless boy.

I need to know why he doesn't have an aura.

Before I could take my second step, Kyoki pulled me back.

"Hey look! There's two more coming from the forest!" She pointed at these two, teenage looking boys.

Just after I went and counted everyone too...

Ten people now.

Surely ten is enough to start a game, right?

Tokumei paid them no note.

One boy had orange hair, one lime.

I know it's possible to have naturally orange hair—although I've never seen one in person—but lime seemed a bit excessive.

They both had similar suits—they were slightly different but I'm not the most well versed with suits—but very different auras.

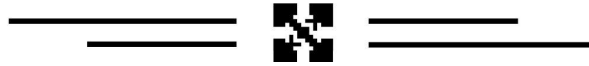
The orange haired boy had a bowtie and a threatening aura.
He seemed to be leading an argument between the two.
The lime haired boy had a regular tie and a bit of a sad aura.
He seemed to be taking in the other boy's words and only
refuting at the appropriate times.

What were they arguing about?

I couldn't make them out from here, but it didn't seem to be
physical.

Not yet at least.

They seemed like a pair to keep my eyes on.



Of the now total ten auras, I felt one getting closer.

It was the kid with the witch-like hat.

Out from behind them stepped the kid with the duck shirt.

Do kids have weaker auras or something?

Why could I only feel one?

The kid tugged on the rim of my hoodie.

The hat they wore covered their entire face from above.

They looked up to me and mumbled.

"Do you know where my sister went?" They were shaking.

...

Of course, these kids would have even less of an idea of what's
going on than I do.

The weight of the situation hit me like a truck.

Their grip tightened.

"I—I was just with her! But now I'm in this strange place, and
she isn't here..." Tears started to well up in their eyes.

The duck shirt kid was staring at their feet, solemnly.

Not knowing what to do, I looked over to Kyoki.

She bent down to their level, I copied.

Now that we were at eye level and I could see their faces more
clearly.

"Could you start off by telling us your names?" Kyoki asked.
"My name is Kyoki!"

The witch hat kid began, "My name... Is Souka..." They let go of my hoodie.

The kid in the duck shirt stayed silent.

"Hello Souka," I didn't want to scare them away, but keeping yourself composed in a situation like this would be hard for anyone. "I'm not sure where your sister went, but I'm sure she isn't too far from here. It might just take some looking." I said, looking deeply into Souka's eyes.

Souka had bright pink eyes, almost like gemstones. They also had very pale skin.

If I had to guess, it would be because of the giant hat acting as a parasol and blocking the sun.

They also had a matching dark cloak which was clearly far too big for them.

They had an absolutely massive backpack on too, It had to be over half the size of the kid themselves.

I could only wish to have the shoulder strength to carry that around.

Although it was possibly filled with helium, to make walking around much lighter.

What am I thinking?

They must have noticed me staring at them because they locked their eyes to the floor, and began fidgeting profusely.

"Hey Souka," Kyoki said calmly, "why don't you stick around with us for a little bit? There's something that I want to show you a bit later." She winked, stuck out her tongue and touched Souka's nose with her finger.

Souka let out a small giggle.

I don't think Kyoki would be lying considering how confidently she said it—although she could just be good at improv.

I wanted to ask what this thing Kyoki wanted to show Souka was, but I don't think me doing so would be to either of our benefit.

We both stood back upright, Souka seemed to be a little more relaxed.

Whatever power Kyoki had to be able to make kids relax in an instant like that, I wanted a piece of.

Despite having minimal answers for the whereabouts of their sister, I felt accomplished.

I felt like it was my duty to protect Souka and find their sister along the way.

Souka looked up at me and in my eyes, I smiled.

They took a step back.

Did I do something wrong?

The kid with the duck shirt held their arm out in front of Souka, “W—We have to go...” and they ran off, over to the girl with the brown hair.

What was that about?

I looked over at Kyoki.

“Awh, looks like you scared them off. Well, I guess it was better that you did, otherwise they both would’ve been **dead** within a minute.”

Chapter 1 End.

Chapter 2: White Noise

"They both would've been **dead** within a minute."

Those words echoed loudly throughout my mind, bouncing from corner to corner, multiplying, and overloading my brain.

Then it all went blank.



I must have been so shocked I passed out, as I was now laying in a bed.

Where am I?

The walls were a deep purple, and so was the pillow I was resting on.

"Are you alright? You fell over in quite a harsh way."

There was a silhouette of someone at the bedside.

Their aura...

Was it the lime haired boy from earlier?

His voice was smooth, although he had a slight accent.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to adjust to the bright ceiling rays.

This was no time to be examining him.

Why am I here?

What is he doing here?

Where even are we?

"Can you hear me? You have yet to answer."

Oh right, I should probably say something at least.

"Mnng... Hhi..."

My brain seemed to be moving faster than my body.

I gave it one more try.

"Yess... I'm allright."

Yeah, that's better.

"That is great to hear! I worried you had been seriously injured." He was so formal, what's up with him?

Before I could ask him anything he continued.

"You must have a lot of questions I would assume? Here, let me inform you of the things you need to know. My name is Akui, I am currently 19 years of age. My current Seigyu is **perception**. I am of royal descent, and have one brother. You may have seen him here already, he is the one with orange hair, his name is Yutaka."

That was way too much information for me to take in right after I just woke up.

I tried to go back through what he said and find the most important pieces.

His name is Akui...

His brother's name is Yutaka with orange hair...

It all seemed important...

Hold on...

Seigyu..?

What's a Seigyu?

Perception?

I laid back down in the bed to reattempt to gather my thoughts.

"Hm, I see you must still be quite tired. I shall be heading out for a moment. If you ever need me, you can ring this bell."

He sure does talk a lot.

I don't know where he got it from, but he pulled out a bell similar to one you would find at a restaurant counter, used to call attendance.

"I have also left some medicine on the table for if you are lightheaded from waking up after passing out in that way."

Sure enough, there was a small bowl with two little tablets in it.

Did I just get a butler?

"Hold on... Your name is Akui? Did your parents hate you or something?"

He chuckled. "Something like that."

He bowed and left through a large metal door.

Silence.

For the first time since I had arrived here, I had time to simply think.

An entire ocean could be filled with the amount of questions I had built up.

Where am I?

What's going on?

Who are these people?

Who is Tokumei?

Where is Souka's sister?

Why would those two have died?

Who was the auraless boy?

How did I get here?

Where's Kyoki?

...

I fell back into the pillow.

The lights were so bright.

They still hurt when I closed my eyes.

How long was I passed out?

Surely only a few hours max, right?

If the sun was down when I passed out, would it be early morning now?

If anyone, I would expect Kyoki to be the one to take me to...
Wherever this is.

What had happened between me passing out and waking up?

Had Akui swooped in and treated me while I was unconscious?

I removed the—also purple—blanket from myself and checked for any injuries.

There didn't seem to be anything...

I rolled over to face the table with the bowl.

Just yesterday, everything was so normal.

The day before that too.

Every week and month and even year before that too...

What led me here?

There wasn't any water within reach, so I took the pills and swallowed them without any.

I rolled on to my front and tried to take a nap.



I don't know how long I slept for, but I was awake again.

I sat up on the side of the bed, and waited for my eyes to adjust to the lights.

I took a lot longer than I had expected.

Does that mean I was asleep for a long time?

There were no windows in the room, nor in the connected bathroom ensuite.

I didn't need to use the bathroom at all—believe me, I did try—but it was nice to know I had running water.

I wasn't thirsty either, but I knew I should drink some water anyway.

This room was less like a bedroom, and more like a hollowed concrete block.

Similar to how I would imagine a bunker.

The bed was large, king sized maybe.

The sheet was black, but everything else was purple.

The floor and ceiling of the room wasn't painted at all.

Just the regular concrete grey.

I knocked on the wall...

Completely solid.

The door of the room was maybe the most out of place.

It was massive—maybe half a metre thick—made of steel and had a big valve instead of a door handle.

It looked super hard to close—possibly why Akui had left it open when he left—but it definitely seemed secure.

I doubted even explosives could break through.

It was fascinating to say the least.

On the floor next to the door, were my boots.

After trekking through that forest, I was exceedingly thankful for Akui.

If I had slept in those boots, I don't know if I would be able to live with myself.

Even if he wasn't Japanese, he sure had manners.

I took the boots to the bathroom and washed them off before putting them back on, ready to explore outside of the room.



Right as I finished tying my second boot, there was a knock at my door.

I looked up to see a tall man walk into my room.

He seemed to be in his late 20's if I had to guess.

His aura was somewhat stressed.

"Hello Minami."

He leant against the wall next to the door.

"Oh, Hello... Who are you?"

He had messy blond hair and a grey jacket.

Was this the guy who was next to the auraless boy before?

"You can call me Kibo, remember that now."

If he was trying to be nonchalant, it was pretty obvious.

"Do you have something you want to say to me?"

What is he doing here?

I didn't want to be rude, but he seemed to be a bit invasive.

"Soooo... Yeah uh..." Is he trying to stall? Is he nervous? "Do you remember what happened before you got knocked out?" His voice was shaky.

"Well, yeah. I got told something and I must have passed—" I paused for a moment.

He said knocked out, right?

I was sure I had only passed out.

Akui even confirmed this, did he not?

Why would he be asking me this in the first place?

Was I forgetting something?

I swear I had just fallen over out of shock.

I tried to wipe the sweat forming on my forehead.

"Ah! Ow what?" I yelped.

My forehead was bruised pretty badly.

"Woah woah woah! What are you doing? Don't prod your bruises!" Kibo dropped his nonchalant attitude pretty quickly.

"What the..? How did I get these?" Of course I missed this on my earlier inspection.

"So you don't remember... Ah great." Kibo sighed. "You really can't recall anything about how you could've gotten that?"

"Maybe I just landed on it when I fell, right? Akui said I fell over in a harsh way."

Kibo shook his head.

"Do you have any idea how long you were unconscious?"

"Well..." This can't be good. "I figured it would be only a few hours, maybe a dozen max."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Minami... You've been out to it for almost two whole days..."

...

I tried to reply with a coherent answer, but instead blurted out "Whaddatwowholedays?!?"

"Yeah I expected you to say something like that." Kibo said calmly.

"That's insane! That can't be true! Right?"

"I'm afraid that's the case."

What?

Two whole days?

That's crazy!

Even if I was knocked out, two whole days is insane!

I wobbled into the bathroom.

Looking into the mirror confirmed it.

I was bruised pretty badly.

Luckily it's behind my fringe, so it was hidden.

Two whole days...

How long was Akui just sitting by my side?

Why did he bring me here?

Did he even?

Why him and not someone else?

Why not Kyoki who I was just with?

I wobbled back towards Kibo.

"What about Souka and the other kid? Are they okay?"

"Souka? Oh, the kid with the big hat right?"

"Y—Yes, that's right."

"Yeah they're fine. They've just been running around with the kid in blue with the duck shirt. Why did you ask?"

"I—I just wanted to make sure." I dipped my head.

"Some troublemakers they are. Like little rats."

"Rats?"

"Yeah, rats."

"That's a weird way to describe children."

"I just don't like kids, they piss me off."

"Right..."

It seems like they still haven't found Souka's sister...

Who am I kidding?

Souka's sister isn't going to be here.

She's probably dead for all I know.

I rubbed my head.

It throbbed.

I had to stay optimistic...

Being separated from a sibling, and ending up here.

...

As I thought about siblings, family, friends... I remembered.

I felt horrible for forgetting.

I honestly couldn't forgive myself for forgetting, but...

I had a brother...

Chapter 2 End.

Chapter 3: Melt

My brother...

He was almost the same age as me, just a couple years older.

Naturally, we used to do everything together.

We would play cards, go on walks and swim in the ocean.

We were almost inseparable.

Almost.



Kibo hung around for a little longer, although I wasn't in much of a mood to talk to him.

Eventually he left, leaving me alone for the first time since I first woke up.

I wanted to say it was peaceful, but having only my thoughts to fester didn't feel great.

I felt like I was alone for a while, but with no reference it's hard to tell.

It took me longer than I'd like to admit to come back to my senses and feel the desire to explore.

I untied and retied my shoelaces.

Doing so just felt right when I was about to head out.

I need to get out now, I'm days behind everyone else.

If there really is a game going on, it feels like I'm definitely in last place.

Before heading out, I remembered something.

The bell!

Akui told me he would come when I ring the bell!

It would be nice to not explore alone.

I don't want to be waiting around for too much longer...

I may as well ring it as I make my way out.

I gently hit my hand on the bell.

Ding!

That was a nice sound.

I held my hands on my hips as I admired the ding.

Ding!

Wow.

I don't know how Akui managed to do it but that's a really good bell.

Ding!

Okay, I need to stop.

I picked up the bell and gently placed it in my hoodie pocket.

I turned back around and began to step towards the door.

What is that?

Is that a drum?

Is it something knocking?

Were they footsteps?

If they were footsteps, they were very heavy.

Bursting through the still open door was Akui.

He was panting, hands on his knees.

"What is it... that you require... Minami..?" Akui wheezed.

I couldn't help but be shocked.

I accidentally let out a little chuckle.

"Ahah—um... I want to get out of here and explore." I was trying to hold back my surprise.

"How long were you simply waiting in here? Why didn't you just go?" Akui tilted his head to the side.

"Oh, uh... I didn't want to go alone."

Akui stuck his head outside the room quickly, before walking up to me and grabbing me by the hand.

"You have been falling behind! Quick! Come with me and I can show you what you have missed!"

He pulled me out of the room with his gloved hand.

"W—Woah okay!"

He dragged me through the doorway, and into a corridor.

The corridor had the same painted concrete walls as the room.

Down the corridor further we ended up in a large empty room, walls still purple.

The only thing in the room was another doorway that led directly into a ladder, leading upwards.

Maybe we really were in a bunker.

A sharp yet dim bang filled my ears and rang for a few seconds before fading.

Akui and I looked at each other.

We both shrugged.

Akui pulled me through the doorway, where we bumped into someone I somehow hadn't spotted previously.

"Minami, this is Nora." Akui held his hand out as if he were presenting a trophy.

Nora turned around to face us, causing me to instinctually step back.

Akui grabbed me by the jumper and pulled me towards them.

Nora had a very... Unique, almost frightening aura.

They were very tall and skinny, but in place of their head, was one of a dog's.

They had a black shirt with a green symbol on it.

Was it a paw print?

They also had a grey jacket and purple pants too.

The dog head though...

I just couldn't shake the dog's head...

Not only that, but they had dog... Mittens? Paws?

They were nowhere near as... Realistic as the head.

"Hello. Minami." Nora grunted. They sounded very strained or compressed—likely from the dog head.

We stood in silence for a few moments before Nora turned around and began climbing the ladder.

"Goodbye. Minami."

"See you later Nora!" Akui waved them off.

As they left I began to cough.

"Hm? Are you alright, Minami?" Akui put his hand on my

shoulder.

“Yeah... Sorry, I think I just need some wa—”

Someone grabbed my ear.

I looked over, it clearly wasn't Akui.

A voice I didn't recognise spoke clearly into my ear.

“Do you recognise him? No... Of course you wouldn't... Not with his altered appearance and all...”

I was pulled back by the ear, back through the doorway as Akui watched.



I fell backwards and watched as Akui stepped towards me.

Instead of acting like you would expect a doorway to, when he walked in it, it seemed to squish him into a flat image, before he disappeared from view.

I could feel someone behind me.

I could tell it wasn't Akui either.

Was it...

I stood up, turned around and confirmed my suspicion.

It was the kid in the duck shirt.

Their aura really was faint.

Transparent even.

Even their body was slightly transparent.

Are they breathing?

They were sprawled across the floor, as if knocked unconscious and dropped there.

Was it the kid who pulled me?

No...

I doubt they would be able to reach high enough and pull me with that much force with their stature.

Did I knock them unconscious when I fell back?

“Kid..?” I stepped over to their side. “Are you okay?”

No response.

I bent down to check their pulse and breathing.

Well, they're alive.

That's a relief.

...

They're not waking up.

Should I slap them?

Just a little face slap?

To wake them up?

...

I ended up shaking them awake.

"Ahg—" They spluttered and spat a bit, but they were awake.

"Kid! Are you okay? What happened?" I helped them stand up.

Maybe bombarding them with questions right after they woke up wasn't the best idea to help them stay calm.

Although, that is similar to what Akui did to me, so...

"Who—Who are you..?" They rubbed their eyes.

I held my hand on their shoulder to try to calm them down.

"My name is Minami, and you?"

"Oh! Minami! I know you! You're the one who had a big nap!"

They piped up very quickly.

A nap?

I don't think it was just a nap...

They continued. "My name is Ahiru! I'm eleven years old, so... Basically an adult." They squeaked.

"Alright Ahiru, do you have any idea where we are?"

In contrast to the rooms I was just in, the walls were a deep grey—not a concrete grey, but a painted shadow-like tint.

"Well... It looks like Nora's quarter!"

"Nora's quarter? What's a quarter? Like on a ship, or one part of four?"

"Uhh... Yes..."

"Yes..?"

"The quarters are where we sleep and stuff. There's a big room with a hallway that goes to our bedroom!"

"What about the 'one of four' kind of quarter?"

"Um... There are four sets of four quarters."

So there are 16 people total?

Does that include Tokumei?

"Why are the walls painted differently? Is that how you knew it was Nora's quarter?"

"Yeah, that's right. Uh, each person has a different colour, and that colour is how your quarter is painted. Nora's colour is grey!"

"How do you know that? Have you been here before?"

"No uh, she told me yesterday."

She?

Nora's a girl?

I suppose the dog head made it hard to tell.

"So does that mean my colour is purple? The quarters I woke up in had purple walls."

"Yeah! You're the purple girl! Even your hair is purple!"

"Yeah! I'm the blue boy!"

We thrust our hands in the air in celebration.

Hm?

"What's up with your finger?"

Ahiru's left pinky finger was missing, and in its place was a dim blue glow.

"Huhhh? Oh, don't worry. That just happens sometimes." Ahiru muttered sadly.

Weird...

"Well... Do you remember how you got here? Or why are we here?"

Ahiru tapped his chin.

"Hmm, um, well... I'm sorry, I don't remember..." He twiddled his thumbs.

Did he get injured when he was unconscious?

No bruise on his forehead.

"Maybe there'll be some clues in Nora's bedroom."

I walked down the corridor and ushered Ahiru to follow me.

I'm sure Nora won't mind.
I don't know her at all but...
I peeked inside...
No one is here apart from me now.
Ahiru too.
The walls were still the same dark grey as expected.
The pillow and blanket were grey too.
The only thing different was the absence of a bowl to place
medicine in, and in its place was a sponge.
A sponge?
Was Nora doing some cleaning?
Surely not...
The sponge was completely solid.
I've never felt one in person, but it felt like how I would
imagine a fossil to feel.
"Why are we here?" Ahiru sat on the end of the bed.
"That's what I'm trying to figure out."
I had so many questions...
While I searched I ran through my mind to see if Ahiru could
answer any of them.
I don't know exactly what I was searching for, but I sure was.
"Hey Ahiru?" He looked over to me. "What's a Seigyu?"
"A Seigyu? Oh! You mean the special thingamabob we can
control?"
"Control? Like a power?"
"Yeah! I'm pretty sure... Mine is... Um... I'm not really sure how
to describe it..."
"If you can't describe it, can you show me?"
"Ooh! I sure can!" He stood up off the bed and faced me.
He threw his hands to the sky...
Where the sky would be if we weren't underground.
If we were even underground actually.
Above his hands a ball of dim light appeared in his hands.
"I call this..! The light thingy!!!"

He sure was enthusiastic.

"Woah!" I'll match his energy. "That's pretty neat. Is that all it does?"

"Haha! Nope! I can do some other things, but they take more effort, so I won't do them right now."

He lowered his arms and held them on his hips, puffing out his chest.

"So... That's a Seigyu?"

"Yeah! I can control the light thingy!"

"So you can spawn a dim light?"

"Hey... It's not dim, I just didn't want to waste my effort..."

Ah.

Right.

"Does that mean... I have one too?"

"Yeah! Everyone here has a Seigyu!"

"...Do you know what mine is?"

"Huh? No? How would I?"

"Oh, uh, I just figured... Nevermind. How did you figure yours out?"

"Uhhhhh... I just started trying to shoot stuff with my hands and I started making some cool lights!" Ahiru mimicked the actions described.

I copied—not expecting anything to happen—but slightly hoping something would.

Ahiru giggled. "Obviously your Seigyu won't be the same as mine! You have to try something different! Like uh... Moving something with your mind, or flying, or teleporting!"

Ahiru flapped his arms like a bird.

If I have to look that silly just to fly, I might just walk.

So a Seigyu is something you control...

Akui said his is perception?

He controls perception?

How does that work?

How do you even figure that out?

Maybe I'll ask Akui when I find him again.

Maybe Tokumei, if he's the leader, he should know how this all works.

Well...

There doesn't seem to be anything—or anyone—in here.

Weird...



Once we reentered the big room I found Ahiru in, I spotted Akui!

"Akui!" I ran over to him.

He was sitting on the rungs of the ladder through the doorway.

"Oh, hello again Minami. Where did you fall off to?" He brushed himself off and stood up.

"Uh, I'm not too sure how I got there, but I ended up in Nora's quarter with this kid, Ahiru."

I turned back to the room I admittedly had just left Ahiru in, however there was nothing but... Nothing.

The doorway was empty.

Not just a lack of Ahiru, but room too.

Strange...

"Ahiru? Yes I know the kid, but don't get why you two would be in Nora's quarter."

"Uh..." I pointed back at the doorway, double, triple and even quadruple taking the lack of space beyond the doorway.

"Come on Minami! Let's go quickly! You have a lot of exploration to catch up on!"

Akui grabbed my hand and dragged me up the ladder.

Well, he obviously let go of my hand before making me climb the ladder, but he led the way.

One last glance at the doorway...

I'm sure I'll be back soon enough.

I didn't expect... Any of that to happen really.
I wasn't exactly sure what to say.
This ladder sure was long.
I was glad Akui smelt nice though.
If I was stuck in this ladder filled vertical tunnel with someone
smelly I might just let myself fall right back down.
What does he smell like?
I didn't want to make my sniffing too loud for... Hopefully
obvious reasons.
He smelt... Like apples.
How pleasant.
Nora sure was weird though.
Was that dog head... Real?
For my own security, I was going to assume it was a mask for
the time being.
And Ahiru...
Where did he go?
Where did he come from?
Honestly, that whole thing was a mess.



After what felt like far too long of a ladder, we reached a
hatch.
Akui unscrewed it while carefully standing on the ladder, and
pushed it open.
A collection of not as bright rays as when I first woke up today
flooded my vision as we climbed out.
It indeed was a bunker.
A bunker for what purpose?
It sure went deep.
Anyway, we found ourselves in a glass box.
Was it a tent?
Akui opened the front like a flap, so it seemed to be a camping

tent made of... Bendable glass?

We were back on the pink and black chequered plane.

Tokumei's throne was empty.

Where could he be?

The forest was to our front, left and back, while to our right was a large collection of oddly shaped grey buildings.

Was that there before?

As I was entranced by this peculiar site, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Were they here to appreciate my pun?

No...

I spun around slowly, to find myself faced with...

Kyoki!

"Kyoki!" I yelled, not exactly meaning to, but my surprise and excitement didn't feel out of place.

"Minami! Welcome back!" She wrapped her arms around me. "Sorry for... Startling you earlier, eheh..."

She stepped back and smiled.

"Ah right, that... Yeah it's fine. I had pretty much forgotten about it by now."

I lied.

"Ahah, yeah that's good!" She chuckled.

"Hello Kyoki," Akui chimed in. "It seems that you two are very close already."

"Yep! Without me, Minami would still be laying in a field somewhere!"

"I mean... Maybe..." I smiled. "I definitely wouldn't have been able to make it through the forest without you."

"Aw, I'm sure you could've made at least some progress!"

"Ahah, yeah, I suppose so."

"Well then," Akui took a step forward. "Let's help Minami with her way around shall we?"

Kyoki and I followed closely behind Akui as he walked towards the strange set of buildings.

Although I was finally in a position to explore, I couldn't shake the fact that something felt wrong.

I'm sure we all had something similar in mind.

Something bad was going to happen very soon.

That is, if it wasn't already happening...

Chapter 3 End.

Chapter 4: Dead End Complex

I was fascinated by all sorts of animals.

I knew of animals most people couldn't even imagine.

I learnt all of the latin names for each of the animals I knew.

On first look, you wouldn't be able to tell, but I had two favourites.

You would think it would be hard to have favourites when I have this much knowledge, but...

Dogs and cats were by far my favourites.

Dogs edged out cats by the slightest amount.

Now when you look at me, I think it would be a bit more obvious, but believe me, I used to look normal.

I went to school like a normal person...

I stayed at home like a normal person...

That was about it to be honest...

Anyways, I worked hard, and after completing all of the necessary work, I was a biologist!

I could spend my whole life with every part of animals!

It was... Incredible.

I was still fairly young so I had some more interesting interests.

Some animals that didn't exactly fit the regular definition of animals piqued my interest.

You could call in a fateful day, but I think that's a bit stupid.

I stumbled across something I wish I didn't, but I just couldn't resist...

That stumbling is the only reason I stand here today.

Well, I wouldn't say I'm exactly standing right now...

He gave me orders.

All I can do right now is follow them.

I wouldn't want anything to happen to us.

Me and my boy that is.



"Are you ready?"

"Yes. It is... Fine."

"Hoohoo! Great! I'll let you know when to cut it."

"Thanks."

"Alright, I need to make sure this all works. Stay put."

"Will... Do."

Then there was a bang—similar to a gunshot.

I was on the floor, my heart was no longer beating, nor was I breathing—for the most part.

I had to concentrate.



We continued to banter as Kyoki, Akui and I entered the complex of peculiar buildings.

The vast majority of the buildings were about three to five stories tall, made of concrete, and looked like they were ready to crumble at any time, if they hadn't already.

All of the tall buildings were strange prism shapes.

Some were triangular, some pentagonal, and some were even bipyramids.

There was, on rare occasion, a pile of what was presumably once a building.

Unlike the quarter walls, the buildings didn't seem like they had been painted.

They were just plain concrete-grey—like the parts of the quarters that aren't the walls.

There was also almost no glass in the window frames, just empty holes.

It's so... Eerie...

"I shall be your tour guide for today!" Kyoki was brimming with excitement.

"Who put you in charge now Kyoki?" Akui raised his eyebrow.

"...Me..." Kyoki smiled.

"Okay then, lead the way!" I matched her enthusiasm.

Kyoki took the lead.

She was doing a sort of funny march the whole time, this kept me smiling.

She hummed some sort of tune.

It felt... Familiar.

I swear I had heard it before.

I racked my brain but came up with nothing.

"Minami! Are you okay?" Akui held his hand on my shoulder.

"Hm? Yeah I'm fine, why?" What was he on about?

"You—You are crying an awful lot—"

Wiping my face confirmed it.

I was crying.

An awful lot at that.

But why?

Kyoki had noticed we had stopped following her, and turned around.

"She's okay Akui!"

I doubted that at this distance she could see the tears streaming down my face.

"I—If you say so..." Akui muttered as he looked to the sky.

"I am fine, Akui."

"That is good then..." He looked back down.



We continued walking through what I had now been informed by Kyoki to be called the "Dead End Complex".

Every now and then we would have a look inside one of the buildings.

They were often filled with what looked like random junk, or nothing at all.

Maybe there was more on higher floors, but we rarely bothered to check.

I could see why it would be called the Dead End Complex, as most of the buildings were simply dead ends, and well—it was a complex of buildings.

One of these buildings stood out however.

On first inspection, it was one that simply had nothing in it.

On further inspection, I saw a small locked metal box.

Is that the right order for adjectives?

Does “small metal locked box” make more sense?

Oh, whatever.

As we entered the room, the atmosphere changed drastically.

I felt... Almost scared?

It was just a small, bubbly feeling, but it was uncomfortable.

I got closer to inspect it...

There was a small keyhole, but I couldn't see any hinges for it to open with.

Maybe it's like a lid?

When it's unlocked it'll slide open?

I don't have a key so I guess I won't know.

Just to be sure I gave it a little kick.

Yep...

Definitely metal...

Kyoki stepped up behind me. “What'veya found?”

I explained my findings to her.

She didn't think much of it, and dragged me away.

If I find a key, I'll know where to use it I suppose.

Is the Dead End Complex the only other place to explore apart from the place I woke up, the forest and the plane?

This place is pretty boring...

As we left the building with the box, I swore I saw a silhouette in the corner of my eye.

Naturally, I did a double take, and even more naturally, it wasn't there once I had taken double.

Maybe taking a third wouldn't hurt...

I'm glad I did, as I saw Souka sitting with the box.

"Souka!?"

How did Souka get there?

I took a step forward, but they turned around, saw me, became what looked like a flat image, and faded away along with the box.

Wha—?

Quadruple take time.

Did Souka just steal the box?

Where did they come from?

Where did they go?

I'm not a cowboy.

I shook my head and continued onwards.

Kyoki skipped ahead, leaving Akui and me behind.

She stopped.

She stopped and looked to her left, unmoving.

"Kyoki?" I sped up my pace to reach her.

"Is something the matter?" Akui continued at his own pace.

"..." Kyoki was silent.

What was she looking at?

She was looking through the entrance to what seemed like just another building.

After following her gaze, I matched her motionless silence.

Akui caught up to us before either of us moved.

I see.

In the middle of the room we were peering into...

In the middle of the floor of the room we were peering into...

Lay Nora's lifeless body...



What..?

"Is she... Dead?" Kyoki stepped towards the body.

I didn't know how to feel.

Kyoki's head was visibly spinning.

Akui was tapping his foot at an impressive rate.

Kyoki sat down on a chair in the corner.

Akui crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

He seemed like he was trying to be calm.

I think in this situation, it's definitely acceptable to show that you aren't calm.

He took the initiative and stepped towards the body.

The moment he did, I felt a soft silky hand tug on my ear.

"Ah! What the—"

There was no one behind me.

Kyoki and Akui both turned to face me.

"Are you alright?" Kyoki looked up.

"What happened?" Akui stepped back over to me.

"M—My ears... Someone pulled on them." I rubbed my left ear.

It didn't hurt, but it didn't feel right.

"S—Sorry... I think I'm just a bit freaked out..." I mumbled.

"No, Minami. This isn't just you, this could be important information. Nora is dead, anything can help us now. We need to find the culprit." Akui put his hands on my shoulders.

He seemed serious.

Well, I couldn't blame him, this isn't a very good situation.

"Someone touched my ears?" I explained, questioning it myself.

"Your ears?"

"Yes, that's right." I nodded.

"I—I see..." Akui mumbled as he scratched his chin. "Did you see who it was?"

"No... It was just like last time... Except Ahiru isn't behind me."

"Last time? Do you mean when we were in the quarters? Is that why you disappeared?"

"Yes... Exactly."

"Do you have any idea who it could have been last time?"

"Well... Ahiru was there, but I doubt it was him..."

"Ahiru... Hmm... I'll keep that in mind. For now, however, we should inspect the body."

The body...

Nora's body...

Nora's unmoving, lifeless body.

I didn't feel sad, no.

What was I feeling?

I didn't know Nora, in fact I found her a bit creepy.

Did I feel bad for her?

Bad for her family?

Would her family even find out?

I had no idea where we were, but I doubted Tokumei would allow us outside contact.

Akui took Kyoki's place in the chair as Kyoki squatted beside Nora.

I followed and sat on the dusty floor.

Gross...

Now is no time to complain about a dusty floor when I am sitting directly in front of a dead body.

I made sure not to get too close...

"There's no pulse." Kyoki had her fingers pressed into Nora's wrist.

"Isn't that normal for... Dead people?"

"It's not just that, there's no breathing either." Kyoki had her head against Nora's chest.

"Kyoki... Do you know what dead means?"

"Well, yeah obviously," Kyoki managed to laugh in this situation. "I just mean... It feels weird."

"Weird? How so?"

"Look at the way she's resting. The position doesn't look the most natural for a dead person."

"What are you talking about?" Did Kyoki have experience with what dead bodies are meant to look like?

Nora was curled up in a fetal-like position, somewhat like how you would expect a dog to sleep.

"Here, look." Kyoki stepped over her body and rested her arms on it. "There's no blood anywhere, there also seems to be no external damage at all."

"How do you know that? She's completely covered up."

We both looked up at Akui, who understood it was his time to step out of the room for a moment.

It felt bad, but we had to check for injuries.

I'd have felt less bad if we had in fact found injuries, but sure enough, there were none.

We allowed Akui to reenter.

"What if it was a heart attack or something? Organ failure?"

"Maybe, but I feel like Nora wouldn't just be laying in an empty room if it was. Surely she would go out into the open to call out for help right?"

"When you put it like that..."

It was weird.

This whole situation.

Our whole situation.

I had just seen Nora only about an hour ago!

Was there anything from back then to indicate that she was about to die?

"Maybe she suffocated from having that... Dog head? She always sounded like she was choking..."

I say always, even though I had only interacted with her once.

"Maybe..."

Kyoki shuffled around and sat the head in her lap to inspect it.

What else about Nora was different?

Aha!

I hadn't seen them before, as they were under her head, but her hands!

Her hands were bare.

Previously, she had these dog paw-like mittens.

Where had they gone?

I pointed this out to Kyoki.

Surely something else was different...

I tried my hardest to remember anything from the short interaction we had.

Her aura...

I found her aura frightening.

Where was her aura now?

Surely her aura would be gone if she were dead, right?

On the surface, there was absolutely no presence of one.

But on further inspection...

"What are you four doin' in here?" We heard a gruff voice from the doorway behind us.



We all turned to face this unknown voice.

Unknown to me at least.

"What're ya doin' with a dead body on your lap, Kyoki?"

In the doorway stood a tall man.

He wore a large brown coat, with matching brown pants and boots.

His coat seemed to be... Very well used.

Similar to Nora, he had a black shirt beneath his coat.

His face was covered in stubble, and his hair looked like a plate of sushi made by toddlers.

Luckily, it was covered by what appeared to be a western cowboy hat.

Finally, his aura was shady, but kind.

Let's just say I'm glad to be an adult in his presence.

"Hello Nioi." Akui walked up to greet him.

"Nioi..?" I whispered to myself.

What kind of a name is Nioi?

I mean, it suits his appearance...

"Hey there Akui, hey Kyoki," Kyoki didn't seem like she was enjoying his sudden appearance. "Hey Nora..." Nora had no reaction. "And is that Minami? Morning sleepyhead." He chuckled to himself.

"Hello..."

...

Nioi continued. "Hey Akui, ain't your brother the bastard who was coughing up bullshit when we got here?"

Does he mean Yutaka?

"Seeing as that aptly fits his description, I would say so, yes."

"For a kid with that personality, he sure has some nice hair."

Yutaka had orange hair, right?

Maybe he meant to texture, of which I had yet to see.

"I swear... With the way that kid runs amok it's like he's trying to get himself shot." Nioi grumbled as he reached into his pocket.

Their banter had almost made me forget about the dead body less than a metre ahead of me.

What's going on?

This is insane.

I've not even spent a few hours awake, and I'm in a completely foreign set of locations, supposedly in some sort of game, investigating a dead body.

Is this dead body part of the game?

It's not a very fun game if so...

"So..." Nioi stepped towards us. "Someone's gone and killed Nora. Ain't that a shame." Akui followed him over. "Any clue how it happened?"

Akui shook his head. "We've only found this here a few minutes ago ourselves. We were trying to look for any clues as you showed up."

"Is that right?" Nioi bent down and inspected the body himself. Kyoki hesitantly informed him of our findings.

"Have ya tried taking off that weird dog mask? Maybe she got

hit in the head from behind or something.”

“We hadn’t yet, no.” Kyoki pulled down Nora’s collar, attempting to find the rim of the mask.

“What the—” The mask had no rim.

It seemed to melt or fuse with Nora’s skin.

“That’s... Gross...” Kyoki stuck her tongue out slightly.

“Do ya have a knife or something to cut the mask off with?”

We all looked at each other.

Doesn’t seem like it.

“Maybe ya can just feel through the mask, feel for any swollen bits.”

Kyoki attempted to do so, however found something interesting instead.

“The mask seems to have a... Helmet or something inside. I can’t reach Nora’s head.”

“A helmet inside a mask? You would imagine you would get hot wearing that many thick layers.” Akui knocked on the head itself.

“Maybe... The dog mask a real dog skull!?” Kyoki held her hands away from Nora.

“Yeah right, a real dog skull couldn’t fit a real human skull, especially that breed. What is it? A black labrador or something?” Nioi gave the head a knock for himself.

Well I didn’t want to feel left out, so I gave the head a knock too.

“Well, the head itself doesn’t seem to be of correct proportions for a real dog. Even if it was masterful taxidermy, I simply cannot imagine a real labrador’s head fitting nicely over Nora’s.”

“Maybe ya have ‘em different in Britain.”

“I doubt it.” Akui didn’t seem to bother with Nioi’s antics.

I sighed.

How am I meant to solve a murder when I know nothing about where we are, or about any of the people?

Why am I even assuming this is a murder!?

What motive would there be?

Is it something to do with this game?

I sighed once more.

"Hm?" Kyoki tilted her head. "What's this?"

She reached under Nora and retrieved a small sponge.

A sponge...

I had just seen a sponge!

I explained to the group about how I had ended up in Nora's quarter and found a sponge just like the one Kyoki had precured.

"You were in Nora's quarter?" Akui scratched his chin. "How did you end up there?"

I assumed the question to be rhetorical.

"Well neat. But how does that help us at all?" Kyoki held her hands on her hips. "Maybe Nora just enjoys cleaning."

"Kyoki, I thought the same thing, but is there anything... Weird about the sponge?"

"Weird..?" Kyoki attempted to squish the sponge between her fingers.

She failed.

"How interesting." Akui held his hand out and asked to inspect it himself. "It's rock solid."

"That's just like how it was in Nora's quarter."

"Still, it doesn't really mean anything." Kyoki shrugged. "Sponges only become squishy when they get wet."

"That's true..."

Maybe I wasn't on to anything.

I got too excited over making a simple connection.

Kyoki stood up.

"C'mon Akui, let's go look for clues outside."

They walked out together, leaving me alone with Nioi.

"Bye guys."

I doubt they heard me.



I had made my way into the chair in the corner.

Nioi was leaning against the doorframe.

Well, it was less of a doorframe and more of a door hole.

It was just flat concrete after all.

He dug deep into his coat pocket, and retrieved an orange.

An orange?

Why did he have an orange in his pocket?

He began to unpeel it, placing the peel neatly into another pocket as he did.

"Do you want one too?" He held another orange out in his other hand.

I accepted his pocket-fruit.

I hadn't eaten all day after all.

Although I wasn't exactly hungry either.

I may as well have a snack though.

I neatly managed to unravel the peel in one big shape.

"You're a natural." Nioi chuckled as he took it from me and placed it in his designated peel pocket.

"Thanks." I was used to preparing food.

You could say it was a strong suit of mine.

Nioi and I simultaneously bit into our respective oranges.

...

Ew...

I expected juice to go flowing into my mouth—and maybe out a bit too—in its delicious citrusy waves, but instead was met by a dusty disappointment.

Nioi frowned too.

"Y'all are meant to be juicy... Not dry..."

Nioi dropped his orange to the floor and gave it a stomp, squishing it into the concrete.

It simply crumbled under his boot.

I gave mine another bite...

Definitely a mistake.

I began to cough and cough.

My mouth felt so dry...

I tried using my saliva to relubricate my mouth and throat,
but there was a strange lack of that as well.

"Are ya alright?"

I managed to stop my coughing and nod.

What had brought that up?

I closed my mouth and felt around with my tongue.

This seemed to make things better.

"Alrighty," Nioi sighed, staring at the dust of his orange. "I'm
gonna go check up on Akui and Kyoki. Who knows what they
might've found."

I watched as he left, leaving me alone with... Nora's dead body.



Guard duty eh?

Seems a bit pointless to be honest.

What am I meant to be guarding?

Nora won't be making a break for it!

Gosh, what a situation I've ended up in.

For what felt like an eternity, I sat.

I sat in wait.

Wait for someone to return.

My leg began to twitch.

I let it.

...

Who are these people?

I got up and sat at Nora's side.

How did I get here?

Is this some elaborate prank?

I've seen videos of people moving people to weird locations in
their sleep, but this just seemed excessive.

I stroked Nora's head gently.

"A—Achoo!"

Allergies...

I was going to apologise to Nora for sneezing directly onto her corpse, but I couldn't find any evidence of a sneeze on her anywhere.

I made myself sneeze again, this time I did so into my elbow.

Sure enough, it dried instantly.

Everything was... So dry...

The sponge...

The oranges...

My mouth...

And now my sneezes...

What could be causing this?

I rested my head on Nora like a pillow.

She was like a big teddy... Dog.

Nora sure was a good pillow.

She was nice and warm.

...

What?

Why would a dead body be... Warm?

I focused as much as I could and sure enough...

An aura...

I could feel an aura coming from Nora.

Sure it was faint, so much so that I couldn't have felt it with other auras interfering.

But it was there.

Was Nora... Alive?

I pressed my head against Nora's chest as hard as I could.

I couldn't feel breathing, nor a heartbeat, just as Kyoki had before.

I—I don't understand...

How could she have an aura if she were dead?

I sat back and pondered.

As I did however, Nora began to move.

"W—What!?"

I stumbled back as I saw Nora being picked up.

Were those...

Nora's mittens?

Nora's body was still completely limp, but she rose into the air,
being lifted by her own floating gloves.

I sat in shock.

There was no one there.

No one there to lift Nora.

The image of Nora and her gloves became flat like an image...

Then she disappeared.



"A—Akui!" I yelled his name.

Why his name?

I'm not sure, but it was his name I yelled.

Just like before, I heard footsteps running up to the room.

"Akui! Nora! She—"

When I turned to face Akui, I was instead met with Nioi.

"Akui's coming. What's wrong?" He asked calmly.

I let him see for himself.

"Where'd Nora go? What'd you do to her?"

"I did nothing! She got lifted in the air and just... Disappeared!"

"Disappeared you say?" Nioi crossed his arms. "How so?"

"I—I'm not sure myself... That's why I called..."

He rested his hand on my shoulder.

"C'mon Minami, let's meet up with the others."

...



The sun was setting.

How long had we been sitting with a dead body?

Nioi tapped me on the shoulder.

"Minami, about the ear pulling thing," He was whispering. "I think I might know who that could've been."

"R—Really? How?"

We spotted Akui and Kyoki in the distance.

"After this whole Nora thing is over, come with me, I have some... Important things to tell you about."

"Important things? What do you mean?"

He stopped walking.

"Minami, listen to me closely now..." I tried my best to do so. "I'm almost a hundred percent certain that the person who... Killed Nora, is the same person pulling your ears. Not only that, but I'm pretty sure Nora is working with them."

"You mean Nora was betrayed?" I whispered back.

"No, I think this was a set up for something. Did you notice anything weird when you were around Nora? A feeling?"

I tried to recall.

"Did you notice what happened to the orange I gave ya?"

I realised.

The first time I met Nora, I was left feeling dry, even coughing...

I asked Nioi if that's what he meant.

"Yes, that!" Nioi confirmed, as he leaned in even closer to my ear. "I think it may have something to do with Nora's Seigyu. Do ya know what a Seigyu is, Minami?"

"Not really." Ahiru hadn't given the best description.

"It's a power, a power that lets us control any one thing. Mine, for example, is **smell**."

Makes sense given his name.

He held his finger in front of my face.

"Can ya smell that? Vanilla."

His finger did smell like vanilla!

"I'm predicting that Nora's Seigyu is the reason why everything was so dry."

“How do you use a Seigyu?”

“You gotta focus.”

“If you have to focus to use a Seigyu...”

“That’s right. I think that **Nora’s still alive.**”

Chapter 4 End.

Chapter 5: Spiral Parade: Red

One green, one grey, four white, and one red.

The red was me.

We were all standing in a circle, each separated by about a two metre gap, and a metal grate.

In the middle of the circle was a hole, a void.

Luckily, we were unable to fall, or be pushed in, as the metal grate also covered our fronts.

It was as if we were trapped in a box, yet we could leave and enter from behind.

I must specify, there were exactly eight boxes like this around the void.

Meaning we possibly could invite another to join our... Group.

Now if we check from left, around to my right, in exact order, the members would go...

Grey, Green, Empty, White, White, White, White, and Red, me.

Nevermind, that isn't exactly the most important thing going on here.

That would be why and what we are planning.

As a collective, this group called ourselves the Spiral Parade.

I have absolutely no idea how or why this name was chosen, but it sounds cool so I have no feelings against it.

Well, except for what *that* one said.

But what would they know?

They aren't even a part of the group.

That said, how did they find the name in the first place?

Lurking around maybe?

Maybe they used their Seigyu and snuck in?

Perhaps someone leaked the name, maybe it was an accident.

I highly doubt any one of us would let that slip.

I put my trust in the other members.

For we are the Spiral Parade.



"Ah... It's still so cold..." I shivered, as I clutched my side with my right arm.

Why does it have to be so windy here?

It isn't helping anyone.

The cool air pressed against my damp clothes, further insinuating the fact that I wouldn't be getting warmer any time soon.

"Geez... Where is everyone..?" I rested my left arm beside me in the sand.

It wouldn't heal if I didn't rest it after all...

I took a deep breath through my nose.

That was a mistake.

It filled my insides with an unpleasant icy moisture.

But really, what did I expect?

Especially when I know what happened the last time it snowed like this...



The red cloak I was wearing was lighter than air.

If I didn't witness them putting it on me, I wouldn't have noticed anything at all.

Although it is bright red on the outside, it was completely transparent on the inside.

I have no idea where they got these in all these colours, but I need to focus as the meeting is starting.

"Welcome everyone. We have chosen you three to participate in the Spiral Parade as we think you have the most potential." Said one of the white figures, presumably male.

"As you know, this is a killing game. We have come up with

many strategies to give us an upperhand." Said another white figure, this time female.

"The first step was gathering you all, the second is to gain information on each participant." Another white figure said, male again, but a different voice.

"We have assigned you all a person to gain information on, we have already done most people so you will not have to do too much." The last white figure said, also male... I think.

I don't think it would be too beneficial to try to differentiate between the voices, so I'll just listen normally.

"When you entered here you were given an envelope. You may now open them."

"These will have the name, picture, and some basic information of the person you shall be investigating."

I opened my envelope carefully.

Needless to say, I was nervous.

As I slowly slid the card out of the envelope I tried not to look at it just yet.

I wanted to see the whole thing at once.

Wouldn't want any spoilers after all.

The card was thick, and felt very firm.

It smelled a little... Strange.

I prepared myself to open my eyes.

To be fair I was being a little dramatic, but being dramatic is just part of being me.

3... 2... 1...

I opened my eyes.

The card I was holding was a deep orange colour.

The handwriting was extremely neat, as if it was printed.

More importantly was the information on the card, not the card itself, although I will make sure to keep this on me.

A picture of a weird boy with orange hair, and threateningly sharp orange eyes stared me down as I read the writing.

I made sure to read it over many times, each more thorough

than the last.

Okay, I think I'm ready.

"Once you have collected the appointed amount of information requested, immediately return here as we will commence step three of our plan."

As soon as they finished speaking, the metal fences were all covered by white sheets.

Our cloaks were removed via a suction coming from the ceiling, and the next thing I knew, the sheets were lifted and I was standing in front of a castle.

This castle should be where I find him.

The one I needed to gain information on.



The ocean was frozen over completely, the snow had turned into a blizzard, and I was sheltering myself inside a cabin sized beach house about fifty metres away from the shore.

The main room was very messy, the floor was covered in random objects that supposedly were meant to be on the shelves.

The carpet was soggy, but considering the temperature outside, it was a little icy too.

If I were barefoot, my feet would be bleeding too, staining the carpet red.

Not that it would matter, my arm is bleeding enough.

I felt a bit bad that I was spilling blood everywhere, but it can't exactly be helped right now.

I was rummaging through the drawers looking for a first-aid kit.

I couldn't find one in there but what I did find was a little more interesting.

In the first one, there was a series of board games, some of which I'd never heard of before.

In another, there were a pile of maid dresses?

They were also drenched.

It was interesting, but it wasn't what I was looking for.

I moved into the kitchen, thinking there might be a kit there.

Luckily for me, there indeed was one inside the cupboard.

I opened it up and grabbed the bandages out.

I slowly wrapped them around my wounded arm.

I made it tight, but not so tight that it would hurt.

I pulled my sleeve back over my arm and took a seat in one of the chairs in the kitchen.



The castle seemed like it was European.

It didn't have a moat, yet it still had a drawbridge, which had been lowered.

I walked along it until I reached the portcullis.

It was closed.

Luckily, it had holes I could see through in it, so I was able to use my Seigyu to pass through.

I'm glad my Seigyu is widely useful.

The interior of the castle walls were somewhat like what you would expect from a castle.

There were medium sized trees surrounding the inner wall.

There were oranges and limes growing on each of them.

They seemed to be recently trimmed as they were slightly shorter and there was a pair of hedge trimmers on the ground in front of one of the lime trees.

They seemed to be dangerous being left out in the open here, so I hid them inside the second bush on the left.

It was covered in oranges.

"Oi," I heard a voice from behind me. "You trimming the bushes there mate?"

I spun around to see who it was.

Of course.

It was the one I had to gain information on.

Yutaka.

"You gonna answer me or what? Bitch."

"Hey, I'm not here for any harm." I showed my empty hands to him.

"Really now? Then come on in I guess." He scoffed, walking through the castle doors.

After a few seconds, I followed him in.

The moment I entered, I got hit with a wave of ornate atmosphere.

It was so fancy.

It looked so posh.

It was the main lobby so I suppose it is what you would expect.

But this was incredible.

There was a huge chandelier dangling from the ceiling.

None of the candles were lit, but the sheer amount of gold it was made of made it seem like it could fall at any time.

The chain holding it up looked ready to break.

It was ready to break.

It was creaking.

It was ready to break.

It was ready to break.

It wasn't breaking.

Haha.

"Where the fuck are you staring off to? Come on you twat, you want to talk right?"

"My bad."

Wow, he has an attitude.

The card did highlight his personality.

He walked up the stairs in the centre of the room.

My hands were sweating beneath my gloves,

I don't know why this is so stressful.

If he tried to attack me I'm sure I could get away as easily as I arrived.

We were now walking down a long hallway, with many doors on either side.

"What are you doing here?" Yutaka asked, clearly trying not to seem too friendly.

"I was just exploring and looking for other people, that's when I found this massive castle and came inside."

"So you mean to tell me you just waltzed through the metal gate thing at the front?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Fuckin' yeah it's a problem! N—Nevermind... That doesn't matter right now..."

"Ah, sure." I nodded as we went back to walking in silence.



"Hellooo?" I heard a voice coming from the entrance.
"Anybody hooome?" I could hear them taking off their shoes.

Oh wait, they shouldn't do that.

The carpet was all icy, if they took their shoes off they could also get hurt.

I dashed out from the kitchen back to the entrance.

"Hello!" I accidentally yelled.

"Oh hello!" They said, clearly startled.

"You should keep your shoes on, the carpet is icy and will cut your feet."

"Oh but isn't it impolite to not take my shoes off?" They seemed adamant to take their shoes off.

"Well I suppose, but do you want to have your feet cut? And besides, it looks like no one has been here for a long time."

"Haha, you seem to really care about my health, but you have no need to. After all, I haven't even introduced myself yet, and neither have you!"

"Oh right, sorry..."

"It's fineeee, no need to be sorry! My name is Furi. Nice to meet

you!”

“You don’t really have to say the nice to meet you part, as the circumstances of which we have met is a bit... Not nice, to say the least.”

“But it is a formality.”

They seemed really into following formalities and stuff.

“Ah, yeah okay.”

“And what is your name?”

“Hmm, well, people call me... Shinku”

I told her my formal name, as that’s what she seemed like she would want to know.



After a while he stopped.

“This one on the right.”

Yutaka pointed to a metal door marked with the letter D.

D?

It probably stands for diner or something along those lines.

I’m not really familiar with castle layouts.

We were pretty close to the end of the hallway, where there was a large spiral staircase leading upwards.

We were standing side by side in front of the door.

Yutaka was holding the handle, unmoving.

...

“Are you going to open the door?”

Yutaka looked at me.

He grabbed me by the back of the neck, swung open the door, threw me inside the dark room, and slammed the door, locking it shut.

“Huh—?”

I tried looking around the room, but I couldn’t see much as it was dim, and my eyes weren’t adjusted yet.

I tried to feel my way to the door handle, but it wasn’t there, it

must have been a one way door.

I could feel all four walls around me.

Was I in a closet or something?

My eyes were slowly adjusting to the light as I could make out a shelf.

I reached out my hand, but felt a sharp squeeze around my neck.

“AH—!”

My body tensed up.

It was getting harder to breathe.

Harder to see.

It was like I was locked in place.

While desperately clutching my throat with my left hand, I tried extending my right out to the shelf.

I managed to barely reach it and pulled it off the wall, along with its contents.

It was only a piece of wood on some pegs, so it wasn't too hard.

Clatter clatter smash!

Everything that was on the shelf was now on the carpeted floor.

I tried using the shelf I was now holding to break down the door, but it barely made a mark, so I threw it to the floor.

I heard the sound of glass breaking.

On the floor was a lamp.

When it had fallen to the floor it must have knocked the switch as it was now on.

As I threw the wood down it must have smashed the glass containing the starting fire as I could see and feel a small flame at my feet.

The fire quickly spread to the carpet and set it ablaze too.

With fire comes smoke, and I was right above it all.

I continued to struggle, but to no avail.

I couldn't feel anything around my neck that would be lifting and choking me.

It was just air...

At this point, I was on the brink of passing out.

My left hand went limp and fell from my neck.

Maybe I can...

Maybe I can use my Seigyu...

But the door was sealed tight.

There wasn't even a keyhole or anything.

How...

Why...

I...

I couldn't feel my...

My anything...

I...

"Not like... T—" I was cut off by the sound of a gun.

A bullet came flying past my face, cutting my right cheek.

It came from through the door.

It was only small, but there was a hole in the door.

I—I could use my Seigyu!

I made my way through the hole in the door.

"You crafty fuckin' bastard." Yutaka grumbled, holding a gun.

The pressure that was on my neck had been released.

The room I was in just moments ago burst into flames with the new oxygen being introduced from the outside.

A line of fire came flowing through the hole, aimed directly at Yutaka.

He was quick to dodge, but the surprise made him drop his gun.

My shoes were burnt, my neck was red, and I had a cut across my cheek.

In contrast, Yutaka's hands were only slightly burnt.

"Wh—What was that!?"

I tried to inhale as much air as possible, but it only made me wheeze more.

"What do you think, smartass? I was tryna kill you!"

"Already? It's barely been a day!"

"I want that reward that Tokumei explained to us." He clutched his hands.

"What for? It's just a little information isn't it?"

"Information is information got it? I wanna get out of this shithole."

Didn't he listen?

He couldn't get out just by gaining a little information.

We don't even know what the information is!

Tokumei made it clear, there is no way to get out.

Well I guess it wasn't that clear, because then he started explaining different ways you could try.

Then it all got surrounded by the other blocks of rules and stuff he told us.

"If I remember correctly, no one remembers how they got here."

"I call bullshit, you know how easy it is to lie to someone that doesn't know you?"

"Well yeah, but who would? There were, what, ten or eleven of us there when Tokumei explained everything. He said a couple people didn't show up, but some of us knew each other right?"

"I mean I guess..."

"Are you really planning to pull this same stunt fifteen times to kill everyone and make your escape?"

"Well... Maybe maybe not..."

"Am I not the first person you have pulled this stunt with?"

"Well... I... Tch... I'm done with this shit." Yutaka said, as he stomped back down the hallway, making sure to pick up his gun on the way.

I waited for a bit, making sure he was out of sight.

I decided to check the other doors in the hall.

The fire had calmed down considerably now.

I started laughing, then coughing.

"I need to go get myself fixed up."

I rubbed my cheek, healing it completely.
I looked down at my card, and ticked off some boxes.
I needed to go find him again...



"Alright then Shinku, tell me about yourself."

We were sitting at the table in the kitchen.

She had finally given in and kept her shoes on.

"Well, I'm 18, I owned a cat, and I have a condition that makes me always feel cold. That's why I have so many layers on."

"Ah, interesting, do you know the name of the condition?"

"Hmm... Nope, I forgot sorry." She looked at my fingers.

"Does it not affect your hands?"

"Oh, it does... I just have even less motor control when wearing gloves, so I put up with it."

"You mean anaemia right?" It wasn't me or Furi that said that, it was a male voice.

It came from my left side, at the end of the table Furi and I were sitting across from each other at.

"Am I right? It's gotta be anaemia!" They said.

They were wearing a white mask with a pink, unsettling smile on it.

"A—AAAAH!" I accidentally yelled.

"Ahahaha!" They laughed. "Don't worry! I'm just here to explain some things to you."

"Huh?" Furi and I said in unison, looking at him, then at each other, then back at him. "How freaky..." She mumbled.

"Sooo... Do you want to know why you're trapped on this beach?" He rested his elbows on the table, linked fingers, and rested his head on top.

"Trapped?" I asked.

"Didn't you notice?" Furi asked, looking at me. "There were big black walls surrounding this beach, I'm honestly not sure how you

didn't notice, but I mean you did say you went in here pretty soon after you woke up right?"

"Yeah, that's right..."

I had noticed the big black walls, but thought it would be easier not to bring that up right now.

"And before that, we were at this weird pink and black chequered plane." Furi said.

"Yeah, that's where my arm got hurt. Then I remember running through the forest and blacking out, then I woke up on the beach."

"Ahah! My bad my bad!" The man laughed.

"You weren't the one who cut my arm though..."

"Yep, well... Let me explain what's going on then." He stood up.

"You will call me Tokumei!" He used his left arm to flick up his cape. "I am the one who has brought you all here!" He put his gloved hands behind his masked head. "You shall abide by me!" He pointed at Furi and me. "Ahahah, okay I'll be more serious now!"

"Um, okay." Furi said, as we looked back at each other once again.

The room went pitch black.

"This is a **killing game**, there are exactly sixteen of you here. You have to try to be the last remaining *living* person. If you kill someone and get away with it, you get a hefty reward, but it will be hard, as almost all of you are highly above average intelligence. But if the others figure out who the killer is, then the killer will be punished. The punishment can be anything from death to a slap on the wrist. It all depends on how you killed, but especially my mood at the time. Back to the reward, if you get away with murder... You will get some very special information that will greatly help you in this game. I won't tell you what it is, or even give you a hint, as that would spoil the surprise! I will explain in more detail once more have died! Ahahahah! In ten minutes I'll bring you back to the main areas, as someone has already *died*. Everyone is going to be coming together to try and figure out who! So if there's anything you want

to grab from here before you will be unable to come back for a while, then you'd better do it quickly!"

The room faded back to its regular colours.

...

What the heck?

What is this man, Tokumei talking about?

A killing game?

Sixteen of us?

Hmm...

Is he some kind of delusional kid in the body of a man?

Absolute nonsense.

Oh, if we are going to be attacked, I should grab some things like Tokumei said to.

I stood up.

"Shinku? Are you okay? You are shaking quite violently..." Furi stood up and ran to my side, placing her hand on my shoulder.

I'm... Shaking violently?

I wasn't shaking, it was more likely shivering.

I was cold, one of the coldest I've ever been.

My fingers were slowly turning ice cold.

I was going pale.

I was having trouble breathing.

My head was throbbing.

I was starting to lose my balance.

"Shinku!" Furi grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eyes.

"Ahah! If you die here then it'll be such a waste!"

"I—I'm okay... I think." I planted my feet firmly on the ground to avoid falling over.

Furi also helped hold me up.

Better start looking for tools...

I wobbled over to the kitchen drawers and started checking them for anything useful.

"What are you doing?" Furi asked.

"If we are going to be taken out of here, in what, nine minutes now? I'm going to grab some stuff."

"Ahah! I can come here any time, but just to stay in spirit, I'll grab some stuff too!" Tokumei sounded excited.

He ran into the front room and all we could hear were the sounds of drawers opening and closing, him giggling, and things... smashing?

Furi ran over to the doorway to see what was going on.

"What are you doing?" Furi asked, this time to Tokumei.

"Ahah! I lied! There's only five minutes left to grab stuff." He said, tightening his bright blue gloves.

"Only five minutes?" Furi mumbled to herself.

I would want to check the walls and look around the beach a bit more, but I have to quickly grab what I need to.

I opened a cabinet and grabbed an item.

I didn't want to be seen holding it so I tucked it inside my inner coat pocket.

Hm?

What was it that I grabbed?

Haha, I'm sure you'll see soon enough.

"As you can tell, I have no plan here." Furi said, shovelling whatever she could find into a big white suitcase-like thing.

She stopped for a moment to look at me. "Are you not going to grab anything more?"

"I've grabbed all I need... Probably..." I said, fiddling with a pair of chopsticks and some salt that was laying on the bench.

I smiled at my little drawing.

"Hm, well, okay then." Furi continued filling the suitcase with items, although it seemed to be filling, it never appeared to be nearing being full... If you know what I mean.

Nevermind.

It doesn't matter.

"Ooh have you checked the fridge yet?" Furi opened it.

"I did when I first got here, why?"

“Just wanted to know if there was anything useful in there.”

The fridge wasn't connected to any power, and I don't know how long it had been that way, so I skimmed past most of the contents when I checked.

“Haha, here you are!” She tossed me an egg with a face drawn on it with a marker, which I barely managed to catch in time.

“W—What is this for?”

“If we get separated after Tokumei takes us back to the main area, I want you to keep this so we won't be as separated. We will still have these eggs to remain intact with one another. Haha, not really, but just the thought of the only connection between us being two eggs would be funny.”

“Uh... Yeah, I guess so.” I smirked, looking at the egg.

It had a funny smiling face—much unlike the horror of Tokumei's smiling face.

I plopped it in my front jacket pocket, so it peeked out a little.

“Haha! That's so cute!” She squealed.

She seemed a lot less out of character from when I first met her.

She just seemed like a girl hanging out with a friend.

“Okay! That's time!” Tokumei burst dramatically back into the kitchen. “Huhhh? Why aren't you excited?”

Furi and I were simply sitting back at the table, just like we were before.

“Are we going to be able to come back here?” Furi raised her hand.

“Nope! Not yet at least. I don't even know how you two got here in the first place!”

Wait...

He didn't?

But I remember him saying it was his fault.

Maybe he did mean about being the one who hurt my arm.

Oh well.

I'll think about it later.

"Okay! Back we go!"

Tokumei put his gloved hands on Furi and my head.

Furi and I looked at each other, I would have liked to stay in that place with her a bit longer.

But now we might be separated, and have to participate in a killing game...

Well, I grabbed what I needed to.

I should be fine.

Hopefully I won't run into the one who hurt my arm again.

Tokumei did say everyone was going to come together...

Blue, pink and purple beams of light appeared around us and obscured our view.

Tokumei seemed to duplicate himself as there were now two of him.

One was still holding my head, but the other was holding Furi's.

We slowly drifted away from each other until the beams of light dispersed.

I gave her one last little wave to say goodbye.

I don't think she saw...

I was now standing back at the chequered area.

Tokumei had let go of my head and he was now standing atop an elevated, floating floor tile.

The tile was pink.

The same pink as the paint on his mask.

He just sorta floated off towards some building complex.

I looked down and I never would have guessed who I saw running and waving at me.

It was Kyoki!!!

I held out my arms for her to run into.

"S—Shinju!! Is that you??" Her grin spread from cheek to cheek.

I nodded, even though it was pretty obvious it was me.

"Hahahaha! I haven't seen you in so-so-so-so-so long!!" She

embraced me extremely tightly.

I don't know what she meant by it being so long ago that we had last seen each other.

We were together right before I woke up here.

Well, she does have a tendency to miss me.

Haha.

I tried to hug back even tighter.

"Hey Kyoki, who is this?" There was a girl dressed in large amounts of purple and black.

A boy with lime hair and a fancy suit put his arm out to stop her from approaching and whispered into her ear.

An older man wearing a cowboy hat walked up behind them eating an orange.

He didn't say anything but he really seemed to be enjoying the orange.

Sadly, Kyoki let go of me and stepped back.

Thankfully she grasped onto my hand while turning back to the others.

"This is Shinju!" Kyoki chimed.

Shinju is the nickname that Kyoki gave me.

She said it suited me more.

"N—Nice to meet you all..." I mumbled, lowering my face into my scarf.

I wanted to hide my face completely, but I wanted to let go of Kyoki even less, so I made do.

"Hi. I'm Minami..." The girl said.

"You may call me Akui." Said fancy boy.

He nudged the cowboy man after a few moments. "It's your turn." He said through gritted teeth.

"Ah, yeah right alright. My name's Nioi! Don't you go forgettin' it now." He wiped the orange juice from his mouth and smiled.

"And I'm Kyoki!" Kyoki giggled.

"Haha, yeah I know." I whispered back to her.

A few other people walked towards us from different angles.

One had blond hair with a black and red jacket.
Another had orange hair with a suit and bow tie.
One more had white hair and a big black scarf.
Two came in next to each other, they both seemed to be kids.
One had a small cloak and wizard-like hat, the other had
blond hair and a blue duck shirt.
It isn't sixteen like Tokumei said, but it was still quite a few.
But—But where was Furi?
She was nowhere to be seen...
I put my hand on the pocket with the egg.
She is here.
Just only I knew it.
The blond man stepped forwards.
“Well then... Are we going to solve this case?”

Chapter 5 End.

Interlude 1: Spiral Parade: White

"Are we satisfied with our choices?"

"I wish we chose less dickheads."

"Bit unavoidable if you ask me!"

"..."

"Are you sure they were the most worthy?"

"Well, we shall gather them and see."

"We have to do more than just gather them."

"Will they be ready?"

"..."

"Let this be a trial of their worth!"

"We already know they're worthy. That was the whole point."

"How about we get them to do our work for us?"

"Hoohoo! How devious!"

"..."

"What work should we have them do?"

"We could just get them to kill everyone else."

"Don't be silly, where's the fun in that! We need to cause mischief, not a massacre!"

"How about we have them get information for us?"

"What kind of information?"

"We already know the locations well enough."

"..."

"Do we know the participants?"

"Mostly, yes."

"Hoohoo! There are still a few we could have some more on!"

"Like who?"

"How about the kid with the wizard hat?"

"Hoohoo! They're a funny one."

"..."

"What about the one with the other funny hat?"

"You mean me?"

"No no no, the one with the cowboy hat."

"We already know enough about him."

"..."

"What about that annoying one with the orange hair?"

"Haha! Yeah, sure."

"I'd rather avoid them as much as possible so it's a win-win really."

"Who would be the last one?"

"...How about mother?"

"Huh?"

"Oh?"

"That sounds stupendous! Great job!"

"..."

"Okay then, it's sorted."

"What will we do while they are occupied?"

"Let us make a plan to start this game for real."

"..."

"Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Indeed."

"Let's plan a murder..."

halfway there...

Keep going , the Kaigi is about to start

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The game begins to find its footing.

Interlude 2: Enigmatic Feeling

Sway...

Sway...

Sway...

The body was swaying back and forth in the wind...

Did they...

Hang themselves?

They really went through with their threat?

If I had known, I could have stopped them with my Seigyu...

Would I have however?

Likely not.

A death is what was needed after all.

Not that this side-game has affected me directly that much.

It's still annoying when the others all complain about it.

At least that's a positive.

What to do...

If I tell the others I found the body, they'll think it was me who
did it!

I suppose...

I can just leave it here.

Sure, I may be a prime suspect, but I can simply not show up to
the Kaigi!

Well, if I don't, I won't be able to defend myself either...

Are they really dead?

...

They are...

...

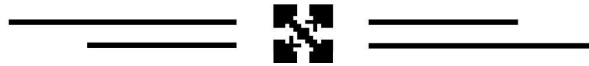
How uncomfortable.

Right in the open too.

Tokumei is going to have a good time with this one I'm sure.

To those affected by this loss, you have my condolences.

How tragic...



"You two should go."

"Okay."

"Of course."

"..."

"We will stay back a little longer..."

"Okay let's go."

"Make sure to introduce yourself properly."

"But of course!"

"..."

"See you after the Kaigi."

"See you..."

"And with a flash we disappear!"

"..."

"There was no flash."

"Cease your bickering."

"Come on, let's just go."

"Okay, bye."

"..."

Chapter 6: Who What Who What

Nioi, Akui, Kyoki and I were walking to the chequered plane for the meeting.

We had managed...

No, Kyoki and Nioi were able to contact some others to join us.

I think they just asked Tokumei to do it for them, however.

As we reached the meeting place, Kyoki ran ahead.

"S—Shinju! Is that you? Haha! I haven't seen you in so long!" She embraced a girl standing in the black and pink chequered plane extremely tightly.

"Hey Kyoki, who is this?" I asked, walking towards them.

Akui put his arm out to stop me from approaching them. "Give them a moment." He whispered.

Kyoki stepped away from the girl.

"This is Shinju!" Kyoki held both of her hands.

"n—nice to meet you all..." She mumbled, trying to cover her face with her scarf.

"Hi. I'm Minami..."

"You may call me Akui." Akui nudged Nioi after a few moments. "It's your turn."

"Ah, yeah right alright. My name's Nioi! Don't you go forgettin' it now."

A few other people approached the meeting place from different angles.

Kibo from one way.

I think it may have been Yutaka from another, as he fit the descriptions I had been given.

Ahiru and Souka came walking in next to each other.

Wait, Souka?

I wanted to run over to them but it might scare them off again.

Also the white haired boy?

I might be able to ask him some things, although I was still a

bit scared, ahah...

"Well then... Are we going to solve this case?" Kibo stepped forward.

"Better make it quick." Yutaka scowled at him.

"What could ya ever need the time for? A murder plan maybe?" Nioi chuckled.

"N—Nothing of the sort!" Yutaka crossed his arms.

"Best not joke about that, Nora has been killed." Akui said, glancing at Kibo.

There was silence.

A few seconds later it was broken by Tokumei.

He came flying on top of one of the pink floor panels from above the Dead End Complex.

He was standing, but sitting next to him was a boy wearing a top hat and cloak.

I couldn't see his face very well, as he was wearing some strange mask.

"Hello everyone!!!" Tokumei yelled from atop his tile in the sky. "Don't worry! I'm coming down now!" He did just that.

He lowered himself and the new boy to the ground. "Ah this is so great! The first step of phase one! This is so exciting!"

Tokumei paced all over his tile while making strange hand gestures.

What does he mean by phase one?

I must have said this out loud as he turned to me.

"Don't you remember? Of right! Silly me... You must have forgotten after you got knocked on the head! I'll explain it in a second, don't you worry!"

"Oh, uh, yeah sure." He said 'knocked out', just like Kibo did a few hours ago... Wow, that felt like so much longer.

"Something troubling you perhaps?" I heard an unfamiliar voice from my left.

"Ah!" I was a bit surprised and let out a small noise.

"Greetings." It was the boy that had been sitting on the tile

Tokumei flew in on.

"Ah, yes, hello."

The boy wore a top hat with a green ribbon, it seemed part of his white hair stuck out a hole in the hat.

White hair?

It's the same as the other boy...

Anyway, he wore a cloak—no, more like a cape, which had a strange pattern on the inside from what I could see.

Most strange was the mask he was wearing.

Some of it was covered by his long hair, but I could make out what seemed to be an eye and half of a mouth, both likely drawn on with something red.

There was a hole in the mask allowing his right eye to see through, along with the lower left half of his face.

"Is something troubling you?" He asked again.

"Oh no, it's nothing."

"Hoohoo! Intriguing. You may be in need of my name, correct?"

"That's right."

"Too bad! You aren't special enough for me to tell it to you directly." He glanced away from me as he said this. "I shall be informing everyone during the meeting. Speaking of which..."

"Okay let's get this started!" Tokumei yelled, making sure to grab everyone's attention. "I'm getting all excited! It's been so long since I've done one of these." His hands made a loud clap as he clasped them together, if people weren't paying attention before, they sure would have been now.

"So, what's all this about then?" Yutaka crossed his arms.

"I already told ya, didn't I?" Said Nioi.

"All you said was to meet here, I don't know what the hell this is for."

"Let me explain!" Tokumei demanded. "First, I want you all to stand on a tile each."

"And why should I?" Yutaka asked.

"Listen to my instructions, if you don't, I'll kill you." I'm sure

everyone could tell he wasn't lying.

I think the whole situation finally started to sink in.

We could die at any time.

"Right... Right..." Yutaka obliged and stepped onto a tile.

Everyone else did the same.

"It's one person per tile, this is for a safety concern, you will see in a second."

He looked across to Kyoki and Shinju who were standing very close.

They stepped apart, still holding hands.

"Kyoki, let go of her hand."

"But—"

"You should know better than anyone how things work around here, Kyoki."

"Fine." Kyoki released her grip.

"Thank you." Tokumei glanced across towards Souka. "I'm going to ignore you for now."

He floated on his tile higher into the air where everyone was able to see.

"Okay, get ready everyone!"

As Tokumei finished saying this, I heard a small and continuous whirring noise.

It looked like I was growing, along with the tile.

When I looked up again I realised I was not in fact big, but floating.

All eleven of us—twelve including Tokumei—were standing on a tile floating in the air!

"I hope you all have a good balance!" Tokumei did a little spin.

Just the thought of falling off made my knees tremble.

It's quite cold up here actually.

"W—What's going on?" Ahiru mumbled. "I don't want to fall..."

Ahiru was sitting cross legged on the tile, strongly grasping the edges.

"Do not worry! I know firsthand that you cannot fall off!" The

masked boy said. "Just watch me!"

He laughed, spread his arms and fell backwards.

"Bitch, what are you doing!?" Yutaka screamed.

"Hoohoo!"

"Who does he think he is?" Nioi mumbled.

"Ah, yes, this would be the perfect time to introduce myself!
Call me Boru!"

Boru was somehow still standing on his tile, even though he had seemed to have thrown himself off moments ago.

It might be more appropriate to say the tile was standing on him, as he was upside down, still attached to the tile.

"What the—" Akui raised an eyebrow.

"That ain't how auto-stabilisation works!" Nioi exclaimed.

"I don't even know what that is..." Ahiru mumbled

"It keeps me stable! I don't have to do any work, but I'll still be upright!" Boru started spinning.

"Oh, okay, does that mean I won't fall off?" Ahiru's grip lessened the slightest amount.

"Just look at me kid! Do I look like I'm going to fall off to you?"

"You do look like you are going to fall off!"

"Hoohoo! But I am not!"

"Ahiru, he isn't lying." Kibo was now also standing upside down on his pink tile.

"Hahaha! This is actually pretty fun!" Kyoki was spinning on all axes at an alarmingly increasing speed.

"You're making me dizzy..." Souka lifted their hand to their head.

As they did, they fell backwards.

Luckily the stabilisation kept them on the tile—although upside down.

"Ah!" Souka quickly adjusted themselves back upright as something grey and circular fell out of their backpack to the ground.

What was that?

It probably isn't important right now, but I'll have a look when

we finish this mess.

"If you don't quit messing around I'll turn off the stabilisation." Tokumei giggled.

"Wo—Waaa—" Kibo fumbled around as he started to slip.

This caused him to instinctively flip back upright where he remained stable.

"Great. Kyoki, Boru, I will drop both of you if you don't flip upright too." Of course they both obliged.

"Is no one going to tell me what the fuck is going on here?" Yutaka scoffed.

"Thank you Yutaka, I will now explain the rules..."



"Okay! So to start, these 'meetings' are called Kaigis. This will be far from the first one."

"A Kaigi, huh." Nioi mumbled.

"There are a set of rules to accompany them, failure to follow them may result in something... unfavourable."

"What do you mean by that?" Akui asked.

"Why not find out? Ahahah!" Tokumei laughed.

"I would rather not..."

"You wouldn't even know how! I haven't explained what the rules are so that you could break them yet!"

"Even more reason to not try anything."

Tokumei called several more tiles together to form a bigger platform for himself.

He drifted to the middle of the circle we were arranged in with a dim blue glow.

Slowly, his left arm lifted.

One finger was raised.

I felt a sharp sting in my ear as there was a deafening bang.

“Rule one: Violence is strictly prohibited. This is only for physical violence, go all out with emotional and mental violence.”

Another finger raised.

Again, there was a sharp bang.

“Rule two: Seigyus are allowed, as long as they don't affect others in physical or major mental ways. For example, using your Seigyu to strangle someone is not allowed, but affecting someone's vision is okay. Although, if you use your Seigyu to majorly influence someone's decisions or thoughts, you will be punished if and when caught.”

The third finger was raised.

This time I plugged my index fingers in my ears.

The bang still stung...

“Rule three: You are not allowed to leave the Kaigi once you have joined, but you are allowed to join in late. If you do not attend the Kaigi at all, you will get a document explaining everything that happened, along with an indicator showing you had not attended.”

Tokumei lowered his arm.

Like an old door—no—more similar to a frog güiro; I heard a creaking noise.

Tokumei, who was facing the other way, slowly began to rotate, being accompanied by a brown glow.

Except, his body stayed in place.

Only his head was rotating.

Looking each of us in the eye as he spun.

Of course we couldn't see his eyes, but we could tell.

“Now for the fun rules, the rules that define this game!”

Tokumei laughed.

“As we should all know by now, Nora's untimely demise is the reason we are all collected here. You all have to work together—or against each other—to attempt to puzzle out what in fact happened here! If you really aren't up to speed, this was caused by one of you. You know who you are!”

Tokumei was laughing, laughing at us, laughing at Nora.

His head had now slowed to a halt.

"Unforgivable..." Akui said. "What was the purpose of this? Own up to it now, don't waste your time."

"Hold on Akui, no need to rush, I still have some explaining to do!"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Ahah! Too bad! You already heard me say you cannot simply leave a Kaigi! They are binding."

"Tch..." Akui seemed agitated.

Well, he isn't to blame, I'm sure we all are.

Some more than others, all with different, but similar reasons.

"Moving on now, I'm getting a little agitated with you all interrupting me."

Everything went pitch black except for Tokumei who was being illuminated as if by a stagelight.

"At any point you can vote for who you think the killer is. When you do, a symbol will appear above the person you voted for. This represents how many times they have been voted for."

A small, upside down, pink, glowing triangle appeared above his head.

"Just like you see here!"

Many more symbols flashed above his head.

"Now, whoever has the most votes when everyone agrees to end the meeting—or once everyone has cast their vote—will be punished if they are the killer or not. Afterwards, if the person punished was not the killer, the real killer will be taken with me in secret. Depending on how many votes they received, they will gain some advantage, along with some very special information."

"So either way the person who is voted gets punished..." Kibo said from the darkness.

"Ahahah! Yep! So you better not mess up and choose the wrong person! On that note, if there are multiple killers, the one who most recently did the killing will be classified as the one you need to vote for. If someone is their own killer, you can vote for me as a fill

in! Same goes for if two people kill each other. Basically, if there are no current killers present, vote for me!"

"This is crazy..." Kibo mumbled.

"What if two people have the same amount of votes at the end?" Asked Nioi.

"Why don't you find out?" Tokumei chuckled.

"You said it again. It's best not to attempt anything that could have more consequences than necessary." Akui was clearly agitated.

"I don't get all this..." Said Ahiru.

"Ahah! It's fine! Don't worry! Just follow what other people do and you'll be fine!"

"Jeez—Don't go telling him that, he'll take it to heart." Said Kibo.

Tokumei simply laughed as he moved out from the middle of our circle.



"Now that we have all of those rules out of the way, let us begin figuring out the death of *our* dear friend Nora!" Tokumei was brimming with excitement. "To kick things off, maybe let's talk about the location of the body, as not all of you were fortunate enough to witness it yourself."

"Fortunate..." Nioi grumbled.

Kyoki began. "Nora was in the Dead End Complex. She was found in an empty room in one of the many buildings on the bottom floor, so you could easily peer in from the outside."

"dead end complex?" Shinju mumbled.

"It's that general collection of buildings down there." Kyoki pointed. "Nora would have been in... that one!"

Simply pointing out a building from a large collection from a distance didn't without giving any extra descriptors didn't exactly help.

Kyoki must have noticed we didn't get it, so she continued.

"It was uh... The one east of the restaurant!"

"which way is east?" Shinju asked.

"The way towards the Dead End Complex, so just further in as you would walk from the plane." Kyoki explained, touching her index finger to her cheek.

A restaurant?

I don't remember seeing a restaurant.

I could see the entire Dead End Complex from up here.

I could even see these big black walls surrounding the entire location, about a kilometre each way.

I looked over the Dead End Complex, remembering the path we took to reach Nora.

Hold on a minute...

The once crumbled grey buildings now looked like a somewhat regular portion of a city!

There were restaurants, shops, even hairdressers!

So the one next to the restaurant was the one Nora was found in?

It looks nothing like the grey prism we found her in!

It seemed to be... A pharmacy?

"Minami?" A familiar voice spoke from behind me. "I told you not to forget about me, silly." He laughed.

I wanted to turn around but was paralyzed.

He rested his head on my shoulder as he wrapped his arms around me.

"I'll see you when you get out of here okay?" He smiled as he drifted out of my consciousness.

H—How?

His presence felt real.

I could feel the warmth of his body.

As if in a dramatic slow motion I returned to my proper state of mind.

Probably just the bump on my head...

"dead end complex?" Shinju mumbled.

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Simply pointing out a building from a large collection from a distance didn't without giving any extra descriptors didn't exactly help.

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"which way is east?" Shinju asked.

"The way towards the Dead End Complex, so just further in as you would walk from the plane." Kyoki explained, touching her index finger to her cheek.

Hm?

Didn't they already say that?

"Could the pharmaceutical building lend us a clue as to the culprit?" Akui asked.

"Why would it matter? The body was just laying there." Kibo replied.

"That did seem to be the case..." Akui scratched his chin.

"If the body was just laying there, couldn't Nora still be alive?" Ahiru asked.

"Sadly not, I checked for a heartbeat and breathing, but there was nothing..." Kyoki rubbed the top of her head.

"Hm..." Nioi lowered his head.

"So Nora really is dead?" Asked Ahiru.

"Undoubtedly!" Tokumei lifted both arms to the air as if he was trying to form a 'Y' shape with his body.

I could see Nioi getting progressively more agitated.

"Who cares about that shit? Let's just hurry up and get this over with." Yutaka was clearly more agitated.

"You could at least be kind about it..." Kibo shook his head.

"Alright, fine, so what did it to her? A knife? A gun?" Yutaka scowled.

"There was no blood." Kyoki raised a finger.

"Ehhhh? That's boring as shit. So did she just have a heart attack and fucking die or something?"

"It's possible, but the circumstances would point against it. She was in a room alone, surely if she was having a heart attack she would go out into the open to try and get help."

"Well, maybe."

"Bloody hell, fine then, but what killed the bitch?"

"If you would just shut up, maybe we would have made some progress on figuring that out."

Everyone turned to see who was talking.

It was the auraless boy.

"My name is Hanekaeru, but just call me Hane."

"You don't look like you could even attempt to fly." Yutaka laughed.

"Not you. You must address me by my full name." Hane stared dead straight at Yutaka.

"A—Alright then! Have it your way fucking aviator." Yutaka aggressively put his hands to his hips, turning away like a stuck up toddler.

"Now to continue the investigation. Is it possible that Nora may have been killed by some other force? Perhaps suffocation or drowning?" Hane sat down dangling one leg off of his tile.

"I don't think it could have been drowning, as Nora was dry." Said Akui.

"Nora was dry?" Kyoki asked. "I don't remember anything being particularly dry."

Kyoki doesn't remember anything being dry?

That doesn't add up.

It looks like Nioi also noticed this fact.

Maybe if we work together we can help remind the two.

"That ain't right." Nioi held his hand out in front of himself.

"Huh?" Kyoki, along with everyone else, turned to face Nioi.

"Kyoki, remember how you found that sponge? How would you've described it?"

"Oh right! Yeah, there was this sponge laying under Nora, it was solid as a rock!"

"That's right."

Hane cut Nioi off. "Okay, there was a sponge. So what? Are you trying to say she couldn't have drowned because the sponge under her would've soaked up all of the water? Nonsense."

"I—Uh—" Nioi fumbled over his words.

Maybe he needs some help.

"That's not all, Hane."

"I would hope it wasn't." He smirked.

"There were many instances of things being dry, not just the sponges. Nioi and I had an orange in the room, and it crumbled to dust instead of being juicy."

"You were eating an orange? Where'd you get it from?"

"My pocket." Nioi patted his pocket.

"I wouldn't expect an orange from an old guy's pocket to be juicy either."

Shinju raised her hand.

"um... when i got here, he was eating an orange too. it looked very juicy."

"That's right," Nioi crossed his arms. "I took another orange outta the same pocket on our way here. It was as juicy as ever."

"Okay then, so what you're saying is that things become dry around Nora?"

"Exactly, I even sneezed directly onto Nora and it dried up instantly, leaving no trace!"

...

Kyoki tilted her head.

"You sneezed on Nora?"

"I—Yeah—"

"Not cool, Minami" Akui shook his head.

"What? Yeah, it was an accident. I'm allergic to dogs!"

"As I was saying," Hane continued. "Being dry would only make the possibility of drowning that much more suspicious."

"How so?" Nioi asked.

"Well, Nora could have drowned, and even sitting alone in a room devoid of sunlight, she would dry up perfectly fine, leaving no trace."

I hadn't thought about it like that...

It still doesn't seem right however.

"If that was true, what would Nora have drowned in? There was no water nearby, nor was there anything to hold water in!"

"Well that's easy. The water could just be dried away once Nora drowned, and the bucket or whatever could've been taken away."

Nioi held his hand out. "That can't be right!"

"Oh? How so?" Hane dangled his other leg off of the tile.

"Why would the water only disappear after Nora had been drowned? Wouldn't it have dried up before she had the chance to drown?"

"You three are making a lot of assumptions I see!" Boru interjected. "How would you know that would even happen? How do you know it is Nora causing this dryness? Would Nora's head even fit into a bucket?"

Hane sighed. "Whatever, we can't know for sure. Let's move on. How about we talk about strangulation next?"

I still had a few things I wanted to say, and I could tell Nioi did too, but we can come back to them later I suppose.

"It definitely seemed like Nora could have been choked, everytime I heard her talk, she sounded very compressed." I said.

"The dog head would most likely be causing that." Nioi said.

"Well? Did you check Nora's neck for compression marks when you took the head off?" Hane asked.

"We weren't actually able to remove the head." I said.

"Well, why's that?" Hane was swinging his legs back and forth.

"The mask seemed to meld together with Nora's skin, if we pulled hard we might have accidentally pulled both heads off." Akui explained.

"Couldn't you just cut open the damn thing and take it off like that?" Yutaka was swinging around a retractable pocket knife.

"Be careful with that, if ya accidentally hit someone, the next case will be mighty easy." Nioi chuckled.

"We didn't have a knife or anything else to cut it off with, so no, we couldn't check." I said.

"So, we can't tell if Nora was choked?" Hane sighed.

"Not yet..." Akui scratched his chin.

"How about we move onto suffocation then..." Nioi suggested.

"This one feels likely!" Kyoki smiled.

"And why might that be?" Asked Akui.

"Well that mask must be pretty hard to breathe in, so it's possible Nora wasn't getting enough oxygen while exploring and passed out. You said it yourself, Nora sounded compressed while talking, so I'm sure that would only make it even harder to breathe." Kyoki rested her head in her hand.

"But if Nora just passed out, they could have woken up again right?" Ahiru asked.

"Maybe when Nora fell over it completely stopped airflow to her brain, or she fell over and bonked her head badly." Kyoki rested her head in her other hand.

"Does anyone have any counter points?" Hane asked. "No? Then let's assume this is what killed Nora for now."

"You shouldn't just—" But I was interrupted.

"May I say something?" Boru chuckled. "When Tokumei ever so kindly came to collect me, I asked if he could take me to the crime scene, and when I arrived, Nora was set ablaze!"

What!?

That doesn't make sense, but I may as well see where he goes with it.

"Really now?" Nioi asked.

"Yup!" Boru said.

"That's silly, there's a very good reason why that simply isn't the case." Akui scratched his chin.

"Really? But I saw it with my own two eyes!" Boru pointed to his mask, one of his eyes was not visible in the slightest.

"There was no water there, that I can confirm." Nioi crossed his arms, "Minami, explain to this doofus why."

Nora couldn't have been set ablaze for one clear reason.

"My pleasure," I pointed to Nioi. "While we were investigating, Kyoki and Akui had gone away on their own, and eventually, Nioi joined them. This left me alone with the body."

"Okay and? What does that have to do with anything?" Boru tilted his head.

"Stop interrupting if you wanna hear her answer." Nioi pinched the rim of his hat.

"When I was alone with the body, after some time, it was completely removed from the so-called crime scene.

"Removed?"

"That's right. I saw the body be lifted by Nora's own floating gloves, before disappearing completely."

"Bodies do not simply disappear, Minami." Hane laughed. "And what do you mean, Nora's own gloves? Did she just pick herself up and teleport?"

Kyoki chimed in. "Nora wasn't wearing her gloves. They were completely missing."

"I still don't get it. You didn't see anyone pick Nora up right? It was just the gloves?" Hane raised an eyebrow.

"That's right." I nodded.

"So how does that help us at all? Can anyone back you up? At this point, Boru's story makes more sense."

Nioi, Akui and Kyoki all agreed that the body went missing, but none could confirm what I had seen.

"Can anyone confirm Boru's story?" Nioi asked.

Everyone looked around at each other in silence.

"Boru, why did you lie about seeing the body?" Kyoki asked.

"What in the world could you ever mean by that?" Boru raised his hand to cover his wide smile.

"You're claiming Tokumei took you to the body after we called you all together right?"

"Yup!"

"He took you to the body that wasn't there anymore?"

"Yup!"

He clearly wasn't going to give it up, so I may as well ask Tokumei.

"Tokumei?" I asked.

He took a second to wipe the front of his mask, which was covered with popcorn grease.

"Yes?" He replied.

"Is this true?"

"Ahah not in the slightest!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Why the fuck did you waste our time and confuse us, bitch!?"
Of course it was Yutaka who broke the silence.

"I was just trying to be helpful..." Boru pulled his hat down to cover his eye.

"And in what fucking world would that be helpful?"

"Well..." Boru clearly didn't have a reason and was scraping the insides of his skull to find an excuse. "I was just trying to get you all on the right track!"

"Well fuck if it worked, that was clearly the wrong track."

"I'll admit, you didn't exactly go where I had wanted you to, but I'll be blunt now." Boru was combing through his hair with his hand. "I wanted you to talk about Nora's Seigyu!"

"And you did that by lying that Nora had been set ablaze?"

"I'll admit, it wasn't my finest attempt, but look on the bright side! We're here now!"

"Can't argue with that." Hane stood up.

"Does that mean Nora's Seigyu has something to do with fire?"
Kyoki tapped her chin.

"Hoohoo! I'm not telling!"

"So ya know Nora's Seigyu? Does that not make ya instantly more suspicious?"

"Enough about me, please! As much as I enjoy the attention, I am simply not relevant!"

Akui took the first step into our new topic. "So, you are saying Nora's Seigyu is somehow relevant to this case? Even though she is dead?"

"Mhm! You were on the right track before, too!"

The right track before?

I looked over to Nioi.

Sure enough, he began to speak.

"Boru, are ya suggesting that Nora can use fire to burn or evaporate the water, hence why everything was so dry?"

"Hoohoo! Maybe!"

"I don't think that's right. If Nora was using fire, surely the room would've been hot, but it definitely wasn't."

"Maybe Nora's Seigyu was dryness, or something equivalent." Akui scratched his chin. "That could explain why everything was so... Dry."

"That sounds better!" Kyoki smiled.

"You're all idiots, y'know that?" Hane crossed his arms. "Nora couldn't've been using her Seigyu to make things dry. She was dead."

"Ahah! I think you have made a mistake there!" Tokumei laughed. "For someone to be able to use their Seigyu, they need to be alive! And not to mention concentrating."

"I know that." Nioi said bluntly.

"Hold on Nioi," Akui butted in. "You know what that implies right?"

"I do. I think that Nora is still alive."

"Don't be silly Nioi, I checked for breathing and a pulse! There was neither." Kyoki shook her head and shrugged.

"Tch... I know that, I don't have complete evidence for it right now, but that doesn't change the fact that I believe Nora isn't dead."

...

"Hoo-hoo! I still think Nora could've been on fire!"

"C'mon Boru, did I not explain it well enough to you?"

"Not in the slightest, no! You said Nora just disappeared? How could that've happened? Was there a portal or something?"

"A portal? No. Nora just like... Turned into a flat image and faded away."

"You aren't helping your case." Hane smirked.

"Maybe it was like..." Ahiru made some gestures. "An invisible portal! It's the only way!"

"An invisible portal!?"

"The fuck are you on? An invisible portal? Yeah fucking right!" Yutaka laughed at the concept.

"I hate to do it, but I'm going to have to agree with Yutaka here. A portal just seems too outrageous." Looking downwards, Kibo shook his head.

"Maybe, the portal was someone's Seigyū!" Kyoki raised her finger.

"Hoo-hoo! Finally, we're talking about Seigyūs again!" Boru clapped at an impressive rate. "And now that we are talking about Seigyūs again, I'll tell you all Nora's!" Is it strange that I think Boru would make a good grade school teacher?

Everyone looked up at him patiently.

Well, apart from Yutaka, but then again what would you expect?

"Are you really going to just tell us?"

"No..." Boru's really starting to get on my nerves. "...ra's Seigyū is **liquid!**"

"Liquid?" Nioi asked.

"Yes, liquid! You were close with dryness, but still oh so far." Boru seemed very chirpy.

"That would explain the dryness." I mumbled.

"That raises a few more que—" Boru once again cut someone off, this time Nioi.

"Now to share our Seigyus! Mine is... **Frequency!**" Boru clasped his hands and kicked one leg up behind himself.

"Frequency?" Hane raised his eyebrow.

"Mmmhm, that's right. Now, let's go in a circle!"

"I see then, I don't feel like sharing my Seigyu, so we'll continue on." Hane sighed.

"Tch, fuck off, I'm not giving that away for free." Yutaka crossed his arms.

"Alright then," It was Nioi's turn. "Don't laugh... But... **Smell**, I can control smell."

"Ooh, very nice!" Boru seemed way too excited.

"It ain't too useful..." Nioi used his hand to shield his face as if from the sun.

"Oh well, moving on!"

Next in line was Souka, who hadn't said a thing this whole time.

"..."

"Hey kid, wake up!" Boru did a large overhead wave.

"..." Souka spun to face the other way.

"Hm, not much of a talker I see, oh well continuing on."

"Um, I don't know how to describe it..." This was Ahiru, "I uh, can make a light appear, but if I really try, I can do way more..."

"Ah, okay..." Boru was getting more disappointed as more people answered.

"My Seigyu is **perception**." Akui said confidently.

"Hoohoo! That's a good one." Boru clapped one and a half times.

"Thank you Boru... On to you, Kibo." Akui was not enthused.

"Well... I have no idea to be honest." Kibo scratched the back of his head.

"Oh come off it." Yutaka pulled out his knife again. "You did that tricky bullshit when you should've burnt to death, you slipped right through that tiny-ass hole didn't you?"

"burnt to death?" Shinju mumbled.

"Yeah, this fucker got locked in a room and somehow set the whole thing ablaze and I had to come in and save him!" It's hard to believe anything that Yutaka says.

"Anyway, I don't understand my Seigyu." Kibo said, brushing his hand through his hair.

It was my turn...

"I don't... Have a Seigyu..." I mumbled.

"Yes you do!" Ahiru was standing up and pointing at me. "You just don't know it yet!"

"Alright kid, calm down." Boru put his hand out in front of himself. "Let's just move on."

Ahiru looked at him angrily then sat back down.

"Ahah, it's my turn now?" Kyoki was fidgeting. "Uhh... *Happiness...*" Kyoki let out a bleak smile.

"Right..." Boru looked saddened.

"It's your turn now Shinju!" Kyoki clapped for her.

"i—I don't know either..." Shinju covered her entire face with her scarf.

"Well that was disappointing..." Boru sat down, "You guys continue this on your own..." It sounded like he was about to cry—

"You're a baby you know that?" Hane cracked his fingers.

"Sh—Shut up!" Boru turned around to face the other way.

"You two seem close." Kibo laughed.

"We've been together these past couple days *sadly*, so it only makes sense." Did Hane just whisper the word 'sadly' there?

"Ya say you've been together, but at which location? I've scoured this whole place and have barely seen you two."

"Probably just unlucky timing, we've been to a few different places." Hane looked around.

"Ah I see..." Nioi scratched his chin.

Shinju looked like she was embarrassed and was sitting down, still covering her face.

Tokumei had drifted over to Kyoki and they were talking.

"So none of you have a portal Seigyu?" Hane raised his

eyebrows.

"Well, maybe. You, Yutaka, Kibo, Souka, Minami and Shinju didn't even give an answer." Akui tapped his foot.

"So we still have no fucking clue who killed that dog bitch?" Yutaka crossed his arms.

"What if it was Tokumei?" I asked, partially covering my mouth with my hand.

Tokumei sighed. "It seems some of you don't remember the rules I very clearly specified at the beginning... Give me a minute..."



Tokumei had retrieved a book from somewhere—hopefully a pocket—and was flicking through the pages.

"Ahah! Here we are." Tokumei had found a page, although he kept flicking, this might take a while...

"There are sixteen total people trapped here—not including me of course—with no way of escaping. Ever. Unless you are the sole survivor within the one year time limit! Yep that's right! You guys have to kill one another to escape! Now I know for some of you this is an everyday task, but it isn't that simple. Once somebody is found dead, we will hold a special event called a Kaigi! In these Kaigis you all will have to try to deduce who the culprit may be. I'll explain more rules for them then, but the main things you need to know are as follows. At the end of the Kaigi if the culprit is found out and voted for, they will be punished. But if you vote for the wrong suspect, they too will be punished, and the true culprit will be rewarded! With what? Some *very* special information. I won't tell you what it is, or even give you a hint, as that would spoil the surprise!"

"He's just reciting word for word what he said when he first explained them." Akui shook his head.

"Hm? What's that? Are you asking if it'll help you escape? That's a secret. I mean, you could try to escape, but it's impossible.

But you could try! There are lots of weird and wacky things laying around! Try creating some new science thing to create a wormhole or something ahah! It would certainly be entertaining for me.”

“Oh Phew, he cut out all the other escape attempt options, there were like, ten the first time.” Kibo rubbed his head.

“Although, we won’t do Kaigis the whole time, as it works less well with a smaller number of people. So when half of you—that’s eight by the way—” Tokumei looked at Yutaka while saying that. “—are dead, we will implement something a little... Different... You’ll have to wait and see! If you survive that long that is... You’re asking why you would kill each other? Ahahah, simple! **So I don’t get to you first...** Ahahahah! The looks on your faces! I’m joking of course, I would never kill anyone if it wasn’t for a punishment! In fact, *I’m not even allowed!*”

“So that answers my suggestion then...” I said, but Tokumei just kept on reading.

“The real reason why you would kill each other is obviously through motives! You don’t kill without a motive... Normally...” Tokumei glanced across at all of us. “Ahem. I’m going to wait a few days before handing one out, so that you guys can get to know one another! Aren’t I just so nice? But for now, there aren’t many other options. As you may have noticed, there are big black walls surrounding this area. They block off a wider area behind it which will unlock itself as less people are living. If you don’t understand, less people equals more space! Feel free to ask me anything! I’m always free. Also, killing me will only get you permanently trapped here, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“You still haven’t explained that there bit to us.” Nioi crossed his arms.

“Oh and I can’t forget your Seigyus! They allow you to control something, whether it be a type of physical object, concept, or... Anything really. But you can’t just use them willy-nilly, they take quite a bit of brain power to control. Once you get adjusted to them, they can be extremely powerful. Let’s have an example... Taste! You

could control how people perceive flavour, or people's preferences, which can be said as taste!"

That's helpful to know.

I would ask more, but it seems Tokumei is in his own world reading from this notebook.

"Other than that, everything else is fair game! You could torture someone with no punishment, as if they aren't dead, it doesn't matter! You could cut someone's arm off! Or maybe even your own! You could hide in the forest and drown yourself! You could befriend even the trees if you get tired of the people."

Ahiru looked down guiltily.

"Oh right. One last thing, some of you have been given special tasks to mix things up a bit. They are fairly specific, but if you catch someone acting peculiar and accurately guess their task, **they die**. Even if you accidentally say their task, if I overhear, it's over for them. The wording is very precise, so you don't have to worry ahah! I'll leave you to it then!"

Finally over...

"How many times have you rehearsed that?" Akui asked.

"Clearly not many if he still has to read from a notebook." Kyoki laughed.

"I didn't have to read from a notebook the first time, thank you very much. I just wrote down what I said after in case I needed to repeat it!" Tokumei held his hands on his hips.

"Bloody hell, how good is your memory?"

"Well I've never done a proper memory test myself, so I'll let you decide." Tokumei smiled with a blue glow.

Tokumei really isn't the big scary authority figure I had first seen him as.

He seemed kind of—goofy.

"So Tokumei killing Nora is out of the question right? And we wouldn't have been given motives either. So could it be possible someone guessed Nora's task correctly?" I began.

"Well it could certainly be plausible." Akui scratched his chin.

"If you guess someone's task and they die from it, do they become a killer?" Hane asked.

"Nope! Not unless I specify it to the task or something else happens, but it's not the case here!" Tokumei swirled his finger above his head.

"So if you were the person who indirectly killed Nora, you don't get punished?" Kyoki put her finger to her cheek.

"That's right!"

"Great! I knew none of you would purposely kill Nora!" Kyoki beamed.

"But Kyoki, we don't know if that is what happened." Kibo shook his head.

"There's no punishment if you were the one to say it! So whoever it was should just say!" Kyoki seemed all too happy.

Everyone was silent.

"How do we know Nora even had a task?" Boru whimpered, still sad from earlier.

"Well—we don't... But—no one else could have done it r—right? It was just us in the area!" Kyoki was fumbling over her words.

Wait a minute. That isn't true. There was someone else that only I saw near the body.

"Hold it right there Kyoki!"

"..."

Everyone was in shock, I think I may have yelled a bit loudly...

"You may not have seen them, but after we started searching around for clues, in the room with the strange box, I found you **Souka!**" I pointed sharply at Souka, who was still sitting and facing the other way, not saying a thing.

"..." Souka looked down at their lap, twiddling their fingers.

"Souka?" Ahiru asked gently.

"..." Souka still refused to respond.

"Kid, if you don't speak up we might end up voting you, as you've been acting mighty suspicious this whole time." Nioi put his

hands in his coat pockets.

"..." Still nothing.

"Come on dipshit, you're more of a fucking liability than anything." Yutaka looked down at Souka as a small pink triangle appeared above their head.

"Huh?"

"Hold on hold on... That's the same triangle Tokumei showed off when explaining the Kaigi rules! Did you just vote for Souka?" Kibo asked angrily.

"Well aren't you a bloody genius? It's obvious the kid did it, little shit won't even defend themselves."

"You're being way too irrational, Yutaka, calm down." I said calmly, although I was not calm in the slightest.

"Oh, well it isn't my fault the kid turned the bitch into a vegetable now is it?"

"Stop it! Souka didn't do it!" Ahiru yelled, putting his hands in the air. "Souka couldn't have! Souka was with me all afternoon!"

"Oh?" Hane raised his eyebrows deviously.

"Souka and I couldn't have done it! We were together in the restaurant place down there!" Ahiru pointed to the Dead End Complex where there was a small restaurant looking building.

The restaurant was the one next to the pharmacy, where Nora was said to be.

The room with the box was also one away from the one with Nora's body...

Does that mean the box room is in the restaurant?

"Ahiru, are you sure Souka didn't leave you at any point?" I asked.

"Oh, well... Souka did go to the bathroom at one point, but that's it! I swear!" Ahiru sounded genuine.

"Ahiru, don't swear! That's not nice!" Kyoki snickered.

"Ah! No! Not like that! I didn't mean it like that!" Ahiru was now very flustered.

"Tch..." Yutaka seemed to also take offence to this.

"Kyoki, stop teasing the boy, let him explain." Nioi shook his head.

"Are you sure Souka went to the bathroom, Ahiru?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Because I saw Souka in what would be that restaurant, but the destroyed version. Souka was sitting down with a box on the floor, before disappearing just like Nora did." Souka pulled their hat over their head.

"Come on Souka, If you don't start talking, you're going to be punished." Hane sighed.

"Punished?" Souka whispered. "P—Punished?"

"Souka? Are you okay?" Ahiru put his hands out.

"Pun—ished? No... Punished?"

"Looks like we broke the kid!" Boru raised his arms.

"I'll... Explain..." Souka whispered.



Souka finally started talking to us.

They already have one vote, so it's definitely possible they will be the one to get punished.

"Me and... Ahiru... Went to the restaurant... After we met up... A few hours ago..." Souka seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"Can you hurry it up? We don't have all day kiddo." Yutaka tapped his watchless wrist.

"Well actually, we do have all day!" Tokumei pointed out. "It should technically be dark by now, but since you've been here so long I've paused the cycle of day and night." Tokumei glowed a lighter blue than before. "Notice how the sun has been setting this whole time?"

"Of course you can do that..." Akui scoffed.

"Sorry 'bout that Souka, you can continue, and make sure to add all the details." Nioi sat down.

"Okay... After we met up... Ahiru told me about what he and

Minami did... Then how he went straight to our meet up spot..."

"Meet up spot?" Kyoki asked.

"We can't tell you about that!" Ahiru shook his hands and head at the same time.

"Right... So we ran over to the... Restaurant... Because Ahiru was hungry... When we entered... We saw Kibo and the White hair one..."

"You mean me?" Hane pointed to himself.

"Yes..." Souka nodded. "You and Kibo were talking... And reading some... Paper..."

"That's right! But they didn't say much and left as soon as we entered." Ahiru tilted his head.

"We went and sat down where they were... Because they had left an envelope on the table... It was empty though..."

Kibo and Hane glanced at each other.

"No it wasn't! It had some small needle things inside!" Ahiru pulled a small pin out of his pocket.

"H—Hey... Ahiru? Can you give that back?" Hane's eyes were wide open.

"Huh? Oh, sure..." Ahiru gently passed the needle to Hane.

"That's right... Ahiru found those needles... And I put some in my pocket..."

"Do you still have them?"

"No... I lost them..." Souka shook their head.

"Ah, great..." Hane put his hand on his forehead.

"I had a look at the envelope... But it was pretty boring... We got some food from behind the counter... We didn't pay though... We don't have any money..."

"Yeah but it's fine! I drew a picture as payment!"

"You drew a picture?" Boru asked.

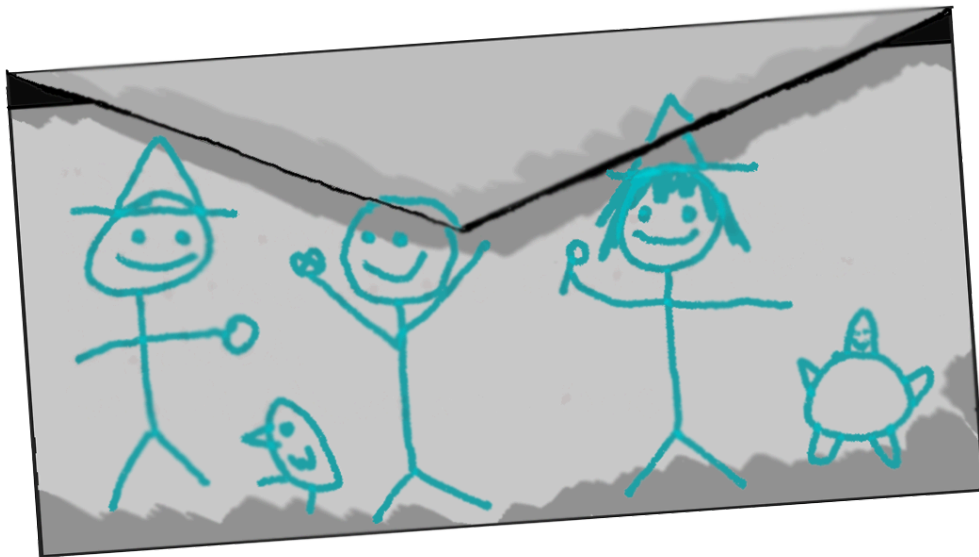
"Yeah! I think I still have it!"

"If you still have it, that means you didn't use it as payment..." Kyoki smiled.

"There was no one there to take it, so I pretended to be the

owner eheh..." Ahiru rubbed the back of his head. "I can't find the picture... Souka? Did I give it to you?"

"Hm... Here it is..." Souka pulled an envelope out of their bag.



(Image not final)

"Oh no... It's gone all damp..."

On the envelope was a crude drawing of what appeared to be three people, one bird, and something else I couldn't make out.

Two of the people were wearing hats—or traffic cones—and they were each holding something. The middle one seemed to be holding some sort of knot shape, the left had a circle, and the right had a microphone shape.

"What is the drawing of?" I asked politely.

"Can't you tell? It's of me and Souka!" Ahiru smiled.

If it was of just Ahiru and Souka... Then who was the third person?

And the other two things, were they both animals?

"There's three people there, who's the third?" I asked.

"Oh that's **Touka**!" Ahiru put his hand to his cheek.

"Touka?" Akui asked.

"Touka... Touka is um..." Souka stuttered, glancing quickly at Ahiru.

"Touka is... Uh... My... Imaginary friend!" Ahiru grinned.

An imaginary friend?

I suppose it would be normal for a kid his age to have them.

"Can you point out who is who?" Asked Kyoki.

"Yeah, uh, the one on the left is Souka, the middle one is me, and the last one is Touka!"

"Now why is Touka the only one with any hair?" Nioi seemed genuinely confused.

"Well because Touka is a girl! Obviously!" Ahiru laughed.

"Right..." Nioi was clearly still confused.

"Well, what about the animal looking things? Are they imaginary too?" Kyoki asked.

"I suppose so... The turtle and duck are Souka's and my old pets..." Ahiru frowned.

"aww, that's sweet." Shinju replied gently, still covering her mouth with her scarf. "i used to have a cat named chi-sama."

I always wanted a pet, but considering I'm allergic to many animals, it probably was for the best that I didn't.

Although I did have a snake that one time.

I don't know if I would call that a pet though...

It was more of an... Intruder.

"Is that the envelope that Kibo and Hane left?" Nioi asked.

"Umm... Yeah... There was no other paper..." Ahiru laughed guiltily.

"Not even a napkin?" Kibo sighed.

"Napkins are bumpy and bad to draw on." Ahiru stuck out his tongue.

"Can I see that?" Akui held out his hand and floated towards Souka.

"Sure..." Souka slowly passed it over to Akui.

"Hmm..." Akui scratched his chin while inspecting the

envelope. "Kibo? Hane? Would you like to share to everyone why you two had met up and for what reason?"

"Akui..." Kibo mumbled agitatedly.

"Ahah. Yeah sure. I was just curious about how we don't feel hungry or need to drink y'know? I thought Kibo might know something about it." Hane casually explained.

"Yeah, that's right. I wasn't able to help much though." Kibo nodded.

If that's really the case, then someone must have been lying.

"Now you point it out, I haven't even felt the need to eat." Nioi rubbed his belly. "Apart from my oranges of course... But that's different!"

That's right.

Earlier I noticed that I hadn't eaten in a few days after I had woken up.

"That contradicts something said earlier." I interjected. "If we don't feel the need to eat, then what was the real reason Ahiru needed to go to the restaurant? He said he was hungry, but that appears to not be true."

"Hoohoo! I'm surprised anyone else picked up on that! Very well done Minami!" Boru clapped.

"Wehh..." Ahiru made a strange sound.

"You right mate?" Yutaka raised his eyebrow.

"Sorry... I lied... I wasn't actually hungry..." Ahiru fiddled with his fingers.

"So what was the true reason you two traversed specifically to the restaurant?" Boru adjusted his mask.

"Souka just said we needed to go... And I followed..." Ahiru mumbled.

"Souka? Why did you need to go to the restaurant?" Kyoki asked.

"I... Can't say..." Souka pulled their hat over their face.

"Souka, you're acting mighty suspicious again, like last time, we need ya to speak up." Nioi said confidently as he tossed Souka an

orange, which Souka caught and put in their bag.

"Well..." Souka sighed. "When I went to the bathroom... I didn't actually... Like with hunger... We don't need to..."

"Huh?" Ahiru looked up.

"You see... There's this box... In the restaurant... Well not in the restaurant... But where it would be... In the run down version... But when I got to it... And tried to use it... Minami saw me and I got scared... So I went back..."

"You say you went back," I held my finger out. "But you did so in a peculiar way. You looked like you turned into an image, and faded away..."

"Ahah! Do you mean **shifting**?" Tokumei asked.

"Shifting?" I asked.

"I'm honestly surprised Souka was the first to figure it out!" Tokumei held out his hand. "Although Hane did figure it out too."

"Can you explain what shifting is?" Nioi raised his eyebrow.

"Sure thing! Shifting can only occur inside of the Dead End Complex! It allows you to move through areas in ways normally you shouldn't be able to. I'm talking about the **Fourth Dimension!**" Tokumei raised his arms.

"The fourth dimension? Do you mean time?" I asked.

"Ahah! Not exactly. I'm talking about a fourth spatial dimension!" Tokumei clapped.

"What does that even mean?" Ahiru put his hand on his cheek.

"Oh boy, this might take a bit of explaining..." Tokumei sighed. "So, you are aware of the third and second dimensions right? How two dimensional space is flat with no width, like a piece of paper or a TV screen? And how the third dimension has width, like how a cube is just a square but extended out into the third dimension? The fourth dimension is the one beyond that."

"What." Yutaka said bluntly.

"Imagine you are a two dimensional person, living on a piece of paper, and I were to push a cube through your realm. You would see a square suddenly appear, and a bit later, disappear. You would

be living on a slice of the three dimensional space. It's like how you can stack multiple sheets of paper on top of each other, all with different images, to create a flipbook! Now think like that but higher. If I were to push a four dimensional hypercube through our realm, you would see a cube suddenly appear then later disappear right? Think of it like pushing yourself through our different three dimensional slices in a fourth dimensional way. It would be like taking our cube we live in, and creating a flipbook out of multiple versions of those! This is what we call shifting!"

"What the fuck." Yutaka again said bluntly.

"Now as Minami thought, the fourth dimension is often mistaken to be time! And to make things even more confusing, it is! Each third dimensional flipbook page represents a time period of location! You see how from up here the buildings look well built up? And from below they look all grey and crumbled? That's because when I lifted you up on your tiles I shifted you through the fourth dimension!"

"So that's why they look all different from up here?" I asked.

"Yuppumundo!" Tokumei spun around with his arms up like a blender.

"The fuck? Have you gone bloody mental mate?"

"I mean, by now probably!" I'm not sure if Tokumei was bragging or asking for help...

"Ah." Ahiru smiled blankly.

"W—What were we talking about?" Nioi rubbed his face.

"Do you mean before the shifting explanation?" Tokumei asked.

"Like you could even call that an explanation..." Kibo groaned.

"Do you not understand?" Tokumei asked sadly.

"Were we supposed to?"

"Well, I'm sorry you all don't understand the simple concept of both concepts of four dimensions working hand in hand in a very specific location with boundaries for the area and time period!" Tokumei crossed his arms and sat down, turning away from all of us

as he drifted back to above his throne. "Do you want me to explain it to you again?"

"Surely you are teasing, are you not?" Akui scratched his chin.

Tokumei sighed and began to speak.

"All you need to know is that you can move through and see the Dead End Complex differently depending on how much you shift..."

"How do we know where we shift to?" Kibo asked.

"Well, you'll see things morphing around you until you decide to stop shifting, then it'll basically just be like you're in a new area... Ooh I have a good analogy, when you shift, it's like hopping into an elevator. But each new floor is the same as the previous, but slightly ahead or behind on the timeline!" Tokumei stood back up to face us. "Right now, there are only two different places you can shift to. The top floor—where we are now with all of the well designed infrastructure—and the bottom floor—the rubbly mess you found Nora in. More floors will be available when you get better at shifting!"

"Well that's neat and all, but how do we actually make use of shifting, or shift in general? Kyoki asked as she stretched.

"You can deal with that after the Kaigi. Ask the ones that figured it out, I don't know. Can you please hurry up and finish the Kaigi? Almost all the clues are in place right? I'll give you maybe... Ten more minutes to bring up anything else you know before I ever so kindly help piece it together with you!"

"Eh? You'll help us all out?" Nioi asked.

"Yes, and the clock is ticking," Tokumei winked, turning his mask into the face of a clock. "Hurry! Spit out all the information you have about these happenings!"

"Alright then. I'll start." I adjusted my hoodie.



"So we know now that what I saw—Souka and Nora disappearing—was them shifting, as confirmed by Tokumei. He said the only ones who knew how were Souka and Hane. Does that not mean it has to be one of them?"

"Ahah! A correction is needed! I did not say it was only Souka and Hane, but just that they were the first! Once you figure it out, it is simple to tell someone else how to do it too!"

"I have one more question about shifting actually..."

"Shoot!"

"When I was in the quarters, I saw Nora and Akui. Nora left by climbing up the ladder, but I was pulled back. I saw Akui step towards me, but the same thing happened to him. He became an image and faded away. You said shifting can only occur in the Dead End Complex, but this was in the quarters. What's up with that?"

"Aha, it's simple Minami. The quarters are part of the Dead End Complex, did you not note their similar features?"

"I see..."

"Minami?" Akui adjusted his tie. "You say you were pulled, correct? It was by your ear, just like how it was when we first saw Nora's body. Would you care to elaborate on that story?"

"There's a rogue ear puller?" Ahiru covered his ears quickly.

"Well, I was leaving the quarters with Akui, where we met Nora, and I got pulled back by the ear, and ended up in Nora's quarter with Ahiru."

"Is that how you got there?" Ahiru was still covering his ears.

"Yes, that's when we looked around, and found a sponge just like the one we found at Nora's body!"

"Maybe Nora just likes cleaning?" Kibo suggested, very unoriginally.

"The sponge was also rock hard."

"So the hardness of the sponge doesn't relate to if Nora is there?"

"Well, Nora had just come from her quarter I assume, meaning Nora was with the sponge only a few minutes before."

"Right..." Kibo mumbled.

"When we found Nora's body, I felt the same hand pull on my ear, however, I wasn't shifted this time. The hand felt... Silky. Like a glove."

"Does that mean the person who took Nora away wearing her own gloves was the one who pulled your ear?" Nioi asked.

"No, I don't think so. The first time it happened, Nora was wearing her gloves as she ascended the ladder. The hand felt the same both times they pulled me."

"You said silky, right? Nora was wearing mittens." Kyoki said.

"That's true... They felt thin, almost skin tight."

"Hey everyone! Hold your hands out in front of you!"

Everyone did so, except Yutaka, but Nioi promptly hit him in the back of the head.

Now everyone was holding out their hands.

Boru was wearing black, skin tight gloves that went all the way up to his elbows.

Hane also wore black skin tight gloves, but they stopped at his wrists.

Yutaka had no gloves, but had a large burn on his right hand.

Nioi didn't wear any gloves, nor did Souka or Ahiru.

Akui wore green skin tight gloves.

Kibo wore red gloves, also skin tight.

Kyoki and I weren't wearing gloves, but Shinju was wearing mittens.

Tokumei was wearing cyan latex looking gloves.

"Yutaka? Are your hands alright?" Nioi asked.

"Fuck off. They're fine, got it?" Yutaka put his hands into his pockets.

"So out of the people wearing gloves it can't be Shinju or Tokumei, as they don't fit the description. But Boru, Hane, Akui and Kibo do." I scanned my eyes across the four.

"I think we can rule out Akui right?" Kyoki looked at him.

"I think so too." I nodded. "That leaves Boru, Hane and Kibo."

I don't think I would be able to narrow it down any further here.

"Hoo-hoo! My my... You really think it could be one of us?" Boru snickered. "Nora still isn't off the table you know! Maybe it could have been someone we have yet to meet!"

"Dumbass, it obviously couldn't be Nora, the bitch is fucking dead." Yutaka shook his head at Boru's stupidity.

"There is a chance it could be someone we haven't met yet." I said.

"Yeah, but that'd be boring!" Boru tilted his head to the side.

"hey, that's not kind..." Shinju mumbled.

"Either way, surely you can rule me out too, right? I was nowhere near the area at the time!" Boru tilted his head to the other side.

"Well we don't know that!" Kyoki held out her finger. "Now we know about shifting, it's possible that you could have been right there, just out of our sights!"

"That's simply creepy! I'm not like that!" Boru laughed to himself. "Why would I even want to touch your ears? That's incredibly strange."

"Why would anyone? It's strange either way." I shrugged.

"So we know at least one of you three pulled Minami's ears, and Kibo and Hane were in the restaurant next door. But would any of them have been in the quarters with Minami the first time?" Akui scratched his chin.

"Are we done here?" Yutaka asked.

"There is one more thing I'd like to add."

Yutaka groaned.

Rude, but anyway.

"I'm not sure exactly what it meant... But I checked when I was alone, and Nora still had a very faint aura..."

"Do you care to elaborate on what you meant by 'aura' again?" Hane asked.

"Huh? I don't know, I haven't really thought too much about it.

Each person has an aura. You get to see a bit of their personality by being near them." I explained, although I'm not sure why I needed to.

Wait a minute...

Whatever I'll just ask him after.

"I know none of you are, but I'm with Nioi. I believe Nora is still alive in some way... Nora's Seigyu being liquid... Everything being dry... Even the faint aura... I don't know exactly how, but I just can't believe that Nora's dead. We don't even know how it happened!"

Nioi perked up. "I have a strong intuition that I've trusted my whole life, the circumstances just don't line up in my head. Until I know who did it, and how it happened, I can't accept that Nora is truly dead."

I know I sound like a broken record, but I just couldn't make sense of all of the details we had.

It was like a puzzle with missing pieces.

The biggest pieces we were missing were the why, the how, the who...

At least we knew the where, what and when...

At least I hoped we did.

"Hey Kibo, Boru, Hane. Do you have anything you want to add?" Akui asked.

"We don't have anything we want to contribute that hasn't already been said, alright?" Kibo said blankly.

"Fine, whatever, have it your way." Kyoki sighed.

Those three were the clear suspects.

Suspects of killing Nora?

Maybe.

The only real thing we had to go off of was the texture I felt when my ears were touched, and that doesn't seem very reliable.

"I'm sure we'll be able to piece this case together without any of your contributions." Nioi crossed his arms.

"Go on, I'd like to hear how this whole case happened myself. If you can figure it out without me having to do any work, I'd gladly appreciate it." Hane crossed his arms too.

"Are you all done here? Is it finally time to piece everything together?" Tokumei clapped.

"Fucking hell. About damn time. That was the longest fucking ten minutes I think I've ever lived." Yutaka seemed exhausted after doing literally nothing this whole time except being a nuisance and bullying kids.

"Ahahah! Trust me, it wasn't. Anyway! Let us begin the final part of this Kaigi! Who will be punished? Will the real culprit be revealed? Will everyone be able to work together as a team to figure out the murder of their friend? We'll find out! Right after these br—"

"You a fucking infomercial or something? Who gives a shit? Just get on with it." Yutaka, along with most of us, seemed ready to be done with this.

Alright then, here we go.

Chapter 6 End.

Chapter 7: This Is Is This?

"Okay then! Since this was such a mess, I'm going to help you through each step of the way, nice and organised!" Tokumei looked excited. "You were horrible at this! My first was much more organised. You lot could barely stay on the same topic for half a minute!"

"Cut us some slack wouldya? We've got some dumbasses among us." Hane flicked his head back and sighed.

"And children too." Akui shook his head.

"I wonder if you can be in both categories!" Boru laughed.

"Calm down, talking like that'll make ya the next victim." Nioi looked down.

"Okay then... That took a different turn than I was expecting!" Tokumei nervously chuckled. "So, first things first, who was the victim?"

"Ain't that obvious?" Nioi tilted his head.

"It should be, I'm just making sure everyone is on the same page here."

"That would be Nora." Kyoki raised her hand.

"Very good! Now where was the body?"

"The Dead End Complex, more specifically the pharmacy but shifted into the decrepit version." Akui scratched his chin.

"What about the cause of death?"

"It was... Um... We never actually figured that out, did we..." Kyoki looked downwards.

"Not like we even need to..." Nioi mumbled.

"Okay then! How about who was in or around the area at the time?"

"That would be me, Kyoki, Akui, Nioi, Ahiru, Souka, Hane and Kibo, right?"

"Don't forget Nora!" Boru laughed.

"Yeah, sure..."

"Now let's figure out each person's alibis!" Tokumei clapped and did a little hop.

"Alibis?" Ahiru twiddled his fingers.

"Well you need to know who it isn't to know who it is, right? Guilty until proven innocent!" Tokumei chuckled.

"Uh, right. Should we say what happened right before we met up?" Kyoki asked.

"Go ahead." Said Nioi.

"Well, right before I met up with Akui and Minami, I was waiting near the chequered plane, I heard a loud bang, I looked around for a little, then a little later, Akui and Minami showed up."

"Was anyone else there to back you up?" Nioi asked, raising his chin.

"Uhh, I'm pretty sure Souka was there. A bit after the bang, when I went back to waiting around, Ahiru came out of a Hari and they ran off towards the Dead End Complex. That was probably only ten seconds before Akui and Minami showed up, but it was after the bang." Kyoki took a deep breath.

"Shh..." Souka shushed Kyoki. "Don't give away our meeting place!"

"I do remember seeing Kyoki though." Ahiru added.

"Well, what's all this about a bang then?" Yutaka scoffed. "Was it a gun or something?"

"Don't be stupid, the body had no wounds!" Hane laughed.

"Well it doesn't mean the gun was shot at Nora, maybe it missed." I suggested.

"I don't think so, the only person we know who has a gun is Yutaka." Kibo shook his head.

"Yeah fucking right I am." Yutaka pulled a gun out of his back pocket. It was only small and had a silencer.

"i... uh... can you put that away?" Shinju mumbled.

"Nop—" Nioi hit Yutaka again. "Ow! Fine!" Yutaka slid the gun back into his pocket.

"There's no way that gun could have made that loud of a

bang." Kyoki crossed her arms and shook her head.

"Not to mention the silencer." Nioi crossed his arms.

"A silencer doesn't make it completely silent, however." Akui said.

"It would still be dampened quite a lot. We heard it from in the quarters, which was far underground."

"Then what caused the bang?" Hane shrugged.

"Maybe Nora dropping to the floor?" Boru giggled.

"What about a firework?" Kyoki's eyes shone.

"Maybe you're all imagining it." Nioi shook his head.

"No, I don't think it could be any of those." Akui scratched his chin.

"How so?" Hane asked.

"Just, none of them seem right..." Akui continued. "But I have a theory that makes a little more sense..."

"Go on, spill the beans." Hane smiled.

"A Seigyu. What if the bang was from a Seigyu?" Akui tapped his temple.

"Well, whose Seigyu would be able to cause a bang like that?" Kyoki asked.

"Someone who was just oh so willing to share their Seigyu earlier... **Boru...**" Akui smiled. "Do you recall? Boru said his Seigyu was frequency. And of course it could have been from something we have no knowledge about, but this seems to line up. If you can control frequency, you sure as hell could make a sharp sound. Not only that, but no one was aware of Boru's whereabouts, yes? Also, he is wearing gloves, which means he could possibly be the mysterious ear puller. Is there anything else your Seigyu can do, Boru?"

"Hoohoo! You got me! I did indeed clap my hands together, causing a big bang!" He clapped his hands, causing a familiar sound to ring throughout our ears.

"Gah... Give us some fucking warning next time!" Yutaka rubbed his ears.

Akui's grin reached from ear to ear.

"There you have it everyone! The one who caused the bang was Boru!"

"Hoo-hoo! Hold on a second there Akui, sure I made the bang, but that doesn't mean anything! I was nowhere near the Dead End Complex! I was over in the field when I clapped!"

That doesn't sound right...

"Boru?" I began. "If you were in the field when you made the bang, why when you were brought here by Tokumei, did you come from over the Dead End Complex?"

"Silly girl! I told you I asked Tokumei to see the crime scene, did I not? Besides! There was more than enough time to make my way there!"

Akui held out his index finger, shushing Boru.

He was acting as if *he* was the main character. "I have one more thing to say before we get too far off track. I know the culprit."

Everyone could only watch as Akui smiled.

He knows the culprit?

How?

I still need to narrow it down a little bit more...

"Go on, tell us who you think the culprit is." Hane smiled blankly.

"I'll wait a little first, you shouldn't have to rely on me. If I can figure it out from what information we have, then surely you all could, right? Especially you Nioi." Akui continued to grin.

"Especially me? Right..." Nioi closed his eyes and sat down.

We all watched him think for a few moments.

"You really do suck at this, don't you?" Hane laughed. "Go on Nioi, tell us your wild theory now! Expose the culprits!"

"H—Huh?" Nioi made his way back up to his feet. "Okay then... So where do I start...? Ahem. I strongly believe that Nora is in fact not dead. I mentioned it earlier, but I didn't have the evidence just yet. Now I think I do."

"Huhh?" Kyoki scratched her head.

"Come on now Kyoki, you were the first to inspect the body,

you even had it on your lap when I walked in! Nora's Seigyu is liquid right? Well, according to Boru—but it all lines up so I think we can trust that. What if... Nora used her Seigyu to concentrate all the blood—a liquid she would theoretically have control over—in her body, to her brain, lungs, and everything else needed to *play dead* for some time. Now, it might sound far-fetched, but this is entirely possible. Nora wears a mask so we wouldn't be able to see any minute movements like twitching of the eye or feel air passing through her nose. Nora definitely could have still been breathing, just very shallowly. It really wasn't a long time Nora would have had to keep it up either, it was only about ten minutes max from you lot finding her, to her disappearance. Also, I think I can explain the dryness."

Nioi smiled and took a breath before continuing. "Perhaps the constant use and accumulation of liquid manipulation at Nora's location caused the surroundings to become dry, as the moisture was needed for Nora to stay conscious. Now, Minami, Akui and Kyoki were together the whole time, none of them could have snuck up and killed Nora then. Souka and Ahiru were together the whole time, except for when Souka went to the bathroom, but we know that that's when Minami saw Souka at the box. The only people unaccounted for in the area are Kibo and Hane, who left the restaurant as Ahiru and Souka arrived. We don't know where they went, but this would put them in the perfect spot to be in the area, ready to shift Nora away. Minami, you said you heard the bang while in the quarters, and you saw Nora after that, right? This means Nora was alive after the bang, and died in the time of you seeing her there, and finding her body. Kyoki saw Ahiru come out of the quarters, meet up with Souka and run off to the Dead End Complex together after the Bang. Surely you would've seen Nora come out of the Hari too, right? Minami, Akui, Nora and Ahiru were all in the same quarters. You said, you had a look around directly after the bang, this was the perfect opportunity for Nora to go by unnoticed. Whether this was intentional or not, we don't know.

Maybe Boru really did make the noise from the field to lure people over there. Ahiru and Souka were shifted into a different version of the Dead End Complex than Nora, so they likely wouldn't have seen Nora up ahead if they followed the same path. Hane was said to be able to shift, and you, Ahiru or Souka, see where Hane and Kibo went after leaving the restaurant?"

They looked at each other.

"I think they went left out the door. I saw them go past the big window when we were sitting at the booth they were just in."

Nioi was still catching his breath.

"Thank you Ahiru. The restaurant and pharmacy are both on the left side of the road. If they went out the door and walked left, they would be going straight towards the pharmacy, where Nora may have already been. So Hane can shift, Nora being taken away was said to be by shifting. When Nora was shifted away, she would end up in the pharmacy. This would be perfect, as they could then make sure Nora was back to health after playing dead for so long. We can also prove they stayed in the area and didn't just wander off after leaving, as Minami's ear was pulled by a glove we determined to belong to either Boru, Hane or Kibo. This was after they had seen the body. It all lines up... So that's why... The culprit, no... Culprits! Are Hane, Kibo, Boru... And Nora! Like Hane said earlier, 'culprits', why would he say that if he wasn't in the know. A classic Freudian slip. All we are lacking is a motivation..."

Nioi sat back down, took out an orange, and drank the juice he squeezed from it.

"Actually..." Akui chimed in. "We do know the motivation. On the envelope that Ahiru drew a picture on, you can just barely make out some text." Akui cleared his throat. "*As you know, the Spiral Parade's second task is to cause chaos. Meet Hane at the location previously disclosed. We will discuss more there.* And on the back it says *NHK*." Akui chuckled.

"NHK? Like the TV channels?" Kyoki laughed.

"No, Kyoki. NHK seems to be the initials of the people involved.

Nora, Hane and Kibo. Whoever wrote them in that order must've had a laugh though." Akui smiled.

"Why didn't you tell us that earlier, Akui?" I asked.

It definitely could've saved us some of Nioi's long rant...

"You see, the envelope was still damp. I needed to let it dry first before I could make out the words. By the time I could, Nioi began to talk."

"Right... And can I ask, what is the Spiral Parade?" I wasn't sure if it was just something I had missed, or if it's crucial information to figure out this Kaigi.

"Uh..." Kibo struggled to get any comprehensible words out.

"It's just the name Kibo and I use for our pair, y'know?" Hane tilted his head to face Kibo.

"Aww, why are you leaving me out?" Boru whined.

"Oh, and Boru too."

"What's all this about a second task? And surely Nora would be included too, no? Why would you be setting tasks in what you initially labeled yourself as a pair?" Nioi had finished another orange.

Kibo continued to stutter.

"I see what you're getting at. You're saying this was all devised and planned by us?" Hane leaned forward.

"Precisely." Nioi nodded.

"You think that Nora is still alive, despite clearly being dead?" Kibo crossed his arms.

"Exactly." Nioi nodded more aggressively.

"Everything just lines up, right?" Akui shrugged.

"Obviously not! How could it? All that just simply isn't feasible in this amount of time! That would need a lot of planning, right? It's only day three isn't it? That was such a stretch in logic! How would you know that letter had anything to do with any of this? How do you even know Nora can do that with her Seigyu? Boru is way more suspicious than either of us combined! You're all stupid? I was just in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and you think I set up and

planned this whole fake murder? At that point, why wouldn't I just kill Nora for real? And besides, Nora was obviously dead! Didn't you see the body? What would even be the point?" Kibo's jaw was tight, and he was pulling at his hair.

"It says here that the point was to cause chaos, this certainly was chaotic wasn't it?" Akui chuckled.

"Surely this seems all too extravagant right? You still haven't even figured out half of the things that happened, you're just choosing to breeze past the other things to make it seem like we did it." Hane shook his hand, dismissively.

Well there certainly was a lot we didn't touch on...

I'll admit, it did seem like a bit of a stretch.

"Like the gloves for example! Why would we take Nora's gloves just so we could shift her away, disguising our own gloves? Couldn't we have just taken off the gloves? It just seems too stupid." Kibo continued.

"Maybe your hands would just be too recognisable, even without the gloves, so you needed another set to hide them." Akui smiled. "You seem pretty flashy, Kibo. Even the tips of your hair are dyed red. I wouldn't be surprised if your nails were too."

"S—Shut up!"

"What if being stupid was the point?" Kyoki laughed.

"Hm?" Hane looked up.

"You said you wanted to cause chaos, a way to do that would be making a stupid case with no culprit, right?"

"What do you mean no culprit?" Yutaka frowned.

"There isn't a culprit if no one is dead right?" Nioi smiled.

"If there isn't a culprit, then who the hell do we vote for?" Yutaka looked agitated.

"Well, why not the two that set up this whole mess?" Nioi laughed. "Earlier Tokumei said to see what happens if there is a tie right? Well why not?"

"You want us to vote for both Kibo and Hane?" Kyoki was taken aback.

"Pff that's silly! There's no way that would ever work out. None of you are coordinated after all." Boru giggled.

"It could still easily be Boru who set this all up and is framing us! Why is he not a culprit!?" Was Kibo starting to cry?

"There was no B on the envelope, was there?"

"That's circumstantial! You're basing who's going to be punished off of a stupid piece of paper!?"

...

"Yes, Kibo." Akui smiled wider.

We all collectively decided to ignore Kibo's meltdown and continue on.

"This wouldn't have worked out if Yutaka didn't vote for Souka earlier, as there would have been an odd number, but thanks to that, we can evenly split the votes." I thought outloud.

"But couldn't Hane and Kibo vote for Souka as well?" Kyoki asked.

"Well, there are ten of us able to vote, and if we assume that both Hane and Kibo will vote for Souka in a last ditch attempt to not get punished, then Souka would get three votes. But there's still eight of us left, split that into two groups and we get four for each. It works out perfectly!" I smiled.

"But what if someone chooses to vote for Souka instead, and then Souka would get punished..." Ahiru frowned.

Akui sighed. "There's no way to prevent that from happening, but if we trust one another, we can punish the troublemakers. Good thing we don't need Yutaka to cooperate." Akui chuckled.

"Hey hey! I'm not done with this!" Kibo interrupted. "Why are we the culprits? Nora isn't even dead! Why are we going to get punished?" Nioi simply laughed.

"So you admit it." Nioi smiled, crossing his arms.

"Huh?"

"You just said Nora isn't dead. You didn't seem to like the idea of entertaining my theory earlier, you even pointed out the fact the body seemed dead. So why would you be so on board with the idea,

unless you already knew.” Nioi looked at Kibo.

“So, Nora really isn’t dead?” Kyoki gasped.

“You slipped up right at the start of this Kaigi Kibo.” Akui crossed his arms. “You commented that the body was just laying there, but how would this have been possible if you weren’t there before us to see, unless you were the one to set it up? We hadn’t mentioned the state of the body yet. The last time Nora was seen, was by me and Minami, in the quarters. She was leaving directly after she would have heard the bang.”

“W—Why couldn’t it have been Ahiru!?” Kibo pointed at the kid.

“What!?” Ahiru pointed to himself. “Why me!?”

“Well—Minami said her ear got pulled in the quarters too, right? Only Ahiru and Akui were there, and it wasn’t Akui, so it would’ve had to have been Ahiru! Ahiru was also left alone when Souka went to the bathroom! So—So!”

...

Kyoki laughed. “You really are grasping at straws here, aren’t you?”

Ahiru held out his hands. “I don’t have gloves, dingus.”

Kibo’s face was nearly as red as his gloves.

“Can you just hurry up and vote?” Hane groaned.

“W—What?” Kibo whipped his head to face him.

“Yeah, it was Kibo and I, just hurry up and vote so we can get this over with.” Hane swung his legs over the edge of the tile.

“Hane..?” Kibo locked eyes with him. “What are you..?”

“Oh, well... Alright then.” Nioi looked at Hane. “Minami, Kyoki, Shinju and I will vote for Kibo. Akui, Ahiru, Souka and Boru can vote for Hane.”

“Any objections?” Kyoki looked around. “Everyone knows who they’re voting for?”

Everyone nodded, except for Kibo.

“Hane, w—what’s wrong with you? Why did—why did you say that?”

"It was obvious we had been caught, I didn't want to listen to you blabber on about why we couldn't have done it when we obviously did." Hane rolled his eyes to the back of his head as he fell to his back.

Kibo sighed. "You—whatever then. What are we going to do with Nora?"

"I have Nora ready for when the voting has concluded!" Tokumei clapped and hopped, like a toddler receiving an ice cream.

"Hey Kibo..." Boru said in a whispery voice—but also making it clear he wanted everyone to hear—voice. "You could always just vote for Hane and get him punished without you!" Boru giggled.

Nioi sighed. "Just take the blame, come on now. Do what's right and don't vote for Hane."

Kibo sat down, punching the tile he was sitting on.

After about a minute of silence, he stood back up.

"Whatever... Let's just get this over with..."



The tension was surprisingly low.

Now that we supposedly know that Nora is still alive, we are just left to have the culprits punished.

Although, all they did was cause a little bit of trouble, they didn't actually kill anyone.

Well, not yet.

It was time to vote...

I had to vote for Kibo, when I was ready, the same triangle symbol appeared above his head, just like Souka.

I had voted...

The triangle appeared above Hane's head, one after another the symbols above each of their heads changed from a triangle, to a figure eight like shape.

The same happened to Souka.

The symbols once again changed, this time to a U shape.

The same happened to Souka. They all had the U shape.

If all goes according to plan, both Hane and Kibo's votes will end in a tie.

I wonder how they will be punished...

Surely the punishment won't be that bad right?

They didn't even kill anyone...

The U shape above Hane's head turned to a semicircle.

If the symbol above Hane's head changes again, then Kibo must have betrayed Hane...

But then, who else would have voted for Souka?

Finally, Tokumei raised Kibo, Hane, and Souka higher into the air.

He lined them up for everyone to see.

Finally...

Finally...

Finally...

The symbol changed...

Souka was drifted back down into our group.

Kibo and Hane were still left overhead...

"Well then..." Tokumei said bluntly. "It seems it's time for a punishment." His mask glistened red around the left eye.

Both Hane and Kibo had semicircles above their heads.

Kibo and Hane accepted their fate.

They had both tied in votes...

"Everyone, are you ready to watch?" Tokumei sounded smug.

"what's going to happen to them?" Shinju mumbled, half covering her eyes.

"I'm not sure. But I sure as hell wouldn't want to experience whatever it might be." Kyoki tried to chuckle but could only let out a small squeaky sound.

"I'm surprised you two aren't trying to resist at all!" Tokumei floated over to behind the two raised up for all to see.

"It's fine, I'm actually kinda pumped to see how we're punished." Hane brushed his hand through his hair.

"What's the point in resisting? It'll only make things worse than it already is." Kibo sighed.

"Well... Yes. That's right." Tokumei flicked the strand of hair sticking out the side of his head. "If you struggle, the punishment will be much more painful!"

"That implies it will be painful either way." Hane laughed nervously.

"Ahahah... Well let's get this underway, yes?" Tokumei raised his hand to the air. "I've even prepared a special guest!"

A special guest?

Does he mean—?

"Ahah..." Tokumei put his fingers up to his mask and whistled a tune.

What was the point of that?

His fingers wouldn't help at all.

He twirled his finger around at the side of his hip. "Woof woof! Come here doggy!"

A tile appeared beside Tokumei.

There was a familiar silhouette perched on top.

That's right.

Nora.

"What is this? Some kind of mannequin or hologram?" Yutaka raised his eyebrow.

"Have you. Not been. Listening?" Nora grunted.

"Suspend your disbelief! Nora is truly alive! Just possibly suffering from blood clotting and ischemia!" Tokumei pointed to Nora. "In fact, Nora can barely stand! So performing this punishment will be all the easier..."



A small melodic jingle played from above.

I'm not sure from where above, as there was no speaker or anything.

It was just like how I heard him speak to me when I first got here.

I felt a sudden rush of movement as my tile floated across to be in a line with everyone else's.

We were all lined up, preparing ourselves to bear witness to what is about to unfold before us.

Tokumei started to laugh as many wires fell from the sky.

They jiggled and wiggled, as if they were dancing.

One by one they multiplied.

One by one they grabbed onto Kibo's, then Hane's, and even Nora's limbs.

Kibo and Hane were both slowly squeezed to immobility.

Their tiles fell all the way to the floor.

You could barely hear them land from all the way up here.

Hane and Kibo were being suspended midair by some thread.

Nora still had a tile to stand on though.

No, nevermind.

Nora's fell too.

Although they weren't being restrained, Nora still had wires wrapped around her arms, legs, and even every finger.

Nora began to fall.

Although only at a very low speed.

Tokumei pulled out a small wooden cross with a puppet attached.

He lifted it slightly higher, and too did Nora.

He laughed.

"Are you all ready to watch this show?" Tokumei started aggressively bobbing the puppet up and down.

Nora was bobbing too.

Nora waved her left arm through the air above her.

In her hand appeared a large greenish ring with a red circle attached to it.

Nora did the same with their right, another ring and circle, but the colours were inverted.

Red ring with a green circle.

First it was Kibo.

He was dragged through the air to infront of Nora with Tokumei to his left.

A wire grabbed the top of Kibo's head and jerked it back.

The red ring opened up like a claw.

Nora's arm was forced down, putting the ring around Kibo's neck.

Ah, so it's a collar?

It's not every day you see a dog put a collar on a person.

A long white wire extruded itself from the green circle.

It connected to the red circle on the other collar.

Kibo was thrust back like a yoyo.

Instead of coming back, it was Hane who was pulled to the same position where Nora had put the green collar on him.

Kibo and Hane were tied together by the neck.

Nora grabbed the centre of the string between them—which was about five metres in length—and started to rise.

Kibo and Hane were being pulled closer and closer together as they were stuck at the same elevation, while Nora rose.

As they got closer to each other their movement slowed.

They both clawed at their necks, desperately trying to remove the collar until they collided, bouncing off each other repeatedly like clackers.

Bounce bounce bounce bounce bounce bounce bounce...

Eventually, they were slowed to a stop as Nora was brought back to her original elevation.

Nora's wires were removed as Tokumei cut the strings of the puppet.

Nora fell onto Tokumei's tile where he caught her, while Kibo and Hane were lowered to new tiles that had been brought up for them.

The tiles were attached, as were Kibo and Hane still.

Both gasping for air—Kibo more than Hane—they collapsed

on to their new floor.

Another tile was brought for Nora, which they stepped on to.

"Shit..." Kibo lifted his hand up to his neck, now being covered by a collar. "Why am I still alive after that? I should have been choked to death."

Tokumei smiled. "You see... I inserted a tube into your throat so air could still pass through with ease. Same for you Hane. Even you Nora."

"What?" Nora lifted her hand to her. "But you didn't put a collar on me..." Nora's voice was smooth, bold, feminine...

Before, I couldn't tell if Nora was female or not without being told.

"You're a woman?" Yutaka asked.

"Was it not obvious?" Nora tilted her head.

"Well... It's a bit hard to tell with the mask and all..." Kyoki put her hand to her face.

"I see, sorry for confusing you all." Nora bowed slightly.

"It's okay!" Ahiru smiled.

Nioi shook his head. "But it isn't okay that you tricked us all."

"H—Huh?" Nora took a step back.

"Oh—Uh—I mean about faking your death..." Nioi put away the orange he had out.

"Oh... Right."

"You feel bad now, right?" Boru chuckled. "So tell us how this whole scheme played out!"

"Oh, don't worry!" Tokumei started to lower us all back to the ground. "Hane, Kibo, Nora, just know you don't have to share if you don't want to!"

"Alright then." Hane turned around to face away from everyone. "I refuse your offer."

He turned his head over his shoulder to face us.

His grin stretched his whole face.

Even though he wasn't looking at me, I felt his gaze pierce through my skull.

The lack of aura made it all the more unsettling...

"What do you mean?" Kibo asked quickly. "Do you mean you're declining to tell them? Or are you declining to not tell them?"

"Oh we're telling them alright." Hane interlocked his fingers.

"What!?"

Kibo grabbed the cord connecting their collars—which seemed much shorter than before. "Why would we do that? What's the point? We've already been punished! Why would we give ourselves up like this!?" Kibo pulled the cord sharply, causing their collars to come together as their heads collided.

They both fell to the ground, unconscious.



We all stood in disbelief.

What just happened?

Are they okay?

Akui stepped cautiously toward the two, before crouching down next to them.

"Both of their foreheads are a bit bruised, but nothing major I don't believe."

Just like me I suppose.

"Why did the rope get so short all of a sudden?" Kyoki walked over to where they were laying. "It was pretty lengthy before, right?"

"Maybe it's a magic size changing rope!" Boru snickered.

"No... Maybe it retracted back into the collars or something."

"That seems more likely than magic." Akui scratched his chin.

"How did that even happen?" Yutaka looked at the two.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. Maybe it will knock some sense into them." Akui smirked.

Nora sighed. "Since they are unavailable to do so, I may as well explain the details of what really transpired." I felt I could trust that Nora was going to tell the truth, and not try to mess with us.

"Finally." Nioi grinned.

"You may want to take a seat, this may take a little bit." Nora walked over and sat behind the unconscious duo, while ushering Kyoki and Akui to move away.

Kyoki went and sat next to Shinju.

Akui stood off to the side of the group.

Souka and Ahiru also sat next to each other, while both Boru and Nioi continued to stand.

I moved over to sit on the other side of Kyoki and began to listen.

"Ahah, are you all ready?" Tokumei was sitting cross-legged on his tile and was still floating around.

"Well, let's start from the start then." Nora cleared her now clearer throat.

"Just wait a second." Yutaka stopped her. "How do we know you won't lie to us all too? You're with those bastards right?"

"Well there is no possible way for you to fully trust me, especially after this scandal. Although I will try my best to redeem myself by telling the full truth." Nora nodded.

"Well, I suppose it's better than nothing..." Yutaka nodded as he sat down.

He seemed a lot calmer.

"Alright, to begin, us three decided that we would attempt a false murder to get this game rolling, as Tokumei was getting impatient. We decided that a fake murder would be best as we didn't actually want to kill anyone yet. We eventually came to the conclusion that it would be easiest if I were the one to play dead. You were quite close thinking that I used my Seigyu, which is indeed Liquid, to make it seem as if I were deceased. Both Kibo's and Hane's Seigyus are not the greatest for this type of task, so it was clear it would have to be me. It took a little while to figure out the logistics, but after some trial attempts of me playing dead, we were ready in that aspect."

"Where and when were these trials? That would've taken

some time, right?" Nioi shifted his stance.

"Yes, it did. We practised in the location you found me, that being the pharmacy in the Dead End Complex. We chose this spot as it was near enough to the restaurant so that Kibo and Hane could quickly and easily make their way to me. The pharmacy was also a good option as they could quickly treat me if anything went south."

"The building was out in the open, how did you make sure you wouldn't be found while doing a trial?" Kyoki raised her hand.

"Well, none of us had Seigyus that could obscure vision—or had enough control of them to do that—so we made sure to only practise at night while everyone was sleeping. It took a lot of effort at the beginning, and I would constantly pass out and lose the act, so doing it at night gave me enough time to recover too." Hold on a minute... Something doesn't sound right.

"If you say you only practised in the location, why was there also a dried sponge in your quarter?"

"Well, I had just gotten done with a practice, we had wanted to do one more right before we did it for real. It was daytime so we couldn't do it in the usual spot, so we did it in my quarter instead. Does that clear things up?" Nora tilted her head slightly.

"Not entirely, you said you needed time to recover right? Surely you wouldn't be able to recover in that short amount of time before you did it for real, *right?*"

"Ah, I see why you would think that. But there was a decent sized gap in between the two sessions. About an hour or so." Nora sure was being cooperative.

"Didn't you say that you would only do practices in that location, as even something small could change things?" Nioi asked.

"Well yes, but the final practice was more of a... Making sure everyone is ready. It wasn't a full practice you see. Can we move on? If we continue like this we'll be here forever."

"Fair enough then." Nioi gestured for Nora to continue.

"Sorry, give me a second—" Nora started wiping the eyes of her mask with her fingers. "Does anyone have a cloth or something I

can borrow?" It seemed like saliva was dripping through the dog mask's mouth. "I haven't talked this much in a long time..."

"i—I have a handkerchief. is that alright?" Shinju fumbled through her pockets.

"That would be perfect, thank you." Nora reached out to grab the blue handkerchief Shinju had pulled out.

"You wouldn't happen to have any more would you?" Nioi asked politely. "My nose just hasn't been acting right since I've gotten here."

"oh, um, sure!" Shinju pulled out a red handkerchief and gave it to Nioi.

"Thanks a ton." Nioi turned away from the group as he unwrinkled the handkerchief and began to blow his nose while Nora used hers to wipe the saliva coming from her mask's mouth.

"I'll make sure to wash this before I return it." Nora nodded to Shinju. "So then, this might be skipping ahead a little, but remember the needles found in the envelope?"

Ahiru nodded intensely. "You mean the ones I found?"

"Yes, that's right," Nora reached into one of Hane's pockets and pulled out a needle. "I'm not quite sure why he decided to have so many, but we used one during practice to point to a location for me to channel liquid. He even punctured my skin with it to see if any blood would come out when I focused my blood away from that spot." Nora rolled up her sleeve to show a small hole on her wrist.

"That must've been some intense training." I was trying my best not to look at the hole.

"Well, not really. Although we only had a few days, it wasn't actually all that bad. We just needed to make sure I could use my Seigyu as well as I needed to." Nora nodded to herself.

"Well, can you explain the rest of the envelope? Why were the needles in there? And what did that message mean?" Akui tapped his foot while crossing his arms.

"No, sorry, I can't say I know. If I had to guess, the message was just to let the two know where to meet up and how. Forgive

me..." Nora bowed her head.

"Guess we'll just have to shake it out of them when they wake up then." Yutaka smirked.

"Of course, I wouldn't be much help trying to explain what happened while I was playing dead either. I'll skip to the aftermath." Nora fixed her posture. "We chose to shift me away after some time as I wouldn't be able to last like that forever. We were hoping that there would be no one there to see me be removed, but only letting one person see was good enough. We had planned for this, hence being why Hane wore my gloves to shift me away. Both Kibo and Hane are wearing their own gloves, but we figured it would be best if instead of taking off their own gloves, they would put another pair over the top. Kibo's hands were hurt and likely easily identifiable, and Hane would have to strip half naked just to take his off, as he dresses in a particularly unique way."

"Hoohoo! Does Hane paint his nails too?"

"I wouldn't know, sorry."

"How in the world did you figure out that you could shift?" Kyoki tilted her head.

"It was Hane who told us about it, so it would be best to ask him when he wakes up." Nora put her gloveless hand on Hane's unconscious head.

"Nora?" I asked. "Where are your gloves now? Shouldn't you have put them back on? Or would Hane still have them on him?"

"Oh... I hadn't actually noticed that... Hane had never given them back to me, so he should still have them. He probably just left them somewhere before coming here." Nora looked at Hane, puzzled.

"Did he leave them in the pharmacy?" Nioi rested his head in his hand.

"It's possible, I'll make sure to check." Nora nodded. "Are there any more questions?"

Everyone was silent.

"Oh, wait a minute, I do. I'm not exactly sure how relevant it is..." I scratched the back of my head.

"It's alright, I'm happy to answer." Nora nodded again.

"Well, in both places you practised, we found a sponge, one on your table in your quarter, and one under you. Why?"

"Ah yes, the sponges. It was another thing we used as a tool to hone my Seigyu. Hane would have me shrivel, bloat and dry the sponge by removing or filling it with water."

"Ah I see." I was somewhat disappointed, I expected the sponges to hold some more importance, but it's fine.

"Ooh! I also have a question!" Kyoki waved her arm in the air. "What was that loud bang sound? Was that really Boru?"

Boru smiled and crossed his arms. "Perhaps! What is it to you?"

"No, it wasn't." Nora said bluntly.

"Gah! I can't believe you! Betraying me like this!" I could see Boru pouting through the gap in his mask.

"It was Hane." Nora looked down at Hane once more.

"Really? How did he make a noise as loud as that?" Kyoki lowered her eyebrows.

"Well, it isn't my place to disclose his Seigyu, but what I can say is that he used it to make the sound. His intention was to mislead you into thinking a gun was fired, surprisingly, it actually managed to deceive some of you." Nora started to fiddle with the wire separating the two troublemakers.

"That pisses me off." Yutaka scowled. "Showing off like that just to successfully trick us."

"Trust me, it won't be the last time he does something like this." Nora chuckled.

No one else did.

"Is that everything now?" Nora sighed.

Everyone looked around at each other with mutual agreement.

"Finally..." Nora laid back and spread herself out on the cold, tiled floor.

She must be exhausted, but I'm sure she isn't the only one.

"Well done everyone! You did splendidly!" Tokukei was clapping as he finally stood down on the floor, eye to eye with us for the very first time. "It would almost be sunrise the next day if I hadn't been holding it, so I'll continue to hold the time in place until you all make it back to your quarters for you to rest! Don't worry about Hane and Kibo, I'll make sure they get well rested too."

It had been sunset the whole time.

It was hard to tell how long we had been in the Kaigi, but it seemed like it would've been a very long time if it was early morning according to the clock.

Was it really over?

This was the first time I've been able to go to my quarter on my own.

I can finally get some rest by my own choice.

I might need a bit of help navigating, ahah...



As everyone began to walk back towards their quarters under the so-called Hari, Tokumei started approaching a—likely very panicked—me.

"Minami, Minami, Minami!" He extended a hand. "You have yet to experience entering a set of quarters, correct?"

"Y—Yes, that's correct."

"Let me explain some things to you, Minami. In each corner of the plane, there is a glass tent called a Hari. These each lead to a set of quarters. Each set contains four quarters each. This is perfect to house the sixteen participants."

Everyone else had gone, aside from Nora and the two boys.

"Are you following, Minami?"

"Oh, uh, yeah."

"Perfect, let me take you to your quarter!" He grabbed me by the hand and with an orange glow, we teleported directly in front of a Hari.

What was that..?

He pulled back a thin, flexible sheet of glass that covered the opening and stepped inside.

"What?" When I tried opening the glass sheet, the seams were gone.

There was nothing for me to grab.

"These openings are lockable, rendering the quarters below completely isolated." Tokumei opened the sheet and allowed me to step inside.

Tokumei opened the tile on the floor which had a handle attached to it, revealing a ladder below. "These Hari only appear at night, or when someone is still inside. You will be sleeping here, as nowhere else has comfortable bedding." Tokumei began to scale down the ladder, and I followed.

"So, I assume my quarter is below this Hari?" The ladder was sturdy, cold, yet reassuring.

"Correct, you along with three others." We had reached the bottom of the ladder, and were now standing atop a staircase.

"Who are the other three?" As soon as I asked this, as if to answer my question without words, I spotted Yutaka sitting at the very bottom of the staircase.

"Hm?" He must have heard our footsteps as he turned behind him and looked at us.

"Yutaka, for one." Tokumei gestured towards him, continuing down the staircase towards him.

"Tokumei? Why the hell are you down here?" Yutaka slid from the middle of the stair to the wall, albeit quite clumsily.

"Don't worry! I'm just showing Minami through the quarters, just like I did for everyone else on their first day here. Or would you like to take over?"

"Uh no I—I'm okay." He got up quickly and entered the doorway ahead, which flashed from a dim void colour to orange, and he disappeared from view.

"What was that flash?"

"That indicates which quarter you are moving to. Depending on which way you enter the door, it will take you to a different person's quarter. Usually you enter your own by default, but if you try, you can enter someone else's." Tokumei walked up to the doorway and stood beside it. "Go ahead, enter the door." I slowly finished my way down the stairs and towards the empty doorway.

I'm not sure why I'm so nervous, I've been down here before, haven't I?

As I reached the doorway, I slowly reached out my hand to it.

It didn't seem like there was anything strange about it, except the complete emptiness inside.

"What are you doing? You don't enter a door with your hand first!" I lost my balance and fell through the doorway as I felt a push at my back.

"What was that for—" I turned back to look at the door which I had just passed through.

Instead of darkness, I could see right back to where I had just come from.

Why was this a surprise?

That's literally how doors work normally.

Except instead of seeing Tokumei standing in the doorway, there was no one.

"I'd better just get to bed..."

I shook my head as I turned back around and to my room.

"We're not done you know!" Tokumei was now standing in front of me gesturing to me to stand up.

"Ah! Can you stop doing that?" I stumbled back a bit as I saw him.

"I would if you weren't so slow, hurry up, we're almost done!" From within the time I had blinked, Tokumei had appeared over next to the vault-like steel door.

"Why is the door like this?" I ran my finger along the valve.

"You never know when you might need extra protection in these rooms." If I could see Tokumei's face right now, I just know he

would be winking. "Alright, off you go! Sweet dreams now! They may be the last you have for a while..."

He damn well knows I won't be having any sweet dreams.

Chapter 7 End.

Chapter 8: Illusion Is Mine

He lifted his hand off of my head as the lights dimmed.

I have somewhere else I need to be, you will be let out of here once enough time has passed.

Knowing what this place is like, I may not be able to leave for quite some time.

He continued,

If you do manage to find a way out before I come to retrieve you myself, you will receive a reward.

This reward would clearly not be anything too advantageous, it would more likely be detrimental.

Finally, he said,

Be careful, this place has already become quite dangerous.

As he finished his sentence he held out his index and middle finger across his chest and faded away, into the coloured lights once more.

Gosh those lights were bright, it took almost a whole minute to adjust.

Where are we this time?

Last time it was a beach, with the ocean frozen over.

To start, I'm in a circular stone room, the floor and walls both seem to be made of the exact same stone too.

The ceiling extends quite high, high enough for me not to be able to see it without some extra light.

There are two metal doors directly opposite each other, red with white edges on one, and the inverse on the other. Neither had a handle, nor were they unlocked.

The red based door had a lock with the word 'key' underneath, along with an arrow pointing from the word to the lock. I don't think that was the most necessary inclusion, if you were able to read the word key, you should probably also be able to discern that one would be needed without being explicitly told.

Running my fingers across the word I could tell it wasn't

imprinted on the door itself, only being written on fairly recently. 26 minutes and 43 seconds ago to be exact. Although with every second that passes, that number gets further from the truth.

The white based door too had a lock, but instead, a simple four digit number lock. Of course, with there only being ten thousand possible combinations, I could just sit down and try them all. They are some of the least secure locks after all. But I don't think it would be worth the time investment. If this is some puzzle room, trying every combination to a lock would be horrible game design.

The room was being illuminated by four lanterns, one on either side of each door. It wasn't perfect lighting conditions, but it was enough to be able to see the whole room, except the ceiling just fine.

As for anything else in the room, there was a small metal chest in the corner. Well not exactly the corner, with it being a circular room and all, but it was resting against the wall and wouldn't come off it. It too had a key lock. The designer of this room (Tokumei most likely) really needs to get more creative with their mechanisms.

I put down what I was holding and started stretching my arms. My fingers had gone numb after rubbing them against the writing. With a Seigyū like mine, you really have to get creative for it to be useful. Lucky for me, I am creative.

Taking my umbrella I began tapping the floor. There was nothing else in this room except for what was previously stated.

While I was tapping, I heard three sharp bangs.

What in the world?

That hurt my ears.

If I really do have to try all ten thousand combinations to get anywhere I'm going to find a way to review my experience. Right now, it's sitting at two out of five stars.

Supposedly I don't even need to solve anything, he did say he'll just come and get me after enough time has passed. But that could be days.

Tapping my umbrella some more, I got up and started searching for anything resembling a clue. I could try 2643, as that was the amount of time since the word key was written.

Putting it in led to little luck. Obviously.

I hadn't checked the lanterns at all. Nothing about them stood out.

Two doors, four lanterns, one chest... three locks? No it was nothing like that, they wouldn't have any order.

I brushed my hands against the walls in a full revolution. I'm almost certain they were limestone. Very sturdy, but chemicals can break them down without much hassle.

The doors were both clear of any clues. Although the labelling of the keyhole did raise some questions—None that were helping.

The chest was the last hope. Those two stars are feeling shaky.

Thankfully after looking a bit closer, I could make out some symbols running along the rim, parallel to the ground. No words or numbers, but shapes.

□□□□┐┐┐┐>>┐┐□□V□^□□

Not so commonly used anymore, what I believed to be a pigpen cipher was at play.

The pigpen cipher is not really a cipher at all. Well it is, but... It replaces each letter with a symbol and nothing else. It's so simple, it is rarely used for encrypting anything, usually just hidden messages.

If you draw out two three by three grids, as if you were about to play tic tac toe, and two X shapes, you've almost decoded the message. You can begin by inserting the letters into each section. A at the top left of the first grid, going right and then repeating but down a line, ending with I in the bottom right corner. Do the same with the next grid, but place a dot in each section too, to differentiate them. Now you also have J to R in the same fashion.

Now with the crosses, you put the first letter in the top, then

left, right and bottom. Repeating the logic with the dots for the second cross, you've mapped out every letter to a section. From here it's trivial to work out any given message.

The first symbol is the sixth dotted square section, giving the letter O. The second is the fifth of the same, giving N.

Repeating this, we end with the message 'ONEEIGHT-THREESEVEN', or one eight three seven. The answer (hopefully) to our lock.

That puzzle wasn't that bad, you can have your two stars, plus a half star.

Putting these numbers into the lock I heard a satisfying click. If that wasn't the right answer I would've revoked any stars ever even considered.

The door still had no handle so I could only push it open.

I now found myself inside a square room, much more filled than the last. The floor was now a fresh bright red carpet, but the walls were the same. The ceiling was barely higher than the door which was a welcome change.

In the centre of the room, was a large crate. A crate much taller than it was wide, resting nicely against the ceiling. I should probably also mention it was wrapped tightly in chains.

Before I could make any further analysis, there was a knock. A knock, seemingly coming from inside the crate. Was someone in there? It definitely is possible, the crate looked like it could fit a person. I tried talking to the crate, but there was no response.

I knocked on the crate, it knocked back even faster.

If someone is in there, I need to get them out.

Alright, how do I go about getting these chains off?

You can hear this right?

Hello? I said aloud once more, to no response.

You can, right? To confirm I need you to say the word fiddle.

Fiddle? Can you say hello first please?

Well, you can hear me. You must be adept with your Seigyu.

What does my Seigyu have to do with you just talking to me?

Hmm. Not strong enough to be worthy, but also not so weak as to be a vessel.

Can you please answer a question without raising more?

Shit, I forget that all my thoughts are projected when I communicate this way.

What I'm getting is that you're using your Seigyu to communicate telepathically?

You could say that.

Then I will. But why not just speak aloud? Are you a mute?

...What's your name?

My name is **Furi**, but answer my previous question before you ask one yourself.

I don't like to talk.

Is that the whole reason? What if you can't talk telepathically?

...

?

Well what's your name?

...Can you help me out of this box already?

Oh of course.

I circled the box running my hand along the steel chain, trying to find any sort of mechanism. The chains seemed to be a closed loop, simply restraining the box. There wasn't even a mark where the two ends could have been soldered together. I explained this to the trapped person.

Well there's probably some tool to break the chain nearby but don't bother, you've told me all I need to know.

The moment the sentence concluded the chains began to thin, each individual loop becoming weaker before collapsing into a ring of rust around the still sealed box. The process took almost a minute, but I was happy to watch. Is this person telekinetic along with being a telepath?

Are the chains gone?

Ah—yes, yes they are.

Why am I not out of this damn box then?

Although the chains were constricting the box, they weren't working solo. Clearly the box itself had some mechanism locking

itself in place.

It seems you still have to get through the box.

Hmm. The box wouldn't budge when I threw myself against it.

Can you just do what you did to the chain to the box too?

What? No, obviously not, this wood is pine right? That would take far too long, not even taking into account how much more wood there is in comparison.

What kind of ability is that? Clearly it isn't the telekinesis I'm familiar with.

Do you want me to look for a saw or something to cut you out?

Hold on, are you able to prop me onto a metal table or something like that? I can't be touching the floor when I do this.

Uh, no. The box spans from the ceiling to the floor, besides, I doubt I could lift a box that size.

Well shit, start searching for a saw then.

This room was fairly cluttered, there was even a full suit of armour. It looked ancient. There were racks of spears spread across the walls. They wouldn't help cut. They just poke. Poke and prod. It also seems like there were no clues to get the key for the other room. Everything in this room seemed decrepit. Well except for the strange box.

You might say this, if you weren't paying attention.

You see 691 words prior from the word before the number itself, was a group of another four. Yes, count them if you don't trust me, but 'fresh bright red carpet' should ring a bell. Unless you were skimming through, which is fair. You either know what's coming up or were forced to read my monologues. I can't think of any other possible reasons.

Returning to the immersion, the carpet was suspiciously pristine in comparison to the century old relics strewn about. That is except for the ring of rust now deep inside the patternless threads. Placing my hand on the floor I found it was only a bit over half an hour old.

What help comes from the carpet being new? Well clearly everything old has been here for a long time. To confirm this I put

my hand on one of the spears. It's hard to be accurate with them being hundreds of years old, but they in fact were.

Running my hand across each one held up on the wall I found all were this same age, each seconds older than the previous at the time I would've checked them. At that scale though this was just assuming.

That was until my hand stopped itself on a seemingly random spear. Nothing was unique about its appearance or texture, but it could tell the amount of seconds it had existed. That amount nearing two thousand. It was the same age as the carpet.

I tried to lift it off the rack where it rested, and it slid off smoothly. Just to check I tried pulling off one of the ancient ones, but it was absolutely locked in place.

So clearly this is useful, but it isn't any different in any department aside from age as the others. We already established that they wouldn't help.

But that was just an assumption.

Can this person also read minds? Can they see through my eyes too or something?

I mean I can try.

『心制』

It's pitch black and my head is throbbing.

Did they say they would try looking through my eyes?

Is that what's going on?

I feel so compressed.

Am I seeing nothing because they are seeing what I would?

Ugh... My head hurts...

Probably just a side effect or something right?

I clenched my hand into my forehead.

I know it doesn't actually ease the pain, and I can't reach inside my head, but it normally helps distract.

Fluffy?

Wait what?
Why isn't it silky?
Why is it fluffy??
I fell forward a little and the brim of my hat hit the—
Why am I wearing a hat?
Releasing my clenched hand I held it out in front of me.
It barely reached anywhere ahead of me though.
My arm had hit the wall ahead, just like the brim of the hat
I'm wearing.
A wall.
Sliding my fingers along it, I... Couldn't tell anything.
Anything but splinters readying themselves to stick into my
fingertips.
A knock came from behind my head.
A knock, and a very sharp pain.
A pain that cut through my skull.
I know I was in complete darkness, but my vision got even
darker.
And I started to fall.
Fall down.
There was no floor.
The wood around me transitioned to metal as I fell.
Fell.
Fell.
I was falling.
It happened so fast I forgot to brace for impact.
But there was none.
I had stopped falling.
Although I was cramped.
Cramped very tight.
In complete darkness.
What in the world just happened..?
I'm trapped inside a metal pit in complete darkness.
How did I arrive here?

The person inside the box said they would try to see through my eyes and everything went black.

I tried tensing all my muscles to break through this metal.

Obviously I wasn't strong enough to do so.

Luckily there was hope.

Hope in the form of a light.

A small light peeking through from below my foot.

I could only see it out of my peripherals, but it was there.

I wriggled my foot vigorously to try to open the gap wider.

And it worked.

There was a hinged flap at my foot.

A flap that opened away from me.

One that, if I opened enough, I could fit my leg through.

After many minutes of trial and error, my leg slipped through and my body bent down.

My leg was sticking out of the flap, but I still couldn't look down to see exactly.

Was I completely trapped?

There was no way to get the rest of my body through this tiny flap.

Maybe there was another flap?

I couldn't feel around with my other leg, as it was bent and too stuck to move.

Same logic with my arms.

I also didn't have my umbrella or bag.

I had put them down after picking up the spear.

Not that I could use them with my cramped hands anyway.

The only thing I could do was feel around the outside of the flap with my free leg.

Only below my knee was free, so even then I wouldn't be able to feel much.

I tried brushing my calf against the wall below the flap, but there was some fabric preventing me from feeling the finer details.

To anyone on the outside, I must look helpless.

Wagging my sole limb outside this flap.

And they would be entirely correct.

I am helpless.

Completely, and utterly, stuck.

In a last ditch effort I stomped against the wall as hard as I could.

That almost definitely caused more pain than it was worth.

And I say almost for a reason.

When I slammed my leg against the wall, I lowered a little.

As in, my whole body.

It was possible the flap was moving up, but I prayed that wasn't the case.

I had only moved down about an inch, meaning I still couldn't see out the flap directly.

I didn't want to, because of the pain, but I needed to, to survive.

I continued to smack my leg against the wall, lowering myself each time.

Wham. Wham. Wham.

If Tokumei was watching, I'm sure he'd be having a great time.

At least that makes one of us.

After who knows how long of me kicking this wall, I was finally able to see through the flap, the gap of which was now about a foot tall.

I braced for the pain and kicked three more times.

Three more kicks was all it took for me to be able to squeeze my average sized body through the gap.

I—I was free...

I managed to squeeze through the opened flap and out into this new room.

My leg was burning.

I hadn't felt it as much in the moment, but I could barely use it to stand.

Thankfully I was just able to.

The pain in my head was lingering, but much tamer than

before.

Turning around I saw the contraption that had just held me for what felt like hours.

It was a food chute.

A food chute with a button to lower the trays.

I was inside a food chute, on the top tray.

I'm just grateful I wasn't in an oven.

Hitting a button like that would have set me ablaze.

My leg would really be on fire then.

I wouldn't have had a chance to escape.

I wouldn't have had a chance to live.

I... I took a lot of deep breaths.

How many coincidences were there taking place for me to be able to live?

I would count, but that would be a waste of time.

All things considered, they probably were set up for this exact situation to play out perfectly.

This is meant to be an escape room and not a death trap right?

I'm just going to believe that this was all planned and I would be fine no matter what.

But nevermind that now, there's a new room I have to escape.

It wasn't a large room, probably around the same size as the last. Although it felt more spacious without there being a massive box in the centre, and the lack of clutter.

There was a bench that wrapped the whole way along the walls, only being disconnected when there was something else present. Such as an oven, fridge and door.

The door, to no one's surprise, was locked.

Now I of course assumed I needed a key, as anyone would. Considering the food chute, oven, fridge and more, I was quick to assume I was inside a kitchen.

Although the food chute did seem a bit off.

Doesn't the chute normally take food from the kitchen to other locations? I could believe that one could be used for bringing

ingredients in, but why from an upper floor? One that felt so high up?

Oh whatever, figuring that out shouldn't help me solve this room or find a key.

At least—I sure hope it doesn't.

Before I could even get a chance to try to solve this room, the door I was now facing away from had burst open.

Before I could even turn to see I was grabbed from behind.

Grabbed?

No, that isn't right.

Hugged.

Embraced.

Embosomed.

They were clearly taller than me, as they rested their head atop mine. Not that I'm short or anything, but they mustn't have been that much taller, as only their raised chin was able to reach the crown of my skull. Of which there was still an unknown hat.

They were likely on their toes too.

"I'm so glad you're safe!" They spoke with quotations! This is unheard of for this chapter! They even seemed thankful for my safety!

To think I would be able to find such a loving friend in this horrible game, how delightful!

They stepped back allowing me to turn to face them.

Immediately after seeing who it was I stumbled back, hitting the bench behind me.

I could barely take my eyes off of her, but for a split second I was able to.

Reaching out over the bench I found a conveniently placed knife. Conveniently for me, not her.

Grabbing it and holding it out in front of me, I finally noticed what was wrong.

I wasn't in my own clothes...

In fact—I wasn't even in my body... How freaky...

Normally if you were to swap brains with another person's body, the brain would be too overloaded to comprehend anything.

"Sprout... Are you alright?" That woman started stepping towards me reaching for my knife.

Sprout? Is that the name of the person's body I'm piloting?

"Come on now, put the knife down." She smiled. I held the knife firmly with both hands.

That lady held her own hand out and pointed with her index finger.

"Good, there's no blood on it yet." She retracted her finger slowly, like she was curling a dumbbell with it.

As she did, it was like the knife was attached to a string, as it was pulled out of my hands and was left suspended midair between us.

I was clenching that knife with all my might. How did she—?

She was holding the knife herself now, gently putting it on a shelf out of my reach.

She stood directly ahead of me, my eyes in line with her chin.

"Come on Sprout, stop goofing off and help me out of this room." She smiled and grabbed my hand, dragging me out into a large dining room.

As much as I wanted to separate my hand from hers, I just couldn't. It wasn't even that she was gripping tightly, it felt like our hands had been welded together.

Not only that, but it felt like my mouth was welded shut too.

Well I could open it, so the analogy falls apart there, but I couldn't make any sounds.

When Sprout said they didn't like to talk, did they mean they just couldn't?

What a weird thing to lie about.

At least they were able to speak through their Seigyu.

Unluckily it seems that power didn't stay in their body for me to take advantage of.

Hold on. If I'm currently in Sprout's body. That would mean

they are in mine right?

Well I'm glad they're out of the box, and hopefully they have solved the puzzles in my place.

Right now I don't exactly need to worry about them taking advantage of my body. I need to fix what should have happened on the very first day here.

I need to re-kill that woman.



Now obviously you've been reading my story this whole time. Otherwise how would you end up reading this right now?

This would mean you know exactly how I woke up here and what I've done to end up in this situation.

Yes it is possible that you haven't been with me this whole time, and are reading this chapter before you read the prior ones.

It is for this reason I will explain.

You would know me Furi, that being how I introduced myself to Yutaka, Ahiru, Souka and Shinku.

In a sense, this is my real name. Furi would be a valid nickname for me. If you stretch my real name a bit that is.

My real name is Fristl.

It may be a bit of a shocker to see a non-Japanese name among the cast, but to be fair, I'm not the only one.

Sprout is the only other person I know of with a different style name—how funny it is that I ended up inside their body.

You could see how you could derive Furi from Fristl no?

First, taking Fristl, and transliterating it to Japanese, would make it sound like 'Furisoru'.

Shaving off the last two syllables leaves you with Furi.

You may be thinking 'oh that's smart, but what of it?'

Yes, why would I go through the effort to change my name to Furi? Why not just stay as Fristl?

Well... If you didn't know, the woman I'm currently with is

named Furi.

It would be a bit weird if there were two Furis running around right?

So I killed her.

Now obviously there's more to it than that, but you should know that by now.

After killing her, I assumed her name.

Well, I thought I killed her.

I was sure I killed her.

Clearly I didn't do a good enough job.

How she's back. I don't know.

I even buried her in the sand.

It seems I have unfinished business.

I need to re-kill this woman while I'm in a form she trusts.

In advance, I'm sorry to the body I'm piloting.

Some bad things might have to happen to it for me to end up the victor.

Obviously I don't want to do this, as I still feel the pain, but just in case.

With that out of the way, let's continue where we left off, shall we?



Leading me into the dining room, Furi sat me on a chair.

Once I was seated she finally let go of my hand and smiled.

As soon as she did I tried to stand up, but surprisingly, I couldn't.

I say surprising but this is likely just the same thing she did with our hands, but with my body and the chair instead.

Well, the chair is comfy, so it isn't all bad.

"Sit there while I finish this puzzle, I'm almost done so it won't be long!" Furi pet me on the head and grabbed a food trolley with some metal food cloches on it.

She lined them up with some others against the wall, and sat down.

What in the world kind of puzzle is this?

Sorry—What kind of puzzle is this?

Does she need to order the trolleys a specific way?

Is there something under the cloches?

Why is she sitting there just looking?

Well I can't really be one to say that, I did do the same when I got stuck with the puzzle I did.

As she stood up I saw something.

Normally this kind of scene would be called "fanservice", as her skirt is very short.

This would be when the main character would "accidentally" catch a glance at the girl's underwear.

This isn't that kind of story.

Under Furi's skirt was an absence of any underwear, instead I saw a projection of myself.

Not like a mirror, it was a projection from behind me.

As if I was the player character in a third person game.

That kind of projection.

I only saw this for a fraction of a second of course, so I couldn't see any closer details.

Even though I was in Sprout's body, and hadn't ever seen the back of their head, I could tell that what I was seeing was me.

It was as if there were some kind of presence I could sense.

Almost like I could see an aura in the place of my image.

Furi rotated some of the cloches, and we both jumped in place (Not literally, as I was still stuck to the chair).

I couldn't see much but Furi ran over to me and unstuck me from the chair, reattaching herself to my hand.

She walked me over to an open door, previously out of sight down a corridor.

She pulled open the door slowly.

Hmm.

The room was pitch black behind those doors.

That doesn't seem like a place I want to step into, considering I was just trapped in a pitch black cramped space only a few minutes ago.

Trying to take a step back, I instead took five forward as I was pulled in against my will.

Oh that's good, I wasn't falling to my death.

Still standing.

Standing in a void.

I was definitely standing, not floating, as I could feel the floor beneath me.

"Is this really a dead end?" Furi sighed.

No!

I was more startled by the return of the italics than the shout.

Tokumei appeared.

Saying he just appeared is more accurate than I'd like it to be.

Congratulations Furi and Sprout for rejoining and making your way to the exit!

The exit? Already?

No, I lied.

Figures.

This isn't the exit, but you are going the right way!

A relief for sure.

Now listen up. I will tell this to Fristl up above too, when she gets to the equivalent checkpoint. You three are the only ones not participating in the current Kaigi, as such, you will be given a document informing you of the current events.

Furi and I receive a folder containing multiple pages and images.

"Is this just a transcript?"

A transcript along with the director's cut! It has every word anyone said during the Kaigi, along with any extra insight!

"So our plan half worked I see." Furi looked at me with a disappointed look. "Kibo and Tsubasa got punished and knocked themselves out." She shook her head.

Correct, also incorrect. The Kaigi has not yet concluded, currently they are talking about their imaginary friends and whatnot. See?

He pointed to a paragraph on my page.

(There' s three people there, who' s the third? - Minami.

Oh that' s Touka! - Ahiru.

Akui clears throat.

Touka? - Akui.

Touka... Touka is um... - Souka.

Touka is... Uh... My... Imaginary friend! - Ahiru)

Huh, it really is a transcript.

"Hold on a second, if their live conversation is only up to this point, then how come I can read ahead?"

(I have Nora ready for when the voting has concluded! - Tokumei.

Hey Kibo... You could always just vote for Hane and get him punished without you - Boru.

Just take the blame, come on now. Do what' s right and don' t vote for Hane. - Nioi)

"Are you telling me this stuff hasn't happened yet?"

That's correct.

"How do you know this is going to happen?"

Simple, really.

I was speechless, both metaphorically and literally.

"This document is really handy, what's stopping me from bringing it into the Kaigi and reading it out?"

Well does it say you do that in the document?

"No it doesn't"

Then it's impossible for it to happen!

"I see."

A bit ironic phrasing considering we were standing in a void. Something I would have said would be impossible. Also the fact there wasn't much to see. Double ironic.

"I'm confused but thanks for this."

Oh and they disappear at midnight.

"Oh okay then."

...

You really need her to wake up. She hasn't done anything really.

"I see, I'll try harder."

Oh yes, take these, they will be crucial in a game we will all be playing coming soon!

Tokumei handed us a gas mask each. Furi clipped hers to loops on my (Sprout's) pants. I did the same but on the opposite side.

Either way, Fristl isn't making any progress, she's just sitting in a room. Her heart rate is through the roof though.

What is Sprout doing with my body?

I'm sure we'll find out soon enough.

On that note, how are we going to swap back?

Likely I'll just need to meet up with them and ask them to swap us back.

Although unless Sprout comes to us, it might be a bit hard to separate myself from Furi.

Well... I could also just kill her again.

I don't even need to hide it, as not even Tokumei knows I'm not Sprout. The blame will be put on them.

There will be absolutely no punishment if I kill Furi right now!

I hadn't noticed it, but we had left the room with Tokumei and were in yet another room.

I'm pretty sure this was one of the towers. Close to the top, still indoors though.

There was a spiral staircase leading down, and a ladder behind us leading up to a locked hatch.

The lock was comically large.

It dangled off of the loop, with the keyhole the size of my palm.

Furi was already halfway up the ladder, looking at the keyhole.

I may as well look for the key.

I might be trying to kill her but I'm not useless.

I only had time to look under a rug before I looked back and saw Furi with her finger in the keyhole.

She rotated her hand and it unlocked.

Had she already found the key?

"Come on Sprout, what are you doing down there still?" She waved me over.

I scurried across the floor and grabbed the ladder.

Looking up I saw the projection of myself once more.

Even though there isn't anything bad there, it still feels wrong, so I looked down at the ladder.

Furi opened the hatch and we were blasted with sunshine.

Climbing onto the roof we could see the whole castle from here.

It's pretty windy up here.

I can see a lot of the area too.

The forest, Dead End Complex, but not the beach.

The plane seems to be busy.

How many people are there?

I couldn't count exactly as they were quite far away, but there seemed to be more than ten.

Tokumei was making some weird holographic diagrams too.

It was like a three dimensional grid with a stick figure.

Oh wait a second.

Yeah obviously, I looked down at my document.

He's explaining shifting and the fourth dimension.

Glad I'm not there, it seems like a mess.

Furi was watching them too.

She was leaning right over the edge of the tower.

I'm going to push her off.

I stepped up behind her, still leaning, and pushed.

Oh.

She didn't move.

She didn't even turn to face me.

Did she lock herself in place to prevent herself from falling?

Maybe.

Welp, plan B.

My Seigyu.

As seen previously my Seigyu can kill with just a hug.

And no, it isn't by telling how old they are.

I can lower or heighten the *acidity* of their body, killing them.

Wrapping my arms around Furi, and tried my hardest to lower her acidity.

Hmm.

Not doing anything.

I'll try to heighten it instead.

Still... nothing.

I—I couldn't even tell how old she was with my fingers.

Where—Where did my Seigyu go?

I didn't have any reference point to see if it still worked on objects I've previously used it on.

"Are you alright Sprout?" Furi rested her hand on my back.

"You're acting a bit strange..."

She pondered for a moment.

After having one more look at the view, she grabbed me by the hand.

They weren't locked together this time, but I didn't try to pull away.

She ushered me to follow her down the ladder, which I did.

Dusting herself off, she stood on the top step of the staircase, presumably leading down the tower.

"Do it." She said flatly.

Spreading her arms out wide, she leant back slightly.

"Sprout, do it."

I took a step towards her.

She knows what I'm trying to do.

I took another step.

And another.

And I dived.

I dived into Furi, grabbing her around the waist.

We both fell.

Fell down the flight of stairs.

It felt like we were falling forever.

But eventually we did land.

We landed, and my whole body hurt.

Furi, cushioning my landing, wasn't moving.

Did I kill her?

Yes.

This isn't a lie.

Well, only if you view it from the perspective of Furi.

Furi successfully killed her.

Her, in this case, being me.

Furi sat up, and snapped her fingers.



Psshhhhhhh

The sound of running water.

Running water from a tap.

I thrust my body into action, the light hurting my cloudy eyes.

Am I trapped in another room?

No.

I was in a bathroom stall.

My clothes were strewn about the floor.

My clothes...

I'm back in my own body...

I would be a bit more excited if my body was also in some clothes, but we can take things in steps.

As I found all my items I racked my brain.

Why am I back in my own body?

Did Furi not kill me?

Or did she kill Sprout?

When you die, it's your mind that dies right?

Sprout's body would be fine... right?
But if my mind was killed, why am I still here?
Does this mean Sprout is back in their body too?
But wouldn't they be dead?
Why did Furi allow me to tackle her down the stairs?
Did she know this would happen?
Did she know Sprout wasn't Sprout?
Where the hell am I?
Well a bathroom clearly.
And thankfully in my own body again.
And now in my clothes.
I stepped over to the tap, still running.
Well I can see in the mirror I am definitely me.
Good, now the tap is off.
Actually...
I turned it back on to wash my hands—Just in case.
The door to the bathroom was locked shut.
Luckily it was from the inside, and not a puzzle, so I could easily leave.
The door led into a small corridor.
There were three doors visible—including the one I just left, along with a staircase, leading up on the left and down on the right.
One door was to another bathroom, a type I've never personally been in.
I would've figured I'd be in that bathroom, considering the person who I had swapped bodies with didn't seem like they would go into the one I woke up in.
Perhaps they were just respecting the body over the mind.
I'm grateful for that.
Now the third door is the one I'm interested in.
This door had a red base, and white edges.
It had been left open, meaning I could confirm it was a door I had seen not too long prior.
On the side of the door facing the inside of the room it closes

off, was the word 'key' with an arrow pointing to a filled keyhole.

Stepping into the room I found the metal chest had been opened, along with one of the lamps being shattered.

The chest was filled with keys of varying bitting lengths.

All of the keys were pushed to the edges though, with a note in the middle.

It read 'Your not very bright'.

The note used the wrong you're...

Was Tokumei stupid or something?

I'm guessing it was Tokumei who wrote it, but I can't be sure.

You would think the leader of this extravagant game would know basic grammar.

I chuckled.

Actually...

The 'Y' was styled in a way to make it look like an 'f'.

'four not very bright'?

Looking back at the shattered light I groaned.

Mainly for the pun, but also because of my stupidity.

Tokumei is really trying his best to make this hard to translate.

My best guess would be that none of the keys in this box are for the door, but there was one hidden in the light which was.

The note would hint to there being something in all four lights, but maybe Sprout got lucky with the first one.

Moving into the other room, the one with the box, I found some more points of interest.

The spear I was holding before we swapped bodies had been plunged into the box, right around head height.

It wasn't put in in a way to damage the box.

No, it was put in like it was acting as a key.

I attempted to pull it out of the box but was unsuccessful at first.

Eventually I managed to remove it by first twisting it, like you would a key.

On the head of the spear, I noticed something I hadn't before.

It read 'If you want the key, you must make a sacrifice.'

Below that, it read 'Not yourself!'

I can only assume the sacrifice was meant to be the person in the box.

Wait wait wait...

Holding the spear, I could once again tell its age.

My—My Seigyu was back!

I'm so glad I noticed it now, a safe place which gave me time to recoup.

I'm also glad Sprout didn't take my Seigyu along with them back to their own body.

That would've been an absolute nightmare.

Well then. It seems like Sprout tried to sacrifice their own body, with my mind in it, to move on.

I would think putting a spear into a box with someone in it would be dangerous, but not because the person inside would fall down a food chute.

I wonder how confused Sprout is, I bet they look like such a fool in front of Furi.

Where am I? What's going on?

I can only imagine.

I can also laugh.

Hahaha.

Let's slow things back down.

I found my bags and umbrella on the floor, and picked them back up.

I checked everything was still inside them...

Nothing out of the ordinary there.

And exited back into the hallway.

I entered the bathroom I had exited to look for anything I had missed.

I sequentially opened every stall.

There were only a handful, so it took barely any time.

I do find it strange why a castle would have a modern public style bathroom, but then again, I was in a food chute not long ago.

I found nothing of note, I even opened the lids on the toilets that had them.

There was nothing hiding in there.

No hidden codes on the walls.

Not even graffiti.

I guess it is a castle.

But hold on...

Nevermind, I don't want to think about the logical loop that would make.

The only items I could find were a bucket and a mop.

They don't need to be disturbed.

Well then, now to decide, do I go up or down the stairs?

What's that?

The other bathroom?

There might be clues in the other bathroom?

No no, there wouldn't be.

...

I don't want to enter that bathroom.

Unless I'm in a life threatening situation, I promised I never would enter those bathrooms.

And currently, my life isn't very threatened.

Back to the real topic now, up or down?

I may as well do what I did before, and go up first.

I half expected to find myself atop one of the castle towers, like last time, but no.

I found myself back in the corridor I just left.

That's... strange.

I stepped back down the stairs, and sure enough, I was still in the same corridor.

Perhaps there are identical corridors.

It would make building a castle this size much easier after all.

We both know that's not the case.

The original circular room had no visible ceiling, remember?

How could there be another room atop it only one story above?

To make absolutely sure, I left my umbrella on the floor of the corridor.

Sure enough, there it was after moving up a story.

I left it there and went up one more story.

I should be two stories higher now, but considering the umbrella sat on the stone cold floor, I could deduce I wasn't going anywhere.

Just for comforting reasons, I stepped back down two floors.

This time, I chose to move down a story from the baseline floor.

Of course nothing changed.

Back up a floor I go.

There are two possibilities here.

Either this staircase is infinite and makes a copy of the main floor every level, or the staircase seamlessly loops for me to be entering the floor when I leave.

I rummaged through my bag, looking for anything that could help me prove one of these theories.

Aha! String!

I love string, it is so versatile and helpful in most situations—This one being no exception.

If I bring one end of the string up the stairs, leaving the other in the corridor, I can see if I can tie a loop.

A loop impossible in euclidean geometry.

Sure enough, I could bring one end of the string up the stairs, and find the rest sitting there.

I tied a knot and admired my construction.

This also proves the top stairs connect to the bottom stairs, as if there was a portal, or something that simply teleported me up or down a floor as I descended or ascended the stairs respectively.

As that would cut the string off, and I wouldn't be able to feed

the string around the loop like I was now doing.

I originally started doing it for fun, but I can now say it for the sake of scientific testing.

I'm sure the anime adaptation will give some helpful diagrams, but for now you're out of luck!

Clearly I was stuck in this corridor.

Tokumei could've just blocked the stair exit, but instead he makes me spend a page and a half figuring out for myself I have to find another exit.

Although I do like this outcome slightly more, as I made an impossible loop of string.

I want to put the string back in my bag, but I also want to leave this spectacle here.

I came to an agreement with myself and cut the string, leaving the loop where it was, and also letting me take the remaining string.

Now where in the world am I going to find another exit?

I've checked every room.

Unless I'm meant to climb out the endlessly high ceiling in the circular room, I'm stumped.

I don't think the room with the box had any way to get out. I didn't check thoroughly, but I would've noticed a doorway right?

Maybe I had to wear one of the suits of armour haha.

To be fair, there is one place I haven't checked.

A place I've paid no mind to.

A place so irrelevant I must've skipped right over it.

That's right, the other end of the corridor.

I stepped over to investigate.

Normally there would be a door at the end of a corridor, not always, but sometimes.

Clearly there was no door here.

Just a wall.

A wall the same as all the others.

Well, not quite.

The wall was slightly off-colour.
I gave it a knock.
I gave the adjacent wall a knock.
And just to be sure, I gave the other adjacent wall a knock.
The off-colour wall produced a different sound.
I'm assuming that means it's thinner.
But it may be a different type of rock.
Is there a way for me to break through this wall?
Considering the off sound and colour, it probably hasn't
always been here.
Oh hold on.
That's right!
My Seigyu!
I put my hand on the regular wall... So old I can't tell the
specifics... Just like the walls I checked before finding the fake spear.
I say fake, but it was a real spear, it just wasn't like the others.
This wall isn't like the others either.
But this wall is definitely fake.
I ran back to the room with the spears, to cross check.
Sure enough, they were the same age.
That sure is nice to know and all, but that doesn't mean I've
solved the puzzle.
The wall is still blocking my path!
I looked around the room with the box
Like before, the only weapons were spears.
Spears would do no good at breaking down a wall.
I'm hoping this puzzle is the final one.
The final puzzle should take the most creative thinking right?
I sat in silence, against the wall I needed to pass through for
many minutes.
Brainstorming.
I don't even know for sure this is the way I need to go!
What if when I break through the wall, there's just a note from
Tokumei saying 'Nice try loser.'

Then I would be completely lost.

I tried poking down the wall with the key spear, but I didn't even leave a mark.

I didn't want to use one of the real spears, as they have been here a long time. I don't want to mess with their history!

Maybe there was a reason Sprout only got as far as they did.

Maybe there was a puzzle impossible for them to do alone.

Maybe this puzzle was specifically tailored to me.

My Seigyu.

Something only I control.

If you recall, I stated the walls were constructed with limestone.

Limestone... I said limestone can easily be broken down with chemicals.

Chemicals, such as hydrochloric acid.

Acid...

And as you know, my Seigyu...

Is **Acidity**.

Suspend your disbelief—and scientific understanding, as I perform a trick.

Hydrochloric acid is the combination of hydrogen and chlorine.

To make this easier, I rushed into the bathroom to grab the bucket.

I then filled it with water.

If we ignore the fact this water is neither pure nor deionised, once we add chlorine, hydrochloric acid will be produced.

Other things will be too, like hypochlorous acid, but this isn't a science lesson.

How do I add the chlorine?

Did you forget already?

My Seigyu.

My Seigyu can not only change the pH of things with a touch—which doesn't always end well—it can also add any one

chemical needed to form an acid.

In this case, chlorine.

This isn't always worth the risk, as needing to submerge your hand in water to create acid, is a bit of a double edged sword.

It is exactly what I need though.

With my bucket filled with acid, I splashed it over the wall.

At first, it wasn't doing much other than bubbling, but that only meant it was working.

I continuously refilled the bucket and created acid of higher and higher concentrations until the wall had dissolved enough for me to step through.

That gas mask Tokumei gave Furi and I when I was in Sprout's body really would've been helpful, I had to hold my breath every time I created an acid of high concentration.

Hold that thought.

On the other side of the wall stood Tokumei, in a similar black void as before.

I dried any liquid that had spilled onto my hands on some paper towels from the bathroom stalls and stepped through the wall.

Congratulations Fristl for rejoining and making your way to the exit!

The exit? Already?

No, I lied.

How did I fall for that a second time?

This isn't the exit, but you are going the right way!

Yeah yeah, give me the document already.

I—Right. Here you are.

He handed me a document exactly the same as before.

This document is given to the three of you who were not present in the current Kaigi. It is essentially a transcript, with some extra information added by yours truly.

Where are we at now then?

Right here, Akui is going on a rant. I'm not even sure what he's on about.

(Blah blah blah blah blah. I know the culprit. - Akui.)

As much as I'd like the document to actually say this, it obviously includes what he was really saying. It's just that none of it was that relevant... Or intelligible.

As you can see, there are only a few pages left of the transcript. All pages after that are just describing the aftermath.

And this disappears at midnight?

Ah—Yes, yes it does.

Even though Tokumei's face was covered by a mask, I could see he was confused.

I'm guessing you also know about the gas mask then?

Well of course I do.

Alright then, tell me why it will be so important.

Ah... I got so ahead of myself toying with my knowledge from last time...

They are for protecting me from inhaling dangerous gases.

Obviously. Tell me why you need them specifically for what's coming.

What's coming?

If you were asking that or simply repeating what I said, it shows you don't know.

The void we stood in somehow went even darker, and Tokumei leaned in closer.

I've given you all three whole days to get to know each other. Starting on day four, a game will begin.

A game inside a game? Gameception.

A game, to give you all a motive to do a bit of real killing. If you know so much about this transcript, you should know there was no real murder.

I forced a smirk, as I did in fact know this. Though it was hard to do with Tokumei looming over me.

Kaigis only happen when someone dies. You know this. I made this one exception to prepare everyone aside from you and the other two delinquents who decided to not show up.

I wanted to point out how I didn't have a choice. He brought me here but took Shinku to the Kaigi. I withheld these feelings.

You know what? I'm going to give you your reward early, and skip you to the end of these chambers.

So this is actually going to be the end? Tokumei tricked me in both scenarios!

One of these, you will find a use for very soon, and the other can be a present for a friend.

He handed me a second gas mask, but also a small knife...

The knife was only as long as my palm, and looked pretty regular. I'm assuming it's a pocket knife, although I don't have any pockets to pocket the knife. I can just put it in my bag.

I'm guessing the gas mask will be the gift for a friend, and the knife...

Clearly I'm not supposing we'll have to cook or chop meat to eat.

Your reward is a weapon to help you with the upcoming game, and resulting motive.

You're saying you want *me* to kill someone?

If that's the conclusion you've arrived at, then be it so.

Who talks like that nowadays?

'Be it so'? He's going to cause confusion for the reader!

I put the knife in my bag.

It's best to keep it for self defence reasons.

Out you get, make your way back to wherever you're going to be for the rest of the day.

Tokumei waited until I blinked to disappear along with the void, leaving me atop a staircase beneath a grand chandelier.

Is this the main lobby of the castle?

I stepped slowly down the stairs, and froze in place the moment I could see out the open doors of the castle.

I froze, not because I felt the chandelier was going to come crashing down in front of me, but because of what I saw out those doors.

Furi and Sprout.

They stood outside the castle doors, but still inside the surrounding walls.

The gate seemed to be closed.

For a moment I tried reaching in to grab the knife I was just given, but we both know how well knives work against Furi.

I tried to finish my descent of the stairs in silence.

Luckily, there was no loud crash of a chandelier falling from the ceiling—or anything else of the sort, that was just an example.

They were both facing away from me, but I doubt I could walk any quieter.

I exited the main doors, and watched.

I don't think there was any way for me to kill Furi now, especially with Sprout here too.

Furi wouldn't have seen my body since I killed—tried to kill her the first time.

I've also never seen Sprout be in Sprout's body, as strange as that is to say.

Who knows, maybe I was piloting their body all wrong.

"Fristl, or Furi... Whatever you go by, come closer."

They had noticed me.

I stepped closer as per their demand.

Clearly I had not stepped close enough as Furi held out her hand and dragged me closer, as if she was pulling a rope with me at the other end.

We were now face to face.

"It seems we have both taken up the name Furi."

I nodded.

"This simply can not do, now can it?"

Even though I wasn't in Sprout's body, I found myself unable to respond verbally.

"How about we come to a deal then?"

Sprout seemed uninterested, and was facing away, perhaps trying to open the gate leading out of these walls.

"You return to calling yourself Fristl..."

I already had, so this will be an easy deal.

"...And I go by Rin instead."

Rin? Why?

“Why?”

I hadn’t said that aloud had I? No I couldn’t have.

“Well my real name isn’t Furi either, it’s **Furin**.”

Sprout turned to face us, their eyes widened, but their mouth remained neutral.

“Furi was derived from the half of Furin, and now Rin is derived from the second half. Simple, isn’t it?” She smiled.

Her explanation was logical, but why was she not going by Furin from the start?

“Now for the proper deal.”

Did she intentionally avoid saying ‘real deal’?

“I’m aware it was you in Sprout’s poor body, from the time I found them, to when I killed them.”

I’m guessing Sprout just told her what happened then.

“How many times have you tried to kill me now? Three? Four? What is it you have against me?”

She’s acting as if she doesn’t know.

“Isn’t it clear you can’t kill me? Do you know how easy it was to kill you?”

“Not exactly, kill, more... Remove. Remove from Sprout’s body.

“You see, Sprout and I are close. We are siblings after all.

“I’m going to tell you this, only because I know you won’t dare to spread this information.

“And if I find you have spread this, I’m going to spread you...

“Your body... Into the floor... I’m going to spread you like butter onto the ground...

“That sounded better in my head...

“Back to the main point! Sprout and I made a promise.

“We gave each other permission to kill the other, if they tried to kill us first.

“From my perspective, Sprout—before I knew it was you in Sprout’s body—tried to kill me.

“This should never happen, so I immediately became

suspicious.

"Once you tackled me down the stairs, I had already decided I was going to kill Sprout.

"And I did. I was rightfully suspicious. Something was wrong.

"The moment I killed Sprout, they woke back up.

"From what Sprout described, you had swapped bodies, and by killing Sprout, you swapped back.

"This seemed to be from a power even Sprout was unaware they had.

"It's a good thing we had this promise, as otherwise you might have been stuck permanently until you were killed by something else.

"Although that tumble down the stairs alone would have been likely to kill you too.

"This promise was made to show trust for one another, but now it has another purpose.

"Returning Sprout to their own body.

"As Sprout has only used this power once, it is difficult to say the specifics, but we now have the power to infiltrate anyone's body, and return when needed.

"While I must thank you for allowing us to find this ability, the deal is not over.

"For attempting to kill me, along with taking control of my sibling's body, you must do something for us...

"You have to kill Minami."

Chapter 8 End

Chapter Decline: Sprout Relief

Just past noon on day 3.

Boru left for the Kaigi.

He was picked up by Tokumei.

I say just past noon, but how much exactly I don't know.

Tsubasa, green and red have been gone all day, setting up grey.

Well they both came back for a bit.

All three of them.

That was exactly noon.

Sis and I aren't going.

Obviously.

The moment Tokumei and Boru disappeared from view, he reappeared from around the corner and stepped through the door.

"Alright you two." He said. "I'm going to take you somewhere."

He split down the middle, and separated each half.

The left half pointed at me, the right at sis.

He waited for me and sis to blink at the same time to move us.

I was surrounded by lights, and could no longer see sis.

As the lights dimmed I found myself in complete darkness.

Tokumei had made me stand up before moving me.

I now see why.

No I can't.

I can't see.

I can feel why.

Is that better?

I'm in a box.

A box with wooden walls.

I knocked.

No reply.

All four walls were solid.

I knocked harder.

My knuckles are sore.

I rammed the wall with my shoulder.

My shoulder is sore.
My whip was left behind.
It wouldn't help here.
I can't sit down.
My legs are sore.
Three sharp bangs.
My ears are sore.
Why am I here?
I kicked the wall.
My foot is sore.
This isn't fun Tokumei.
Where is my special treatment?
There are no objects at my feet.
My feet are at my feet.
Yes, obviously.
If my feet weren't at my feet, something would be wrong.
Yes, obviously.
How long have I been in here?
I don't know.
It feels like a long time.
Has it been a long time?
Maybe.
Maybe it hasn't been.
...
A door opening?
I could hear it from outside the box.
I knocked on the wall.
"Hello? Is there someone in that crate?"
Someone's there.
Yes, obviously.
They knocked on the wall.
I knocked on the wall.
Is this person someone I know?
Is it sis?

You can hear this right?

"Hello?"

...

You can, right? To confirm I need you to say the word fiddle.

I don't know why I chose the word fiddle.

It was just the most random thing I could think of.

Most random within a split second.

Surely if I had an hour to find the most random word, I could.

Not the most random ever, but more random than fiddle.

"Fiddle? Can you say hello first please?"

Well, you can hear me. You must be adept with your Seigyu.

Hmm. Not strong enough to be worthy...

but also not so weak as to be a vessel...

"Can you please answer a question without raising more?"

Shit.

I forget that all my thoughts are projected when I communicate this way.

Well that clearly isn't true.

Well I sure hope it isn't true.

"What I'm getting is that you're using your Seigyu to communicate telepathically?"

You could say that.

"Then I will. But why not just speak aloud? Are you a mute?"

I'm not a TV.

...What's your name?

"My name is Furi, but answer my previous question before you ask one yourself."

Your name isn't Furi.

I know your name isn't Furi.

You're an impostor.

Once I get out of this box I'm going to beat 'Furi' up.

I don't like to talk.

"Is that the whole reason? What if you can't talk telepathically?"

...

But I can talk telepathically.

"Well what's your name?"

You're annoying.

I'm not going to entertain you.

Can you help me out of this box already?

"Oh of course."

At least you aren't useless.

I could hear her stepping around the crate.

She said it was a crate.

I suppose I can believe her on that.

"The crate is wrapped tightly in chains. It's just one continuous loop too. No weak links visible either.

Well there's probably some tool to break the chain nearby but don't bother, you've told me all I need to know.

Chains are normally steel.

Steel rusts easily.

I put both hands against the walls and tried my best to rust the chains.

After I could feel the lack of anything to rust, I continued.

Are the chains gone?

"Ah—yes, yes they are."

They are?

Why am I not out of this damn box then?

"It seems you still have to get through the box."

Hmm. The box wouldn't budge when I threw myself against it.

"Can you just do what you did to the chain to the box too?"

What? No, obviously not, this wood is pine right? That would take far too long, not even taking into account how much more wood there is in comparison.

"Do you want me to look for a saw or something to cut you out?"

Pine is highly flammable.

If I'm able to burn the wood without burning everything else I can get out.

Hold on, are you able to prop me onto a metal table or something like that? I can't be touching the floor when I do this.

"Uh, no. The box spans from the ceiling to the floor, besides, I doubt I could lift a box that size."

Well shit, start searching for a saw then.

I still couldn't sit down, so I had to stand while I waited.

"Uhh... This obviously won't help. These won't help as we know."

But that was just an assumption.

"Huh? Can this person read minds? Can they see through my eyes too or something?"

I mean I can try.

『心制』

Oh wow, I really can see through their eyes.

They're holding a spear.

I held the spear closer to their eyes.

Oh wow, I can even move around.

...

What.

I flipped the spear over.

How can I do that?

I looked behind me.

There was a large wooden box.

The box I was just in.

The box I should still be in.

A strand of hair fell.

It fell past my eyeline.

...

I scanned the room.

An escape room.

Back at the spear.

There was text on the head.

"If you want the key, you must make a sacrifice."

Myself?

Below that, it read,
"Not yourself!"
The person in the box is the only other option.
Unless there's someone else around here.
I checked.
There wasn't.
I circled the box, and found a spear head shaped hole.
I inserted it.
Kachink.
A mechanical sound came out.
A mechanical sound, followed by a whistle noise.
A whistle that got quieter the longer I listened, like a cartoon.
I'm guessing they fell.
I fell?
My body fell...
Are they in my body?
I'm in their body...
I need to solve this escape room quickly.



I left the room I was in and was now in another.
Circular.
Two doors.
One locked.
One open.
Four lanterns.
One locked box.
No ceiling.
...
The locked door had a label.
The word key was written, pointing to a keyhole.
That is where the key would go.
Where will the key be?

The chest also had a key lock.
I can't see any keys lying around.
I'll check the other room.
I can't find a key.
...
I'll just rust the lock.
It's small so it shouldn't take long.
I sat down in front of the box.
The whole time I was rusting the lock, I was fidgeting.
Fidgeting profusely.
Who was it who said that?
I remember that line.
Good.
The lock was gone.
Unluckily the one in the door was integrated.
If I rusted it I would be stuck.
I opened the chest.
It was filled with keys.
I only need one key.
All the keys are different too.
This is sickening.
I grabbed a random key and tried it in the door.
...
Nothing.
Fuck this...
I'm not trying them all.
Surely there will be one that's noticeably different.
I dug through the box.
All the way to the bottom.
A note.
It read "Your not very bright".
That's rude.
Also annoying.
I turned the note over.

"But you know what is?"

Tokumei.

Please.

Next time you put me in an escape room, make better puzzles.

I stepped over to one of the lamps, and smashed it.

Inside was a key.

It seemed to work.

That's lucky.

Not sure if they all had the same key or did just get lucky.

You can't be going around dropping the subject like that.

Right.

...

You're right.

That's better.

Hahaha...

The door's open.

A hallway.

On the opposite wall were two bathroom doors.

One male, and one female.

Not the doors themselves, but the signs labelled them as such.

Normally this would be a predicament for me.

Not now...

I rushed in.

What are you doing?

I'm "looking for clues."

Yes.

Looking for a way to swap back.

I need to check.

I need to check everywhere...

S—Stop.

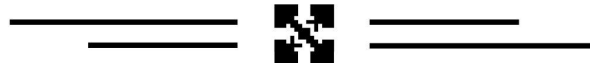
No.

I'm looking for clues.

What if someone sees you.

They won't be seeing me now will they?

...



If I were a Christian, I would be committing a sin.

Not that I would know the Christian sins.

I only know the seven deadly ones.

Are they the only sins?

If they are, I might not be.

You definitely are.

I definitely am.

What I'm doing is definitely classified as "wrong".

I'll have to make up for my wrongdoings.

That's the way the world works.

You do something wrong, you pay with equal value.

Equivalent exchange, as they call it.

Or maybe that's how the world *should* work.

It doesn't work like this in all places.

Most places in fact.

There's never a person who can tell between right and wrong.

At least not definitively.

There's always a line.

A line that isn't a line.

A line that is a plane.

A line so thick it graduated from the first dimension.

A line the wriggles.

A line that bends.

A line that allows some past, but not others.

The goalposts are always moving.

Sometimes they come closer.

Sometimes they zoom away.

This isn't fair.

Why do some people get to avoid punishment for committing the same crimes as others who don't?

It doesn't make sense.
It's never just **black and white**.
And then I found my role.



...
...
...
And then everything went black.
I opened my eyes and found myself atop sis' lap.
At the bottom of a staircase?
...
I'm fully clothed, that's good.
A bit of a shame, but still good.
It's not a shame, it's as it should be.
Yes.
"Welcome back bud."
Sis sat me up.
"How are you feeling?"
Fine?
Normal?
I feel fine.
"That's good."
Oh.
My head was backwards.
"Mhm, let's fix that."
Sis twirled her finger and my head cracked back into position.
"What happened?"
I told sis what happened to me... Mostly...
Sis told me what happened to her and my body.
"C'mon, let's get out of here."
She took my hand.
We were already at the bottom of the staircase.

Nevermind.
There was a floor here, but the staircase continued.
We followed it down.
There were no windows on the walls of the spiral staircase.
No lights either.
I think it's still daytime.
It definitely wouldn't have that many hours since noon.
I couldn't tell.
Now we had reached the bottom of the staircase.
Now we were together in a long hallway.
We walked through.
We did stop halfway through though, at a door.
A door labelled "D".
There was a hole in it.
It was small, probably the size of my finger.
Inside the room was a mess.
Everything was charred and burnt.
Almost like there had been a fire.
A giant fire, localised entirely within this room.
...May I see it?
No, of course not.
Outside of the room there were also a few remnants.
Remnants of a scuffle of some sort.
There was a bullet.
A bullet on the ground.
I picked it up.
...
29 hours, 38 minutes, and 14 seconds.
...
That's how long the bullet had been sitting there.
...
We continued on.



The main lobby.
At least, I assumed it was.
There was a large chandelier hanging above.
It seemed very stable.
I threw a pebble at it to make sure.
I don't know why I had a pebble in my pocket.
Sis grabbed the pebble from afar and put it back in my hand.
Oh.
It was the bullet.
Not a pebble.
Silly me.
The exit of the castle was right ahead.
It's also the entrance.
Who would've guessed.
It seems we still aren't home free though, there's still another
wall keeping us in.
Hopefully keeping us in, and not other things out.
What are you on about?
We do want to get out.
Nevermind.
I'm no titan, but the outermost wall is easy to pass, right?
There was a drawbridge with no moat.
There were also little trees with fruit.
"How about you try rusting down the gate? It seems pretty old
already so it shouldn't be too hard."
Alright then.
I walked over and started to rust the gate.
What's the proper name for these gates?
Port... Portcullis?
Probably.
Sis started talking.
Not to me.
To the one I was inside.

Controlling I mean.

I turned away from both of them.

I just need to rust this gate.

Why are my cheeks hot?

I'm going pink.

Good thing sis can't see my face.

It would ruin my brand.

Hm?

Did sis just say her full name?

I was honestly a bit shocked.

But not too shocked.

...

It seems like sis said something shocking.

The other girl—I think I heard sis call her Fristl—took a step back.

"I'll do it."

The girl said.

"But I'll need some help."

Oh good, the gate is finally rusted.

Sis pat me on the head and began talking.

"Tomorrow morning, Minami will be easy to approach."

"How so?"

"You're under the same Hari as Minami, or should be."

"That's right."

"She wasn't there last night, but will be tonight."

"How are you so sure?"

...

"Just trust me, she'll be in a bit of a tough spot."

"Wait, so is she going to be in a tough spot or easy to approach?"

"I'm sure you'll find out once you enter her quarter."

...

"Congratulations everyone!"

Tokumei rose out of the ground where the gate once was.

"You made it out alive, and together!"

"One final test before I let you free though..."

Tokumei created a new gate in place of the one I just rusted.

Everything went black for a split second.

"You have to feel an amount of pain high enough for me to let you out."

An amount of pain?

Tokumei held out a glass cube.

Inside the cube was a bee.

A bee? Hornet?

Are we meant to let it sting us?

"Sprout, you have the requirements met for the maximum amount of pain."

I—what?

Tokumei handed me the bee.

"You have what the other two don't. You must make a sacrifice, remember? From the spear?"

I have to...

I looked down.

Then back up.

And back down once more.

Oh...

That...

Unbelievable.

It's a little embarrassing, but I let the bee out of the box, and into somewhere else.

The moment before impact...

『心制』

Fristl screamed.

Chapter Decline End.

Chapter 9: Can You Kill a Secret?

I had a dream last night.

It doesn't make much sense.

Not the fact that I had a dream, but the contents.

Normally I forget my dreams, but this time was different.

Maybe it was because I was able to go to bed on my own.

I was trapped.

Trapped in a box.

The box was at the bottom of the ocean.

There were some fish in the box with me.

I think there were four? I'm not quite sure.

Either way, I was trapped in a box at the bottom of the ocean.

I managed to escape through the bottom of the box.

The box was lying on its side.

Once I got out, the fish turned into big monsters.

Similar to a hydra, they were all connected.

One of the heads was like a cyclops, and another like a planet.

Probably most similar to SSaturn.

The other two were similar.

Although I couldn't make out many details.

One of the two blurry ones swung at me, barely missing.

I was protected by some seaweed, which blocked the hit.

The other of the two swung also.

This time avoiding me completely, and flying back.

Back and hitting the singular eyed head.

The head slid right off and onto the sea floor.

It disappeared.

The one who did this melted down, back into a fish.

The fish split down the middle and disappeared.

From there... I can't remember.

I think I was shot up and out of the ocean, high into the sky.

The waves were rough, and the sky was cloudy.

I fell fast, but the moment before I hit the water, I woke up.



It's nice to wake up without someone looming over me.

In fact, even if there was, it was still dark enough for me to not be able to see them.

The room is still pitch black.

Is there a light in here?

I don't remember seeing a switch anywhere.

There was clearly light last time I woke up.

Let me just roll out of bed.

Splash

Huh?

I tried rolling over but I couldn't move anywhere.

Then I fell.

I fell into some water it seems.

Yep, definitely water.

I was being surrounded by water.

I tried reaching out but I was trapped.

What?

I'm trapped and I'm being surrounded by water.

I tried to feel the texture of what was holding me.

Nylon maybe?

It was a thin fabric.

It was thin fabric, but I wasn't able to stretch it enough to be transparent.

Perfectly black.

Like a void.

I don't think I had anything on me that could help me out.

I tried to rip the fabric, but it was tough too.

The water was gradually consuming me.

What a nightmare.

There's got to be an opening somewhere right?

How else would I have gotten it?
There has to be some sort of weakest link.
I tried kicking my way out.
Still no luck.
At this point I started screaming for help.
I clearly couldn't do anything on my own here.
Why is this happening?
What did I do?
I wasn't able to scream for much longer, as I was forcefully submerged under the water.
I obviously started flailing, but all I did was lose my breath.
Losing my breath isn't exactly great when I can't catch it back.
"Stop flailing!"
I jumped when I heard their voice.
One part out of surprise, and another of fear if they are trying to keep me underwater.
It wasn't a voice I could distinguish from my position.
I tried my best to stay still.
It seems like it would be in both of our best interests.
Two breaths in, one breath out.
I quickly remembered I was underwater.
"Stupid thing..."
Were they struggling too?
A knife.
A knife appeared pointing directly in between my eyes.
What followed was a hand.
A hand that grabbed me.
It grabbed me and pulled me up.
Out of the water, and onto the ground.
I was coughing and wheezing, trying to search for my breath.
"Are you alright?"
The person said, also with a shallow breath.
I wasn't in the shape to reply with words just yet, so I nodded.
"Well, that's good."

I wiped my eyes with my completely drenched clothes.
A river?
I was in a river?
I was now off to the side of it, on some rocks.
Next to me lay the black fabric I was trapped in.
Well, it was black on the inside.
The outside was completely transparent.
I was finally breathing somewhat normally again.
Two breaths in, one breath out.
I can finally use my technique.
A technique taught to me by... A close friend.
I needed to thank the person who saved me.
I turned over to see who it could've been.
Maybe Akui, like the last time I woke up.
Possibly Kyoki, she would help me.
But no.
Sprawled across the ground on their back, lay Yutaka.
The aggressive orange haired boy.
Akui's brother, almost the complete opposite of Akui himself.
The one I last saw while entering my quarter.
"Yutaka?" I tried to hide my surprise.
"Yeah..?" He seemed completely out of it.
"Thanks for that." I lent out a hand.
"Yeah." He ignored my hand and remained flat.
We were both drenched, tired and I'm not sure about him, but I
was certainly more than a bit shocked.
We're in the forest.
The one I passed through with Kyoki when I first woke up
here.
This part of the forest is different though.
Like I said before, there were rocks running down to a river.
The river wasn't too wide, I'm not even sure I can call it a river.
Let's stick to calling it a stream.
The stream wasn't wide, but it was about two metres deep at

its lowest point.

Yutaka still showed no signs of getting up.

The fabric was interesting.

Black on the inside, yet completely transparent from the outside.

Like a one way mirror, but just... Black instead.

I didn't want to just leave it here, so I picked it up and somehow it fit inside my jumper pocket.

It was sopping, but so was I. So it was fine apart from being heavier.

"Ugh..." I groaned at the state of my clothes.

It wasn't the prettiest outfit, but it was comfortable.

Yutaka wasn't as wet, but still, having a wet suit would be even more detrimental.

"There are changes of clothes in the Dead End Complex." Yutaka monotonically stated.

"Oh, like a building with clothes?"

"Yes."

Well that's helpful.

I wonder if it will be just copies of the clothes I'm in right now, or if there will be some variety.

Will I be able to wear other people's clothes!?

I'll think about it when I get there I suppose.

My mind was still racing.

I'm guessing Yutaka's is too.

I'll sit with him for a bit until we both calm down.



"Thanks again." I smiled. "I definitely would've drowned if it wasn't for you."

"Well yeah obviously you would've." He looked away from me. "You're welcome..." He mumbled.

"How did you find me? This place seems pretty far from

everything else.”

“I heard your scream and came running.”

“You must’ve been close, you jumped on me right after I stopped screaming.”

Yutaka seemed a bit flustered.

“Tch, even if it isn’t obvious, I don’t want anyone to actually die...”

...

I don’t want anyone to die either.

I would hope no one else would too, but...

I can only assume it was someone who tried to kill me.

“Did you see who put me in the water?”

“Nah, they ran off through the forest. I prioritised you over them.”

“Which direction did they go?”

Yutaka stood up slowly and looked around.

Seems like he’s ready to get moving, so I followed suit.

“Uhh..” He climbed up to the top of one of the large rocks. It was a smooth rock so I don’t know how he climbed it so effortlessly. “It was a bit back up the stream but around that way.” Yutaka pointed back up the stream.

“Well let’s go check over there.”

“I doubt they would still be there, let’s just go get new clothes.”

“Even if they aren’t there, they may have left clues.” Yutaka didn’t seem convinced. “We can go get new clothes right after.”

Yutaka sighed. “Alright then.” And he jumped down from the rock.

The rock wasn’t short, so I held my hand out by reflex.

I don’t think I could catch him with just one hand, but it’s what I did.

His hand touched mine gently as his momentum slowed to a stop.

Yutaka pulled his hand back right as he stopped.

His face was nearly the same colour as his hair.

Ahah.

Not really, but it was definitely not like before.

“Lead the way.” I said cheerfully.

Yutaka didn’t reply, but he did start walking.

I followed.

The trees were so still.

Apart from us two, along with the flowing stream, everything was so motionless.

There’s no wind.

It made me shudder.

It doesn’t feel right.

There were no birds to fill in the emptiness.

No bugs.

No wind.

No movement.

I felt out of place.

Even more than I have before.

The rocks on the sides of the stream transitioned to grass once we arrived at a wooden bridge crossing the stream.

Sorry—I can explain that better.

There’s a strangely new looking wooden bridge crossing the stream.

On one side of the bridge—The right side, the stream was surrounded by rocks.

On the left, the rocks were replaced by sand and grass.

Behind us was more forest.

Ahead of us was more forest.

Ahead of us is where we were heading.

We crossed the bridge, me in the back still.

“I’m pretty sure you would’ve been tossed or rolled off this bridge.” Yutaka stomped on the bridge.

The bridge didn’t seem like it would collapse easily, but I don’t think we should be increasing the chance.

I bend down to inspect the bridge.

The edges were definitely wet.

Whether this was from us two drenched people standing on it, or from the splash I must've caused from being dropped in should probably be considered.

I couldn't see my reflection in the rapidly moving water.

As to be expected.

Anyways—

As I followed Yutaka we found a note.

A note pinned to a tree.

I think it was just pinned in with a needle.

Not a sewing needle though, and also not the needles Hane had.

It was a surgical needle.

There was no fluid inside the tube, although the needle was in a pushed position.

The needle wouldn't be able to hold anything anyways.

It was like the tree was the recipient of receiving a shot, and it had just been injected.

The note on the other hand, was read aloud by Yutaka.

"Come to the hospital a sap." He sounded confused, especially at the end.

"A sap? Let me see..." Yutaka ripped the note off the needle and passed it to me. Yeah, I figured. "It says ASAP, as in 'As Soon As Possible'."

Maybe whoever wrote this was making a joke about trying to extract sap from the tree using the syringe, but it was probably a coincidence.

"A hospital?" Yutaka looked around. "I don't think there's one here."

I also looked around. Still nothing but forest in all directions.

"Do you think this note was left by the person who threw me in?" I flipped the note over. There was nothing on the back.

"It doesn't seem like it, but I obviously can't be sure." Yutaka shrugged.

"If it was left by someone else, maybe the person who threw me in saw it and went to the hospital."

"So you're saying we should check at this mysterious unknown hospital?" Yutaka wiggled his fingers about as he said this.

"Well yeah. The note makes it seem like whoever wrote it needs help."

"What if it's a trap set by Tokumei or something?"

"Well, it might not be." Yutaka did raise a valid point though.

"Tokumei said he can't kill us directly, but we know a motive is coming up, so maybe he'll trap us in there and not let us out until one of us dies..." Yutaka kicked a stone resting neatly atop another.

"Even if that did happen, he would probably forget to lock the doors or something."

Yutaka sighed.

"I could see that happening." There was a faint smile on his face. Knowing I could cause that made me smile too.

When I first got here, and met Kyoki and Souka, I had a strong urge to protect them.

Now I'm here with Yutaka, but I'm not feeling that same way.

This isn't saying I don't want to protect him.

I want to protect everyone.

No one should have to fall victim to Tokumei's sick scheme.

But even him...

I want to make sure no one will die.

Whether I'm successful is yet to be seen, but whether or not I'll try my best has been decided.

...

I will.



Yutaka and I kept moving through the forest.

He was holding onto the note, and I had hidden the needle.

I didn't want anyone to try to do anything nasty with that

needle if they found it in the open like it was before.

We both were still damp, but much drier than before.

This forest is a lot bigger than I thought it was.

When I went through it the first time with Kyoki, we went straight through and out the other side.

Maybe because she knew where we were going?

I would expect Yutaka to at least have some knowledge of where we are.

If he could hear me scream, he must've already been in the forest right?

What was he doing here?

I asked him, but he chose not to answer.

How big is this forest? It feels like we've been walking for a really long time.

As soon as I thought this, we came across someone I didn't expect to see.

Walking around slowly, as if looking for something, was Nora.

The moment I noticed, Yutaka ran at her, knife in hand.

Nora hadn't seen him yet, so I yelled at her to watch out.

She was far enough away to hear me before Yutaka reached her.

"You bitch!" Yutaka screamed as he lunged at her.

Nora jumped back, sending Yutaka further past her.

Yutaka twisted his body around quickly to face Nora.

He took another step forward but froze in place.

Quite literally in fact.

His feet were stuck to the ground.

"What's going on here??" Nora stepped away from Yutaka and over towards me.

"Tch..." Yutaka slumped down and tried to pull his legs up with his hand.

"I noticed he was damp so I froze his feet to the ground, can you tell me what he's trying to do?"

Before I could answer Nora was lifted into the air.

She grabbed at her neck as she was pulled towards Yutaka.

She flew through the air and was slammed into what seemed like an invisible wall.

"Guh—" Neither Nora nor I was ready for the impact.

"I know you did it, why!?" Yutaka yelled at Nora, now suspended above him.

Nora didn't reply.

"Talk to me for fucks sake!" Nora was slammed into the invisible wall over and over again.

"Stop it! Stop!" Nora coughed. "What are you on about!? Are you crazy!?" Nora was lowered down to eye level again.

Well, almost at eye level, she is considerably taller than both Yutaka and I.

She was also held just high enough off the ground to have to stand on her toes.

"Let me go! I'll unfreeze you! Just act like a normal person!" Nora fell to the floor. "I never thought I'd be glad Tokumei did that to me, but it actually helped." She laughed quietly.

What Tokumei did to her? I'm assuming she means during the Kaigi yesterday right?

Yutaka was able to lift his feet once more.

"Alright," Yutaka held his knife atop Nora's lowered head. "Why did you do it?"

"I don't know what you mean! What do you think I did?"

"You put Minami in that bag! You're the only one out here! Of course it was you!" Yutaka kicked Nora in the side. She hit a tree and rolled onto the dirt.

Nora clenched at the dirt with her un-pawed hand.

"Tch." Yutaka crossed his arms, looked downwards and froze completely.

"Wha—" I ran over to Yutaka to inspect him.

He was frozen solid.

I had nothing to break him out with, but I tried clawing at the ice.

No results.

"Minami... Stop it." Nora slowly made her way up and over to me. "I froze him completely this time. I trust you won't act the way he did."

"You'll unfreeze him right? He'll be fine?"

"He'll be a bit cold but he should be fine, if not, I'll make sure to help him be fine." Nora placed her hand atop his icy scalp and gave him a little shake. "Alright, now I have more than a few questions."

"Same here."

"Why are you both damp?"

"Well I woke up after supposedly being thrown into the stream back there. Yutaka jumped in to save me and get me out of the bag I was in."

"I'm guessing that's what Yutaka meant by putting you in a bag then."

"It really wasn't you?"

"No of course not! Why would I do that?" I'm never sure where to look when talking to Nora, do I look at the dog eyes?

"Uh... I'm not really sure, I think Yutaka just thought that whoever we found first must've done it."

"Really? Why would he think that?"

"Again, I'm not really the one to ask, but I am really sorry you had to experience that." I bowed deeply.

Nora sighed. "Don't worry about it, are you okay? How long ago did this happen?"

"I'm fine thanks, we've been wandering for probably almost half an hour by now."

"I see, how did Yutaka get you out of the bag?"

"He cut his way through, with the knife he is holding on to now no doubt." I reached into my pocket to pull out the bag to show Nora. "Here it is, any ideas about it?"

I handed it to Nora for her to inspect.

"It's completely transparent on the inside, what was it like being trapped by something seemingly invisible?"

"Oh, no, originally it was transparent on the outside, I was trapped in complete darkness. I just turned it inside out so I wouldn't lose it."

"I see..." How does Nora see through the mask? "So from the outside, it would just look like you weren't even in a bag." She folded the bag inside out, back to how it was at first when I was in it. "I'm surprised Yutaka was able to figure out there was anything there, let alone to cut through it."

"Well he could probably feel it when he tried getting me out I assume."

"It's a good thing it was oriented that way, if it wasn't he wouldn't know where he would be cutting into." Nora handed it back to me.

"So you have no clue about the bag?" I stuffed it back into my pocket after turning it back inside out.

Nora was silent for a moment. "I don't know the specifics, but I know of this kind of material."

"Tell me anything you know."

"I think it would be better if you asked someone else who would know more, I don't want to get something wrong and muddy your ideas." Nora shook her head.

"Who should I ask?"

"..." Nora looked around. "I think your best bet would be Hane."

"Hane?" The auraless boy. This is just piling more and more to my list of things I need to ask him. "Where would I find him?"

"Do you remember the Kaigi yesterday? Well you should, there's no reason you wouldn't—Remember how after its conclusion, Kibo knocked himself along with Hane unconscious. Once Tokumei unlocked the Hari, I took both of the boys over to the hospital and kept them there. They couldn't exactly go to their own quarters on account of being unconscious, linked together by the neck and possibly wounded. Although they are under the same Hari so that could've helped, but I figured the hospital would be a better space for them."

The hospital...

"Nora, did you leave a note pinned to a tree saying to go to the hospital as soon as possible?"

"No? Can I see this note?"

I fumbled through my pockets, but remembered Yutaka was the one keeping hold of it.

"Yutaka has it."

"Ah, don't bother then. I didn't leave that note, but I think if you want to talk to Hane we should be on our way."

"Sure. Oh! One last thing, why are you out here in the forest anyways?" I feel like we're still pretty deep into the forest, all I can see are still trees on all sides.

"Hane told me to come out and have a look for something, then come back."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

...

"I think I have now." Nora grabbed the still frozen Yutaka and held him over her shoulder. "C'mon, let's not keep him waiting."



We weren't walking for long until we arrived.

What this was I couldn't tell you.

It was like a giant star shaped building.

Not like a regular five point star, but a four point one.

It wasn't flat either, it was fully three dimensional.

It was kind of poked into the ground, standing on its tip.

"Well here we are." Nora set the still very much frozen Yutaka down.

"You mean... This is the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Why does it... Look like that though?"

"I couldn't tell you why, if you can figure it out I'm all ears."

"How can I figure it out when I don't even know what it is?"

"It's a hospital."

"No I mean the shape, why is it so weird?"

Nora took a step back.

"It's not weird! It's beautiful!"

I wasn't saying it wasn't...

"It's *Escher's solid*." Nora waved her hands like a child would showing their parents something they think is fridge worthy.

"...And that is?"

"Surely you've heard of M. C. Escher right?"

"Well yeah, I'm pretty sure I had one of his artworks on my wall actually."

"Do you recall which one?"

"Oh um... The one with the stairs going in all different directions and on the walls and stuff."

"*Relativity* I see... Or maybe *House of Stairs*... Either way, do you know his other work, *Waterfall*? It includes a seemingly impossibly constructed waterfall, where the bottom of the stream zigzags its way up to the top of the waterfall without having any increase in elevation? Not that water flows upstream of course."

"I'm familiar. I think I had another artwork by him to do with water. But the waterfall looks like it flows into itself indefinitely right? Which would be perpetual motion which we know is impossible."

"Yes, that's the one, but we aren't interested in the waterfall itself."

My semi-obscure knowledge was all for nothing.

"What we are interested in is what rests atop the towers. There are two peculiar shapes most are unfamiliar with. On the left is a compound of three cubes, each rotated to make a shape with what look like pluses on each face. The one we are interested in is the one on the right. A compound of three ever so non-regular octahedrons. I suppose low square bipyramids would be a better term..."

I'm sure the difference in terms isn't that important.

"This combination of three low square bipyramids—one for each axis in 3D space—form what is known today as *Escher's solid*."

"Grea—"

"This shape is mathematically known as a stellated rhombic dodecahedron. Stellation basically involves taking a shape and making each face pointy. The shape also has plus-like figures on each face, although this time it is a bit harder to spot. This allows it to fit neatly inside a cube. If you imagine turning a cube inside out, you get the regular rhombic dodecahedron. The dual of a cube is a regular octahedron, and the dual of a regular rhombic dodecahedron is a cuboctahedron. The name is a mixture of cube and octahedron, but I'm sure you could've guessed that. You could say it also has dodecahedron in the name, but the suffix -hedron isn't anything special. It just means face. It's crazy how related the cube and octahedron are, and even more crazy how the rhombic dodecahedron, which at first looks nothing like either shape, is also so connected! I'm only scratching the surface too!"

"I—"

"Some people like to say the rhombic dodecahedron is the sixth platonic solid in spirit. This is backed up by the fourth dimension having not five platonic solids like in three dimensions, but six! This sixth solid has no higher or lower dimensional equivalent, as it is made out of octahedra and is called the 24-cell. The closest equivalent in three dimensions is both the cuboctahedron, and the rhombic dodecahedron!"

"... Are you..."

Nora looked back over at me, coming back to the real world.

"Yes I'm done... I'm so sorry for ranting..."

"Ahah... No it's fine, you seem very passionate, and I found it all very interesting... But..."

Nora tilted her head.

"How does that relate to anything at all?"

"Oh right..." She coughed. "That's the shape of the building."

I wish she would've said that at the beginning so I could have a

point of reference for what she was saying.

"Ah, that makes a lot more sense now. Thanks."

Nora hurled Yutaka back over her shoulder.

"He's been frozen for a while, we should hurry in." Nora began walking towards the doors of the hospital.

"Is it safe to go in?" I was still worried it might be trapped or something.

Nora turned back to face me.

"It's a hospital." She said monotonically.

It was enough to convince me.



The inside of the hospital seemed extremely normal considering the jaggard exterior.

This seems like the reception, or maybe a waiting room. Probably a mix of both.

Nora walked over and behind the counter, while I went and sat on a bean bag.

There's a whole lot of kid toys here, including the one with all the rods that you move the beads across.

It's a staple, if it wasn't here I would assume that someone must've taken it because of how iconic they are.

Nora had slowly begun unfreezing Yutaka, and sat him in a chair.

"Is he alright?" I got up from the not so comfy bean bag.

Nora put her finger on his neck.

"..."

"..."

"Yeah he'll be fine."

Nora headed back to the counter, and set a kettle to boil.

"Do you like coffee, Minami?" Nora pulled two mugs out of a cupboard. A mugboard.

I don't remember ever drinking coffee, but I'm certain I like it.

"Yeah I do, thanks."

"How do you like it?"

It was like I replied on instinct.

"Three sugar packets, milk, cinnamon, chocolate powder. Please."

What a weird order. Why was that the first thing I said?

"Oh wow, your dentist must hate you." Nora laughed. "I'll see what we have."

I swear I've never had coffee in my life. Normally I'll just have hot chocolate or something like that.

With what I asked for I may as well be having one.

"I'm sure Yutaka won't mind his black." Nora set aside the mug assumed to be for him.

He isn't exactly in a state to drink at the moment.

"Hane also had three sugars in his, although not with all of the extra stuff. Kibo still hasn't woken up."

"Are they still linked by the wire?"

"No reason they wouldn't be."

"How long will they stay like that?"

Nora began pouring the coffee into the mugs.

"Probably until the next Kaigi or so. It is a punishment after all."

"How do you feel about it? You're half the reason they got punished in the first place."

I know it was a bit of a direct question, but I was curious.

Nora took a moment.

"I find it pretty funny actually."

That definitely wasn't what I was expecting.

"How so?"

"Well I mean, it was only really positive for me. I can breathe properly now, and they kind of knocked themselves out on their own."

That is true.

Kibo knocked them out after the punishment was over.

"Why was the wire so short when it happened? Are they..." No they couldn't be...

Could they be... Sharing a bed!?

No no...

That can't be right.

Nora laughed.

"They're in separate rooms right now. The wire extended up to about 10 metres or so. Easily enough to slip under the door and give them room to walk around." Nora began walking towards me with two mugs. One in each hand.

"Thanks." I carefully took the mug from her.

I looked deeply into the light brown liquid.

I haven't had coffee before.

What if I don't like it?

I walked over behind the counter myself and leant on it.

There was a sink to my side if I needed it.

Before I could take a sip, Nora had made her way to Yutaka.

Instead of handing it to him like she did to me, she splashed it over his twice damp body. (Now thrice.)

He jolted up out of his chair.

"FUCKING... FUCK." He clenched his face.

"What the hell??" I rested my mug on the bench and ran over to him. "Nora?? What was that!?"

"He's awake again..? Oh uh... I knew he'd be fine!" Nora put her hands on her hips, still holding the now empty mug.

"Ahh..." Yutaka had fallen to his knees. "Fucking hell..."

I bent down and put my hand on his back.

"Are you okay? How bad is it? Can I see?"

"Arghh..." Yutaka slowly removed his hands from his face.

It...

It looked fine.

"See? He's fine. I just wanted to wake him up!"

...

I mean it worked...

"Does it hurt?"

"N—No It's fine."

Nora had come back with a tea towel.

He reluctantly took it and dried his face.

"I made it not too hot. It wouldn't burn you." Nora took the towel back.

Yutaka made his way back to his feet.

I walked him over to the bean bag and he sat down.

I looked for a chair for myself in the child space.

Hmm...

On the small wooden table rested another object made of wood.

It was the same shape as the hospital from the outside.

A rhombic dodecahedron?

No, a stellated one.

I picked it up, but it fell apart.

It fell into six identical parts.

They were kind of... Paper boat shaped.

I'm sure there's a better way to describe it, but I'm sure that was fine.

I'm pretty sure I've seen this puzzle before.

Maybe at a dentist.

I sat down on the floor and tried to put the six pieces back together.

It's hard to hold all of them with only two hands.

The table was low enough for me to reach it from the ground comfortably.

After a bit of trial and error, I managed to get five of the six pieces together.

...

There was a gap perfect for the final piece, but no matter what I tried, it wouldn't fit in.

The puzzle was locked in place, not giving at all.

Ah!

Something touched my shoulder.

Yutaka sat down next to me, and took the puzzle from my hands.

He began disassembling it...

All my work...

He put three pieces together in each hand.

"Watch." I was.

He gently lined them up against each other, and they slid into place, reforming the shape I had begun to be familiar with.

"Woah! How did you know that?" Yutaka didn't seem like the kind to be adept with wooden puzzles.

"Well... I had some time to kill one time, and it was there. Some other things were too, It's just... Kind of muscle memory."

"That's really cool, so you're telling me you can do more of these?"

"Uh... Yeah that's right." Yutaka stood back up and walked away.

I took the puzzle and put it together like Yutaka did.

That's neat.

I put it down gently and stood up as well.

"Nora? Is Hane awake?"

"Hm? He was earlier, I'm not sure about now, he doesn't exactly have much to do in his room."

"Can I go see him?"

"Well yeah sure, let me show you where he is." Nora waved her hand and began walking into a hallway.

I turned back to face Yutaka.

He was rummaging through some cabinets.

"Come on, we're going."

Yutaka looked up at me, confused.

"We're going to go see Hane."

"Uh, No." Yutaka ducked back down to the cupboard height.

Hmm. I guess I'll come back for him.

I followed Nora down the corridor.

She stopped once she passed over a cord connecting the bottoms of two doors and turned to face me.

"Hane is to my right, and Kibo is to my left."

"Thanks Nora." I walked in the door to my right.

"Uh—" Nora seems like she tried to say something but didn't.

I closed the door behind me.

Following the cord with my eyes led me to the person in the bed.

Kibo.

He was under his covers, in the hospital bed.

The sheets were pulled right up to his neck.

At the base of his bed was his name written neatly.

Looking at Kibo himself, his head was wrapped in bandages.

I stepped over to his bedside and shook him a little.

He seems completely out of it.

His cheek has an exposed cut on it though, it doesn't exactly look fresh so I suppose it's fine to leave alone.

He really is just unconscious.

I began to snoop around the room for anything useful I could borrow.

It's pretty empty.

Empty as in, nothing unique for a hospital room.

None of the computers turn on—I don't think the building is connected to electricity.

I began rummaging through cabinets and drawers.

There weren't even any files or papers of medical history.

I guess it makes sense, they wouldn't just be in a random room.

I went back over to Kibo.

He's lacking an aura.

Resting my finger up against his neck I confirmed he was still alive.

Maybe his aura was just faint.

While my fingers were there, I inspected the collar around

Kibo's neck.

I couldn't slip my fingers underneath it, it was tight.

It was hard to tell if his neck was red, or if it was just the collar making it look like it was.

I tugged the cord a little.

I began waving it back and forth, making waves in the wire that followed all the way out of the door.

I wonder if Hane can feel me doing this.

Imagine the waves are getting amplified and he's being flung around the room.

Anyways, I should probably go talk to him like I had planned.

The amount of questions I've built up specifically to ask him has grown so large.

What do I even ask first?

I grabbed a clipboard with some paper and a pen.

To check to make sure it was working I drew a little bird.

Yup. All working.

I scribbled some more and ripped off the page.

I tossed it into a small bin by the bedside.

As I exited the room I began writing down some questions.



I've built up so many by now.

Nora wasn't in the hall anymore.

I didn't check back in the main lobby so that I would get sidetracked.

I followed the cord into the room Hane was supposed to be in.

I opened the door slowly, and poked my head in.

"Not used to knocking are you?" Hane was sitting on his bed, which unlike Kibo's, had all of the sheets removed and thrown haphazardly across the floor.

"Oh... Right, sorry." I stepped through the door and closed it behind me. "How... How are you?"

"Could be better, not as bad off as Kibo though." Hane scoffed.

"Why does he have it worse?"

"Oh y'know... Momentum and all that." Hane doesn't exactly sound confident. "You don't have to stand so far away, I won't bite."

I stepped over the bedding and grabbed a chair from a corner.

It was one with wheels on the bottom, an office chair I suppose.

I couldn't quite wheel it over to his side—as per the mess, so I carried it over instead.

"So, why are you here Minami?" Hane moved his hands up behind his head.

I told Hane about what happened from me being thrown in the stream to ending up at the hospital.

"How interesting, that must've been pretty scary, being saved by Yutaka and all."

Was he saying that being saved by Yutaka was scary?

I think it was meant to be a joke so I gave a small chuckle.

"Can I ask... Why are your sheets all over the floor?" I turned to look at the mess he'd made. I didn't even know you could fit that much fabric on a bed.

"I took them off." Hane had his eyes closed, sinking deeper into his pillow, which managed to stay on his bed.

"Well yeah, I could've guessed that, but why did you take them off?"

"They were uncomfortable, I dunno." Right then...

"Has Kibo woken up yet at all?" I guess I'll jump into asking my questions.

"I wouldn't know. We're in separate rooms."

"How did you get to the hospital?"

"Nora told me she dragged us here after the Kaigi." Nora told me that too, I was just making sure he isn't lying.

I reached into my pocket.

"Do you know about this bag?" I held the bag I was in up to show Hane. "Nora said you might know something about it."

He opened his eyes and leaned forward to inspect it.

He pinched it between his fingers and rubbed it.

"I think Boru made it."

"Boru made it? How?"

"I dunno"

"Does that mean he's the one who threw me in the stream?"

"Who's to say? I'm sure he would make it for someone if they needed it. I have no clue what he'd be up to now, or even where he'd be for that matter."

I'll keep that in mind too.

Actually, I can write it down, and so I did.

"What was the punishment like? Did it hurt?"

"Well yeah obviously it hurt, did you not watch it happen?"

"Well... I did watch it, I just figured I could get some more specifics."

"I mean, I was choking but could still breathe, and smashed into Kibo repeatedly. That was probably worse than the pain itself to be honest."

It doesn't seem like Hane and Kibo are all that close.

"What is the Spiral Parade exactly?"

"I said it before, it's our team name of me, Kibo, Nora and Boru."

"Why did you decide to team up?"

"Well, power in numbers."

"Why do you need power?"

"It's a killing game, you're going to be picked off one by one if you don't have a team."

"Aren't you scared of getting betrayed? How do you trust them?"

"They can't betray me. They can't beat me. They know what would happen if they tried."

...

Alright then.

"You mean you have some power over them?"

"I'm the one who formed the group, and therefore I'm the leader."

"Yes, but that isn't enough for them to not betray you. I meant more if you had some physical power over them."

"Well sure, I have that too."

I looked Hane up and down.

"Not to be rude... But you don't exactly look that strong. Especially compared to Nora..."

"Tch—Hey, I am strong..." Hane sat up on his bed with his legs crossed. "Sure I'm scrawny, but... Tch..." Hane pulled a shot put ball from somewhere along the opposite side of his bed. "Just... Watch."

Hane held this ball about thirty centimetres above the table to his bedside, and dropped it.

It landed with a thud and almost no bounce.

"Exactly what you would expect. Right?"

With all that build up I was expecting something different at least...

"Now..." Hane picked up the ball and held his other hand where it had just landed for a while. "When I drop it again..." He removed his hand from the table and dropped the ball in its place.

The ball hit the table, and instead of slightly bouncing and landing with a thud, it bounced right back up into his hand, still outstretched.

"What the—"

"My Seigyu, Minami. I'm stronger than them."

"You can make a heavy ball bounce? Doesn't Nora control liquid as a whole?"

"It's not about the ball. Imagine that with a bullet or something!"

"So what? Your Seigyu lets you control the conservation of momentum?"

"No Minami. Keep watching." Instead of holding his hand on the table, he hit it as hard as he could with an open palm, and then dropped the ball.

The ball hit the table and bounced right up past Hane's hand and skimmed the roof before falling back down and denting the metal table majorly.

"My Seigyu, Minami. Can you guess what it is?"

"And it isn't the conservation of momentum?"

"No... You know how Nioi's Seigyu is smell? Mine is just like that. Hanekaeru..."

"... Wing frog?"

Hane sighed.

"Hane as in jump or splash, and Kaeru as in return or come back. My Seigyu is **Recoil**, Minami."

Recoil? I noted that down, along with the now known Kanji for Hane's name.

"So is that all you can do with it?" It seems kind of boring...

"N—No. Of course that's not all..! I'm just... Injured still." Hane layed back down on his bed and rolled away from me.

"Uh, don't worry! I don't even know what my Seigyu is! Let alone what a Seigyu is in the first place!" I shook my hands in front of me instinctively, even though Hane wouldn't have been able to see.

"Yeah you do, Tokumei explained them again in the Kaigi."

"Well... I don't know how they work or how to use them or anything..."

Before Hane could answer, Nora burst through the door.

"What is going on in here!?" Nora looked directly at Hane.

"Shot put ball." Hane said monotonically as he flicked his hand, as if dismissing the question.

Nora sighed and turned back around. "Just stop breaking everything in here, other people might use these rooms in the future." She said as she left the room.

"What a pain..." Hane grumbled. "Anyways what were you saying again?"

"Oh right. How do you use a Seigyu? Or even figure out how?"

Hane sighed as he sat up to face me once more.

"Well first, you need to concentrate. You need to focus on accessing your Seigyu."

"Accessing? From where?"

"Uhh... Imagine a radio in your head. You need to find the right channel your Seigyu is on."

"What in the world does that even mean."

"You need to focus on stabilising the wavelengths. It's like meditation or clearing your mind or whatever... I'm pretty sure there's an exact channel where your Seigyu will be the most powerful, but there are pockets of smaller power and stuff where it'll be weaker, or with different powers. I don't exactly know... You just gotta go digging through your mindscape until you find something, then hone in on that I guess."

A radio... Finding the right channel?

"How will I know if I find it? How would I even use powers that I don't know how to use?"

"Hmm... Just a feeling."

Just a feeling?

"Something will feel different. Seigyus have downsides too, they're not just some superpower."

"Well what's your downside?"

"Uh. I guess it just stings a bit to use, especially when I put more energy into something like I did at the end there. I can channel the Seigyu through any body part. If we were outside *and Nora wasn't around* I'd be able to show you some more. For example, I can jump pretty high."

"How high?"

"I dunno, it depends how high I want to jump."

Great...

"Is there a limit?"

"Well it depends how much force I'm able to put into the ground before I jump. You push into and off the ground when you jump normally, so when I do it, I go higher. I can practically pogo around if I wanted to, but that'd be pretty tiring."

"So I just need to find the right wavelength?"

"Sorta, yeah."

"How long did it take you?"

"About half an hour after I learnt about it."

Oh so it should be easy then! I can't wait to find out what my Seigyu is! I hope it's something powerful!

"So uh... Can you only exert force that you can put into things yourself?" I wanted to know the limits of his power. It might be useful in learning more about Seigyus in general.

Hane was silent for a moment "I'm able to store force in objects and can release them at will. This charge can stack too, but it gets harder to imbue more force... Lemme borrow some paper real quick." I ripped off an empty page and handed him my pen.

Hane began writing down what looked like an equation.

"I haven't figured this out perfectly yet, but imagine N is the amount of force I put into something. x can be how many times I've put force into this one thing."

He turned the paper around and presented his equation.

' $N(1/x) + N(1/x+1) + N(1/x+2) + \dots$ '

"In short, the more force I try to put into something, the harder it is. The first time the force is one to one, and the second time I can only add half as much force and so on and so forth."

"So that's the *Harmonic Series* right? If you just kept punching a thing you could get infinite force?"

"Well yeah, maybe if I had infinite time." Hane smirked. "Obviously I don't. I get tired and N will decrease over time too. I haven't tried hitting two things at the same time and releasing one into the other though. I'm not even sure if that would even help that much."

"And how do you release this force?"

"Well you saw before, when the ball hit the spot it was released. So either when something with enough force hits the spot, or I can release any spot whenever I want. It's hard to keep track of too many though. If I can't keep my focus they release on their own."

That only really happens when I have around 20 or more locations set up. I can set booby traps and stuff, it's pretty funny to be honest."

"You've been experimenting a lot haven't you." I chuckled.

I'm getting more and more excited to find out what I can do!

"If I tried hard enough I could probably jump all the way to the moon." Hane snickered. "Yeah right... No one else can do that. Well... Obviously Tokumei would do it in a blink."

Tokumei...

"Do you know what Tokumei's Seigyu is?" Out of everyone, I'd guess Hane or Boru would be the ones to know.

Hane fell back into his bed. "Pffff... Absolutely no clue. He does anything and everything. He's the only one here that's stronger than me. To be honest, I'd be surprised if his Seigyu could be summed up in a single word. Unless that word was, I dunno, 'everything'?"

"Also, wouldn't putting that much force into your legs to jump high, like... Crumple your legs in an instant?"

"I control recoil Minami. It means I can also absorb impact. If someone was to punch me, I could absorb the impact and reflect it one to one. Sure if someone drops a car on me or something I won't be able to just reflect that, but yeah a punch won't affect me."

Is this what he meant by '*They can't betray me. They can't beat me.*'? They literally can't affect him? But Nora still just controls liquid!

"And does that follow the harmonic series too?"

"I haven't tested this one as much but I'd assume so. If I get hit in two different spots then they count separately, but yeah. And when I hit something a second time, the half of the force that doesn't get absorbed is sent back into me, when I can then also absorb fully. When I try for a third time I only get a third back too. Where the third third goes I have no idea. Maybe it gets turned into heat or something."

I'm glad I'm writing all of this down. I would not be able to remember all of this on my own.

"Are there any other aspects of your Seigyu I should know

about? I don't think what you've told me fully explains your ball trick. Why did holding your hand on the table make it perfectly elastic? Oh right, and how did you make the gunshot noise?"

"Of course there's more. More I haven't even found yet. It hasn't even been a week. As for the ball trick... Ah screw it I may as well tell you. When I drop the ball the first time, I'm using it as a catalyst to store the force it lands with into the surface. I hold my hand there to check it worked as there isn't a big window for it to work. I also move the spot from the table into my hand, which I then put into the ball. Then when I drop the ball from the same spot, it has double the force, which after hitting the surface, releases the stored force from the spot and sends it right back up, as it now holds the force of two ball drops—One to stop it on the way down and one to send it perfectly back up. When I held my hand down I was also just checking the spot where I would hit it, which I then did with more than three times the amount of force as the ball dropping would have done. I store that in the spot and then I drop the ball onto it."

What an elaborate trick.

"So you don't even have to touch a spot to store force in it?"

"As long as I use something that comes directly from me, like throwing a ball, I can set that object to store force. Yeah. Maybe If I had a bow and arrow that wouldn't work, as the bow is doing most of the work there. Although I haven't exactly tried. It would be cool If I could set up some dominos and have it carry the force through like a Newton's cradle."

"You must've been practicing that all morning." I chuckled.
"Where did you even get a shot put ball in the first place?"

"I think it might actually be a small cannonball..."

What!? Not only did that not answer my question, it raised more!

"I found it in the castle. You wouldn't have been to the castle, would you?"

There's a castle here?

"Uh... No, I haven't heard of a castle."

"Yeah. It's a pretty neat place. Lots of stuff laying about."

"So you just had that in your pocket the whole time?"

"Yeah sure."

What was that supposed to mean?

"Now, the gunshot sound... That was a combination of Boru's Frequency and my Recoil. I used recoil to snap my fingers with much more force, and Boru amplified the sound."

"So Boru was there with you setting up the case... Should he have been punished too?"

"Nah I don't think so, he was just there to observe and help with the sound."

"Observe? We didn't see him at all. Where was he watching from?"

Hane paused for a moment.

"Boru's Seigyu is... Frequency, yes? That includes his ability to change the frequency of the light waves... Around him? I'm not sure exactly, but he can make himself look basically invisible."

So that means...

Hane continued. "Boru was with us the whole time. Even in the restaurant. Ahiru didn't see him as he stayed invisible until Tokumei went to get him for the Kaigi."

Maybe Boru was the one touching my ears then... I couldn't see anyone when I turned around, but if they were invisible, that would make a lot of sense...

Does that mean he was there with me in the quarters too?

"I still don't fully understand why you pretended to kill Nora. I get you wanted to cause chaos, but was that really the only reason?"

"Hmm... I wanted to test the rules of this place. No one was really dead, but Tokumei still hosted a Kaigi. He clearly knew she wasn't dead, but made pretend that she was. Maybe I also wanted to see how smart everyone was—Their deductive skills and such. Seeing who's the biggest threat... If I wasn't voted for, a reward would've been nice too."

"So you wanted to gain an advantage is what I'm getting."

"Yeah you could say that. Although since I didn't actually kill Nora, I'm not even sure if I would've gotten a reward. I guess I'll have to try again next time."

"Next time?"

"You never know. I like to keep my options open, you feel me?"

"Sure..." I bent over to one side, searching for the tab on my chair. After an amount of time I'm a bit embarrassed to admit, I found it and raised the height of the chair. "Why did you get Kibo involved? Was he really all that necessary? I wouldn't be surprised if he hates you now..."

"Haha... Kibo, right. Can I tell you a secret?" Hane leant forward, and used his hand to hide his mouth from the side of the room with the entrance. "When we all voted at the end, I voted for myself."

Hane voted for himself? I took a moment to try and recall the voting plan we had made... Me, Nioi, Kyoki and Shinju were meant to vote for Kibo... Akui, Ahiru, Souka and Boru were meant to vote for Hane... Yutaka had voted for Souka, and we expected Kibo and Hane to do the same.

"But you and Kibo still ended in a tie, and Souka still ended up with three votes. Shouldn't you have ended with five and Souka two?" I put down my pen and rubbed my cheek.

"That's what I thought would happen too. So clearly not everyone voted how they had agreed to, but since everything ended up how you had expected, no one noticed a thing."

"So that means either Akui, Ahiru, Souka or Boru lied about who they would vote for?"

"I think so. Do you have any idea who it could have been?"

Hane asked that, not as if he was looking for an answer, but as if he was quizzing me.

"Well it wouldn't have been Souka, and I doubt it would have been Ahiru..." There was really no need to narrow it down. The answer was staring at me with one clear eye. "It was Boru, wasn't it?"

"Ding ding! Spot on. We as the Spiral Parade agreed to gang up on whoever we thought we could. In other words, not to vote for each other. Since Souka already had one vote, thanks to Yutaka, they were easy pickings. Sure, if all three of us voted along with Yutaka, Kibo still would have ended up in a tie. I likely would've been able to get a reward, but I knew Kibo would be pissed at me, even though it was out of my control. Knowing Boru would do that, and hoping everyone else would do as they were told, I voted for myself. In hindsight, that definitely wasn't what I should've done, and if I find myself in the same situation, I might just vote someone random to get to see Kibo being punished alone... Maybe... I'm just glad Boru was meant to vote for me, otherwise Kibo would've gotten out scot-free and I would be punished alone, or with Souka. So really, thanks for that." Hane laid back down and sunk into his pillow.

"It really doesn't seem like you and Kibo are on the best of terms—"

"Well yeah obviously I'm pissed at him. He got us tied together and now I'm stuck in the hospital as he has his fucking beauty sleep!" Hane crossed his arms across his chest.

"Even during the Kaigi you two didn't seem to have the best relationship..."

"Probably because he thought I would betray and vote for him or something. I dunno, he gets pissy quick."

"What about you and Boru? You both.. Have white hair?" Why would both of them having white hair have anything to do with it? I wiped my face with my hand and moved on.

"Boru... He's... Boru's my brother."

What!? The white hair really did have a relation!

"We're not related by blood or anything, and he's a fair bit older... But he would be considered my brother."

So the white hair really didn't have a relation...

"Boru was the first one I found when I woke up here. In this game I mean. I'm glad it was someone I knew and not some random like Kyoki." Hane smirked to himself. I didn't.

"Where did you wake up?"

"I woke up in a treehouse."

A treehouse!?

"Where's this treehouse?"

"Oh it's off in the forest somewhere, I dunno."

Yutaka and I didn't stumble across it when we walked through. It mustn't be close to the stream I suppose.

"It was around sunset when I woke up. Boru was also in the treehouse, but I had to wake him up. He had a feather-filled pillow and a blanket that barely fit his body. He even had one of those long sleeping caps. It was like he was doing a bit, but I think he genuinely just sleeps like that."

I knew Boru was a bit silly, but even I didn't expect that of him.

"After I woke him up he stuffed all that stuff into his hat. He just keeps it on him I guess."

"And where did you first find Kibo?"

"Kibo was also near the treehouse. He was stuffed into some wooden crate. I ignored his calls for help at first, but I came back for him."

No wonder you don't have a good relationship...

There's something I haven't gotten a chance to ask anyone yet, and I think I really should before we get too far off topic...

"Hane..."

He sat up a little.

"Do you... Remember anything from before you ended up here?"

I lowered my chair back down as I waited for a response.

"Well obviously I remember stuff."

"I mean directly before..." I felt like the clipboard was about to snap in my hands, I put it, along with the pen down and tried to breathe.

Two in... One out...

"Directly before..."

Hane sat up fully, crossing his legs again.

"I remember... **That I died.** I suffocated to death..."

I couldn't help but let out one of the most inappropriate laughs I think I've ever had. I clasped my hand over my mouth soon after.

"I—I remember the same thing! W—When I woke up here I had the strangest feeling that I—I shouldn't be alive, I thought I had died! I'm just glad I'm not the only one!"

My head throbbed as I thought back... I thought I had died, but at the time I dismissed it. It just would not stop lingering in the back of my mind however. Having not only another person think the same, but be confident in the fact they had died, lifted a weight off my shoulders, while also making my stomach sink... Having confirmation was great... But... Does that mean I really did *die*? It doesn't seem possible... I'm alive now, aren't I..?

"I—Is this... The afterlife?" I looked up at Hane, our eyelines now level.

"..." Hane averted his gaze. "It is."



I really am dead.

A phrase no one should even be able to mutter truthfully.

It feels wrong.

But...

I remember dying...

Not explicitly, but I just know I have.

It feels right.

It doesn't feel fake either.

It feels real.

But if I believe that...

Then how could you explain where I am now?

I never once believed in an 'afterlife'.

I didn't particularly like thinking about that either.

You could say I was scared of death.

After all, who wouldn't be?

I guess I was avoidant of the topic altogether.
I don't want to think about not existing.
I... I like existing.
Liked..?
I don't want to think about that...
A living being...
Once it dies, it becomes nothing more than a *thing*.
An *item*.
Reduced to nothing but a prop.
That's what I expected would happen to me...
But...
Clearly I've been *given a second chance*.
It's hard to imagine nothing.
Although, if anything, nothing is what we were forever.
Only a small glimpse of *something*.
I don't understand why I was given a second chance.
A second chance to experience *something*.
But I shouldn't let it go to waste.
That means...
That means I need to be the sole survivor...
If I die here...
If I'm the sole survivor I'll be able to escape this game...
Why...
Why can there only be one survivor?
This isn't a second chance...
This is a sick joke!
Sixteen of us...
All given a second chance at life...
Only for one to live?
Is one life really worth the fifteen others?
Is... My life..?
And what does *escape* even mean in the context of the
afterlife!?
What, do you just get to... Respawn?

Do you just wake up in your old, once dead body?
I don't want to wake up in a coffin, buried six feet underground!
Do you reincarnate?
My consciousness passed down into a newborn baby?
Will I even remember this sick game?
Will I remember anything..?
There's too much I don't know...
Too much I *don't want* to know...
So many questions, with so little answers.
Hane... He's been surprisingly helpful.
But I know I can only ask him so much.
For real answers about the foundation of this game...
I'll need to go to the source.
I'll need to ask **Tokumei**...



"Hello? Ear—Afterlife to Minami?" Hane waved his hand in front of my face.

"Oh! Sorry... I was lost in thought..." I shook my head and tried to recalibrate myself.

I looked down at my clipboard.

'Look at the door' was written in pink, sloppy letters.

"The door?" I mumbled.

Hane and I both looked over to the door of the hospital room I had entered what had felt like a long time ago now.

After a second, the door began to slowly creak open.

Did Nora not latch it properly when she left before?

It opened about a third of the way before stopping.

...

"What was up with that?"

I turned back to face Hane.

Well, what I expected to be Hane.

In his place, laying on his stomach and kicking his legs in the air...

Was **Tokumei**.

I screamed before quickly covering my mouth.

My chair rolled back and hit the cabinets behind me.

"Ahaha! Did you call?"

I felt Tokumei's grin widened through his mask.

"W—Where did Hane go!?" I asked, still covering my mouth.

"Hane is exactly where he was a moment ago. But where are you?" Tokumei rolled around to sit cross legged.

"Where... Am I..?" I looked around, the hospital room felt exactly the same... Except for the presence of an **aura**...

Everything was also... Oddly still... And colourless...

"That's right! We're not in the same hospital room you were in before. Not even another room inside of the hospital! Where we are, is completely devoid of time. Well, clearly a version of time is moving, but compared to where you just were, time isn't moving. It's like... If you were looking at a stack of paper. From the outside, you see the whole, and time would move at a constant rate from top to bottom. Where we are, is in between two pieces of paper. Compared to the rest of the stack, we don't exist. Only when you look closer and separate the sheets do you find where we are, or even come into existence! To Hane, it won't even look like you moved. Because, on the sheets of paper, you didn't. You simply moved in the time between sheets..! Get that?"

I nodded and pretended like I understood any of that.

"Soooo Minami. You wanted to ask me something?" Tokumei tilted his head like a dog would.

"Right..! Um..." I flipped through the pages on my clipboard.

Tokumei reached out and pulled the clipboard from my hands.

"What you want to ask me won't be there. You know that."

I looked at him blankly.

"Don't worry! I'll give it back before I leave!"

What it was that I wanted to ask Tokumei..?

I rubbed my cheek and tried to remember.

"Hurry up Minami! We don't have infinite time or anything!"

I instinctively apologised.

"No need to apologise, just ask what you want to ask!"

"Why..?"

Tokumei leaned in closer.

"Why are we all here? Why are you making us do this? How did we get here? Where are we? Who—Who even are you!?" My teeth were so tight it was hard to get the words out.

Tokumei took a moment to reply, although it felt like forever.

"You should know I can't answer all of those Minami. I'll let you ask one question, which I will give a truthful answer to. Don't think you can be tricky and ask multiple questions in one either. I feel like you know the question you want to ask, and it's the reason why I'm here. What were you thinking about right before you called me?"

I took more than a moment to think.

Any one question...

This is exactly what I've wanted...

Exactly what I've needed...

But...

It doesn't feel right.

It doesn't feel fair.

Does it need to be fair?

He's given me this chance.

A chance I may never get again.

I want to ask about so much.

I want to ask about what happens after I win...

I know he wants me to ask that too.

He's clearly hinting towards it...

But really...

Do I expect to win?

Do I really expect myself to be the one to make it to the end?

I'm so far behind...

Even if I ask something like 'What did I miss when I was asleep?' I doubt he would tell me everything.

He said he would answer truthfully.

...

"Tokumei..."

I knew what I was going to ask, but I had to push away all of the other questions I wanted to ask.

It's hard, but I know this is right.

"...Why are you giving me this chance?"

Tokumei paused.

"You mean...? To ask me a question?"

I nodded.

He handed my clipboard back.

"Well... I wanted to help you. I know you're struggling a bit, hell, you almost died this morning. I just figured... Well, you called and..."

He sighed.

"I just... Don't want you to hate me."

I watched him silently.

He got up off of the bed, to the opposite side I was sitting on.

Facing away from me, he dug into his tattered skirt pocket and pulled something out he held to his chest.

"You can have this." He faced and tossed me the small item.

"Sorry for wasting your time. I think I'll set another motive today..." Tokumei kept mumbling as he left the hospital room.

I looked down into my hands.

A key.

A small metal key.

It had a small note attached to the handle.

'You'll know where this goes when you find it.'

I carefully slid it into the pocket on my shirt, under my jumper.

"I'll see you later today, Minami." Tokumei said, peeking in through the doorway, before slamming it in his own face.



Hane's voice continued, as if it never left.

"Huh. That was weird. Was there a draft or something?"

I looked back at the bed, where Hane once again sat cross legged.

Completely oblivious as to my meeting with Tokumei.

I stayed silent.

"Howdja know it was going to open and slam again like that?"

Oh right, Hane only looked at the door because I read it off of my clipboard.

"Oh uh, it must have been a coincidence."

The aura in the room was gone, but the colours were back.

"I have one last thing I'd like to ask you, Hane." I finally got to ask him something I'd been meaning to since first seeing him. It was hard to hold back a smile.

"Shoot."

"Why don't you have an aura?"

Hane tilted his head.

"I don't have an aura? I don't think we're on the same wavelength here—What's that supposed to mean?"

"I told you about auras in the Kaigi, remember? You even asked me about it."

"No I get that, I just don't get why you think I don't have one. Does Kibo have an aura? Does Boru have an aura? Do *you* have an aura?"

"Kibo does have an aura. I checked it earlier, it was faint because he was unconscious though—"

"Are you saying I'm dead or something? I'm very much alive thank you. As alive as I can be in the afterlife!"

"I—I'm not sure. Now that you mention it though... I don't remember Boru having an aura at all either... Maybe I just paid no notice to it, but I don't remember ever feeling it..."

"So it's a family thing then. I guess we just don't have auras."

"I thought you said you weren't related."

"Maybe it's just the white hair then. It reflects all of the aura so you can't... Read it or whatever you do."

Well, he isn't wrong.

Everyone with white hair doesn't seem to have an aura, but everyone without seems to have one...

"Why is your hair white by the way? It doesn't seem the most natural."

"Huh? Well you're one to talk, your hair's purple." Hane brushed his hand through his hair and looked away from me.

"I dye mine, it's normally black."

"Then why wouldn't you assume I do too?"

"Well... It just feels... Too white. No amount of bleach should be able to make your hair that white without burning it all off. What colour is it naturally?"

"It's... It's naturally white..." Hane hugged his legs, continuing to avoid eye contact.

"Is Boru's too?"

"Yeah... Although his is more grey..."

"Is that just from his hat?"

"I dunno, maybe. I rarely see him not wearing one. He is older than me too..."

"How much older could he be? He definitely doesn't seem elderly. How old are you in the first place?"

"I'm... I'm 17—"

"Oh, well I'm 18."

He rested his cheek on his arm.

"You didn't answer me before."

"About what?"

"Do *you* have an aura?"

I was hoping he would forget.

I didn't want to think about that in the first place.

There's no way for me to tell if I have an aura.

"I don't know. There is no way for me to."

I hoped I had one.

Then I wouldn't be such a hypocrite asking about his.

"Well... Thanks for letting me ask you all of that." I stood up and began making my way out of the room.

"Not much else I can do while I'm stuck here." Hane remained cuddled up like a ball.

"...Bye then."

Hane didn't reply.

I opened the door, half expecting Tokumei to still be there, obviously he wasn't.

Making sure not to trip on the cord connecting the two boys, I closed the door behind me.

"Oh Minami! Welcome back!" Nora greeted me the moment I stepped back into the lobby.

"You sure took your time in there." Yutaka said, in place of a greeting.

"Ahah, yeah well, I had a lot to ask." I walked over to where they were sitting, opposite each other at the counter.

They had a deck of cards, and seemed to have been playing for a long time.

"We're playing blackjack, care for a game? Yutaka keeps winning almost every hand."

They weren't playing with tokens, but Yutaka seemed to be in a much better mood than before, so I can take her word for it.

"I'm alright thanks. I'm ready to go and change out of these clothes in the Dead End Complex."

"Me too. I'm sick of wearing that twat's jacket."

I hadn't noticed it as they were similar colours, but Yutaka had removed his suit jacket and was instead wearing the one Kibo had been previously.

He shimmied it off and threw it to the floor.

All he had left was a single white button up.

"It might be dry now, can you go grab my jacket, Minami? It's

hanging on that chair.” He pointed to a chair not that far from himself, pulled out of the counter a bit.

Before I could pull his jacket off of the chair I noticed something.

Something I can’t believe I had forgotten.

The mug with my coffee, which had now gone completely cold, was still sitting on the counter.

I let go of the jacket and picked up the mug.

I don’t want to drink this anymore—

“Oh, your coffee. I was going to remind you about it but kept forgetting. Sorry.” Nora scratched the back of her head.

“Go give it to Hane and tell him it’s an ice coffee.” Yutaka smiled and pointed down the hallway.

I looked back at Nora, as if asking for permission.

It was a bit hard to assess due to the mask, but I took her silence as a ‘go ahead’.

I held the mug in one hand and tossed Yutaka his jacket with the other.

“Be right back!” I walked fast, but kept at a slow enough pace so as to not spill the drink.

I made sure to knock on the door this time before entering.

“What is it now?” Hane had now thrown his pillows off the bed too.

“I got you this.” I walked over to the bedside and placed down the mug. “It’s an iced coffee...”

Hane didn’t reply.

“O—Okay bye for real now.” I hopped over the mess and back out of the door.

Nora had packed up the deck of cards and Yutaka was finishing putting his jacket back on.

“Heh, did he drink it?” Yutaka was still smiling.

“I left before I saw.”

“A shame for sure. Alright, we ready to go off?”

I had a quick look around the lobby, I don’t think I’ve left

anything behind.

"Yeah, sure." I nodded.

"I'll be staying here of course, I'll see you two later." Nora waved us off.

"Oh uh, how do we get to the Dead End Complex from here?"

"Um..." Nora thought for a second. "If you just walk in a straight line out of the door, you should end up at the chequered plane. You'll have to go through a little bit of forest, but It's not too far."

"Alright, thanks Nora! Bye!" I waved as we walked out of the hospital building.



"I can not wait to get out of these clothes." Yutaka was still smiling from earlier.

"I'm still wondering what clothes they'll even have." Will it just be duplicates of the clothes we're wearing now? Can I wear other people's clothes?

"They have a whole lot."

We walked in silence for a bit.

"So... Do you know how to shift? You would have to, to be able to get to the place right?"

"Hm? Nah no clue what Tokumei was on about there. The place is all built up normally. I dunno where all that Nora stuff was but I think that's the shifted one."

How would that be the shifted one? I don't know how to shift, and it was like that the whole time, wasn't it?

"Weird..."

Tokumei shifted us during the Kaigi, he didn't shift us back after either. It should still be the built up version right?

We continued walking, eventually passing through a small wall of forest before arriving at the chequered plane.

The Dead End Complex was still in the built up form as I had

suspected.

"Hell yeah, we're so close now." Yutaka picked up his pace and almost left me behind as he left for the Complex.

I blindly followed Yutaka along the centre of a road before ending up at a large, trapezoid shaped building.

There were two large glass doors at the entrance, with wooden walls surrounding that looked like they were melting into the floor.

Above the doors was a half broken neon sign, simply and aptly reading 'clothes place'.

"C'mon c'mon hurry up." Yutaka was already pulling open a door.

I ran in behind him before the door slammed shut.

The building extended extremely far back, I could just barely make out the back wall.

All along the side walls were rows upon rows of boxes, shelves and racks, filled and covered with different kinds of clothes.

There were eight defined sections on each side, presumably one for each of us.

I wandered down the aisle, that being the entire building, searching for what looked to be my section.

About half way through the building, I ran into someone I was beginning to miss.

"Minami!! No way!!! Hiiii!" Kyoki, clearly in the middle of changing, ran up to me, waving with both hands before wrapping her arms around me in a tight embrace.

"H—Hi Kyoki..!" I could barely get my words out, as she was squeezing me so tight.

She didn't seem to have letting me go in mind any time soon.

"Shinkun! Look who it is!" Kyoki let go of me and turned back around to face the section she was standing in prior.

"p—please don't call me that around other people—" A girl I faintly remembered peeked her head out from behind a large rack of clothes.

"Aww, but it's so cute!" Kyoki ran back over to her and dragged her out from her hiding spot. "You remember Minami right?"

"y—yes... kinda." She was covering her face with both of her hands.

Instead of what she was wearing in the Kaigi, she had a white button up, long black pants and a black vest like thing. She still had her blue scarf on though.

I made my way over to them as she began to squirm more and more.

"Eheh, why are you squirming? Minami won't hurt you!" Kyoki wrestled her hands from her face and lowered them, wrapping her arms around her body, like a tight hug from behind.

She was trying her best to turn around to face away from me.

"It was Shinju, right..?"

"t—that's right." She was very pretty. Her eyes were a dim yellowish colour, with red highlights.

"I'm Minami, nice to meet you again." Her scarf was loosely wrapped around her neck, I'm surprised it wasn't falling off with how much she was wiggling.

Kyoki giggled. "Now tell her your favourite food!"

"what..!? no! that's embarrassing!" Shinju kept at her struggle, but Kyoki was persistent. After realising it was no use, Shinju gave in. "i... i like marshmallows a lot..." She tried looking down to hide her blushing face.

"Oh, I like marshmallows too." I hadn't had too many marshmallows before, but when I did they were nice.

"See?" Kyoki gave Shinju a shake. "Bonding already!" The moment she let her go, Shinju ran back around and hid behind a curtain which seemed to be a changing room.

Kyoki giggled. "She's a bit shy."

A bit...

"I see that." I smiled. "What's with the outfit?"

"Oh! Her's? We were just doing a bit of reminiscing."

"You knew her before the game, right?"

"Eheh, yeah. We've been dating for about three years now or so. She means the world to me." Kyoki wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth gently. "We met at a bar! That's why she was dressed like that." Her grin was contagious to a concerning degree.

"A bar? How old are you two?" Kyoki pulled me over into what seemed to be her clothing section and began rummaging through the vast array of items.

Kyoki looked upwards and was seemingly using her fingers to count. "Well, I'm 19, and she's 18, although it was only about a week to her birthday."

"And you met at a bar? What were you doing at a bar at 15 and 16?" Kyoki was handing me clothes and I mindlessly held them for her.

Kyoki stopped for a moment.

"It was a bar mixed with a casino type of thing."

"That doesn't explain it, that raises more questions!" She continued handing me items.

"Well, I was always really lucky, and would make bets with all the drunk people and take their money. Also since I wasn't of drinking age, the bar couldn't sell me drinks, so I always got them for free!"

"I still don't think that makes it legal..."

"Well, they weren't selling it to me, and that's the illegal part."

"I think you aren't allowed to drink alcohol either. And what's with the scamming part?"

"Scamming? No no no, it wasn't scamming. They agreed to the bets, and I just always won. Then I could get my free drinks and make them even more drunk! Sometimes they would fall for the same thing ten times in one day!"

"How much money did you get from that?" I was just curious. No other reason.

"Tens of thousands of yen per day." Kyoki looked me in the

eyes.

I would write that down on my clipboard, but my hands were a bit too full to get it out of my pocket at the moment.

"It was great! Then Shinju—Who was working there at the time—Came and stopped me after the more sober ones complained."

"Shinju was working there? At 15??"

"Yeah, the whole place was owned by her grandpa or something, family perks I guess. She came to talk to me, and later that night, we were making out in the bathrooms."

"That escalated quickly!?"

"From there we started dating, and have been ever since! There've been no hiccups or complications, I just loved her so much!" Kyoki faced the curtain Shinju was behind, clearly intending for her to hear that.

Over the course of our conversation, Kyoki had developed quite a big pile of clothes she was making me carry.

I could barely see over the top.

"Okay great!" Kyoki grinned. "I want you to try them all on!"

"All of them!?"

She led me over to the curtain and peeked her head in.

"Shinkun! Can Minami come in?"

"i—I told you not to call me that around other people..!"

"Oop, sorry, sorry..."

"y—yeah i guess she can."

"Great! Talk about marshmallows or something while you help her try things on!"

Kyoki pushed me through the curtain, nearly toppling the mountain of clothes I was carrying.

"H—Hey." I lowered the clothes onto the floor.

"hi..."

"Can you help me sort through these?" She was sitting on a small wooden bench, with a large mirror behind her. She had changed back into her old outfit, the one I remember her wearing at the Kaigi.

“yeah sure...”

We began sorting through the heap, and eventually ended with some much more manageable piles of items.

From outside the curtain I heard Yutaka’s voice.

“Hey Minami? I’m done here, let’s leave.”

Kyoki replied, seeming to be standing guard of the curtain. “She’s getting changed right now.”

I peeked my head out from around the curtain.

Yutaka was looking away. “Put some clothes on...” He wandered off.

Kyoki was still topless, standing guard.

“Oh, uh. Bye Yutaka!” I yelled out to him.

“I’m not leaving yet. I’ll wait by the door...” His voice faded as he got further away.

I don’t want to leave him waiting too long.

“Let’s speed through these then.” I looked back at Shinju, who nodded.



She helped me speed through outfits, every time showing the result to Kyoki, who praised each and every one. None of them really resonated with me though.

It was a bit weird changing in front of Shinju, but we’re both girls so it’s fine.

I did get her to turn around when I changed out of my wet clothes though.

When she pointed out she was now just looking at me through a mirror, I told her to just cover her eyes, which I trusted she’d do.

I left the damp clothes in a neat pile in the corner as I tried everything on.

The clothes were fresh, brand new even. Although there were no price tags or anything on them.

Over the course of changing between outfits, Shinju and I

talked.

"Was what Kyoki was saying true?"

"yeah, for the most part."

"The most part?"

"well, she exaggerated some bits..." She was looking to the side, blushing and smiling. "she would always come over to my apartment after I was done with work. my dad owned it, but he left for a business trip overseas after getting me my job. he left me with enough money to pay for it for a while, but i still needed to work to pay for other things. she would get drunk a lot too. i had to protect her from getting into too much trouble. we had... a lot of great times. i just love her so so much." Shinju was muffling her entire face with her scarf.

"So, did you live alone? What about your mother?"

"she was... around... we would go out for lunch together sometimes, but she lived elsewhere."

"Did you ever get lonely by yourself?"

"not really... i would always look forward to seeing Kyoki, so that made up for it i guess."

"What did you do when you were together?"

I heard Kyoki laugh, as Shinju simply blushed.

Kyoki chimed in.

"I hear it's going to be cold Minami, you might want to wear something warm!"

I usually like flowy things, which wasn't great if it was going to be cold. Shinju seemed to be the opposite.



We eventually got through all of the piles, and I ended up with a black long sleeve and skirt which comfortably passed my knees, along with a purple puffy jacket. Shinju suggested I also wear a red beanie, which I agreed to. I had black boots, and socks that covered the rest of my legs.

I made sure the shirt had a pocket, and also grabbed a satchel like bag I could wear across my shoulder and access from my hip.

"Alright Kyoki, I think I'm done."

I emerged from the curtain, and looked back at the mess we had made across the floor and hooks on the walls.

Shinju had put on an extra jacket before coming out too.

We all faced the mess.

"I should clean this up—" I bent down to start picking things up, but Kyoki put her hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

"Don't worry about it! I still haven't found an outfit yet. I can do it when I'm done!" Kyoki hopped around me and behind the curtain. There was no real reason to hide behind it as we had pretty much seen everything already. "Yutaka's waiting for you! You still need to explore right?" Kyoki peeked her head out. "Waiiiit... This is your first time in the Wonder Palette, isn't it?"

"Wonder Palette..?"

"Oh, that's just what I've been calling the cool version of the Dead End Complex. Feel free to spread the name!" She went back to struggling to put a top on.

"Oh, neat. Yeah it is. Good idea." I wonder where she got the name from. "Okay then, see you later!" I began walking off with my new, dry and very warm outfit.

Shinju smiled and waved as I left.

I did the same.

"Thanks for the clothes!" I yelled as I left the section.

Shinju ducked back behind the curtain to join Kyoki.

I'm guessing these are Kyoki's clothes. They could be Shinju's too.

I didn't leave anything in my wet clothes, did I?

I moved everything into my pocket or bag.

Maybe Kyoki will wash them, I wouldn't be surprised if there was a washing machine somewhere around here.

That was nice.

As I made my way back to the entrance, I saw Yutaka.

He was slumped down, not even trying to hold himself up.

"Yutaka..?"

"Hmn?" He lifted his head slightly. "Oh, Minami. You're finally done..."

"Were you... Sleeping?" He slowly made his way back to his feet.

"I wouldn't be surprised if I was. You girls take so damn long."

Yutaka looked nearly the same as he did before, except this time he didn't have a suit jacket, but a zip up black one with fluff in the hood.

"Sorry to keep you waiting..."

"Yeah..." Yutaka hobbled over to the large glass doors. "Where now?"

Where do we go now?

I followed Yutaka out the door as I spotted it.

"The restaurant!"

"What? Are you hungry for slop?"

Now that he mentions it, I haven't felt hungry in a while...

I guess that's how the afterlife works.

"I want to check it out, it was relevant in the Kaigi, but I hadn't been to this version of it." Maybe I could figure out what Souka was doing with the box...

"Sure." Yutaka didn't seem to carry the same enthusiasm.

It was down the road a little bit, and on the opposite side.

It also had a large neon sign above the entrance, this time saying 'Rest.auran't'.

The sign might've been a bit dirty.

Nevertheless, we entered through a set of glass doors.

The interior was very red.

Red skirting, patterns, outlines, floor tiles, chairs, booths...

As my eyes reached the booths, I saw another group of people.

I don't know if you would consider it a group actually.

I don't know how many things you need to denote a group.

Anyways, there were three people sitting in a booth together.

"Oh! Hi Minami!" Ahiru sat up straight and waved to me.

He was sitting next to Souka, who didn't move, and opposite them, was a girl I didn't recognise.

I made my way over to them, as Yutaka wandered off on his own.

"Hello Ahiru! Hello Souka, and hello..." I looked at the girl.

She was blushing and trying to avoid my gaze.

"Hello..? What's your name?" I leaned over to try and get a better look of her face.

Ahiru spoke for her. "Her name's Rissolle! She's our cat!"

Rissolle!?

On closer inspection, I noticed she had a collar around her neck, which was attached to a leash Souka was holding in their lap.

She finally spoke.

"Ahhh..! This is so embarrassing!" She held her hands up to cover her face, as she slammed her head into the table.

...

Umm...

"What's going on here exactly..?"

"Our cat got loose! So we put her on a leash so she wouldn't run away again!"

"Are you a cat?"

With her head still planted firmly into the table, she squeezed out a no.

I think she was starting to cry—

"Stop that." Souka said dryly, tugging the leash.

Rissolle (!?) looked up at me, with tears streaming down her face.

"Can you tell them to stop, please..."

"Uh—Yeah okay." I turned to face the two kids. "Seriously, what are you two doing to her??"

Ahiru and Souka looked at each other.

Ahiru then turned to me, while pointing at Rissolle (!?).

"Rissolle was up to no good! So I snuck up behind her and put

this collar on her! We're teaching her to behave!"

"How do you sneak up and put a collar on someone? Why don't you just take it off?"

"Every time I try to take it off they yank it again..." She sniffled. "I was preoccupied when they snuck up on me, and couldn't fight back... Can you please take it off of me..?"

Souka yanked the leash. "Bad cat."

She began to cry again.

I had a look at the collar from behind.

There was a padlock keeping it in place.

"Can you let Rissole go? She's clearly not a cat."

"My name isn't Rissole!" She cried.

I'm glad. "What is your name?"

She sniffed. "It's Fristl..."

Oh.

F-Rissole.

I get it now.

"I'm Minami." I awkwardly smiled at her.

"This makes it so much worse." She shook her head, burying it back into the table.

Me being named Minami makes the situation worse?

"So um... What were you doing before they... Caught you..?"

She rolled her head to face me. "I can't tell you."

Huh?

"Why can't you tell me?"

"Secret..." She rolled back to face down into the tabletop.

A secret?

"Why's it a secret?"

"Because I can't tell you." She sat back up into her booth stall.

"Right... Uh, Ahiru? Do you have the key for the lock?"

"Uhhhh..." He dug his hands deep into his pockets. "No, I think Souka has it."

"Souka..?"

"I hid it." Souka tugged the leash again, for no clear reason.

Fristl jerked forwards.

"You hid it? Where?"

Souka looked upwards.

"Dunno." They looked away.

"You don't know where you hid it!?"

Fristl continued to sob.

"Fristl, did you see where they hid it?"

"Well..." She wiped her nose with a napkin. "I kept watch of the key, but then Souka went into the bathroom while Ahiru held me outside. After that... It was gone."

"Ah. Have you not tried just... Pulling the leash away from them?"

I reached out to grab the leash, but Souka yanked it, and kept it out of my reach.

"The rope bit is sharp! Only the handle is okay to touch." Ahiru pointed at the leash.

Right...

"Ahiru, what was the bad thing Fristl was doing?"

"Who's Fristl?"

"Rissole—"

"Oh! Rissole!"

Fristl sighed.

"She was being a sneaky creep! We found her in the forest running around wearing a weird mask!"

"A weird mask..?"

"Yeah! It was grey and had weird creepy pipe things."

Like... A gas mask..?

What would she have been doing wearing a gas mask, running around in the forest?

Fristl grabbed me by the sleeve.

"Can you go and check the bathrooms for me? The key is probably in there."

Souka yanked the leash.

"Y—Yeah, I'll go have a look."

Before I could leave, Souka hopped out of the booth.

"I'll follow."

"O—Okay then."

I didn't exactly know where the bathrooms were, but if it was just a regular restaurant, they shouldn't be too hard to find.

Before not too much searching, I came across two bathroom doors.

"Alright Souka, which one did you hide the key in?"

...

No reply.

I entered the left door.

Souka didn't follow.

I stepped back and entered the right door.

Souka followed.

Respecting the door signs I see.

Considering that, the key will probably be in this room.

"S—Shit!" Yutaka jumped back as we entered. "What the hell are you doing in here!?"

"Hm? Hi Yutaka. I'm looking for a key."

"A key? Why the fuck would there be a key in here!?"

Yutaka had seemingly just been looking at himself in the mirror.

"Souka probably hid it in here." I looked down to my right, where I could only see the top of their big hat. "Right?"

Souka didn't show any signs of response.

I guess I'll start looking.

I looked around all of the stalls, in the toilets, the sinks, the doors, the locks.

Eventually Souka stopped me.

"It's not here. Why would it be here?"

"Huh..?" I stopped my search and faced Souka.

Yutaka was leaning up against a wall, watching, while Souka hadn't moved since we had entered.

"What do you mean it isn't here? Riss—Fristl said it would be."

"Why would she know? She didn't see the key. She never even came in here."

Souka lifted their hat just high enough for them to slip their other arm in, and retrieved a key.

"I had the key. Obviously."

They held the key between their fingers, holding it out in front of them.

They let go, dropping it back into their palm...

"Gone."

Souka presented their outstretched hand, the key nowhere to be seen.

"Huh..?" I stumbled towards them, searching for the key across the floor.

No signs.

Not even a *plink* as the key hit the floor.

It really just vanished.

"Souka, where did the key go??"

"Gone. Weren't you listening?"

"Where is gone?"

"Gone."

They turned around, and began to leave the bathroom.

Before they could leave, they would have to pass Yutaka, who was now leaning up against the door, blocking the exit.

They looked up at him, and with neither saying a word, Yutaka punched Souka in the cheek.

"Augh..!" Souka toppled sideways and onto the cold floor.

"Yutaka!? What was that!?" I ran up to Yutaka, hopping over Souka on the way.

Souka swiveled around and sat up, leaning on the outside wall of a stall.

"What's wrong Minami? You wanted that key right?" Yutaka crossed his arms, continuing to lean on the door.

"Huh? Wha—Well yeah? But I didn't want you to hit them!?" I crouched down next to Souka, inspecting their cheek.

Yutaka pulled out his gun and pointed it at Souka.

"Where's the key, kid?"

The colour from Souka's face flushed away as they began to fumble.

"I—I—I don't have it! I—I dropped it! I don't have it!" They covered their face with their arms.

"Yutaka!? Stop!"

"The fuck you mean you don't have it!?" He ignored me. "You slid it down your fuckin' sleeve or something didn't you!?"

"No!" Souka cried as I took a step back from the situation.

"Tell me where it is." Yutaka gripped his gun tighter.

"I—I shifted it! So please stop!"

Shifted?

"The fuck you mean shifted?"

I had snuck up behind Yutaka and grabbed him, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Minami!?"

"Put the gun away, Yutaka!"

"I can't when you're holding me back!"

I carefully let go of him, and watched as he put his gun back in his pocket.

"Are you okay Souka?" I helped lift them back to their feet.

I told both of them to breathe and calm down.

"I guess..." Souka still wasn't perfectly calm, but I can't blame them.

"Yutaka. Why did you hit Souka?"

He took a step back. "You wanted that key right..?"

"Yes I wanted the key, but that doesn't explain why you hit them!"

"W—Well, so you could get the key off 'em." Yutaka brushed his hand through his hair. "I guess I'll just leave then if you don't need me to help!"

Yutaka exited the bathroom, leaving me alone with Souka.

We both looked at each other, and back at the door.

What had gotten into him?

"I'm so sorry about him, Souka..."

"It's whatever..." Souka was visibly shaken.

"Um. So about what you said before... You shifted the key?"

"Uh, yeah."

"How did you shift it? And where to?" The topic of shifting had completely missed the train's stop when I was asking Hane about everything.

I was excited I finally could, although the circumstances were less than ideal.

"I... Um... I did drop it into my palm... But when I shifted it, it would've just fallen on to the floor... Just not here..."

"But how..?"

Souka thought for a moment, before grabbing me by the sleeve.

"I'll just take you there..."

They took a step forward, and the room around us—For lack of a better word—Shifted into the grey, dull and concrete style I remember.

"Wha..."

"That's shifting."

Directly in front of us on the floor, was the key.

Souka bent over, picked it up, and handed it to me.

"Really..? You're just giving it to me after that?"

"I don't want to get hit again..." Souka turned away from me.

It was a very different style of key to the one I had in my shirt.

I could tell as much from the hole in the padlock.

This one was much more like a house key.

"Thank you Souka."

I looked around the room.

If this was the bathroom of the restaurant before...

Shouldn't the box be here?

I asked Souka about it.

"No... I took that away."

"Away? Where?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"What was it for?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"...What are you doing with it?"

Souka gave me a look, as if to say 'Do I need to repeat myself?'

"Well uh, can you take me back?" There was no real reason for me to stay here any longer if the box was gone.

"...Okay." They grabbed my sleeve again, before shifting us back into the bathroom.

"What's up with that? The shifting?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Well, Tokumei said you were the first to figure out how to do it, so clearly you must know how it works."

"Well... Tokumei's a weirdo."

"I suppose... But..."

Souka rubbed their cheek.

"It's not something you figure out. It's just something you do."

"Hm?"

"Well, you learn to walk forwards, but you don't need to learn to walk left. You just walk and shift."

"I... Don't understand..."

Souka sighed.

"I don't know how to explain it to you. You just think about doing it... And then do it."

"It's..." I sighed. "Whatever. Thanks for trying, Souka."

They nodded.

"Where is that place though? The grey concrete one I mean."

"It's the other version of this place. Just... Shifted."

"Relative to where we are right now, how would I get there?"

"You shift."

"What if I can't?"

"Then you can't."

...

"But—"

"It's like, on top of where we are. You just can't see it. There are different versions of the Dead End Complex, and you shift to go between them. It's like walking down a road and seeing different buildings."

"That at least I can sort of visualise..."

Souka left the bathroom as I was attempting to.

I quickly followed, keeping the key tight in my hand.

We made our way back to the booth, and Souka sat down, grabbing the leash off of Ahiru.

"Did you find the key..?" Fristl looked up at me, like a dog, waiting to be fed.

"...I did."

"Yippee!" She hopped as much as she could, while sitting on a seat. "Unlock me! Unlock me please!"

"I am, I am..."

I grabbed the padlock on the back of her neck and put the key inside.

It fit perfectly.

I removed the padlock, and the collar fell off.

Fristl immediately got out of the booth and rubbed her neck.

"T—Thank you Minami!" She bowed and quickly ran out of the restaurant doors.

"Hey! You let our cat get away!" Ahiru frowned.

Where did she run off to?

"Where did you even get this collar in the first place?"

"In the clothes place!" Ahiru grinned.

The clothes place? That doesn't seem like clothing...

Ahiru continued. "It was in the dog lady's section! There were plenty of them there. Even the keys were the exact same!" Freaky...

I'm glad Fristl wasn't here to hear that.

"Well... Thanks, you two..?" I don't know what I was thanking them for, but I did anyway. "Bye..!" I waved as I left them in the restaurant.

I purposely kept the key on me, so that if another situation like that arose, I could swoop in and unlock them.

"Bye Minami!" Ahiru waved as I left, Souka didn't.

I pulled open the doors and stepped outside.

Oh!

It had begun to snow.



Yutaka was slumped against the outside wall of the restaurant.

I walked over and stood next to him.

"What the heck was all that about?"

I looked to my left, I could barely make out Ahiru and Souka through the tinted glass window.

"What was what about?" Yutaka looked up at me.

"You punched Souka! Then you threatened them with your gun! Don't tell me you've forgotten already."

"Obviously I haven't forgotten. I'm not an idiot. You could see he was clearly trying to hide the key from you, and you wanted it, so I tried to get it off 'em." He crossed his arms.

"I did get the key in the end, but I didn't need it that bad! It was just to undo the collar on Fristl's neck."

Yutaka turned to face away from me.

"Whatever. Let's keep going." He got up and started walking away from me.

I took a moment before catching up, to look at the sky.

There were clouds.

Clouds producing snow.

Why would there be weather in the afterlife?

Oh whatever.

It's probably just Tokumei doing this for fun.

Even so, it's somewhat comforting.

Kyoki was right about it being cold too.

Thanks Kyoki.

I ran up behind Yutaka as we continued down through the Dead End Complex.

We walked in silence for a while.

I was just following him.

There were some interesting buildings on the way, like a hairdressers, but we didn't stop and look.

Eventually we came across a hill.

It was a bit hard to walk up due to the snow, but eventually we made it to the top.

That was when I realised, it wasn't a hill.

It was a bridge.

A bridge suspended high above water.

Not too far from each side of the bridge, but still a ways into the water, I saw large black walls.

It was strange.

It was as if the world just cut off.

It didn't stretch upwards forever though.

After a certain height, you could see the sky again.

The walls stretched higher than any buildings, but you couldn't see them from in the Dead End Complex before.

If someone dies...

Will the walls disappear?

Will they move?

Tokumei said that the fewer the people, the bigger the place gets.

It seems counterintuitive, but that's how he's set it up I suppose.

Either way, I didn't plan to dive off the bridge, and swim over to the walls to inspect them.

Especially not in this weather...

We crossed the bridge, and on the opposite side, was a sole, lonely building.

Maybe you could say it was still part of the bridge, as the

building seemed to be on a squarish pillar, extending out of the water and connecting to the bridge.

It wasn't a large building.

It seemed out of place.

It was only one story tall, and looked a lot more worn down than the other buildings in the 'Wonder Palette'.

The neon sign wasn't functional at all, but read 'bake-ri...n'.

What does bakerin mean?

All of the other signs had such clear meanings.

Why is it so isolated?

Why is it so weird and... Off-looking?

Is the snow making it seem drearier than it really is?

As we got closer, I saw the building was lit inside.

Is someone in there?

What could they be doing in there, all the way out here?

Taking shelter from the snow?

I couldn't see any movement from inside.

Maybe the light was just left on.

We were only a few metres away from the building now.

Yutaka didn't even wait, he just walked up and opened the door.

I didn't rush, but I made my way inside too.

Inside, there was lots of bread.

Whitebread, sourdough, baguettes, croissants and muffins.

That was just what I could see the moment I entered.

Bakerin...

Bakery...n..?

We walked around the large shelf on our left, and into a more open area near the counter.

"Wha..!"

There were two people sitting on the floor, next to some chairs and a coffee table.

Why does every building we go in have people!?

"H—Hello."

Two more faces I didn't recognise.

If there are 16 of us here, not including Tokumei... Then I think I've met all but one now.

Well, it might be a bit soon to say I've met these two.

I've only just stumbled upon them.

They both had white hair, although one had bits of black mixed in.

One seemed to be a girl and one a guy.

The girl had a light blue dress poking out from under a fancy white button up shirt.

The guy had no colour.

Just purely black and white.

He had what seemed to be a police uniform on.

They also seemed to prove my theory.

My theory that...

No one with white hair has an aura...



The girl spoke.

"Hello Minami."

She smiled gently.

"H—Huh? How did you know my name?"

She covered her mouth and chuckled.

"Who wouldn't know you? The girl so useless she fell asleep and missed the first day and a half of the game!"

"H—Hey..."

Yutaka stepped in.

"Who the fuck are you? Why are you calling her useless!?"

Yutaka had his hand in his pocket.

The girl continued.

"Oh, and who could forget! The puny little Yutaka who keeps trying to kill people but always fails!"

Her laughs got stronger.

Yutaka was fuming.

I put my hand on his shoulder and told him to calm down.

"Who are you two? Why are you here?"

"..."

The boy said nothing and looked at the girl.

She spoke.

"You two, come and have a seat." She pet the chairs they were sitting next to.

I took a step towards the chairs, but Yutaka grabbed me by the strap on my bag.

"We don't need a seat, yeah?" He crossed his arms.

"Ahah, it wasn't a suggestion." She held out one arm, with her index and middle fingers pointing at me and Yutaka respectively.

She then moved her arm to point at the chairs.

As she did this, we moved up off the ground, and into the chairs, as if she had picked us up and moved us from there.

As we moved, Yutaka flailed and said some swears.

We were dropped into the chairs.

Yutaka immediately tried to stand up off the chair but couldn't.

I tried too but sure enough, we were stuck to the chairs.

They both shuffled over to the opposite side of the coffee table, to face us head on.

"The fuck is going on!? Why can't I get off of this thing!?" Yutaka continued to squirm.

The girl giggled.

"I stuck you to the chairs."

"Why!?" Yutaka tried kicking the coffee table, but it didn't budge.

"I told you to take a seat, didn't I?" She smiled and tilted her head.

"W—Who are you?" I really couldn't get off of the chair.

It's like I had been glued to it.

"Me..?" She held her hand against her chest while pointing to

her lip with the other hand.

"Yes you!"

"Well... 'Tis a secret!" She stuck out her tongue.

"Now's not the time for fuckin' secrets!" Yutaka seemed to be trying to move the chair itself now too.

"Don't fret, don't fret! It was a joke! Obviously!" She chuckled to herself.

Yutaka scowled.

The girl continued.

"My name is **Rin**! And this here is **Sprout**." She pet the boy on the... Hat.

"Bake...Rin..?" I muttered.

"Bakerin? No. It's just Rin. Always has been always will be!" Her eyes sparkled.

Sprout looked at Rin.

She continued.

"Anyhoo... What brings you here?" She interlocked her fingers and used them as a table for her chin to rest on.

"Um, we just stumbled here."

Rin frowned.

"Did you meet Fristl?"

"Oh, I did actually, yeah."

"Hmm. Did she try to kill you?"

"What!? No? After I released her she ran off. Why would Fristl try to kill me?"

Rin stood up and flicked my forehead.

"Ow..."

"So you are alive. Interesting. You said you released her? From what?"

"Uhm..." She flicked the bruise on my forehead. That hurt.

"Ahiru and Souka had Fristl on a leash, I helped her unlock it."

Rin shook her head and sighed.

"I suppose I need to reconsider..." She tapped her temple with her index finger.

Reconsider?

Rin put her forearms together, forming an x shape facing me, before rotating them around and forming another x, with the other arm in front.

Rin... Just disappeared.

Her crown thing fell to the floor with a key-like *plink*.

My vision suddenly went black.

“Wha—!”

My vision came back as Rin removed her hands from my face.

She was behind me?

“You like that?” She walked back around to where she was before, and picked up her crown.

“What was that?” I replicated the arm movements she did.

“That won’t work silly.” She laughed. “We don’t have the same Seigyu! That won’t work!”

Same Seigyu?

Does that mean some people *do* have the same Seigyu?

How does she know we don’t have the same?

She knows what my Seigyu is?

“How do you know that? What’s your Seigyu?”

“I’m not going to tell you my Seigyu! Nor am I going to tell you yours! Boring...” She shrugged.

“What was the point of doing that? Was it just to show off?”

“Eheh. Maybe. So you really don’t know your Seigyu?”

“N—No, I don’t know it?”

“I see...” She lifted her finger and I popped off of the chair.

I basically did a little hop.

I stood up from the chair and wiped myself off.

“The fuck am I still stuck?” Yutaka was continuing to struggle.

“Shush.” Rin bent over the table and put her finger on Yutaka’s lips.

“Don’t fuckin’ touch m—”

Rin slid her finger across his lips, sealing them like a zipper.

He was practically silenced, but he continued to thrash

himself about.

"I love doing that." Rin smiled.

"Was that your Seigyu too?"

"Mhm."

"Alright..."

I walked around to their side of the coffee table.

Sprout scooted away from me.

"Now Minami, you can leave now, I'm letting you. I will be keeping Yutaka if you do though."

"What..?"

I have no reason to leave, so I'll stay.

"However... If you leave, I'll tell you my Seigyu, and how I use it."

That sounds nice.

"But... I will kill Yutaka here and now."

"What!? Obviously I won't leave!"

"Hmm... What if I also tell you *your* Seigyu and how to use it?"

"My... Seigyu..?"

Yutaka was shaking his head aggressively.

I don't want Yutaka to die at all!

Knowing my Seigyu would be nice...

I'm sure I'll figure it out soon on my own, it's fine!

"Don't you know Minami? After you kill someone, you gain their Seigyu. This means you can have multiple Seigyus at once. Yutaka here has a decently strong Seigyu! My Seigyu is obviously far stronger, but you wouldn't want me to gain his Seigyu too do you? Having multiple Seigyus lets you progress your abilities faster too! I can tell you Yutaka's Seigyu, but only if you yourself choose to kill him before I do! Clearly leaving now and killing Yutaka is the better option! Don't worry, neither Sprout or I will be participating in the Kaigi if you choose to kill him. Practically no witnesses!"

Is one life worth the 15 others?

I would love to know my Seigyu...

I would love to know Rin's Seigyu...

I would love to have Yutaka's Seigyu...

But...

Is all of that knowledge worth Yutaka's life?

I don't want him to die.

I...

I can't even trust that Rin is telling the truth.

She has no reason to lie right?

Unless...

Killing Yutaka, and telling me all of that information is beneficial to her.

I don't even know her...

I'm not going to leave.

If I don't leave, will something bad happen anyways?

How will I get her to unstick Yutaka?

Clearly something worse will happen to Yutaka if I do leave.

"I'm staying."

Rin smirked.

"You had to think about that for a while, didn't you?"

I didn't deny it...

"Yutaka, do you really trust this girl with your life? Oh, who am I kidding! You didn't have a choice." She chuckled.

Yutaka was breathing heavily through his nose.

He seems tired.

"Yutaka..." I walked over and tried pulling him off of the chair.

Nothing.

"...You're making me feel dirty..." Was that Sprout? "...I need to go shower..."

Sprout stood up and walked behind the counter of the bakery and into a back door.

"Hmm..." Rin watched him leave, then turned back to me.
"We're siblings, did you know?"

"Siblings?" Like Hane and Boru? "Is he your brother?"

"No. Sprout is not my brother. They are my sibling."

Oh.

"Sorry."

"Mm. Well. Why are you two here?"

...

Oh right, Yutaka can't reply.

"I just followed Yutaka here."

"Right... Well. If you aren't going to take my offer, I'll ask you for a favour."

"A favour?"

"Yes. If you agree to take on this favour, I will let you both go, without killing Yutaka."

"...No strings attached?"

"One string. The favour."

"Right... Well, what's your favour?"

"...I want you... **To kill Fristl...**"



"Kill... Fristl..?"

She smiled, her eyes swirling in her skull.

"Yes, that's right."

"...Why..?"

"Good little favour holders don't ask questions." She poked her tongue out.

I don't think I'm actually going to be killing Fristl.

All I'm doing is saving Yutaka.

I can just save him now and put it off...

I know nearly nothing about Fristl, but I have no reason to kill her.

Wasn't she trying to kill me according to Rin?

What's going on there?

"I'll accept your favour."

Rin smiled and snapped her fingers.

The moment she did, Yutaka popped off the chair, and his lips unzipped.

"Thanks Minami!"

Yutaka jumped over the table and would've squished Sprout if they were still sitting there.

"Let's get the fuck out of this crackhouse!" He grabbed me by the hand and tried to pull me out through the door.

Rin didn't physically try to stop him, but she did say something.

"Hold on you two. I have something to give you."

"Oh fuck off, we don't want your shit." Yutaka pulled at me.

Rin grabbed my other hand and pulled me back.

"H—Huh??" I was being pulled apart.

Rin was clearly much stronger than Yutaka, and held me in place.

"Stay there you two."

She let go of my hand and walked behind the counter.

Yutaka continued to attempt to pull me away, but my feet were now locked to the floor.

She knocked on the door Sprout had gone through.

"Sprout...? Can I come in?"

...

Through the door, we heard a panicked "no."

Rin sighed.

"Oh. There they are."

She turned around and grabbed something out of the glass trays for bread in the counter.

Maybe it was some things instead.

"For visiting me—And also that we don't want or need these—You two can have these."

In each hand, she held a gas mask.

A gas mask?

Didn't Ahiru say Fristl was wearing one earlier..?

She stepped back over to us and gently handed us a mask each.

"T—Thank you, Rin."

Yutaka didn't thank her.

"Of course." She held her hand up in the air above her.

Was she asking for a high five?

I gave her one, and I popped off of the floor.

"You'll be wanting to hold on to those masks." She held two peace signs up to her face. "I reckon Tokumei is going to be setting a motive today, right Minami?"

That's right...

He did say he was thinking about setting a motive...

"Rightyoo! Try to sleep well tonight. Sprout and I will be staying here, and we have been for the past few days. Don't tell anyone though. If you tell anyone about our meeting, I will consider that as you voiding our favour. And I will kill Yutaka."

Rin smiled, with her fingers on her cheeks.

"Now get out of here before Sprout gets out of the shower."

"O—Okay... Bye..."

What a weird duo.

I clipped the gas mask to the strap on my bag.

Yutaka clipped his to a loop on his jeans.

Yutaka pulled me out through the door of the bakery, and into the snow.

It was beginning to get dark.

Not quite sunset though.

Maybe the clouds were making it darker than it seemed.

"That was fucking insane!" Yutaka was panting, still holding onto my hand and pulling me along the bridge.

"Yeah, it was weird..."

There were streetlights along the bridge that were turning on as we ran across it.

Before we got to the end of the bridge, we both stopped.

There was someone standing in the snow.

They were even covered in it.

How long had they been standing there?

"Come on you two! Let's go to the plane!"

It was Tokumei.

He was on a tile, but it had been covered by snow.

He floated upwards as he turned around to face us.

He drifted towards us very quickly, and told us to hop on.

We hopped on the tile with him, and held on tight to the edges as we sat.

He drifted us back to the plane not too fast, but still fast enough as to where I didn't know if I would fly away if I let go.

It was just like Boru did when he came to the Kaigi.

...

Is he taking us to a Kaigi?

Has someone died..?

No no...

He's setting a motive.

That's what makes the most sense.

I tried to ask Tokumei about it, but he didn't reply.

After not too long, we arrived at the chequered plane.

The tile slid into place in the floor and Yutaka and I stood up off of the ground.

We were in the middle of the plane, surrounded by basically everyone else in the game.

"Welcome!" Tokumei floated upwards by himself. He didn't even need a tile. "I've gathered you all here to inform you about the motive!"

So it really is about a motive...

He turned to face us, a crowd.

"In the next few days, one of you is guaranteed to **die**."



My heart skipped a beat.

Maybe two.

One of us?

Guaranteed to die?

I looked around at everyone here.

They all had different levels of shock.

Sure enough, every single person—Excluding Rin, Sprout and the person I hadn't met yet—Was here.

In the crowd, I spotted Kyoki and Shinju.

I left Yutaka and ran over to them.

Before anyone could talk, Tokumei continued.

"Yes, you heard me right. No tricks, this motive guarantees at least one person will die."

At least?

He didn't say that before.

"Arise! Killboard!" Tokumei threw his arms to the sky.

Killboard!?

The ground began to shake, as a giant billboard emerged from between the tiles.

Once it reached its peak elevation, Tokumei drifted down and stood atop it.

It was bigger than some of the buildings in the Dead End Complex.

"Here we have the killboard! Don't worry, the board itself won't be doing any killing!" Tokumei laughed down at us. "There are four columns and three rows. The columns are for each set of quarters!"

But why are the—

"But where are there only three rows? You don't even need to ask yourself! They are empty right now, but once someone is inside the quarters, a heart rate will appear! This heart rate will obviously be of whoever it is in the quarters! If there are four of you in one set, then the fourth person's heart rate will not be shown, only three of your four heart rates will be shown."

Tokumei floated down from the top of the board, and onto the ridge at the bottom of the screen.

"I will be pausing the days at midnight until this board is filled with 12 heart rates. I will only progress once all 12 of them are below

70 bpm, as that should mean you are all asleep! Pretty boring so far? Ahahah! Here's the kicker! Every night, I will be releasing a toxic gas throughout one random set of quarters!"

Everyone began to panic.

"Do not worry! I've hidden exactly 10 gas masks around the game! They will basically act as an immunity to the gas if you manage to fall asleep wearing one!"

I looked down at the mask attached to my bag.

I held on to it tightly.

As long as I have this, I should be fine...

"This will continue every night from now on! Every night, until at least one person is dead, that is... Doesn't matter if it be to the gas itself, suicide, murder, an accident, et cetera! With this being the first proper motive, I've made it a pretty simple one!"

Tokumei started laughing.

And he kept laughing.

Laughing and laughing and laughing.

Eventually he stopped.

"Oh right. If everyone in the game is asleep, and the conditions for progressing the night are not met... All quarters will be filled with gas."

Akui was quick to raise his hand.

"Yes Akui?"

He cleared his throat. "Would that not just make us all sleep elsewhere? Choosing to sleep in the quarters—Without a mask especially—Seems like a simple death sentence."

"You raise a good point Akui! If I do end up filling every single set of quarters with gas, and no one dies from that, I will kill anyone not wearing a gas mask, no matter where they're sleeping. Yes... That includes myself."

Why!?

That doesn't make sense!

"Final thing..." Tokumei's voice drowned out all of ours. "Once you enter a quarter past sundown, you cannot leave until morning,

or until someone dies and the game ends.”

I didn’t think it could get worse...

My gas mask doesn’t feel as comforting anymore...

“And... Yeah! That’s about it! This *Gas Game* begins tonight by the way. Good luck!”



What in the world...

Even knowing he would set a motive, I couldn’t have seen this coming.

This doesn’t seem like a motive designed to make us kill each other, but for Tokumei to kill a whole group of us himself.

Tokumei’s laughs felt like they echoed throughout the entire afterlife.

Shinju was crying, holding tightly onto Kyoki.

Kyoki held tightly back.

Nioi held his hat to his chest, and scratched the top of his head.

Souka was trembling, and Ahiru was holding back tears.

Yutaka’s fists were clenched tightly at his sides.

Akui seemed lost in thought.

Fristl looked panicked, and was also standing as far away from Ahiru and Souka as she could.

Nora was motionless, holding the dog mask already around her head.

It seems like Kibo had woken up too, as he and Hane were here, still connected by the cord.

Hane seemed almost pleased.

Kibo seemed the opposite.

How did I feel?

I looked down at my hands.

I don’t know how I feel.

Do I feel scared?

Maybe.

Do I feel happy..?

No.

Definitely not.

I'm not looking forward to this.

Why would I be?

Am I completely dreading this?

...

Also no.

Obviously I don't want anyone to die, but now it's inevitable.

With my mask...

I should be completely safe, right?

If I just lock my doors, and not let anyone in, I should be safe from being killed too.

That's a good thing... Right?

Will there even be a Kaigi if someone does die?

What would the point be if it was just by the gas?

Someone I had forgotten—No—neglected to point out before he began to chime in.

"Hoohoo..!"

We all looked up at him.

At Boru.

He had made his way below the killboard, holding a gas mask high above his head.

As a group, all we could do was watch as he continued...

"Since I won't be needing this..."

No one could stop him from doing what he was about to do.

Even though we all knew exactly what he was going to do.

This wasn't a mere *plink*.

This was a smash.

Boru threw the mask to the floor as hard as he could, before stomping on it for good measure.

"Hoohoo! Make that nine masks, Tokumei!"

The snow didn't help cushion the impact.

Boru had just broken one of the masks.
He had basically just sentenced someone to death.
Whether it was himself, or someone else, we didn't know.
Boru and Tokumei laughed in unison.
No one else made a sound.

Chapter 9 End.