Ghost at Twilight

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Ghost at Twilight

by FidgetFidgets

Summary

Kudo's lateness and an accident during a particularly long and beautiful sunset triggers a string of coincidences whose far-reaching consequences Shiho can't foresee. Talking to a stranger who shares the same bad luck in love, she takes a walk down memory lane and recalls the story Gin told her when she was a child: the legend of the ghost at twilight...

A Shiho-centric story about the downfall of the Organization and the aftermath (pairings: Sherry/Gin, Conan/Ai, Shiho/Shinichi, Shiho/Kaito, Shiho/"stranger").

Notes

Disclaimer: "Detective Conan" belongs to Gosho Aoyama, and "Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon" belongs to Naoko Takeuchi.

This is an alternative story to my other fanfic "Encounter in Venice" and one of the possibilities of what could have happened if Ai had taken the antidote before Shinichi brought down the Organization.

Thanks a lot to my friends and betas Rae (Astarael00) and SN1987a and the Aicoholics on LiveJournal, without whom I would never have started this fic.

This story is dedicated to June (teainapot on Fanfiction.net).
The lovely aritzen (SN1987a) hasn't only kept me motivated for years but is even betaing the long fic now that it has ended. I can't thank her enough!

Edit: I've begun to work on a possible prequel for this fic (and for "Encounter in Venice"): "The Red String of Fate": http://archiveofourown.org/works/10862862/chapters/24175650

- Inspired by Encounter in Venice by FidgetFidgets
- Inspired by The Red String of Fate by FidgetFidgets
When I finally reach the small bench where he is supposed to wait for me, I see it's already occupied by someone else: a young black-haired man whose face is half-obscured by a pair of dark sunglasses, looking a ridiculous sight in the soft light of the evening. Fighting for breath, I let my gaze wander but can't find Kudo anywhere. He must have been caught in a traffic jam like me or—and this is just as probable a case—he has stumbled over a corpse again.

I look about myself and notice to my disappointment that all the benches within view are occupied, mostly by elderly tourists, who must have come to gaze at the cherry blossoms and the sunset, which has begun unusually early and seems to last longer than usual, as I already saw it when I got off the bus and expected that the sun would have disappeared completely by the time I reached the bench. However, the sky is still tinted by the last lavender light of the setting sun.

Noticing that I'm searching for a place to sit, the stranger smiles and makes an inviting gesture with his hand, indicating the place beside him. My feet are hurting in the new sandals, and I'm tired from walking at unaccustomed speed. Hence I gladly accept his offer with a curt "Thanks" and install myself next to him on the bench.

For a while, I only stare at the pond, watch the ducks paddle furiously towards the bread an elderly couple has thrown at them, dart unseeing glances at my watch, admire the cherry trees, and don't say anything to the stranger. As time goes by and nothing happens except that a few tourists have begun to gawk at us, I begin to throw a few furtive glances at the stranger, wondering why he is wearing his huge black sunglasses when the sun is almost gone.

Just when I've decided to ask him what he is doing here, on this bench, as he doesn't seem to be doing anything except gaze into the water, he turns his face to me and removes his sunglasses, giving me an amused smile.

"Satisfied?" he asks curtly, in a low, melodious voice.

For a moment, I don't know whether I should regard him as arrogant or impertinent. No doubt I would only roll my eyes at his response and interpret it as an aggressive overreaction to my harmless curiosity if his eyes weren't smiling at me. He seems the popular type with his trim good looks. Certainly he believes that I'm attracted to him, which I'm not!

"I was only wondering whether you were blind," I snap, irritated by his self-assured manner and his rude little remark.

He flashes me a wide toothy smile.

"Ah, and I thought you had recognized me."

Now that was an unexpected retort. I stare at his face, try to remember whether I've really met him somewhere, and realize that I must have, as he does look vaguely familiar to me, although I can't explain how I could have forgotten someone with such a spontaneous and cheeky attitude.

"Have we met before? I'm not sure..."

This time it's him who is staring at me in surprise. Then he smiles and sticks his sunglasses into his pocket.
"I'm not sure either. But you do look familiar to me... although I'm sure I wouldn't have forgotten you if we had met before."

If another man had said it, I would have thought he was trying to turn on his charm after insulting me with his breathtaking arrogance. Yet from his mouth it sounds natural, more like a statement than flattery.

"Why were you wearing sunglasses at this hour?" I decide to change the topic.

"I put them on this morning and then forgot to take them off," he claims, giving me an explanation I find unsatisfying and hard to believe. But I usually don't probe into other people's private lives and don't intend to cross-examine him now.

"Are you waiting for someone?" He looks genuinely interested.

"Yes, a friend." I glance at my watch. "But I see he is already forty minutes late... He is usually never late—but maybe he got stuck in a traffic jam? There was an accident somewhere near here this afternoon..."

"Why don't you give him a call?"

I don't have a mobile phone, I tell him, whereupon he pulls out a tiny black phone and hands it to me.

"You can use mine."

"Thanks, but I don't think I should call him. He knows that I'm waiting for him—so I'm sure that he will come."

I don't feel comfortable using the phone of a stranger to call Kudo, especially not when Kudo might be working on a case.

The stranger shoves his phone back into his pocket.

"I've never seen you in this park before," he remarks. "Do you and your boyfriend often meet here?"

"No, no, you've got it all wrong. We're not going out with each other... And actually, it will be the first time that we've met here."

"Oh, the first date!"

"It's not as romantic as it sounds." I glare at him. "It's just a game... I told him I didn't have anything to do this weekend because our mutual friends are on a school trip. Hence he drew a map and dared me to hunt for a treasure tonight."

"And the treasures are the cherry blossoms in Ueno-koen?"

"The sunset and the cherry blossoms. I solved the code, which said I should wait for him on this bench at six p.m. to watch the sunset before we go somewhere to have dinner together... Well, but now the sunset is almost over and he still hasn't come yet. I hope he won't be late for dinner."

He throws a mischievous look at me.

"Now I see why you said that he will come. You know, very few men would design such a romantic game for a friend if they didn't have very special feelings for them."
"Then he must be one of the few men who do. He is going out with a woman he has been in love with since they were six. You can be sure that he doesn't have any feelings for me."

"Ah, sorry, I didn't know about the girlfriend." He gives a rueful smile.

"Come on," I sigh. "We've known each other for years. If our friends weren't on the school trip and his girlfriend busy training for a karate championship, all of us would be sitting here, feeding the ducks, and then going out to have dinner together. But since they're away, it's just us two... It's not like I'm in love with him."

"Really..." he remarks as he gazes thoughtfully into my eyes. "From the expression on your face when you talk about him, I bet you are."

I stare at him in disbelief, speechless at the matter-of-fact way in which he talks about my feelings although we've just met.

"But I could be wrong." He grins. "Appearances can be deceptive. A casual observer could get the impression that we two are a couple just because we're sitting here together, right?"

"Exactly!" I smile back. And even though I'm feeling completely at ease sitting here with him, watching the water shimmering in the soft lavender light while a cool breeze ruffles my hair, there is something on my mind... a little voice nagging at me. I have the feeling there is something important I have forgotten, something I've erased from my memory.

"And who are you..."

"And who are you waiting for?" you ask, deciding to probe into his personal affairs without scruple now that he has dared to tease you about your friendship with Kudo.

"I'm waiting for a friend of mine, too." He smiles. "We went to school together and still meet occasionally in this park."

"Ah," you comment with a knowing smile. "To watch sunsets and cherry blossoms?"

He grins and even blushes a little, much to your amusement.

"To have a little walk," he says simply.

"That sounds romantic," you remark.

Whereupon he tells you that the fair lady—a radiantly beautiful woman with a happy-go-lucky zest for life—is happily married to a promising young surgeon, who is always busy and probably glad that he takes care of his wife for him in this platonic way lest another man take advantage of the situation. That woman must be irresistible, you think, to have two nice men at her feet whereas you don't have even one. He tells you in passing that he has been in love with her—rather pining after her, you think—for seven years by now.

"Whenever we have time, we meet here. She wanted to come this afternoon, but perhaps her husband has a bit of free time tonight and she'd rather spend the evening with him. She told me I should go home if she didn't come before sunset. But I think I'm going to wait for a bit longer. I'm
not busy this weekend." He grins. "You see, I'm an optimist."

"You mean you sit here for the whole evening, waiting for hours, just to take a walk with a woman who is married to someone else and who won't come if her husband is home?" You stare at him in amazement. "Doesn't it seem... futile to you?"

Once again you realize that appearances can be deceptive. You didn't expect him to have such low self-esteem. Pining away for a married woman and waiting patiently in a park just to spend an hour walking around with her whenever her husband is busy seems humiliating, idiotic, and above all depressing to you. What irks you most is that it must seem to him as if you were doing the same thing he does. He certainly thinks that you're waiting for Kudo because you are pining after Kudo and are trying to spend time with him whenever possible—grabbing your chance when Kudo's girlfriend is busy training for the next championship.

"I don't think it's pointless because I don't expect to gain anything from it," he protests, kicking distractedly at a pebble. "I only enjoy spending my free time with her, nothing else."

You realize you've touched a nerve. There must have been a friend (or more than one) who had told him the same thing.

"I didn't mean you need to expect anything from it... But isn't it depressing to pine away for someone who is happy with someone else? What about getting over it and looking out for another woman? There must be an alternative."

You pause to imitate his gesture and kick a pebble into the pond just to see what's so fascinating about it. "There is always an alternative!" you insist, hating yourself at the same time, as you realize how superficial and rude you sound. Your attempt to bring him back down to earth is simply ridiculous since you don't have the right to advise him. You are a complete stranger! On top of that, you're not older (perhaps even younger?) than him, and have made worse mistakes in your life than running after a person who is in a happy relationship with someone else.

You're usually not so obnoxious and hypocritical, you think. Something is terribly wrong with you today. Your nerves have been on edge since you saw that Kudo wasn't waiting for you as expected even though he is never late without a good reason. You feel irritable this evening, which is unusual, as you've become calm, almost placid, since the Organization was destroyed.

"I know there is always an alternative," the stranger agrees, kicking another pebble into the pond. "But I can't think of one... I don't want one!"

You smile and shake your head at his blissful ignorance. Your irritable mood has vanished, perhaps because—against your expectations—he hasn't compared the friendship between Kudo and you to the relationship between him and the woman he is waiting for. We're all fools when we're in love, you think, generously generalizing from him to all people.

"Since you said you're an optimist, I bet you still hope that she will change her mind someday," you remark in a conversational tone, showing that you don't take the talk seriously anymore and that he shouldn't either.

"Now I know you can read my mind." He is obviously relieved that you've lightened the conversation, which had taken a direction he didn't like.

"Although I'm shocked at your ignorance, I'm impressed by your optimism!"

"So you think it's unlikely that she will ever change her mind?" he asks, which surprises you, as
you've expected that he would gladly change the subject of your chat.

"She is married to another man, isn't she? And since you've met each other for years just to have a nice little walk, it doesn't seem to me as if she wanted to change the situation very soon."

"Imagine this scenario: Perhaps she does love me and just won't admit it to herself because she knows it would only complicate things. She was already engaged to him when we met. She loves him, I know, and would never do anything to hurt him. But... Would you want to meet a guy you're not in love with three times a week in a park? For a few weeks, maybe, when you're frustrated with your life and need someone to cheer you up, but certainly not for five years..."

You admit he has a point although you think it only makes his situation worse. If she does have feelings for him and still chooses to be with her husband, there is nothing he can do to make her change her mind. It's not like he is trying to take advantage of the situation—he tells you—being not only a former admirer but also a good friend of hers. He seems to have contented himself with the thought that he will be waiting for her on some bench in some park for the rest of his life.

For a while, you two don't say anything but only sit next to each other in companionable silence, watching the wind ruffle the water in front of you.

Then he breaks the silence with a small mirthless laugh and grimaces playfully, perhaps to hide the melancholic expression which has just flitted across his face.

"To be honest, I know that's just wishful thinking... But it's still a very comforting thought."

Even an easy-going guy like him has a face he wants to hide from others, you think, recalling a young magician telling you that, even in the worst situation, a real showman mustn't forget to bow and smile.

"You had better hope she doesn't love you at all," you casually remark, deciding to tell him a story which might distract him from his bleak prospect of a life-long unrequited love. "Your life would be in danger if she loved you. Have you ever heard the story of the ghost at twilight?"

Usually, you don't act on a whim, especially not when it comes to talking about childhood memories with a stranger. You don't know why you're trying to tell this stranger something you've never told any of the people close to you. It's neither his good looks nor his friendly manners, as you've already met many good-looking, friendly people and have never felt like confiding in them. He doesn't look like a confessor either—not that you would have felt compelled to tell him anything if he had been one...

You simply like his easy-going manner. There is something about him which brings back old memories you thought you had already forgotten. If you were an artist, you would call him your muse—even though that doesn't really describe your feelings about him... As it is, you're not going to label him anything and are only going to enjoy his presence.

There is something else, too, something about today, which is troubling you. Is it because you're sure you've really met this person somewhere? Like Gin, you don't have a good memory for faces although you have what people call a sixth sense. Your intuition tells you there is something about today you've blotted out. But, no matter how hard you try, you cannot remember.
A/N: The story has already been completed, and I'm uploading the edited and betaed version. :) Since I've messed up the chapters whenever I replaced the edited version while keeping the old ones, I've decided to delete the old chapters this time, especially since I've regrouped the scenes because the old chapters were either too short or too long.

Edit: I've split this chapter again since it seemed a bit long and ending it after this scene feels natural as well.
The stranger doesn't pay...

The stranger doesn't pay attention to your words, as he has just discovered a small squirrel climbing the cherry tree next to you. A smile steals into his eyes and then slowly curves his lips a second later, reminding you of the smile Kaito gave you two years ago when one of his favourite doves landed on your head...

That was a week before Kaito admitted that he was in love with someone else and you realized that his love for you was only a spur-of-the-moment passion—the type one experiences when one talks to a complete stranger one has just met on the train and suddenly feels attracted to them even though one can't explain why.

"Look! It's the first squirrel I've seen this year," the stranger exclaims, beaming at you. "I'm not really into watching animals, but my... the girl I'm waiting for... loves to. It's a pity she is not here."

"It seems to me you're really fond of squirrels, too. I don't know why you're trying to hide it."

"I'm not trying to hide it. They look pretty to me—and it's natural to like beautiful things, isn't it? I just can't stand spending hours watching animals at the zoo."

"I must admit I can't either. But a few children can watch them for hours without getting bored."

"A few women, too. I don't know any man who likes the zoo."

"I do."

"A friend of yours?"

"My ex-boyfriend. He had a strong dislike of fish, though I've never found out why."

Although you've hidden your secret trysts with the former Kaitou Kid from all your friends, you don't even try to hide it from this carefree stranger, who has told you—with no apparent hesitation—about his unrequited love. Watching the squirrel as it climbs from one branch to another, stopping in the middle of its movements for some inexplicable reason before it resumes its action, you tell the man beside you in passing that—once upon a time—you had a whirlwind romance with a charming young conjurer, which ended only two weeks after it started.

"Why did you two split up? Not because of the zoo, I hope." The stranger's eyes are still following the squirrel attentively. "Or was it the fish?" He grins at the thought.

You smile, watching the squirrel jump from one cherry tree to the next in a single effortless movement.

"It was neither, sadly. He had a childhood friend he had been in love with since they were six—and it seemed that his feelings for her were stronger than his feelings for me."

"The story of your life," the stranger remarks with sympathy.

"I know a lot of people who are in love with their childhood friends," you sigh, as protesting against his implication that you're in love with Kudo for a second time would be futile effort.
"Having a childhood friend must be fun. Did you have one?"

"No, I didn't. But now that I'm thinking about it… We two would have made a cute pair if we had met in kindergarten, wouldn't we? I'm not sure whether we would have fallen in love with each other as we grew older, but I'm sure I'd have cheered you up."

"Do I seem so unhappy to you?"

Since the downfall of the Organization, your life has been as peaceful and as happy as it can be. As Kudo and you have barely spent any free time with each other after you gave him his antidote and he celebrated it by running to Ran, you've even been spared from the murder cases which he always draws to him like a magnet. Your trivial daily problems now can't be compared to your problems back then when you were working for the Organization—when every movement was a matter of life and death and you could be disproportionately punished for a small mistake.

"You don't seem unhappy." The stranger's expression suddenly grows serious. "I think it's because you're much too proud to wear a depressed face in public. But you do exude an aura of tragedy. It's your ironic smile and your disillusioned gaze, which are at least ten years older than you."

If he had told you these things before you took the antidote, you'd have laughed at the irony of his sentence.

"Appearances can be deceptive! There were a few tragic loss... events... in my life a few years ago. But I really can't complain about my present life."

"Was the separation from your boyfriend one of the tragic losses?"

You knit your brows, ponder his question, and then slowly shake your head. "Tragic" is not the right word, you tell him, as the time with Kaito had seemed to you like a dream, which was too beautiful to be real. Waking up from it didn't hurt half as much as you had thought it would.

Now that you can look at your past crush on Kaito from some distance and compare it to your other one-time loves, you realize that it was probably the happiest romance of your life, certainly owing to Kaito's pleasant character and the fact that the relationship was too short to get complicated. No sooner had you fallen in love with him than he had fallen out of love with you, disappeared out of your life, and married his childhood friend a year afterwards, as you learned from Hakuba, who had innocently asked you whether you wanted to come with him to attend their wedding.

Since you didn't have enough time to get up your hopes, there had never been anything like longing, jealousy, or any other strong and selfish feelings which could have set the scene for a drama, as far as you were concerned.

And as far as Kaito was concerned, you had never been a real alternative to his childhood friend despite his short infatuation with you—which you can admit to yourself without a twinge of jealousy, especially now that everything belongs to the past. You've taken the blow well—certainly much better than he dared to hope. All's well that ends well!

Occasionally, he would send you a letter, a self-drawn card, or a present on special occasions and surprise you with the fact that he still has not forgotten about your romantic interlude. But, since you've never met him in person or heard his voice again, you've begun to think of him as a ghost that sometimes visits you by mail and not as a man who lives in the same city as you—a man you can meet again whenever you want to.

You don't want to, however... You never do. You don't want to see him and his wife—who bears
an uncanny likeness to Ran—on their way home from the grocery store, when he is carrying huge plastic bags while she is holding his arm. And you know very well that it's not jealousy or the fear of shattering any irrational hopes or illusions, or whatever. You don't nurture any foolish hopes. There must be another reason why you don't want to be reminded of him.

Deep down, you know the reason. However, you don't want to think about it.

What was the title of the story again, the stranger asks you after the squirrel has hopped from the tree and disappeared in the grass.

"Ghost at Twilight," you tell him.

Perhaps it really was an old and forgotten fairy tale or—and this is more likely—only a ghost story Gin had made up to scare you to death. Nevertheless, you believed in it for years and almost expected to see his ghost at twilight someday. Naturally, that was long before he shot your sister and long before you met your sister's boyfriend and fell in love with him. You can recall that you were four or five—and Gin was your knight in shining armour just because he had beautiful long hair and icy emerald eyes, which changed colour with his moods.

In contrast to Gin's, the stranger's eyes are blue and warm, reminding you more of the sky than of ice…

"If you love a person so passionately and deeply that this love will last for your whole life, you will usually express your love someday. But if you successfully hide your feelings from this person and everyone else, perhaps even from yourself, the subject of your love will die. Between the first and the second twilight after their death, you will meet their ghost for the last time—to say the words you never said when they were still alive."

"Why should you do that after their death if you didn't do it while they were still alive? To give their soul a reason to return to their body? Or to prevent them from haunting your dreams?" he asks with a raised eyebrow and a small, friendly mocking grin.

"I don't know. I've forgotten. To make them come back to life, perhaps. They're supposed to be already dead, I know, and it's impossible to raise the dead. But it's a ghost story, after all."

You sigh, noticing in annoyance that you sound defensive. You also begin to wonder whether you're making a fool of yourself, and regret your decision to tell him the tale.

When you turn to him again, you notice that he is smiling at you with a distant expression in his eyes. He looks as if he is trying to recall something.

He thinks he knows the story, he says, although his version is very different from yours.

"One day, when twilight is three times longer than usual, you will meet the ghost of a stranger who has just died and who you could have fallen in love with if you had known them. You will see them three times during the following twenty-four hours, before they disappear from your life forever. The only way to break the spell and help them come back to life is to say the right words, which will come to you at the right time if you really want to save them."
"Who told you that story?" you ask with a raised eyebrow. "It sounds rather complicated compared to my version of it."

His friend, the girl he is waiting for, he tells you. Thirteen or fourteen years ago, when she was still a child, she met a stranger on a train—a "gloomy young man in black"—who told her the ghost story when she asked him to donate something to her fairy tale collection.

"She dreamed of publishing something like Grimm's Fairy Tales, you see... And who told you your version of the ghost story?"

"Someone who... took care of my education... when I was small. Maybe it's the same man who told your friend the story. But I don't think it's an old tale. I'm sure he made it all up."

"Maybe it was the same man. But that would also mean he intentionally told two different girls two different versions of his ghost story," the stranger remarks, smiling again. "Or the original version completely slipped his mind and he had to make up a new one."

He belongs to the lucky type of person to whom words and smiles come naturally and frequently. Very much like Kaito... However, you don't want to think of Kaito again. Thinking of him once a day is more than enough.

"I don't think it slipped his mind. He had a fantastic memory and was very creative when it came to inventing morbid stories. It would be just like him to tell two different girls two versions of the tale. I'm sure he would have told a third girl a third version, which would have differed greatly from the other two... Perhaps he didn't want to share the original version with anybody."

"So he is a very playful person with a very romantic mind?"

You wince at the thought.

"'Playful' is not the right word to describe him, neither is 'romantic'... But he did have a vein of humour."

"Black humour?"

You nod even though you think that "gallows humour" would have been the better choice of word.

"You don't seem to like him very much."

"Not anymore."

Your childish infatuation with Gin had died long before he shot your sister—yet the secret affair between you and him lasted until you learned about your sister's death. You've always tried to make yourself believe that both of you had stumbled into the relationship without knowing why—that it must have been the undeniable chemistry between you two which ignited your dangerous love affair despite the fact that you two had never really liked each other in the first place.

Now you know that the truth was slightly different although you will forever be denying it, as you can't explain how you could have fallen in love with him... To put it poetically, you had been greatly enamoured with him for no reason at all when you were very young. You had hoped that someday you would manage to break through his thick shells of ice and see into the very depth of his soul.

Your crush on him lasted for many years, during which you thought that the impossible task of your life was not creating APTX 4869 or leaving the Organization but winning Gin's affection and
stealing the key to his heart.

You wish you had failed, as you did steal his heart and discover the real man behind the facade—ironically only after you realized you had fallen out of love with him.

A/N: I've decided to split the first chapter since it felt a bit too long when I reread it. The edited and betaed Chapter 3 will be posted tomorrow since aritzen is going to beta it tonight. This is also the reason why I decided to split the first chapter and post the second chapter now (I didn't want the subscribers to be spammed by two fic alerts from me during the same day).
"You really want..."

"You really want to hear the first fairy tale I've ever heard? But it's a dark one... All right, you annoying little brat! It's called 'Ghost at Twilight' and says that, if you love a person with all your heart and successfully hide your feelings from them, perhaps even from yourself, the person you love will die. At twilight, you will meet the ghost of your love for the last time, which is your very last chance to admit your love to them and bring them back to life. Now I've told you your bedtime story as I've promised. What about shutting up and going to sleep at once like you've promised?"

"If I didn't dare to admit my love to them while they were alive... where am I supposed to get the courage to admit it to them when they're already gone? And how the hell should I know that they're a ghost and that I should admit my love to them?"

"Haven't your parents told you that you mustn't curse? But you have a point there. You actually won't know that they're a ghost although you will feel that the day is special. And if you don't tell them about your feelings, they will stay dead, which is how most stories end. It will be better for both of you, anyway. Are you satisfied now?"

"...What are you drinking?"

"Sherry."

"Why are you drinking it?"

"Because I'm tired of the other wines. And this one has always been my favourite."

"Why is it your favourite?"

"Because it simply is. It tastes good, looks good, and I'm addicted to it. It's the only thing that makes life worth living before I get my own Porsche. And now shut up!"

"What is it called again? Your favourite wine—"

"Sherry."

"When I get a cocktail name, can I choose 'Sherry'?"

"Only if it doesn't already belong to another member by then. Otherwise you'll have to kill the other Sherry first... But little girls will only get their cocktail names if they can go to sleep when they're told to go to sleep. Now shut your eyes, just pretend that I'm not here, and sleep—for God's sake!"

"But there is a problem, Gin..."

"Hmpf!"

"There is a problem with your story. How will I feel that the day is special... the day when the ghost appears?"

"Now... I've forgotten that part of the story. Hmm... First, it will seem to you as if something inside you had died... But it's not only that: On such a day and on the following day, twilight will be at
least three times longer than usual. Sometimes, during this magical twilight, you will have the chance to meet the spirit of a stranger who has just died and who you could have fallen in love with if you had known them... Their ghost will appear to you three times between the first and the second twilight. And you can bring them back to life by saying the right words, which will come to you at the right time, if you really want to save them."

"That sounds very complicated."

"It is complicated! Just forget it! It's only a fairy tale, anyway... Or remember only the first part to tell it to a stupid brat when she asks you for a bedtime story!"

"I think I'd want to save them. Would you save them, too?"

"No, of course not! There will always be a high price to pay if you save someone you could have fallen in love with... And why should I save someone I only might fall in love with if I wouldn't even save the one I love?"

"What price?"

"You will fall in love with them afterwards. They are your alternative future."

"...That means that, if I save my love's life, I can't save the stranger's, right?"

"If you met both ghosts at the same time and wanted to spend your whole life with the stranger after saving them, you could save both. But you won't meet both of them at the same time. That would be too much of a coincidence... if your love and your alternative future died on the same day, I mean. No, usually, someone else's love—who is also your alternative future—dies and returns as a ghost. And during the same twilight, you can meet them, your alternative future... Or your love, who is someone else's alternative future, dies and appears as that person's alternative future during that special twilight. If that's too complicated for you, just remember that you usually don't meet two ghosts at the same time."

"But if I really meet two ghosts during the same twilight... Will I need to give up my love to save the stranger?"

"Didn't you listen to what I said? You can save both people and then spend your life with the stranger. Of course you could still have an affair with the other guy if you like... But I guess you wouldn't want him anymore because you'd be in love with the stranger instead. You can also only save the stranger guy and let your secret love die. Two affairs cost nerves, money, and time—I wouldn't recommend it to anybody! But the probability that you meet two ghosts during the same twilight is as high as being struck by lightning and eaten by a shark at the same time, at least according to my version of the story."

"Are there other versions?"

"There is no story with only one version, idiot! There are always at least three versions of the same story and, usually, all versions are incomplete or even completely wrong. No one on earth knows the famous one truth. Only idiots or hypocrites believe in it. But... come to think of it... most adults are idiots or hypocrites, anyway. Don't ever trust anyone!"

"Not even you?"

"I can tell you now that I'm not lying to you, can't I? But, unless you can read my mind, you can't know whether I've told you the truth or not. Hence you shouldn't trust me either."
"Ah! Don't you ever dare to touch my hair again! Your fidgeting aggravates me beyond endurance!"

"What would you do if you met two ghosts during the same twilight?"

"I wouldn't save either of them. Neither of them would appear to me, anyway!"

"Why not?"

"First, I don't love anybody. Second, if I did, I wouldn't keep it secret from them... And third: if there were any dead body I could have fallen in love with if I had known them, I wouldn't want to complicate things by bringing them back to life. Life will be simple if you keep things simple. But I told you that two ghosts don't appear during the same twilight. Remember that and shut your eyes now."

"I swear I'll shoot your ugly teddy to pieces if you don't shut up and leave me in peace!"

"You said that two ghosts usually won't appear during the same twilight."

"What's the problem with that?"

"But then there is absolutely no catch in that story. You will never need to choose between your alternative future and your love, right?"

"I'm so tired of this! If you try to find a meaning in such a story, you should try not to take it literally! It's not really about dead bodies or zombies that come back to life! It only says that people with too much common sense and needless moral principles will never allow their real feelings to emerge before it's too late. Having an authentic love in this world is impossible because most people are cowards in want of intelligence and fantasy. A secret love doesn't get enough energy to live and therefore will stay a ghost forever. Sometimes fate intervenes and, either way you choose, you cannot win, for example if you really had to choose between two different types of love. But I already told you it won't ever happen, because two ghosts simply don't appear at the same time!"

"So the first part of the story says that people kill their true loves with their cowardice and then can't bring them back to life while the second part basically says that people should open up and grab their chance when they meet a soul mate?"

"Nobody can give you the right answer if you don't know it yourself."

"...I think the story means that people would have more freedom of choice if they listened to their subconscious and were free from their self-imposed constraints. Twilight is the end of the day, when the light disappears. And you once told me that the darkness is a symbol for the subconscious."

"Perhaps we should send you to school as soon as possible to reduce your IQ. But you bore me to death because you're continually trying to say exactly what you mean. Overly honest people are always boring and helpless!"

"That means you're boring, too..."

"You got me there. But I'm usually not like that. It's all your fault! And I think I drank too much.
"Why won't you shut up and leave me alone now?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Never! I've never loved anyone. I simply have too much common sense. True love is only a stupid fairy tale and completely made up by some stupid guy who had to tell a stupid girl a stupid bedtime story."

"You don't even love sherry?"

"Ha! I'm sure you'll grow up to be a manipulative little wicked witch... Fine! I told you I'm addicted to it, which doesn't necessarily mean I'm in love with it. But it's still the closest feeling to love a guy like me will ever get. You're too young to know what love is, so just shut your eyes now and try to sleep!"

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A/N: This was the shortest chapter of the whole fic. But Young Gin wanted a chapter for himself. I let him.

PS: I've been told by Momo Cicerone (who writes lovely Shinichi/Shiho banters *points at Momo's FFNet profile) that the ConanAi-group on Discord had a channel for this fic, which really amazed me. O_o So, when I used the invite Momo gave me to enter that new world which seemed to me a bit like Ali Baba's cave complete with the forty robbers in there (yours truly is terrified of group chats since she fails at both scrolling and typing!), I discovered that two readers of mine (Dee and Poe) have discussed the plot and character dynamics of the fic with each other. It makes me feel a bit like a real author although I'm only writing for fun. XD

It was hilarious (and really cute) how Poe, while sharing snippets of the fic, cut out anything which wasn't related to Shinichi/Shiho for the Shinichi/Shiho fans and how she paraphrased (and commented on) what happened in the gaps. I was intrigued by how those snippets of the original story have been merged with a reader's reading of the story, resulting in a new version of the story, which is slightly different from the original.

I've only become slightly paranoid since both Dee and Poe change their names like other people change their clothes and have apparently reviewed under different names or left guest reviews without a name. As great as their Discord group it, I also regret that I've intruded on their place since they had fun discussing the fic with each other and certainly didn't expect that I'd find their channel someday.
Part 01: It seems I...

It seems I've been sleeping with my eyes wide open, staring at the distant horizon while dreaming about something I can't remember anymore now that I've woken up with a start. I can dimly recall that, in my dream, I had been lying in my cozy children's room where I lived twenty years ago (before they moved me to an orphanage of the Organization), snuggling against the ugly beige teddy bear I loved when I was three or four and carelessly misplaced then lost when I was a few years older. It turned out that the bear wasn't a present from my family as I had thought but from an unremarkable member of the Organization who had worked with them and whom I had never met because he had committed suicide in one of the Organization's laboratories. And since I didn't attach any sentimental memories to the teddy except that I had once believed it to be a present from my parents, I didn't feel utterly dejected when it disappeared. Perhaps my subconscious had decided to get rid of it to free myself from another dispensable material possession.

The more we dwell on a detail of a forgotten dream, however, the more fragments of that dream we suddenly remember—although we can never be sure whether we really remember what we've dreamed or whether our fancy only played a trick on us by filling the most significant gaps with products of our own wishful thinking.

The flickering light of a candle dancing in a glass of reddish-brown wine, the diffused light of a full moon breaking through the patterns of the transparent blinds, casting stripes of blueish shadows on the ochre sheets of the bed; Gin's smooth, silky hair between my fingers; his expensive eau de toilette mingling with the smell of fresh tobacco; the mellow tone of his deep voice and his slightly slurring speech when he was intoxicated... I can recall that there had been many nights like that one, long ago, indeed so long that I can't remember what we had talked about or why he had been in my room in the first place. And it startles me that—even though I thought I had forgotten that time and moved on—those nights are still hiding in a dark corner of my mind, forcing me to relive the past in a dream, which has felt surprisingly pleasant, almost like a fond distant memory.

During my involuntary nap, which must have been so short that no one else has taken notice of it, the stranger seems to have run out of pebbles to kick and has proceeded to the low railing in front the pond, where he is standing now with his left foot comfortably resting on the railing while he languorously yawns and stretches his limbs.

"I've been sitting here for three hours already." He sighs. "What about a short walk around the pond? I really doubt our 'dates' will still come tonight. And if they come, they won't have any problems finding us because we'll only be walking up and down for a while and won't go far. Besides, you look like you're cold. A short walk will do you good, too."

"Well, why not?" A glance at my watch has shown me that it's almost eight o'clock. Kudo is already two hours late and can't expect me to stay glued to this bench and wait patiently for him for another hour like his beloved Ran certainly would have done. Apart from that, I do feel cold.

Now we're strolling along the wide path in silence, avoiding walking in the direction of the temples, where it must be swarmed with tourists even at this hour. Although it's already past seven, there is still a faint band of light in the horizon, I absently note. The rainbow I saw on the way to the park has become so pale that it's barely visible in front of the sky, which looks strangely velvety tonight. A glimmering lavender on the horizon and a shimmering indigo at the top of the buildings, which gradually turns into a midnight-blue and deepens the higher my gaze wanders. I
recall that, sitting in the bus, I had stared in wide-eyed wonder at the sunset, thinking that it was the most beautiful sunset I had ever seen, indescribable with its rich pink, orange, gold, green, and blue running softly into each other like the first transparent washes of colour on an exquisite piece of Chinese silk. I had almost expected that Kudo and I would miss it just as we had missed many other sunsets before. And now that my fear has turned out to be justified, as I came late and Kudo hasn't come at all, I have the sneaking suspicion that we will never manage to watch a sunset together, as either of us will always be late or will not come.

Despite the pouring rain this morning, the pavement and the wooden bench the stranger and I have been sitting on are completely dry owing to the fierce sun and the warm, strong wind blowing this afternoon. Now that the sun is almost gone, the wind has become chilly and light, although a few breezes are still strong enough to ruffle the surface of the water and the hair of the people walking past us. The leaves of the ginkgo trees are rustling melodically as their branches are moving slowly to and fro in a fantastic dance, waving with ghostly arms at us when we pass by.

As it strikes me that the lower layer of the stranger's hair, trimmed at the nape of his neck, barely moves in the wind, I take a closer look at his hair and notice that the short locks behind his ears have obscured the fact that his hair is long in the middle and neatly held together by a broad satin band.

"The man who told me the story about the Twilight Ghost had long hair and a ponytail, too, when he was seventeen or eighteen," I remark, thinking that one substantial difference between Gin and this stranger lies in the fact that Gin loved to show his hair instead of hiding it beneath his long coat. He was rather proud of his hair, his clothes, and his Porsche, and treated them with meticulous care whereas the man next to me seems the sort of person that would handle a dinner jacket with the same attention with which he treats an old pair of jeans.

"You don't like him anymore, you said... So you mean you once liked him very much?" the stranger asks, fixing my eyes with his expectantly. "Was he only a childhood crush? Or was there something more than that between you two?"

"How on earth did you come up with that theory?"

I've tried to sound exasperated in the hope that he won't probe into my personal affairs any further; but he only gives me an amused look and I smile in reply, giving up the facade. His childlike directness is infectious.

"I thought you wouldn't dislike him so much if he had only been your unrequited childhood love," he simply states. "People tend to idealize those feelings afterwards, when everything belongs to the distant past, and you don't look like the resentful type to me... There must be a reason why you loathe the man so much."

"I only wonder why you're so sure that I've ever idolized him or had a crush on him in the first place. He could have been a mentor or a friend who disappointed me, couldn't he?"

He stops short in his track and turns to raise an inquiring brow at me, his lips curving into a victorious, self-satisfied smile. It seems he has an extensive collection of smiles, which are always available to him when he needs them.

"You look as if you despise yourself for the things that happened between you and him. It's not hard to read your face, you know. Your thoughts are flitting across your eyes so quickly that I get the feeling they show up on your face as soon as they cross your mind. Don't frown just because I dared to tell you the truth!"
I laugh.

"You're the first person who tells me that. Other people often complain that I'm something of an enigma."

"Then today you must be very different from other days. Anyhow... I wonder how you became involved with a man so much older than you. It's not that I mind the difference in age! I'm only curious."

"He wasn't so much older than me," I protest, "only fourteen years or less."

Now I'm painfully aware that this was an unfortunate slip, as fourteen years are quite a remarkable number in a world where mentors aren't supposed to have affairs with their young protégés and where girls are supposed to know the real age of their lovers and seldom content themselves with a fake birthday and a code name. The stranger must have noticed my blunder, too, judging from the alert, strangely knowing look on his face.

"How did it end?" he asks, elegantly leading our conversation away from the dreaded question of Gin's real age.

"Badly! I fell in love with someone else... He noticed it very quickly and began to show me a few sides of his I didn't know before. We never split up officially. But we both knew when it ended."

There it is, the whole tragic and ugly thing beautifully wrapped up in a tiny package easy to swallow! Hearing my own voice talk about it, I can almost deceive myself into believing the pretty lie that it had been a normal love affair like many other love affairs: ignited by curiosity and a superficial attraction, burning with the intensity of an inferno for a short while to be snuffed out by a breeze in the end, leaving nothing but—first glowing and then cold—ashes and a few other unrecognizable remnants that turn to dust as time goes by.

"Oh, so that's how you fell in love with the conjurer, the one with the phobia about fish!" the stranger exclaims gleefully, beaming at me; and I'm suddenly reminded of Kudo, who has often used the same ringing, airy tone when he tried to cheer me up.

"No!" I grimace. "I fell in love with my sister's boyfriend. It sounds awful, I know, but I couldn't do anything about it."

Having told this stranger almost everything about my love life, I see no reason to lie to him when it comes to Dai. I will never see him again, anyway, which makes it easier for me to dump all the memories of my past loves on him and get rid of them all at once.

"Don't flatter yourself! It doesn't sound so awful at all, although I must admit you do have a talent for getting into trouble." He grimaces, mimicking me.

"Says the person who is waiting here for the wife of someone else," I wickedly remark.

"Let's agree that we share the same luck when it comes to love!" He smiles and offers me his arm, which I take in a daze, not quite sure what to think about his behaviour until it dawns on me that he must be spending a lot of time abroad, judging from his clothes, his shoes, his odd hairstyle, and the familiarity with which he treats a woman he has never met before. The remarkably regular and straight features of his face, his azure eyes, and his fair complexion point towards some European ancestors. And from his flawless Japanese and his chivalrous but easy-going manners when it comes to women, I guess that he has had a conventional European upbringing among Japanese people or has attended a Japanese school while spending a considerable amount of time with Italian
or French teenagers.

However, I am neither Holmes nor Kudo and tend to misinterpret my observations as soon as I make them. Knowing that deduction is not my forte, I would rather stick to my habit of observing my surroundings without trying to come to a conclusion—especially when a conclusion is of little or no importance.

A few people turn to gape at us (as if there were anything unusual about a pair walking arm in arm along Shinobazu-no-ike on Friday evening!) and don't even stop when I wheel around to meet their eyes. Their impertinent, unconcened stares irritate me whereas they bounce off the stranger like water off a duck's back. Judging from his relaxed appearance, he takes as little notice of them as if they weren't here at all.

Some of the azaleas, which have begun to blossom unusually early this year, are already in full bloom, giving off a delightful sweet smell. Their distinctive, overwhelming scent reminds me cruelly of the night in the spring three years ago when I was sitting at the window of my new apartment, staring at the blazing red, at night blueish-grey shimmering azaleas in front of the gate, waiting for Kudo in vain because he had forgotten me in Ran's presence.

The stranger, on the other hand, doesn't seem to connect any unpleasant memories to the fragrance of azaleas in full bloom. To him, they only belong to the "beautiful things" he naturally admires. He neither notices that their scent is much stronger than usual, nor does he wonder why they're blooming so early this year.

"We're already out of sight!" he exclaims, stopping at a large pink azalea shrub for a moment to give the flowers a radiant smile, and then turns on his heels, dragging me along with him.

"Although I really doubt that they will come tonight," he continues in a voice which makes it sound like an excuse for disrupting our pleasant ramble to hurry back to the bench.

"I don't know if she will, but I'm sure that he will come," I assert. "He will come as soon as possible because he knows that I will be waiting for him!"

Even to my own ears it sounds like I was reciting a spell, which sounded a bit forced—as if this witch didn't really believe in her own charm.

"Perhaps he will," the stranger says, skeptically, and cleverly changes the topic. "Excuse my insatiable curiosity, but you said you had fallen in love with your sister's boyfriend and that you and your first love split up as a consequence. What happened afterwards?"

"Nothing happened. I never had the slightest chance to begin with. I never got the idea of stealing him from her, anyway. You see... I had hoped that she would meet someone else she fell madly in love with and leave him to me someday, which was not the case."

"What was the case then?"

Betrayal, death, and a murderous grudge which ended three years ago? There is so much I'd like to tell him and too little time for me to do so. It might take me a whole night to sort out my recollections and another night to explain to him that there is not only one version of my story but many versions, which differ greatly from each other, and that I don't really know which one of them is true.

Whenever we tell someone the true story of our life, we dig for the few surviving tattered remnants of our past, pathetically trying to piece together the fragments we find in an old, dusty corner of our memory to provide a coherent, believable account of our story. But the reconstruction of the past,
no matter how vividly remembered, will not be equivalent to the past itself, as we can only catch a fleeting glimpse of our temporary subjective reality before it evades our perception and withdraws into the impenetrable realms of the past. As a result, the story of our life continuously transforms with each of our new attempts to fill the gaps, to give the vague shadows of our recollections a fixed shape and meaning.

At the beginning of a biography whose title I've forgotten because I only leafed through it once when I was waiting for Kudo in a bookstore, I found an interesting quote by William Maxwell, supposedly taken from his short novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, saying that, "In talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw..."

"They split up... but not because of me," I reply after a pause—after deciding to tell the stranger the short version of the story, which is only half a lie. "He pretended to be something he wasn't. And when he stopped living that lie, he left her... us."

I'm aware that I suddenly sound exhausted and listless. Either the thoughts of Gin had tired me out or I'm simply not accustomed to talking about my life.

"What's your sister doing now?"

I hesitate, not because I'm not sure whether I should tell him or not but because I'm afraid of the impact of hearing myself saying it, as tears have begun to come easily to me since the downfall of the Organization—as if I had to get rid of all the tears I had held back when I read the newspaper Gin had nonchalantly tossed on my desk after informing me of her death.

"She died six years ago," I tell him at last, almost surprised at how easily the words leave my mouth.

"Ah," he gently says without asking me how she died. Despite his boldness and flippancy, he seems to feel instinctively when to stop.

"Isn't it unsettling how fast life can end?" he finally remarks, leading our private conversation into a more general and philosophic direction. "You spend your whole life living only in your own small world until everything comes to a sudden stop. You're gone forever. And afterwards nothing matters anymore."

"Well, maybe you'll be lucky and encounter a stranger who can bring you back to life." I grin at him.

He smiles, enigmatically.

" Wouldn't you like it if things like that came true? If fairy tales were real?" he asks softly, in a voice suddenly as enchanting, as hypnotic and irresistible as if it belonged to a magician who was trying to pull me into the realm of dreams.

I chuckle at my own imagination, breaking the spell.

"I don't think so. I don't like witches and ghosts at all. I already have enough trouble with real life—going through these never-ending trials and errors."

"But you don't want it to end either," he says as a matter of fact, flashing a small witty smile at me.

"Sometimes I thought I did. But since it will end someday no matter whether I like or not, I might as well try to enjoy it until then."
"That's the right attitude! The only difficulty lies in the question of how to find a way to enjoy it, of course. But that surely depends on one's own creativity. I've set myself the goal of living happily and creatively!"

"That sounds really impressive! On the other hand, waiting for hours for someone who doesn't come doesn't seem very creative to me, you see."

"It depends on the company you spend the waiting time with," he gallantly retorts, and I'm about to remark that his attempt to flatter me is rather wretched (as he has already betrayed his impatience by looking about himself at least ten times during our conversation!) when I spot a petite young woman and a tall man coming towards us. She is waving violently in our direction while he is busy dodging her flying arms.

"Oh no!" I gasp in mock horror. "She has even taken her husband to your tête-à-tête!"

"Don't be silly! And I almost thought that he was your friend, who came with his puppy-love girlfriend. That's how the two of them look, you see."

"How?" I ask, uncomprehendingly.

"Boring," he says with a grin.

As they get closer, it turns out that they're not waving at us but at an elderly couple walking behind us, who seem to be their aunt and uncle or the aunt and uncle of a friend of them.

Oh dear, Auntie Jenny, we're so sorry we came late, shouts the young woman and immediately begins to unleash a torrent of English curses directed at traffic jams and ruthless drivers, after which she rapidly proceeds to the description of an accident that seemed to have caused another traffic jam:

Ohhhh... There was such a terrible accident you can't imagine how horrible just because somebody was searching for a ball on the street yes the children lost it and a driver was too fast and hit the guy and somehow a motorbike fell over and another car crashed into the young girl crossing the street and then into the traffic lights which didn't work by the way and so three or four people died or are seriously injured no we don't really know since we didn't see anything but blood oh we only heard it from somebody who heard it from an eyewitness I think of course we didn't see it because we were waiting in the long queue as if the traffic jam wasn't enough no no of course I mean it was another traffic jam and then there was this accident and then we were stuck again until the ambulance arrived and ooohhh there was blood everywhere on the pavement and this ball lying there added to the macabre scene why oh why do these children always play ball on the streets while there are playing fields and the parents should really take care of them if I imagine that I could have been walking over the street just at that moment and wouldn't have been able to react although of course I know I'd have been fast enough to dodge the cars and of course I'm not stupid enough to try to get a ball even if it were lying at my feet but some people are always too nice for their own sake and it's always the wrong ones who die...

She doesn't pause for even one second or at least slow down to catch her breath but rambles on and on while dragging the elderly couple with her to gawk at what is left from the scene of the "terrible" tragedy. Her husband or boyfriend (or whoever he was) clumsily stumbles after them, puffing like a locomotive, his tiny ears glowing pink from excitement. I remember that seeing the bloody ball on the pavement made me feel sick (even though I should be accustomed to blood by now!) and recall that I had passed the street with eyes glued to my feet to avoid glancing again at the scene. To say I'm a rather composed person is an understatement, as I've witnessed enough murders, suicides, accidents, and other types of gruesome deaths without my
nerves failing me. But perhaps the peaceful life during the past three years has softened me—for this time I intentionally turned away and censored whatever I had accidentally glimpsed... Certainly not out of embarrassment, terror, or even pity, but only out of self-preservation, out of the feeling that, in my mental condition today, I won't be able to bear it.

Feeling that the arm I'm leaning on is growing tense, I look up at the stranger and notice that his fresh complexion has turned visibly pale. Now he halts dead in his tracks and narrows his eyes to stare into space with a slight but deepening frown, lost in his own thoughts.

A/N: The book with the Maxwell quote is *Dancer: A Novel* by Column McCann.

The next fic update will be for either "The Red String of Fate" or "Encounter in Venice" depending on which one I finish first.

Also, I've finally finished university. Yay! :D Life is still busy (in a good way), but I'll have a bit more time to write and draw again.

In other news, I'm not going to tweet anymore whenever I update my DW journal.
Part 01: When we return...

When we return...

When we return to our bench, I notice in surprise and slight amusement that the sky still looks the same as before, as if a magician (Kaitou Kid?) had placed an enormous photorealistic painting of the eight-o'clock sky behind the buildings on the other side of the pond, tricking us into believing that the sun has stopped setting and is now hanging—in a desperate attempt not to disappear before Kudo's arrival—precarciously over the surface of the water. A few moths are gathering around the light of the street lamps, which is throwing long shadows on the quiet, deserted pavement. As far as my eyes can see, the stranger and I are the only people left at Shinobazu-no-ike.

The stranger has been silent since Talkative Woman & Co. departed to gape at the scene of the accident. Although I think I know exactly what is bothering him, I decide to appear ignorant so that he can choose to tell me or to keep it to himself.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. I was only thinking that she has never let me wait for so long. She knows my number by heart. I'm sure that, if she had really stayed home tonight, she would have given me a call."

The talk about the accident has made him anxious about her safety, as people in love often link everything they hear to the object of their affection. Telling him about the probability of her being involved in that accident is less than one percent and therefore almost nil would be as helpful as explaining to him that those tragic accidents happen every day without making an impact on our lives. Knowing that, I ask him why he doesn't give her a call instead of waiting for her to call him.

"I can't. She doesn't have a mobile phone," he explains, growing more desperate with every passing second. "If she had, I'd have called her hours ago."

I settle on the bench while he stays at the railing in front of the water, his hands hidden in his pockets, gazing intensely at the lavender light in the distance with a mixed expression of desperate hope and fear.

"This sky is driving me insane," he murmurs.

"Why don't you call her at home?" I suggest. "Then you will know for sure whether she has left or not."

"I don't want to talk to him," he gloomily remarks. "But you're right. I'm getting rather childish! I'd better call her now."

Watching him fidget with his mobile phone, I picture Kudo crouching at the scene of the crash at the moment, inspecting the car wrecks and the sketchy outlines indicating where the bodies of the victims had lain. There might have been irregularities in certain details of the accident (defective traffic lights or defective car brakes) so that Kudo has been called to solve the mystery—or, more probably, he has stumbled over the scene of the crime on the way to Ueno-koen and naturally stayed there without thinking of contacting me.

"It's me," the stranger says into his mobile phone, pacing up and down in front of the bench. "Sorry to disturb you at home, but can I talk to Odango for a moment?" Undoubtedly, he likes food or at least dumplings, as he refers to his love interest as "Odango" even in the presence of a complete
stranger.

The person on the other end of the line seems to say something he has already feared (probably "I thought she is with you at the moment!"), as he pales and stammers, "But no, it's impossible....," "She is not here..." and "No, I've been waiting for her since five p.m. ..."

The other person, however, keeps their cool in spite of the stranger's panic. From the bits and pieces I can hear from the conversation, I surmise he is a rational, calm man, who is telling the stranger in a reassuring voice that "it wouldn't be the ... (first?) time she's got lost" and that the stranger shall "call again if she doesn't show up during the next ... (I couldn't hear the number) minutes" so that they both can go and look for her.

"How can he stay so cool?" The stranger frowns after ending the conversation. "His wife is missing and he doesn't give a damn!"

"No, she is not missing," I correct him. "You obviously think she is missing. But, in his view, she has just gone out for three hours without contacting either you or him. I only wonder why she decided to go out even though he was home. Didn't you say that—"

"He is home, but he is probably studying, as always. I think she was bored to death watching him reading his books, which is why she decided to meet up with me instead."

Or she has begun to miss your regular rendezvous, I think, but don't say it aloud, as I don't want to give him ideas. On the other hand, his nervousness is rubbing off on me as I begin to comprehend his anxiety. There is no reason why she should leave home without heading to Ueno-koen immediately since she knew that he would be waiting for her here unless...

"Is it possible that she has met a friend on the way?"

"Oh, she has an army of friends. But she wouldn't let me sit on some bench to wait for her while she is enjoying ice cream with another friend—if that's what you mean. She is the type who would take her friend with her to Ueno-koen so that all of us could go to the ice cream parlour together afterwards."

"And if she got lost on the way?"

"Her husband already suggested that." He sighs. "But it's not the first time that we've met here, you see. I can't understand how she could have got lost since—"

He is interrupted by the ringing of his mobile phone—a familiar melody I've heard before. Frowning, he clicks to answer the call and immediately smiles in tremendous relief.

"You idiot!" he says, affectionately. "Where are you? I've been waiting for you for hours."

The "idiot" has a high and ringling voice and a clear articulation but a haphazard way of narrating and can obviously talk at a speed which would make it impossible for a foreigner to comprehend the meaning of her words. Being a native speaker, however, I can make out that she had fallen asleep on the way, got lost during her attempt to walk back, and is now waiting for him to fetch her from some street where she is staying at the moment, as she cannot figure out how to come to Ueno-koen. And she is—she stresses this fact by repeating it for at least ten times—"extremely hungry".

"No problem," her knight in shining armour says, "I'll fetch you immediately! Just stay where you are! I'll find you something to eat."
"She is impossible," he tells me afterwards, laughing. "She fell asleep on the bus and then got lost because she misjudged the distance between the bus station where she got out and Ueno-koen. She is waiting for me at a public phone box now. I'll go and fetch her."

"I told you that there's no reason to worry." I smile, thinking that, when I was younger, I didn't have a sense of direction either. "You should hurry now since she sounded really hungry on the phone."

I've expected him to laugh, to put away his mobile phone, to say goodbye and then run like the wind to his friend as Kudo after receiving a call from Ran would certainly have done. Hence I'm surprised to see him offering me his mobile phone, which I don't take.

"You can give him a call, too, if you like," he says with an encouraging smile.

"No, thank you."

"Just give him a call! You'll feel better afterwards."

"No!" I refuse curtly, slightly piqued by his persistence. "I'm not that anxious!"

"Why not? He has let you wait for—" he glances at his mobile phone "—almost three hours."

"It doesn't matter. He is probably working on a... on something important at the moment. I don't want to interrupt him."

"Working on Friday night, huh? What's he doing for a living? Is he a barkeeper or a manager?"

"He is neither."

"What is he doing then? If he is probably robbing a bank at the moment, you can invent something else to tell me, of course. Just tell me he is a doctor or surgeon who might have been called to—"

"As far as I know, he is not planning to rob any bank. Perhaps he is preventing people from robbing a bank at the moment, though."

"Oh, a policeman," he takes a wild guess.

"No, a detective." My old irrational mistrust and antipathy against the police force has prevented me from letting him believe that Kudo is a policeman. It seems the education of the Black Organization did leave some lasting impression on me after all.

"A detective," he murmurs, suddenly looking distant. "I once met a detective... a very famous one. I think we might have got along pretty well if we had only met by accident like you and I." His eyes darken. "But the circumstances were not so favourable then."

I neither ask him whether that detective's name was Mori or Kudo, nor what the "circumstances" were. In exchange—and much to my relief—he doesn't ask me to tell him Kudo's name.

"What's your name, by the way?" he asks instead, reminding me that we haven't introduced ourselves to each other despite having talked with each other for almost three hours.

"Miyano," I reluctantly tell him. It would have seemed ridiculous to me to hide my name even after the downfall of the Black Organization even though I'm not sure whether I want us to meet again.

"Miyano, and?"
"Miyano Shiho."

"Where do you live?"

"In Juuban," I automatically say before it suddenly occurs to me that, in reality, this sympathetic stranger might be a dangerous stalker and that I should never, ever, give my address to a man I don't know.

"Juuban," he murmurs, shaking his head with a smile while keeping his eyes on his mobile phone. "Such a coincidence!"

Luckily, he doesn't ask for my address but for my number instead. "Ueno-koen is pretty big," he remarks, fidgeting with his mobile phone. "We might not meet the next time when our love interests are late again."

Noticing that I hesitate—I've been wondering whether I should give this impertinent stranger my number or not because I've already told him too much about my private life—he gives me another bright smile (the final one, judging from his expression) and shrugs, slipping his mobile phone back into his pocket.

"I often forget my own number as well," he claims. "If we had something to write, I would give you mine. But you can easily look it up in the phone directory. I think it won't be difficult for me to get your number either, but I don't want to be a bother. If you're looking for good company the next time you're in Ueno-koen and your Kudo Shinichi is busy solving a case again, just give me a call!"

He turns and walks swiftly away before I can recover from my astonishment and ask him how he has guessed that I'm waiting for Kudo. Even if Kudo had been the famous detective he told me about, he couldn't have known that Kudo is the detective I'm waiting for. Perhaps he has taken a wild guess again to observe my reaction to his words. Surely he is grinning now, pleased with himself for successfully playing that prank on me, I think, shaking my head at so much cheekiness, and finally realize that—even if I wanted to call him—I wouldn't be able to find his number in the phone directory, as he hasn't told me his name.

A/N: The book with the Maxwell quote is *Dancer: A Novel* by Column McCann.
Part 02: Now that the stranger...

Now that the stranger...

Now that the stranger has left, you finally realize how still the air at Shinobazu-no-ike has become. Black birds are soaring through the sky without making a sound; the leaves around you are moving so quietly that their continuous rustling sounds not louder than a whisper; and the wind has become so weak that the gentle breeze barely grazes the surface of the water reflecting the last light of the sky.

The only lively things here are the shadows of the birds gliding over the pond—dark indigo apparitions sailing across the water like ghostly ships from another time.

Usually, the world becomes livelier as it darkens, as the creatures of the night awaken and the tiniest sounds seem powerful in the silence. You can remember that you often stayed awake at night and listened to the peculiar, uncanny sounds when you were small. Back then the clouds and shadows still seemed to have the shapes of animals and fabulous monsters, and you feared the darkness far more than you feared the Organization...

From time to time, a ray of sunlight will peep through the pale purple clouds, mirrored by light flashing up in the deep violet water—at times white, at times golden—and brightens up the world around you until it disappears again as quickly as it has come.

Kudo is never late without a very good excuse, you think. On the other hand, this wouldn't be the first time that he hasn't come because someone happened to drop dead on his way. Instead of waiting here for the whole night, you should go home and curl up in bed with a book and a cup of tea.

But "going home" has lost its meaning since the Professor died. Back then, going home meant returning to the house where that mad genius had been waiting for you to prepare his dinner, as he could never cook without destroying half of the kitchen. Sometimes, the Detective Boys or Kudo—or even Ran—would visit you two and bring the biscuits Ran had made. Now going home means returning to an empty apartment and either cooking for only one person or eating the leftovers on the following day. Cooking dinner—or rather housework in general—has turned into a lonely, tedious, tiring task.

You hate to admit it to yourself. But the older you get, the more you realize that you don't belong to the class of people who can live alone, for your mind is too destructive to be let loose on itself. Without distracting company, time-consuming hobbies, a useful purpose in life, or at least a few challenging tasks to fulfil, you will stay forever a detached observer of other people's lives while nothing remarkable happens to you. Since Kaito left, time almost seems to have stopped. For you, only the changing seasons and the happenings in your friends' lives mark the passing of time.

No, you think. Perhaps you're never really honest to yourself, not even now.

You remember that you hated creating APTX 4869 and its counteragent. And you're positive you would have loathed creating any other drug just as much because you hated sitting alone in dark cellars no matter whether they belonged to the Professor or the Organization. You hated watching liquids boil, testing deadly poisons on innocent rats, and looking like a female version of Frankenstein's monster after two sleepless nights!

Like most young women, you love strolling down the streets showing off your distinctive hair
without the fear of being shot from behind. You enjoy wearing bright skirts and dresses and shoes which are your real size as well. Without flattering yourself, you know very well that you look like a film star on holiday even without make-up, especially now that the dark rings under your eyes have disappeared completely.

You've always been a vain person, without doubt. Vanity was a character trait whose development the Organization supported and encouraged. The Organization even paid for your subscriptions to various fashion magazines when you were working for them.

And of course you can live on your own, as you are a perfectly organized ex-Black-Organization-scientist, who was raised to live alone. You're able to work highly efficiently so that—even though you work part-time \textit{and} go to university—you could take a second part-time job without overworking yourself. You have nothing to take care of, anyway. You don't even have a real hobby. Like most independent young women, you spend all the money you earn on random unimportant things, which is not a tragedy, as you don't have a family you need to provide for. None of your friends is in need of money either.

You cannot even say you are lonely. Twice a month (usually on weekends), the Detective Boys drag Ran, Sonoko, and you to a shopping centre or to the cinema. You greatly enjoy those meetings and secretly rejoice in the fact that you almost never meet Kudo anymore, as he usually only has time when you're busy and vice versa. No Kudo means no brutal murders or creepy criminals, although you must admit that there are moments when you do miss Edogawa Conan...

You don't have any problems, you conclude. If the Professor were still alive, you would be happy.

A glance at your watch shows you that you've been waiting for another hour.

You will wait for another hour and, if Kudo has still not come by then, walk to the scene of the accident to look for him. Being a self-absorbed jerk when it comes to solving crimes, he has probably forgotten you again just as he did during your birthday three years ago. It was the same during the first anniversary of the downfall of the Organization although that time he forgot you because Ran wanted to see him for some purely sentimental reason. Or perhaps he will send you a substitute again like he did on your birthday two years ago when he sent you Kaito as a replacement, thinking that you wouldn't notice the difference...

On the other hand, you know you're a resentful, unforgiving, thankless wretch. Kudo has saved your life more than once, after all, so you might as well ignore his inability to spend an evening with you. You can behave like a grown-up and go home now, as Kudo will certainly not come anymore. If he has solved the case by now, he will have gone home because he will have expected that you've gone home long ago. Perhaps he is giving you a call at the moment, thinking that you don't answer the phone because you're mad at him.

It's difficult for you to keep your balance since your legs have fallen asleep. And you discover in surprise that there are goosebumps on your skin, as you've completely forgotten that the air has become cold and damp and that you've been freezing. Now that you've woken up from your apathy, you also notice that the world around you has become livelier again, buzzing with all the tiny creatures of the night...

A cold breeze blows up your dress, and you bend down to straighten it with both hands...

And that's when you finally notice that your handbag is gone.

After recovering from the initial shock and disbelief, you can feel the old half-hearted resignation and mild annoyance washing over you again. The loss of your handbag completely occupies your
thoughts now. Your exasperation at Kudo's absence is almost forgotten.

Distracted by the stranger's stories and questions, you might not have noticed its loss, but you've felt all the time that something was wrong, that something important was missing. Luckily, you're sure that your hands were empty when you sat down next to the stranger so that you don't need to stain the positive memories of your pleasant talks with him by suspecting him of stealing your precious bag.

You can remember that, just like the stranger's friend, you had fallen asleep on the bus on the way to Ueno-koen. (It was almost impossible not to fall asleep in that weather, in a bus working its way through the traffic jam at snail's pace.) When you woke up just in time to get out, you must have forgotten your handbag there. You can remember grinning at the young blonde woman sleeping next to you, who had been knocking her head repetitively against the windowpane. She was still fast asleep when you watched the bus chug away. But you can't remember where you left your handbag although you're sure you were holding it in your hand when you were waiting for the bus...

You must have dropped it in your sleep. And now your handbag is either still in the bus or the blonde woman has found it. Or—and this is even more probable—someone else has taken your handbag and left the bus with it by now. Standards have slipped since you were a little girl pining after Gin. Now you can't believe that anyone would return an original Fusae handbag anymore even though it contained nothing but Kudo's map, a pen, your notebook, and your wallet with a bit of money in it.

You're glad you always keep your keys and important papers in your pockets instead of your handbag. Even so, you wish you had left your mobile phone in your handbag and could call your own number to find out whether anyone had found your bag and would return it to you for a generous reward. You hadn't known how much that handbag meant to you before you lost it. It had been sitting in your cupboard for months although (or because?) it was a birthday present from Kudo.

The hollow sound of heels clicking on the pavement—the rhythm of footsteps oddly familiar and foreign at the same time—interrupts your train of thought. Through the lavender light of the late evening, Kudo is coming swiftly towards you, raising his free hand to greet you and to keep his flying hair, which has become longer and messier than you expected, out of his face. Contrary to your expectations, he is not in his usual jeans and jacket but formally dressed in a smart midnight-blue suit and a white shirt with a fluffy collar, and has draped a long white coat over his shoulder in a rather picturesque way.

"Thank God," you sigh, amused at yourself because you really mean it. You must admit there is something ludicrously dramatic and theatrical about the whole scene, but you don't really care, as you're still trying to analyze the funny feeling that seeing him has taken an enormous weight off your mind.

When he comes closer, however, you can see the ring on his finger and the familiar but rather un-Kudo-like mischeivous gleam in his eyes. Now his formal clothes, his huge blue travelling bag, and even his ruffled long hair suddenly make sense. And you don't know whether you're more disappointed, glad, or surprised—or shocked at the fact that you didn't recognize him immediately the moment he smiled at you.

"A lovely flower for an even lovelier lady," Kaito grins and—pretending to catch an invisible object flying through the air—presents you with a half-blossomed pink azalea, "although I'd have brought a yellow rose if I had known that I'd meet you here."
You look indecisively...

You look indecisively at the flower in his hand and think back to the first flower he gave you at the goodbye party following the downfall of the Organization: a yellow rose with orange-red stripes matching the colour of your hair, leaving you at loss for words.

With a vengeance, you remember the evening when everything started, when you peeked through the peephole and saw Kudo standing in front of your door. Something startled you, the stark contrast of Kudo's dark head against the white corridor... or his lips—somehow looking more humorous than usual—curved into a smile which was just a tad too cheeky... or the intense scent of the twenty-two red roses invading your apartment when you opened the door for him. You felt that something wasn't right but didn't sense any danger.

"I had been searching for yellow roses everywhere," he said when he came in, his smile deepening. "But then I saw these and thought they're just as fitting."

Noticing the unfamiliar glimmer in his eyes, you knew immediately, instinctively, that he wasn't the real one. You recalled Kuroba Kaito's disconcerting similarity to Kudo and, after a moment of confusion, put two and two together. This time, you decided that you liked the fake considerably better than the original, who had been busy working on a new case and again forgotten about his promise to spend your birthday with you. You had been in a particularly irritable mood, partly because Kudo had already missed your twenty-first birthday the previous year and partly because you hadn't even wanted to celebrate your birthday before he mentioned it to you. No one had known Miyano Shiho's real birthday except for him. You had been oddly touched by the fact that he had paid attention to it before he deleted the files on Sherry on the main computer in the headquarters of the Organization. He had even joked that you had to celebrate it, if not with others (with whom you celebrated Haibara Ai's birthday) then at least with him to repay him for what he had done. You had replied that you wouldn't mind treating him to dinner once a year on your birthday if it didn't result in an inadequate ego boost on his side.

The first time, on your twenty-first birthday, he was caught up in an important case. Naturally, you didn't blame him for not coming.

Afterwards, you two were supposed to celebrate the anniversary of the downfall of the Organization together. And again he forgot because he had been at Ran's place, watching a DVD with the photos and movie clips Sonoko and Ran had taken at the previous Christmas party. That time you had been furious, mainly because you had spent the whole afternoon cutting vegetables and meat for a sumptuous meal you had to eat alone.

The third time, you were positively surprised when you heard the bell. You hadn't bothered to cook even though your fridge was a bit fuller than usual, just in case he happened to remember. Perhaps that was the reason why you could see through Kaito's disguise at first glance.

Later, during dinner, which you two didn't spend at your place as planned but in Furuhata's bar, a small restaurant above the famous Crown game center, Kaito told you that Kudo was investigating the dubious death of a young woman (the sister of three celebrities whose names you didn't pay attention to). It seemed that one of the three brothers had pulled the plug to her life support system, which resulted in the girl's death. Kaito, who was an acquaintance of one of the suspects, viewed it as an act of mercy and shrugged off the search for the culprit while Kudo, who firmly believed that no one had the right to decide over another person's life, naturally wanted to bring the case to an
One thing had led to another afterwards... a good meal, a few drinks, his story of Aoko, who had gone abroad after the downfall of the Organization (after telling him that she never wanted to see his lying face again), your story of your ex-boyfriend, who had stoically carried out an assassination during your very first date, a bit of good music and magical tricks and shared laughs and, when you parted, the first shared kiss. The two weeks afterwards were mostly a succession of pancakes and hot chocolate or coffee in the mornings, overlong zoo visits and comparatively short strolls in various parks during the afternoons, movies in the evenings, and long nights on the sofa cuddling and talking about future plans. Now it seems strange to you that you two never talked about the past again after your birthday and spent your nights building castles in the air instead.

Too bad that state only lasted for two weeks; and after the twelfth stroke of the clock—or rather after the arrival of Nakamori Aoko's twelfth letter (they all came at the same time, having gone astray on the way for unknown reasons)—your magician ran away.

That flower, too, will not live to bloom, you think without a suggestion of real sadness. Nostalgia is a luxury you seldom enjoy.

"Well," you say, "in that case, I won't take it and will wait for the yellow rose instead."

Kaito lets the azalea disappear with a theatrical gesture—even though you couldn't see how he did it, you suspect that he is hiding it in his coat—and sighs.

"I should have known that you'd never be satisfied with a substitute."

"You really should have. But I'll forgive you if you tell me why you're wandering through Ueno-koen at this hour. I thought you had given up on your thievery games."

"I'm hurt to learn that I've come down so low in your estimation. I'm not stealing anything, only taking a walk looking for inspiration for my shows next month." A proud smile flits across his face. "My first official, full-length series of shows under my real name."

"Kuroba Kaito's debut, so to speak?"

"Yes." He flops down onto the bench and gestures for you to settle on the place next to him. "It's much more difficult not to be Kaitou Kid than I thought. I didn't really have to act much back in those days, at least not when I was showing myself as Kid. All I had to do was to plan and hold a few sensational shows according to a few set rules: sending an enigmatic notice to the police, disguising myself and impersonating someone else if necessary, appearing on time, stealing the gem without being caught, returning the gem to its owner if it's the wrong one, disappearing into the night without being killed... Whatever I did, I always did it in my own style. Now the rules have changed, and Kuroba Kaito needs a completely new style if he doesn't want his audience to say that he has only copied every gesture from Kaitou Kid."

"Ironic, isn't it... that you need to put on a mask in order to make people believe you're really yourself."

"You mean I must be a good actor to perform under my real name. But a magician is always an actor. And I'm always myself even when I'm playing a role."

"Ah, now we've arrived at the complicated problem of identity and role-play in life. It's getting too philosophic for my taste since I prefer talking about our health and the weather in the first five
"No conversation with you could ever stay on the surface! We'd get into deep waters even if we tried to chat about the weather."

"Are you sure? Let's talk about the weather then! Today it's been pretty fickle, hasn't it? Rainy in the morning, sunny in the afternoon, and look at this sunset!" You turn your face demonstratively towards the glowing stripe where the water and the sky meet. "Isn't it fascinating tonight? The sun seems to be hanging over the horizon forever and ever."

"I've noticed it, too, although it didn't surprise me. Someone told me yesterday that twilight would be especially long tonight. Long and dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes, dangerous in a good way. Magical..." He winks at you. "I heard it's easy to lose your heart tonight if you aren't very, very careful."

"Oh, then you should be very, very careful," you imitate his tone of voice. "You don't want to risk your marriage just because of one special sunset."

"In my case it's different: I already risked it two years ago. Such a thing doesn't happen twice." His voice still sounds humorous; but there is a softness underneath the humour telling you that he really meant to say what you think he has said.

"So you're out of danger now," you dryly comment, "because you've won."

"I'm out of danger now because I've lost. We all have, in a way."

To your surprise, his eyes are looking almost wistfully at you, although it might be only a trick of the light.

"I don't know who you mean with 'we all'... It was me who has lost. You were the one who left me to get married, if I remember correctly." You cross your legs and interlace your fingers behind your head, leaning back comfortably to show him that you've stopped caring. "I don't think it was the wrong decision for you, though. I've seen you two together and thought you're very happy with her."

"Oh, we are genuinely happy, as happy as we can be." He laughs. "But—" he adds in the same soft voice which never failed to get under your skin, "—I knew very well before Aoko and I got married that it would never be like it could have been if I had never come to your birthday. Of course I only have myself to blame, not you."

If Aoko-san is only half as pure as Ran, two years will be too short a time to forgive her true love that he had started a relationship with another woman just because she had told him to go to hell and never come back again—an understandable reaction after learning that he had fooled her and the rest of the world for over three years. You really feel for them. Nevertheless, it annoys you that he seems to view your delightful two-week entanglement as a tragic mistake, particularly since he didn't even regard his past as Kid as one.

"If you had known so well that your relationship wouldn't have recovered afterwards, why had you returned to her? Wouldn't it have been easier to stay with me instead?" To your embarrassment, you realize that it must sound like a proposal in his vain ears. "I'm not asking you to come back to me."
"I know very well that you're not!" He dramatically winces. "You don't need to damage my ego by telling me that so explicitly!"

He gazes past you into the distance as though he were rummaging in a past which happened an eternity ago.

"I had to make a decision." As he turns his gaze on you again, you believe to detect a hint of emotion in his eyes. "I couldn't have both of you, after all. If I had stayed with you, I wouldn't have known how to get out of the mess we were in. Leaving you was the best for all of us."

He hesitates before adding with a wry smile, "I wanted to be loved for myself, not only for my looks and other attractive qualities which might as well have belonged to someone else."

"I think that was an unjust and totally groundless accusation, really unworthy of you," you tell him with a raised eyebrow, wondering what "mess" he meant, as the word doesn't really suit the short infatuation two years ago, which has come and left as abruptly as the summer rain. You weren't emotionally damaged afterwards although it was a bruise to your ego.

"Besides," you continue, unable to fight your bantering mood, "we're getting back to our problem of identity again: If your looks and other attractive qualities—whatever you mean by that—don't belong to yourself, what features belong to yourself then? It must be something you thought Aoko-san liked and I didn't. But I can't think of anything. If my memory serves me correctly, it was me who accepted your past as Kid, which she didn't do."

"I think you've misunderstood. My looks and my attractive qualities naturally belong to me." His grin deepens. "Come on, you know I have plenty of them. And Aoko likes them just like all the girls who give me chocolate on Valentine's Day do. But you... you liked me very much because of my resemblance to someone else. You wouldn't have been that attracted to me if I hadn't had someone's face and voice. My disguise that evening did contribute a lot to my success, didn't it?"

The word "mess" whirls around in your head and suddenly makes sense, falling into its rightful place on a puzzle whose picture has become recognizable though still incomplete.

Noticing the look on your face, he gives you an endearing grin, and your anger subsides as quickly as it has come.

"I know being so clumsily honest doesn't suit me at all, but I didn't know it would earn me such a gloomy look."

"I've just realized you're a brainless idiot," you comment in a playful voice to soften your statement, but a trace of resentment is still audible.

He looks mildly disappointed.

"From your reaction, I guess my assumption was right."

"From my reaction, you should have guessed that I'd never have expected you to be such an idiot—and on top of it, an idiot with no self-respect! Why did we ever go out with each other if you thought that I only used you as a replacement for Kudo?"

"I didn't know it in the beginning. And then I hoped things would eventually work out between us, but they didn't. I always had the feeling there was Kudo's ghost between us although..."

"—although Kudo and 'Ran-chan' had already been going out with each other for over a year," you proceed in a sharp voice. "That was what you were trying to say, wasn't it? He and I met so rarely
you could have counted it on one hand. And you really thought there had been something going on between him and me?"

"I only noticed that you seemed to prefer him to me, for a reason I couldn't understand! We two look alike, sound alike, and are the same age. He is certainly not smarter than me while I'm much more lovable and attractive than him!"

"You two even share the same enormous ego even though he doesn't flaunt himself half as much as you do. And both of you are ingenious idiots lacking common sense. I can't argue with you, after all. Even if I told you a thousand times that I didn't go out with you because you resembled Kudo, you wouldn't believe me. So let's change the topic!"

"Oh, if you repeated it to me a thousand times over, I might believe you and admit that I had had the wrong impression. But, you see..." He makes a dramatic pause before asserting with a wicked grin, "You're only making half-hearted attempts to do it."
"I knew you would insist on trusting your own judgment, no matter how inaccurate it is. So let's change the topic now!" You flash him a demonstratively indulgent smile. "How's your health?"

"It has never been better," he replies without batting an eyelid. "Better than yours, actually! You're thoroughly dishevelled and pale."

At least he is flexible and doesn't insist on continuing a senseless fight.

"Thanks for the compliment. But you would look the same after sitting here for—" you glance at the watch, "—over four hours, staring at that sky."

"Except that I wouldn't. I'd have left after half an hour at the latest. That leads us to the question of why you've been sitting here, watching the sky for such a long time."

You briefly consider telling him the truth and then decide that you would rather not, especially not after the previous topic of your conversation.

"I was pondering my pathetic life before you came," you tell him instead, knowing that it would sound more convincing if you told him a part of the truth instead of a real lie. You've always liked telling the incomplete truth, perhaps because even the whole truth loses its authenticity the moment you say it aloud. At your age, you've learned that saying the naked truth is a simple but unreliable way to exchange information. Everyone lives in their own limited world, makes their observations from their own special angle, and uses their own vocabulary in their own way. Most of the time, misunderstandings will arise no matter whether you tell the truth or a white lie.

"So you've been sitting alone on a bench for over four hours just to ponder your life? That sounds like you're having a serious problem with it."

"Not as serious as it would have been if I had been pondering it in the rain!" For a moment, you consider changing the topic, but then you decide you aren't in the mood for small talk. "I'm so sick of living my life the way I've been living it for the last two years! And it's odd that the feeling came so suddenly today—practically emerging out of nowhere. Maybe I should take up a time-consuming hobby, like collecting mystery novels—or even writing some."

"Now I get why you told me I'm happy," he comments thoughtfully, resembling Kudo more than ever with his brows drawn together. "You obviously aren't!"

"I can't say I'm unhappy either," you admit. "Life is actually good these days. It sounds ungrateful, I know, but I'm simply bored to death. Nothing really happens to me."

"Are you bored because, without Kudo, you don't come across any murder cases any more? Or do you miss the thrill of being hunted down by the Black Organization?"

You shoot him a warning glare.

"It's the feeling that life will always be the same no matter what I do... It's like a game of cards with people you know too well while having guessed all the cards they're holding. You know exactly how the game will continue after the first round."
"So that's your view on life? A card game with rather transparent rules and always the same cards on the table?"

"More or less... Maybe I'm just bored with myself. After living for so many years by oneself, things are getting extremely predictable. I've discovered that everything in life follows a certain pattern, and once you've grown accustomed to that pattern, things are getting incredibly tedious! I have the theory that Kudo can solve his mysteries so quickly because murderers, too, always follow a set pattern. After knowing so many of them, he must have learned to recognize them at first glance. Even their methods can't vary that much. There are only so many ways to kill a person."

You've talked about Kudo despite trying not to. As always, whenever you're desperately trying to avoid doing something, you're certainly going to do it in the immediate future! At least Kaito doesn't use your slip against you but only smiles and leaves the bench to rest his foot on the low railing in front of the pond, reminding you vividly of the stranger you met this evening.

"You sound very much like Poirot," he unexpectedly says, turning round in a swift movement. "Since you mentioned mystery novels, I guess you've been reading a few featuring Poirot recently."

There is a victorious look in his eyes which resembles the expression in Kudo's whenever Kudo points his index finger at the murderer and declares, "The culprit is you!" When it comes to theatricality, Kudo differs from his idol Sherlock Holmes, who is dramatic in an entirely different way.

"Not recently but months ago. Well, perhaps you're right, and this is only a delayed reaction to them!" You chuckle at the thought. "I suppose I begin to sound like Poirot with the complaint that the patterns of human behaviour bore me although, on closer inspection, I think I bear a slight resemblance to Miss Marple as well. Just wait until I'm older! I might even take up gardening as a hobby."

He laughs and extends an impertinent hand to ruffle your hair.

"I've read a few Marple novels, too, and you don't resemble Miss Marple at all. But you're right: people are usually predictable! That's why the normal course of events is so easy to guess after knowing the situation where everything starts. I don't mind. I'd never have succeeded as Kid if I hadn't known how other people's minds work. It's easy to pull the wool over the eyes of your audience if you know the rules and can use them to your advantage."

"I know you belong to the few who can always use their knowledge to their advantage. Most people don't notice the rules at all. But I belong to the type that knows all the rules and is thoroughly sick of them. It's like watching a conjurer perform a trick and knowing exactly how it works! Smarter people than me get great satisfaction from that, but I'd rather keep the illusion. I often get frustrated when I can't preserve the mystery no matter how hard I try."

"You forget that, sometimes, luck—or fate, if you prefer that—throws the dice anew, changing the course of all things. That's the moment when the thrill starts. If you're always aware of it, you'll never be able to feel bored anymore, because you can never be sure that things will always continue as you think."

"Do you mean many coincidences culminating in an unexpected event? But those things, too, happen because they fit the pattern. For example, an alert person with quick reactions is less likely to get run over by a car than an inattentive klutz. Even when the most improbable thing happens, people will always behave according to their nature, and after a while, life will continue in its same downward spiral as before."
"Not always. I think it's natural that you'll get bored of life if you believe it to be a card game with all the cards lying on the table. First, you don't know the faces of all the cards, just as you don't know all aspects of the people around you. You can only guess them. And second, rare coincidences, which aren't supposed to happen, do happen once in a while. There is always someone winning the lottery, no matter how improbable it is."

"Of course the most improbable thing can happen to one out of a billion people once in a while as long as the chance that it happens isn't exactly nil. But you must admit that, when it comes to the average person as an individual, such a thing is so rare that it might as well be nonexistent."

"That's true. But the sheer awareness of the possibility can break your own destructive pattern of thinking, which—in my opinion—is what you're really so sick off. Someday, it might be your turn to pick a card, and you'll suddenly pick a wild one, changing the whole game." With a graceful flip of his hand, Kaito bends forward and slowly, gingerly, pulls a card out of your hair.

"The Queen of Spades," you exclaim, beholding the elaborately drawn card in his palm. "An excellent choice for someone like me. Very flattering indeed!"

The Queen of Spades on his card is an elegant woman whose auburn hair is cascading down her waist in loose waves, hugging her body like an antique frame. Her smart black dress and the proud carriage of her head give her a faint aura of tragedy without lacking a certain romantic charm.

"That's strange," murmurs Kaito in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "I wanted to pick a wild card, not the Queen of Spades!"

"A card to demonstrate that life can hold unexpected things? Like the Joker?"

"Yes, I've done this since I was eight. And I've never picked a wrong card before!"

He looks so disturbed that you almost feel sorry for him.

"Which is why this—" you indicate the Queen of Spades in his hand, "—actually serves the purpose of demonstrating that one does pick the wrong card from time to time. The most improbable thing has just happened. Thank you!"

"But 'wrong' sounds so negative. Perhaps it is the right card for you. And since you didn't accept my flower, I must insist that you keep this card!" Before you can reply, he slips the Queen of Spades into the right pocket of your dress and throws a glance at his watch.

"I'd love to stay longer, but I must leave now. Aoko—she has been at her father's place because she can't resist visiting him once a week to mop up the whole apartment—is now waiting for me at Two Lights', the new club that opened last month near the Juuban amusement park. Have you ever been there?"

You shake your head in response.

"The food is magnificent! The owners have asked me to give a midnight performance to attract more customers—or at least that was their excuse for inviting me. I have the impression that they're only trying to support my career without telling me. That place is always packed with all kinds of customers. You seldom get a table without booking days in advance."

"How nice of them. Well, then... Break a leg!"

"But aren't you leaving, too? What about walking to the next bus stop together?" He gives you a sly wink. "Hakuba has told me you're still living in your Juuban apartment."
You shake your head, smiling.

"I'm still living there; but I think I'd rather stay here until the sun has gone down. Don't let your wife wait!"

"I won't, but do take care of yourself—and don't mind the ghost if it bothers you!"

"Ghost?" It's peculiar that he of all people would talk about ghosts.

"A friend of mine—the same woman who told me that twilight would be dangerous tonight—told me that such an unnaturally long twilight only occurs when a spirit doesn't die with its body but decides to wander earth for one day to find a person who can bring them back to life. She said the ghost would try to steal a heart. Hence my previous warning that this twilight is dangerous!"

"Your friend must be a real romantic," you remark, wondering whether his friend has met Gin, too, as her story sounds like a rather loose version of his bedtime story.

"She isn't the type of woman you'd call a romantic, but she is a real witch, probably the last one in the world. She has read about the legend in her magic book even though she doesn't know the truth about it. No one knows."

He smiles and gestures in the air, waving away an unwanted thought.

"She also said the ghost wasn't a malevolent apparition and wouldn't try to harm anybody. Probably you wouldn't even notice that they're different from a normal person if you came across them."

For a moment, you're tempted to tell him your version of the ghost story and then decide against it. He must go now, and you don't want to steal his time.

"Well, I'm glad there won't be any danger for me if I happen to meet the ghost here. But you're going to be late!"

"No, I'm never late!" he asserts with a self-assured smile and bends down to kiss you. "I'm always on time."

With that, he disappears in a puff of fragrant white smoke.

It takes you a while to notice that you've been staring rather idiotically at the place where he has stood. Pulling yourself together, you reason that he must have come to Ueno-koen to rehearse a new trick before he ran into you. Perhaps you've just witnessed the dress rehearsal for his performance tonight. He is a professional magician, after all.

How dramatic—and still an incorrigible flirt! His poor wife must be having a hard time with him.

A/N: There will be weekly updates for this fic from now on since SN has decided to beta it every Monday night. :D

In other news, I'm still writing "Encounter in Venice" although I've spent too much time on random scenes instead of the next chapter because I didn't know which scene to bring in the next update. It's always difficult for me to choose when many different things are happening at the same time.
Part 02: Now that you...

Now that you're alone again, you regret having declined Kaito's offer to walk to the bus stop with him. You would have walked home, anyway, if he hadn't appeared so suddenly. So why are you still sitting here, waiting for the sun to go down? As always, it's hard for you to discover your true motivation behind so many different motives.

First, you're paranoid about Aoko-san seeing you two together if she randomly, on a whim, decides to fetch her husband from the bus station instead of waiting for him at her father's place; and second, there is this peculiarly long twilight you don't want to miss. Even though you're not five anymore and certainly don't believe in fairy tales or ghosts or witches (especially not in the witch Kaito so readily invented for you), you still like the idea of giving your life a story. The stranger and you have talked about living creatively, after all. So why shouldn't you wait on this bench until the sun goes down and give this story an appropriate ending instead of giving up at this point?

In a novel, this evening might be only the beginning, and the protagonist would go home and continue to fret about her misspent evening and her senseless life while the sun wouldn't go down before she has met her own ghost at twilight. In your case, however, you know very well that this evening is only one of many other evenings during which nothing really happens, which is actually a blessing. And your simple short story with the title "Waiting for Kudo" will conclude very well with "The sun finally goes down, and Shiho walks home alone in the night". There is something poetic about a young woman walking alone in the middle of the night, returning to an almost empty apartment with a just as empty fridge. It's a pity that such a scene looks much more romantic on the wide screen than it looks in real life. You will neither die from lack of food very soon nor is an empty apartment terribly depressing as long as you don't have to spend your whole life in it. In a movie, the setting is everything, contrary to real life.

As always, having convinced yourself that something must be true, your mind begins to search for arguments which destroy your previous statement and attempts to look at the matter from another point of view.

If you hadn't met anybody at this bench tonight, would you have recalled the story of the Ghost at Twilight and spent so much time contemplating true love and the lack of it in your life? Wouldn't you have waited for Kudo for a while and then go home to spend another cozy evening in bed with a mystery novel and a few cups of tea? And, without meeting Kaito, you certainly wouldn't have decided to stay here until the sun disappears completely. You only told him that you planned to wait until the sun has gone down so that you wouldn't have to go to the bus station with him. Are the happenings of tonight really random and unimportant, or could a few unexpected encounters change the course of your life?

It's not like you to ponder over useless theories.

After this sunset ends, you're going to walk back to Juuban and drop into Furuhata's bar to have a snack and a drink. Motoki-san's cheerful face and his pleasantly served truisms will certainly chase away the remnants of tonight's gloom. In addition to his appealing looks, he has the talent for making complicated things appear ridiculously simple, which might explain why his bar, his sister's coffee shop, and the game centre beneath them are so popular with troubled teenagers and young artists. Immediately after selling the Professor's house to Fusae-san and moving into your new apartment, you had taken notice of its popularity, but you had never been tempted to visit it,
it was always a tad too noisy for your taste. If Kaito hadn't suggested to try it out, you would never have entered it at all.

During your first date with Kaito, when you were watching Furuhata Motoki saunter from table to table, you were particularly impressed by his organized, calm, and efficient way of working. Furthermore, he seemed to have a good awareness of when his customers wanted to be left alone and when they would like to talk to him; and he obviously knew how to deliver banalities in the right tone of voice just as he knew how to make the old vanilla and chocolate ice-cream look like something one had never tasted before.

A nice, relaxed, good-tempered man, probably someone a woman could spend a lifetime with and, alas, actually a specimen you've never found even remotely attractive. It's strange but true: that type of man, often as steady as a rock despite his flirtatious demeanour, usually attract the neurotic, high-strung type of woman, the ones that never know what they want and are never happy with the things they get. You, on the other hand, have always gravitated towards overactive, impulsive men who like to live dangerously, men who never really settle down and who manage to get into trouble as fast as they get out of them on their own. While the attraction is at times mutual—as evidenced by your two weeks with Kaito—your relationships with these overly independent men always start under unfortunate conditions. Considering how all your crushes ended, one might get the impression that you only fell in love when you knew it couldn't last—and that, in reality, you've never really wanted to have a lasting attachment to anyone at all.

Before nodding off there is usually a moment when you can sense that you're leaving the real world to enter the realm of dreams. In such a moment, when you feel sleep overcoming you and your limbs growing heavier and heavier with every breath you take, you can dream and think about your dream at the same time, which you find fascinating and slightly disturbing for no logical reason. Unsettling...

"Isn't it unsettling how suddenly life could end?" Were those the stranger's words or Gin's? You remember they both said something similar at one point or another although they had obviously chosen different ways of living to deal with the fact. Remembering the stranger's lively smile and Gin's sardonic smirk, you know that, as time goes by, the former will fade away into the back of your mind whereas the latter will stay with you forever. You are the negative type. Therefore, it's probably normal that you can't forget the first time you fell out of love.

The events of that evening unfold before your eyes once again, not in disconnected scenes like in most of your dreams but chronologically, in sequences, giving you the feeling as if you were watching a movie again which you had watched only once and almost forgotten. Even though you have the feeling that this has happened more than once in the past and ended badly, you still take pleasure in the mixed feelings this dream always gives you: the sense of déjà vu and the uncertainty about what is going to happen, the premonition of imminent disaster and the joy of being able to revisit a time of your life when you were still naive and optimistic and very much alive.

The opening music of your movie is a catchy love song which, in your opinion, didn't suit the plot although it was extremely popular with the audience. If you had been asked to choose a theme song, you would certainly have chosen a different one. The first time you heard the lead singer's voice, however, you instantly fell in love with it. It made you neglect the excessive mellowness of the chord progressions and is probably the reason why you can't even remember the lyrics of the
song anymore despite having a good memory for verses. You only have a dim recollection of its contents (something odd like an unrequited love between two people belonging to different stations of the galaxy) and remember you dismissed it as nonsense—just another love song which tried too hard to be romantic and tragic and unbearably sweet at the same time. The voice of the lead singer was the only thing worth remembering and perhaps—if you really want to be fair—the good instrumentalists and background singers. But that's all you liked about it.

You never heard it again because you were always busy with work or with Gin, who was a snob and only listened to music if it was played live by famous jazz musicians in expensive bars. In retrospect, you think he was more of a snob than an assassin. Once or twice, during uncommonly childish moments, you wondered whether he would have become a high-ranking member of the Organization if it hadn't been for the luxury the Organization offered, the expensive shampoos and eau de toilette, cigarettes and caviar, the Porsche and the tailored clothes... Perhaps, under different circumstances, he would have become a dealer or a lawyer or a politician instead...

You've just arrived at the border between consciousness and unconsciousness where you could simply leave your dream if you wanted to. But you don't want to, not during the pleasant part.

On the wide screen, the first scene opens in a small café where fifteen-year-old Sherry and her sister usually meet. You still know the setting well, can still smell the chocolate cake on the table and the hot coffee on your lips as if you were sipping it. The song from the two giant speakers at the bar has just ended, leaving you with a strange feeling of emptiness. You know you're supposed to be happy, waiting for the man you've been in love with since kindergarten, but it's hard for you to feel anything except impatience. A glance at your watch tells you there are still forty minutes left until your rendezvous with Gin, who is going to fetch you at the corner of the street near Tosho-gu Shrine. You still have half an hour to sip your coffee at a leisurely pace since, as you know him, Gin is not going to appear even a minute before the agreed time. You console yourself with the thought that he won't come late either. His punctuality will be his death some day!

Noticing the eyes of the other customers on you—it's no wonder as you're dressed up to the nines and sitting alone at a table for two—you pick up the newspaper on the stand next to your table and pretend to immerse yourself in it. On the front page, there is a screaming headline about a Gruesome Locked-Room Murder, which had been solved by "the savior of the police force" teenager-sleuth Kudo Shinichi.

Interesting guy, you think, contemplating his radiant, proud, innocent blue eyes. How can someone who has just solved a murder case smile so innocently at the camera? The guy was either a genius or a machine. It's not like one must lose one's ability to smile after seeing a corpse to prove that one is human, you admit, but usually people would be visibly affected by the sight of a mutilated corpse for at least a few days. Only extremely stupid, tough, or intelligent people (who are able to regain their composure in an instant) can still smile like that after looking at the corpse as it was described in the news—and you doubt that Kudo-kun belongs to the first category.

There are the familiar sounds of the bell and the cold breeze which enters the café every time a new customer arrives, and you turn your head to look at the newcomer.

It's not Gin, as you've already known instinctively when the door opened. Your sixth sense (or is it just your fine nose?) is as good as ever. The person at the door is infinitely more delicate and refined and a complete stranger to you. She is a graceful girl about your age or slightly older, with conspicuous reddish-brown buns and eyes of the same colour, who looks a bit too ladylike and totally out of place in her ornate red evening dress and reddish-brown makeup.

Sherry, the heroine of this movie, looks just as out of place in her elegant little black dress (sans
makeup), which is probably the reason why she is smiling at the young woman now. You can watch Sherry smiling because, in this dream, you exist twice. Sometimes, even when you're awake, you have this feeling of complete dissociation, as if you were both the actor and the observer at the same time.

The young woman seems to have been encouraged by the smile, as she walks to Sherry's table and asks her whether Sherry had seen a young blonde man in a blue suit or not.

"I'm a bit late," she explains, "and I'm afraid he might have thought that I haven't come. You see... I told him not to wait because I probably wouldn't make it." For a moment, her serious eyes are twinkling mischievously. "I've just skipped a class to come here."

There is a pleasant tea-like smell about her which is almost too natural to be a perfume. Sherry, whose fine nose likes fragrant plants, identifies it as sweet osmanthus.

No, she hasn't seen any young blonde man in a blue suit, Sherry replies—actually, she hasn't seen any blonde man at all during the last thirty minutes, and she is a very good observer. It seems "he" is late, too...

The redhead sighs, again with a smile. It appears that "he" habitually comes late. She often wonders why he is always in a hurry and still comes late all the time.

Sherry remarks that it's—ironically—always the people who are always in a hurry who are also always late. Most of them are a klutz as well, which can't be a coincidence.

The stranger laughs.

"Oh, I know such people, but he is really not one of them. He is extremely organized and agile, not what anyone would call a klutz. That's why I can't understand why he always behaves as if he were chased by someone."

She smiles. And for a moment, she seems torn between leaving (prompted by her good upbringing?) and sitting down, yielding to the spontaneous good rapport with the girl she has just met. Sherry, who has noticed her indecisiveness and who is in a friendly mood, indicates the chair opposite her.

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend, too," she says, secretly rejoicing in the fact that she has called Gin her boyfriend for the first time. In reality, it's also the first time that he has asked her out for another purpose than questioning her about the development of APTX.

"Oh, what a coincidence! And your boyfriend is late, too?"

"No, it's me who is early. I'm paranoid about coming late."

The distant sound of an engine is growing gradually louder as it advances, and then dies away in a beautifully smooth diminuendo. At that moment, the camera leaves the two girls to pan to a motorbike which has just stopped in front of the café. The driver, a sporty young person in a blue biker's suit and a blue helmet, lingers indecisively at the door for a minute and then returns to his bike—leaving the door of the café open—to honk rapidly. The camera zooms in to his face, which is almost completely hidden by the helmet, to show his troubled eyes, and then slowly zooms out before returning to the two girls, who are still chatting with each other.

"I think your boyfriend is honking at you," Sherry says, thinking that it's amazing that such a well-mannered lady could have fallen in love with such an ill-mannered guy. It's the classical story of opposites attract.
"Oh God!" the stranger exclaims, rising from her chair. "He told me he would be wearing a blue suit... That's why I'm wearing this dress. I thought we're going to some fancy place where one had to wear formal clothes."

"Didn't he tell you where you two were going?"

"No, he never does. He only told me it would be a place I like. But I see he won't come in." She smiles for the last time, automatically straightens out her dress, and then gives a deep bow. "It was extremely pleasant to chat with you. I hope your boyfriend will come soon, too."

"Have a good time," Sherry says. And she—and you—gaze after the stranger's retreating figure with mixed feelings while her outlines dissolve in the blinding light.

The atmosphere changes rapidly with the scenery, and you find yourself standing in front of Gin's beloved Porsche, enjoying another rare sight: Gin is smiling, beaming at you from beneath his new black hat. You wonder whether you're the only person who notices that he changes his hat every month and whether he changes them out of vanity—they all look remarkably similar to each other—or out of paranoia.

"You look smashing," he says in a fake old English accent, regarding you with a single long look of appreciation. His English is much better than you've expected, as if he had studied it very well or started to learn it when he was very young.

"I suppose you expect me to return that compliment," you laugh quietly, breathing in the familiar scent of his perfume and cigarette while climbing into the passenger seat. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere where we won't meet the whole crew... I'd like to be alone with you for once without the whole gang knowing about it." He lights himself a cigarette and starts the car. "But there is a job I need to do first. Just got a call about it from Vodka. Business before pleasure, I'm afraid."

You remember Gin once hinted that his job was to ensure that the most important financial transactions of the Organization proceed as smoothly as planned. Therefore, when the Porsche stops at an unappealing side street next to a little flower shop, you almost expect him to go in and tell you to wait for him inside the car until he returns. He doesn't attempt to leave, however, and only lights himself another cigarette, this time offering you one.

No, thanks! What are we doing here? Are you going to buy me a flower?

The smoke has begun to irritate you. It annoys you that he is not trying to tell you any details about the job he has to take care of, that Vodka always appears either in person or in the form of a phone call whenever you're with him, that he never lets you distract him from doing his job... You even begin to wonder whether you haven't mistaken his attentions for love.

Not here, he replies. According to Vodka, the person he is waiting for has entered the shop about ten minutes ago. They should come out at any moment. There they are!

You turn away from him to glance at the entrance of the shop and discover to your great surprise the stranger you just met in the café. Behind her is her sporty blue-clad biker, who has just put on his helmet and is now taking her hand to pull her towards his bike in a hurry. Once again it strikes you how exquisite and out of place she looks, like an expensive exotic flower in the middle of the pavement. The impression is strengthened by the gorgeous bunch of roses she is carrying in her arm, a huge, exquisite bouquet, in which three radiant roses are glowing brightly amidst a cloud of tiny green, pink, and white flowers. The colours of the roses immediately catch your attention: snow-white, golden-yellow, and a deep scarlet.
Strange choice in combination, in your opinion. Usually, people would stick to one or two colours when they buy roses, especially roses of such colours and dimensions. Other people passing by seem to be thinking the same, judging from the look on their faces when they catch sight of the bouquet.

"Must have cost a fortune!" Gin remarks.

"The flowers or the woman?"

"Neither. I saw a similar bike in a shop a few years ago. Was too extravagant even for my taste."

The stranger and her boyfriend, in the meantime, have climbed on his overpriced bike, which is now racing down the main street at breakneck speed. In an instant, a midnight-blue car, which has been parking on the other side of the street, also starts its engine to drive in the same direction. Gin throws a glance at the car, puts out his cigarette, and begins to follow them at some distance.

"I know the girl," you say quietly, deciding that telling him the truth now is better than letting him discover it on his own later. "We just met at the café."

Gin shoots you a quizzical look.

"And…?"

"Well, I didn't expect her to have anything to do with the Organization."

"She doesn't. She is just another stupid good girl falling for the stereotypical bad boy." He grins. "But he is one of us."

"So it's him and not her? What kind of business do you have with him?"

"I'm only giving him a red card. He has stolen important information to store it on his personal computer. The Boss doesn't want him dead, though. The official explanation is that he hasn't tried to sell it to anyone. In that case, I think it would be better to kill him now before he finds a buyer. Traitors should be taken care of properly."

"Maybe he is only keeping the information to ensure his own safety," you remark weakly, as you don't like the direction your conversation is heading.

"He shouldn't have stolen it in the first place! But the Boss likes him for no apparent reason. Hence we're only allowed to give him a few scratches. A little warning, not more."

"So how are you going to give him the scratches?" you ask and suddenly remember. You remember that you're dreaming and that the past has been similar to this dream, which you've had over and over again in many variants without really remembering it after waking up.

Vaguely, you remember the expression of horror and disbelief on her face when her eyes met yours, the scratching sound of the motorbike against Gin's car, her scream and the feeling of the steering wheel under your hand... Gin's grip around your wrist and his cool, steady voice as he told you calmly, "Don't ever do that again."

"Isn't it unsettling how suddenly life could end?" asks Gin's voice quietly, ironically, his sad little smile fading away as the world around you turns into night. You can feel Gin's lips on your cheeks and his hand in your hair while you're staring at the stars in the sky, thinking of the other girl, who is probably still lying on the pavement.
Just another innocent victim who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time while her boyfriend got a red card. She had survived, so Gin had told you, just as her boyfriend had, although she certainly received more than just a few "scratches" after what you had witnessed... You don't have a rational reason to feel guilty, especially since your attempt to intervene might have saved her life. Why is her face still haunting you in your dreams?

You know you will not remember her face after waking up—you never do... But her delicate little smile and slightly melancholic eyes will linger somewhere in a dark corner of your memory, reminding you of the reason why you can never love anyone unconditionally again.

It has become incredibly quiet, you realize, as if all sounds had died.

"Haibara," says Kudo's voice, breaking the silence. "Were you going to sleep here?"

The starry night disappears with the sensation of a pair of warm hands on your shoulders. When you open your eyes, he withdraws them immediately, taking a step back to frown at you. Blinking at his silhouette against the twilight, you try to suppress the shiver running through your body. The air has become extremely cold during your nap.

"Where have you been?" you snap at him, putting all the frustration you've accumulated during the whole evening into one sentence. "It's almost... no, it's already midnight!"

He throws up his hands in defeat, which is a gesture so uncharacteristic of him that your anger vanishes.

"I tried to be on time! But... It's a long story."

"Give me the short version now and the long one later!"

"I..." He seems, for once, lost for words. "I overslept."

Oh wonderful, you think. You've been waiting for him like a lovesick idiot, sleeping on a park bench until midnight to find out that he had been napping at home for the whole evening! Your eyes must have expressed exactly what you're feeling, judging from the look on his face.

"I hadn't slept for two nights because of my last case." He sighs. "So the snooze at noon turned out longer than expected. When I woke up it was already seven. Afterwards I went directly to your place since I expected to find you there. I tried to call you, but you probably left your mobile phone and your badge at home again. Then I waited for hours at your door because I thought you were caught in the traffic jam on the way home. But since you didn't come home, I went to Furuhata's..."

His voice trails off.

*Furuhata's...* You have to repeat it once in your head before your mind grasps its meaning. The other thought going almost simultaneously through your head is that the sky has still not changed even though it's midnight. When your eyes leave his face to look at the sky, Kudo, following your gaze, turns round.

With a start, you notice that the sun is visibly sinking, draining the last reddish tints from the sky. While the shadows underneath the lamps deepen, other shadows are fading away, their outlines dissolving into the darkness with the last rays of natural light.
"I suppose we've just..."

"I suppose we've just watched the sunset together," I remark, thinking with some amusement that, if my story were to end at this point, the readers would consider its conclusion a happy ending. "What about having dinner now?"

Now that the last reddish tints have completely disappeared from the sky, I notice that Kudo has become paler since the last time I saw him, sporting deep shadows under his eyes, which are still as attentive as ever. Now those eyes are scanning me for a moment, giving my left arm a short wondering glance before they return to my face.

"I know only two restaurants on the way to your apartment where we can have dinner at this hour." He pulls slightly at my elbow to make me follow him. "I'd like to give Two Lights' a try although it's probably still crammed with people. If you don't mind, we can have our late-night dinner there." Throwing a suspiciously innocent glance at me, he adds, "Unless you prefer going to Furuhata's instead."

I scrutinize his face for a moment, wondering whether he has mentioned Furuhata's bar for the second time without intending to imply anything until the almost imperceptible but definitely mocking expression in his eyes gives him away. For lack of a witty retort, however, I decide to pretend that I haven't noticed his insinuation at all.

"No, thank you. On second thought, I think I'd rather call it a day and go home."

While I'm actually wide awake and would have loved to go to the new restaurant which seems so popular, going to Two Lights' at this hour with Kudo would inevitably entail running into Kaito again. After my conversation with Kaito and the discovery that Kudo has known about Furuhata's all along, sitting with Kaito (with or without his wife) and Kudo in the same bar is the last thing I want.

"All right," Kudo says curtly, and lets go of my elbow.

For an awkward moment, we stare at each other in silence.

"Well, then I'm going home now," I say slowly, feeling extremely exhausted all of a sudden. "Good night!"

Turning on my heels, I wonder once again why I had agreed to see Kudo tonight and why he had bothered to ask me to spend the evening with him. We hardly ever meet, and whenever we meet, we fail to communicate. Things have become uncomfortable between us ever since we returned to our original bodies, but I'm not sure whether it was because of what happened at Pandora's Box or whether it was just the usual moving on.

"I'm going to call us a taxi," he says, falling into step beside me, and pulls out his mobile phone.

"I don't mind walking."

"Oh great, my battery is dead again," he sighs at his battered phone, completely ignoring my remark. "It's time I get a new one."

"I don't need a taxi, anyway," I repeat in case he hasn't paid attention to me. "It's only a thirty-
minute walk to Juuban."

"We can take the bus," he suggests as he casts a meaningful glance at my new sandals.

"No, thanks. A little walk will do me good."

I don't know why I'm trying to hide the fact from him that I've lost my handbag and, as a result, don't have any cash on me. Perhaps I'm afraid that Kudo would immediately run off to hunt for it.

Now we're walking next to each other in strained silence, as if neither of us can think of anything appropriate to say. We've known each other for too long to chat about our health and the weather, but, on the other hand, we are not so close that we can easily banter or walk in complete silence with each other as Edogawa and Haibara could have done.

"Are you busy tomorrow?" he asks at last.

"No, this weekend I'm completely free."

"I'm going to fetch Ran from the train station tomorrow night," he says in a confidential tone. "Until then I'm free, too."

While I'm still wondering what I'm to do with this piece of information (did he mean that we should go out and have breakfast or lunch together tomorrow because he has overslept our dinner?), he begins to bombard me with information about our mutual acquaintances as if I had been away for years: Kobayashi-sensei—perhaps it's time we call her Shiratori-sensei now that she is married—has caught a nasty flu (news I've already heard from Ayumi-chan); Hondou-kun is holidaying in Rome, recovering from a fresh wound (which, knowing him, I believe he inflicted upon himself during another spell of bad luck or clumsiness); Jodie-san has broken her right arm during an attempt to stop two fleeing bank robbers at the same time (I've already learned about the whole unfortunate affair from Jodie-san herself, who has been keeping in touch with me since she moved to Chicago)... It seems Kudo, like most optimistic people, likes to start with the bad news before moving on to the good ones.

"Hattori and Toyama announced their engagement last Sunday," Kudo proceeds as expected.

"I know," I interject. Ran has already informed me about this. "Those two are so slow it almost hurts to watch them. They should have married years ago—just like Ran and you."

I don't know why I said that. Perhaps I only wanted to see him blush again. But Kudo Shinichi at twenty-two certainly doesn't get as easily embarrassed as Kudo Shinichi at seventeen. He doesn't blush at all but only shoots me an inquiring look and asks, "So you think that, too?"

"You already wanted to propose to her years ago. I don't know what you're waiting for."

Marvelous! First we didn't know what to say to each other and now we're already discussing his marriage prospects. Next, we might even get the idea to discuss mine.

"My mother keeps nagging me about it these days," he sighs. "She doesn't let even one phone call pass without asking me when Ran and I are finally going to marry. I think it's too early for both of us because Ran still wants to win the next national karate championships and I still want to focus on my cases. I haven't even set up my own detective agency yet." He kicks at a pebble, which amuses me for no clear reason. "My mother suggests that we get married as soon as possible, have one kid or two, and work on our careers again when they're old enough to go to kindergarten—but that's exactly what I don't want to do."
"Isn't it normal that you don't want to do what your mother wants you to? If she had suggested the opposite, you would probably have run off to get married in an instant."

He winces.

"Maybe... But that's because she has no common sense at all and keeps saying confusing things I can't understand... things like I wouldn't know what I want and should learn to stick to my decisions for once. She once said really odd things about you, too..." He knits his brows and frowns at an invisible person in front of him while kicking nervously at a pebble on the street.

"What things?"

He sighs, hesitating as if he weren't sure whether he should tell me or not. Then he smiles and says almost apologetically, "It was years ago, so it doesn't really matter anymore... But she said you were always looking at me because you thought there was something on my face."

"I can't remember staring at you at all," I protest, puzzled by his mother's assertion. "I usually look directly at people when I talk to them. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

"I already told you I can't understand what's going on in her head either."

We're walking in silence again. This time, however, it feels slightly less oppressive than before.

"Has Sonoko told you she is going to Venice to study art history?" he proceeds.

"Yes, she even told me she has already rented a villa there."

"It's another silly idea of hers! She has never been interested in either art or history."

"I think it's an excuse to move away from her mother and spend more time with Kyogoku."

He knows Sonoko's mother likes to pick on Kyogoku. But he can't quite understand why it absolutely had to be Venice. Why should anyone want to pay an exorbitant price for a villa in an expensive, impractical, tiny city to study something they aren't even interested in?

Venice has a certain romantic charm if you can tolerate all the inconveniences, I point out. Tenoh Haruka and Kaioh Michiru have been living there for years, just like Aino Minako—and rumour has it that Seiya Kou is going to move there, too. If four of Sonoko's favourite stars don't mind the inconveniences, why should she? Sonoko, who has never concerned herself with money matters, would have moved to Honolulu if she had known that Seiya Kou would be there. Of course it absolutely had to be Venice!

"Seiya Kou... I see Sonoko has already infected you with her Three Lights obsession," he says in a humorous tone, not really meaning it.

"Luckily, she hasn't. I don't even know what he looks like although she insists that I must have seen his face on TV or on a poster somewhere. But isn't it supposed to be 'Two Lights', like the restaurant?"

No, it was 'Three Lights' before the band dissolved, Kudo explains. Two of them—the background vocalist and the keyboardist—are staging a comeback in July as 'Two Lights' while Seiya, their previous lead vocalist and Sonoko's favourite, seems to have retired.

"I'm surprised Sonoko didn't show you all of her Seiya Kou collection," he chuckles quietly to himself. "Ran has told me that Sonoko collects anything remotely related to him, from DVDs, CDs,
posters, photos, ads, and autographs to the random merchandise—you know, the usual stuff: mascots, key chains, T-shirts, stickers, mugs... No sooner had she discovered him than he retired from the stage and disappeared into thin air—so she tries to make up for it by collecting junk. It looks like a mania to me. The poor guy is lucky she hasn't broken into his apartment to steal his clothes... yet."

"She once told me she didn't know where he lived. His jealous agent is hiding his whereabouts well. Besides, she is not the type who would—"

"His agent probably had to hide his address for his own safety. Some fans can turn violent when they feel abandoned by their idol, and I remember many of his fans felt betrayed when he left the stage without giving them a good excuse. Still, I didn't expect Sonoko to let such small obstacles hinder her."

Kudo seldom talks sardonically about any other person but Sonoko, and I'm not sure whether he only dislikes her because of her influence on Ran or whether he really can't stand her personally. With her capricious and whimsical nature, she must seem to him like the polar opposite of his modest girlfriend. In any case, I realize I have to lead the conversation in a different direction if I don't want to end up ridiculing Sonoko behind her back.

"Since she never mentioned his band to me, I always thought Seiya was a soloist."

"As far as I know, he has never been a soloist. He never appeared onstage without the other two."

"And how come you know so much about him? Are you a secret fan?"

"Nonsense. I'm only well-informed about him because it's important for my job. Apart from that, it's you who really lack knowledge when it comes to the people the public is interested in."

"That's going to change soon. Sonoko has invited me to her place to have a look at her idol collections, and I'm running out of excuses why I absolutely can't go."

"You don't want to go?"

"Not as long as I can still find an excuse!"

"I'd have accepted her invitation just to have a look at that monstrous collection of hers. But of course she wouldn't invite me! Why don't you want to go?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with her. The older I get, the more I prefer meeting people in public to visiting them at home. I like keeping a certain distance... It makes life simple."

"I prefer visiting people in their homes," he says thoughtfully. "You can learn a lot about other people by looking at their apartments and studying the contents of their cupboards and drawers."

"You know, that's actually something I can imagine you doing... looking into other people's cupboards without their permission."

He laughs. And the past three years seem to have been erased all of a sudden, as if we had only taken the antidote a few days ago.

"g."

A cool breeze makes me shiver, and Kudo takes off his jacket to throw it over my shoulders before I can protest.
"I'm still warm," he says. "But you've been sitting in the park for hours. You're going to catch a cold."

"Aren't you the one who always caught a cold?" I ask, throwing the jacket back at him. "Spare your gallantries for Ran when you fetch her from the train tomorrow. And you should really stop carrying all your belongings with you. Your jacket is even heavier than Kojima-kun's bento."

I'm shooting myself in the foot again because I'm freezing and would gladly have snuggled into that warm jacket if it had not belonged to Kudo. However, there is something about the way he treats me which irks me to no end.

"I remember catching most of my colds from you," he says, handing me his jacket again with a smile.

"That's not true!" I protest, shoving his jacket away. Busy fighting off his unwanted chivalries, I was about to run into a wall on my left and barely manage to jump to the right at the last moment, knocking against Kudo during the process.

"Speak of the devil!" Kudo smiles, indicating the poster on the wall where two young men in suits, the tall one in yellow and the short one in blueish-grey, are gazing down at the audience with piercing eyes. Framing their figures in a very picturesque and hardly natural way, their flying ponytails are easily the longest I've ever seen.

"So that's Two Lights?" I ask, letting my gaze wander from their beautiful androgynous faces to their much-too-glossy hair (apparently a result of hairspray and Photoshop overuse) to the roses on their suits. "Are they the owners of the restaurant in Juuban?"

"Yes, their fans probably hope that they're going make a surprise appearance there in the near future, especially since there is a small stage for live music on the first floor. As far as I know, the house is always bursting with fans and reporters. Two Lights haven't shown themselves until now, but I suspect they're saving the performance for the week before their comeback."

"They could look fabulous with those pretty faces, especially the short one." I eye the poster critically. "But standing next to each other like that, they look a bit ridiculous, don't you think? I feel like calling them Shortie and Stick. And the roses they wear on their jackets really add insult to injury."

"When they were Three Lights, their lead singer was standing between them. I think they looked better then, when their ponytails and the lighting made them look like three shooting stars."

"So why did they split up? Was Seiya's voice so unbearably bad that they had to stop?"

He laughs.

"You've never heard anything by Three Lights, haven't you? His voice was almost unbearably good. There was a real hype about him before he retired from the stage."

"Really? Well, I suppose not everyone wants to be a lead singer of a former boy group forever. It must have been suffocating."

"Probably," he says slowly, thoughtfully, as if I had reminded him of something.

"One extra capsule of APAH for your thoughts!" I give his arm a little nudge since he seems suddenly very far away.
"How generous! But I'm sure you'll be disappointed," he says dismissively. "I was suddenly reminded of an old case of mine. The one on your birthday two years ago… Do you remember? I didn't make it in time because I was investigating a case."

"I've almost forgotten about that," I lie. "Most probably I didn't even expect you to come. You know, it wouldn't have been the first time that you had stumbled over a case."

"I was late, but I did come immediately after solving the case," he says, matter-of-factly. "It's you who wasn't home! And you didn't even take your mobile phone or your Detective badge with you, as usual." There is a trace of bitterness in his voice, which throws me. "You never carry it around anymore ever since you took the antidote! Anyway… Since I didn't want to sit there doing nothing, I decided to visit the culprit first and come back later.

"But you didn't return, did you? Or was it so late that you didn't dare to ring again when you were finished with your case?" I ask, fearing that he must have seen me with Kaito through the huge windows of Furuhata's. Is it really futile to hide my past with Kaito from him, or could I still pretend that Kaito and I had only gone out for dinner that night and never met again? Thanks to Kaito's disguise, I could even have pretended that I had never known it was Kaito in the first place if I hadn't been taken by surprise by Kudo's question.

He only gives me an enigmatic smile, which seems fainter and lasts slightly longer than usual, before his eyes leave mine. Following his gaze, I realize we're now standing in front of my landlady's garden, where the azaleas are already in full bloom. In the darkness of the night, only dimly lit by an old lantern next to the entrance door, the colours of the flowers have changed from pink and red to a greyish mauve and midnight-blue. And once again I'm reminded of Kaito, who had been standing here with me two years ago, kissing me goodbye for the first time.

"Well," Kudo says quietly, meaningfully, somehow conveying the impression that he knows exactly what I've been thinking of.

"Well," I echo, stepping back so that I will not confuse him with Kaito in my distraction and accidentally kiss him out of habit. "It's goodbye again, isn't it? Thanks for bringing me home."

"Are you very tired?" he asks.

"Not really! But you definitely look as if you need to catch up on sleep."

Now that I'm studying his face more closely, I notice that he doesn't only look extremely sleep-deprived but also exhausted and despondent. Since I'm not under the illusion that he would have dragged himself to our odd tête-à-tête in such a condition, waited for hours in front of my apartment, and searched for me at Furuhata's and Ueno-koen simply to tell me that he had overslept when an e-mail or a phone call the next day could have cleared up the situation, I conclude that he might have wanted to meet me tonight for a much more solid reason. When I open my mouth to tell him that we don't have time to stand here staring at each other forever and that he should tell me at once whether anything is wrong with him, he takes a wide step towards me, closing the distance between us, and places a hand on my shoulder.

"Since you're not too tired, may I ask you a favour?" he asks gently, in his sweetest voice. I still know that voice well because he always used it in the past whenever he was begging me for the temporary antidote.

"You can always try," I reply just as sweetly, ironically, thinking that I'm most probably going to offer him advice on choosing a present for Ran. What else could he want from me so badly at such an hour?
He bends forward and rummages around in the pockets of his jacket, which he has successfully thrown over me and which I'm still wearing. After an eternity of searching for it and pulling out sundry objects like a bunch of keys, an address book, a wallet, letters, papers, old tickets, two notebooks, various pens, pocket knives, magnifying glasses, earphones, and tracking glasses, he fishes out an empty brown bottle, which I immediately recognize as the first bottle of APAH I gave him three years ago.

"Can you give me the next batch of APAH? I took my last capsules before leaving my house tonight. I don't have any left."

"You've already used up the latest batch?" I stare at him, aghast. "There were three hundred capsules in it, enough to last until June, or so I thought."

I've got into the habit of sending Kudo the APAH capsules four times a year by throwing a sealed package into his mailbox when no one is watching. Thinking that he—being the workaholic he is—might need three instead of two capsules on particularly stressful days, I always make sure to give him at least three hundred capsules so that he will never run out of painkillers before receiving the next batch. As I expected him to swallow them within limits (how could I, considering it's Kudo I was dealing with?), I thought he must be collecting them by now instead of barely getting by on what I give him.

"I can't help it," he sighs. "I think my headaches only get worse with every passing day—and you said there wouldn't be any side effects. I hope there is nothing wrong with the antidote."

"That's strange! There aren't any complications as far as I'm concerned. I've even reduced my daily dosage to one capsule."

Since he didn't have any health problems during the first year after taking the antidote, it's unlikely that the antidote has anything to do with his current problem, I explain to him. The headaches are most likely a reaction of his body to the shock it experienced when it returned to its original state after the long interruption, like the pain one experiences when one tries to move an arm which has been too long in a plaster cast. They are going to disappear gradually with time depending on his mental health and ability to heal, even though I can't tell him how long it will take.

"... Still, I'd like to examine you again and do a few blood tests on you. I have to find out why you need so much APAH to get rid of your headaches." I study his pupils with scientific interest. "Your body might have grown immune to APAH during the years or really developed an allergy to it, which would be even worse. In any case, I'll have to find an alternative painkiller for you, something that you can mix by yourself. I don't want to spend the rest of my life mixing APAH and spoon-feeding you every day. I'm not very busy this month, so drop in on me whenever I'm home and have yourself checked."

"Thank you. We're going to do that as soon as possible, tomorrow morning if you don't mind. But can't you give me a few of your capsules in advance for tonight?"

"You know what? You begin to sound like a real drug addict, which—now that I'm thinking about it—you actually are, considering how much APAH your body needs." I consult my watch, which says ten to one a.m. "I can give you a few of mine for tonight if you like and make you the next batch before I go to bed. You only need to wait for an hour."

"That would be great!" He sighs in relief, beaming at me with such a happy expression on his face that it pricks my conscience. Nothing I've ever invented has functioned properly—especially not when Kudo was concerned; and the realization that he is still a victim of my drugs and perhaps forever depending on me profoundly disturbs me.
"Would you mind if I came with you at this hour?" he asks. "Or would you prefer me to wait for you at Furuhata's?"

There is that peculiar sense of déjà vu again when he mentions Furuhata's, and the memory of Kaito offering me his arm with a smile... Kaito's smile on Kudo's face...

He is looking at me expectantly, obviously preferring to wait in my peaceful, quiet apartment where he can collapse on the sofa to sitting in a noisy bar with background music and fans while his headaches are killing him.

"That's ridiculous! Of course you can wait upstairs in my apartment!" I tell him in a fit of irrational thinking, ignoring the thought that it might be better if he waited for me in Furuhata's, in the Crown game centre, or in another bar at the end of the street. "I'm going to make us tea."

Fumbling around in my left pocket for the key, I find it stuck in the small hole it has pricked into the thin fabric. Once again, I must admit that the pockets of this dress were not made to be used, at least not in the way I use them, and spontaneously put my right hand into my right pocket to search for something my mind hasn't clearly defined yet. When I realize that I'm looking for the card Kaito has given me, I discover to my bewilderment that it has disappeared. However, there is no hole in my right pocket! And for a moment, I don't really know anymore whether I can still trust my memories and my own perception or whether all the happenings of tonight have only been parts of a long, strangely naturalistic dream.
Part 03: The house where I live...

The house where I live is a building of three one-bedroom units, each with a large balcony connecting the bedroom with the living room. My landlady and her husband occupy the first floor, their daughter Reika—an archaeologist who is always abroad and whom I've never met—the top floor, and I the second floor.

Three years ago, on the way to the private hospital in Juuban, to which the Professor was admitted after his accident, the azalea shrubs and the two cherry trees adorning the entrance of the house caught my attention. Preoccupied with the Professor's condition at that time, I didn't care enough about the sight to ponder the reason why it caught my eyes. Two months later, however, when I spotted the house with the azalea shrubs and the cherry trees again in an advertisement while searching for a new place to live, I felt strangely affected by the coincidence. Still, I wasn't sure whether I really wanted to live in Juuban again.

The rent was, thanks to the Professor's foresight, a minor issue. After he passed away, I learned that he had bequeathed all of his inventions to Kudo and the rest of his personal belongings and his property to me, much to my surprise, as I would never have expected him to leave a will at all. While I was wondering whether I should keep the house exactly as it was before the Professor's death or remove his stuff from my sight so that I could get accustomed to the thought that he was no longer there, Fusae-san contacted me and asked me to help her find a house in Beika. I immediately suggested that she move into the Professor's house, thinking that the Professor would have liked the idea. Thus—and despite (or rather because of?) Kudo's weird offer to stay at his place—I resolved to exchange Beika for another district of Tokyo.

I was still wondering whether or not I should go and have a look at the apartment in Juuban when Kudo called and informed me that a lovely married couple—old friends of Hattori's mother—were looking for an uncomplicated and well-behaved tenant, having had unpleasant experiences with the previous one. The price of the vast one-bedroom apartment they offered was still negotiable if I agreed to move in right away. Coincidently, their apartment was the same apartment I had seen in the advertisement, which practically settled it. Whenever I think back, I can't help feeling that it was not me who found the apartment but the apartment which found me.

g."

"It's hard to believe you've already been living here for three years," remarks Kudo, who has just returned from the bathroom.

I let my eyes roam about the vast living room, trying to take in the minimalistic elegance of the naked green walls, the bar, the sofa, the coffee table, and the TV as if I were looking at the apartment for the first time.

"Why? It's spacious this way. I have all I need. I could even get rid of the TV since I haven't switched it on in months."

"I always thought you liked personal and decorative things: curtains, paintings, flowers, photos... But there is nothing like that here, not even one photo or any of the small plush animals you liked so much."

I raise my brow at him.
"Did you think I was girly?"

He chuckles at the thought.

"I wouldn't put it that way, but the Professor's house did look a great deal nicer after you came. Where have the curtains gone which were still here the last time I visited you? And where do you keep your books now?"

The last time he "visited" me was my last birthday, which I celebrated by switching off my mobile phone and staying in the library until it closed. When I went to bed that night, I discovered his present on my pillow: a lavender-coloured handbag and a birthday card telling me that he had left to catch his train to Osaka where—so I surmised—Hattori was probably waiting for him.

Strangely enough, what really irked me wasn't the fact that he had dared to break into my apartment but that he had given me a handbag, which proved—once again!—that he had misunderstood me and taken my jokes seriously when he wasn't supposed to. Moreover, it was the type of present he ought to have given Ran. It was the same when he offered to let me stay at his place, unconcerned about what other people would have thought if I had really agreed to live there. He had done such things before, when we were still Edogawa and Haibara, giving me a necklace he must have bought on a whim because he needed a last-minute birthday present. Or did he do it because I once, thinking of Ran who always got various knitwear from him as if she were his mother, said that a girl would like to receive a necklace for a change? Despite his obvious genius, Kudo can be unnaturally dense when it comes to communication in general and communication with women in particular.

"I've given most of my old books away, and the few books I still own are in my bedroom, along with personal things like letters and photos," I inform him. "Don't even dream of ransacking my bedroom when I'm not looking…! I only make myself comfortable there because I never have any guests here. Well, and all the curtains and the plush animals are in my wardrobe so that they don't gather dust. Seems my laziness takes over my comfort-loving side when I'm alone."

He strolls over to the bar and ensconces himself next to me. Illuminated by the seven lamps, which I had paranoiacally installed in my living room when I moved in, with his tousled hair and an unfamiliar five-o'clock shadow on his chin, he appears older and more haggard than I expected him to look after taking the antidote. In a few years he will look exactly like a modern Japanese version of Sherlock Holmes, I think in amusement. All he needs are a pipe or a cigarette and the trademarked deerstalker.

"Perhaps you need a husband who does all the housework for you," he suggests all of a sudden. "That way you can decorate your apartment without thinking about how much of a hassle it would be to keep it clean and cozy."

"That basically means I ought to marry a woman." I sigh. "Have you ever met a man who is good at doing household chores?"

"Oh, I've known a few although most of them were either the victims or the culprits of my previous cases. I don't know whether that had anything to do with their housekeeping skills, though."

"I hope not. I've come across enough murderers for one lifetime. Apart from that, I need someone who can live up to all of my other expectations. I have quite a few when it comes to my future house husband!" I might as well emphasize the celebrity attitude which I, according to Kudo, always display without noticing.

He rolls his eyes, once again taking me seriously when he is not supposed to.
"I'm sure there are a few men—oh well, very few men!—in the world who can meet even your standards. But since it's a universally known fact that nobody is perfect, I fear you'll have to overlook quite a few weaknesses in a man to find one with all the good traits you're looking for."

"And what if I'm absolutely not willing to? You know, maybe it's better for me not to decorate my apartment at all. From all the men I've met until now, I've arrived at the conclusion that having a husband is a luxury I can do without."

He laughs, handing me two cups as the water is boiling.

"I admit I can't cook. But even I can make myself useful when it comes to household chores."

"Too bad I can't marry you, can I?" I joke and immediately regret it when I see his bewildered face. There is definitely something wrong with me tonight. Only five minutes after my irritation at his tendency to take my jokes literally and to misread my intentions, I unthinkingly blurted out things which any man I know would misinterpret as a flirt. To prevent him from saying something obvious and humiliating like, "No, you really can't!" or, "You know I'm going out with Ran!" (Kudo's stupidity is at times immeasurable!), I continue in my most matter-of-fact voice: "Green, vanilla flavoured? Or is it too late for that?"

"Anything is fine for me as long as it isn't coffee."

Green tea might impair the effects of APAH, too, if he drinks them together, which is why it would be a good idea to swallow APAH first, I suggest as I hand him a glass of water with ten APAH-capsules, the only remaining ones I have left.

"Thanks," he beams and downs everything in one gulp.

Offering him a cup of tea, I take another for myself and walk over to the sofa, where he joins me. The confusion between us gradually fades away after the first sips of the fragrant tea, much to my relief; and we spend a few minutes beholding the patterns on our tea cups in comfortable silence until he fishes out a playing card from his jeans pocket and puts it on the table.

"I found this under the bench where you slept. Is it yours?"

The ornate Ace of Spades looks similar to the card Kaito has given me and undoubtedly belongs to the same set. However, it's clearly the Ace of Spades, not the Queen I expected, unless...

I flip the card and there it is, the Queen of Spades! How could I have naively believed that Kaito had picked the wrong card? The realization that it might not have been an accident at all disappoints me for no logical reason.

"If it's not yours, I'm going to keep it then," Kudo dryly remarks and grabs the card.

"It's mine!" I protest, snatching it out of his hand. "Thanks for returning it to me."

"So, unless you've discovered your vocation as a magician, what are you using it for?"

"It's a lucky charm. It's not like I really believe in it, but I like it. It's pretty and stylish, and I'm sure I've never seen the design before!"

"It's one of Two Lights' comeback merchandise," Kudo remarks. "On the backs of the two cards, which Kuroba removed when he glued them together to prevent the double-faced card from appearing visibly thicker than normal cards, you could have seen Two Lights' silhouette in front of Tokyo's skyline."
"He told me he is having his debut at Two Lights' tonight. Perhaps the double-faced cards are a part of his tricks," I think aloud and could have bitten off my tongue the moment I said it. Kudo, amused that I've fallen into his trap so easily, throws me a victorious look.

"So that's why you absolutely didn't want to go to Two Lights' with me: Kuroba is there!"

"I don't feel like sitting there with both of you. You two always had this love-hate rivalry-thing going on, making everyone else feel like the fifth wheel next to you."

"I'm glad we didn't go," he says instead of protesting, and smiles at me. "I prefer being here with you and drinking tea to suffering at Two Lights' with Kuroba and a horde of Three Lights fans—sipping at an overpriced cocktail while my headaches are gnawing at me."

I smile without responding, wondering whether he has noticed that the way he said it implied that what made a difference for him was actually APAH and not me. Either gallantry doesn't come to Kudo naturally or he simply enjoys paying me backhanded compliments. Anyhow, I'm not in the mood to bicker with him.

"Don't you think it's strange that Kuroba gave you the Ace and the Queen of Spades as a lucky charm?" he asks between two sips of his tea. "Don't both of them foretell rather negative things?"

"When it comes to cards, it's all according to your interpretation." I wave his comment off with a dismissive gesture, amused at the thought that perhaps Kaito did pick the wrong card. "I doubt that a double-faced card can change my life, but I like it nonetheless."

"It certainly has a sentimental value," he says quietly, thoughtfully.

I don't reply, not because I'm trying to avoid the topic but because I myself don't know whether the card has any sentimental value to me. Kaito has sent me other cards before, which were usually drawn by himself and arrived on special occasions. Even though I keep them in a box because I like them too much to throw them away, I usually don't feel the need to look at them again, much less carry them with me. I've ceased to see a sentimental value in material things long ago.

And yet tonight I feel strangely attached to certain places, things, and people, as if the unnatural twilight and the stranger I met had reawakened some infantile feelings in me. I know I should leave the sofa to mix APAH so that Kudo can leave as soon as possible, but, for some strange reason, I feel reluctant to let him go. If I didn't know myself better, I'd believe that I'm trying to lengthen my time with Kudo, to stretch the hours I can spend with him into infinity as if our time together were a magical rubber band in one of Ayumi-chan's shoujo manga. And why? Just to make up for the one special sunset we could have spent together but missed? A ridiculous assumption when it comes to myself, who has spent her whole life studying the arts of staying detached and letting go.

"How did you know it's Kaito who gave me the card?" I ask instead, without bothering to call Kaito formally by his family name since I feel that I can no longer continue this futile game of hide-and-seek.

"Who else would give you a double-faced card?" The corners of his lips curve up although he is keeping his eyes on his empty cup. "I only didn't expect that you're still seeing him."

"I'm not. We ran into each other while I was waiting for you. It's actually the second time such a thing has happened although you didn't send him as replacement for yourself this time."

"I didn't send him the last time either," Kudo gloomily says, confirming my suspicion that he did see Kaito and me at Furuhata's two years ago; and yet I can't tell why he hadn't shown himself that
evening if that was the case.

"How did he find my apartment and how come he knew it was my birthday? He told me he had learned it from you."

Which is absolutely not true, Kudo protests. On my birthday (and according to Kudo's version of the story), they met by accident at the police station, during one of those difficult and practically unsolvable cases in which all witnesses were unreliable and all substantial evidence gone. A young woman who was recovering from her coma had died because someone had pulled the plug to her life support system. Incidentally, the surgeon in charge of the victim was Dr Mizuno, the same who had attended to the Professor three years ago. Remembering that Kudo was a renowned detective, she gave him a call and asked for help. He soon discovered that she had withheld important facts about the case from the police, thinking that she might have been mistaken and fearing that her witness account might ruin an innocent person's life. Kaito, who was an acquaintance of both the victim and the suspects, happened to have visited the victim a few hours before she died. Therefore Kaito, too, had been called to the police station to give his witness account before Kudo arrived.

"So he was one of your suspects? Or did you actually work together to solve the mystery?" I ask in amusement. Kaito and Kudo seem destined to get in each other's way.

"Neither, he wasn't a suspect—he didn't have a motive but a solid alibi. Dr Mizuno and a nurse recalled that the victim was still alive after he left. Five minutes after Kuroba left, the oldest brother of the victim—one of the suspects—entered the room and stayed there for half an hour. Only ten minutes and thirty seconds after Kuroba left, Kuroba arrived at Hakuba's place to help Hakuba renovate his apartment, according to Hakuba. Kuroba was still painting the walls when he was ordered to the police station to give his witness account. A perfect alibi, which Kuroba wouldn't even have needed because he didn't have any motive at all."

"So he wasn't your suspect. But I gather from your words that he didn't assist you either."

"No, he wasn't very helpful, not that I'd have expected him to be. Anyway, he remarked that I seemed to be rushing through the case, so I told him I was in a hurry because I was visiting you."

He said it so casually, as a matter of fact, that I suddenly feel piqued by his nonchalance. Leaving the sofa to mix APAH at the bar, I can't help but remark on the way, "But that doesn't really explain why you absolutely had to tell him I was going to celebrate my birthday with you."

"I didn't know you'd have minded it. Are you ashamed of celebrating your birthday with me?" he asks with a look of bemusement, unwittingly rubbing salt into my wound.

"No, not really."

As though a pair of curtains had been pulled back to show a hidden closet behind the wall, the reason for my frustration has been revealed to me in all of its glorious stupidity. What's so special about a private birthday party once a year? I've treated it as if it had been a secret love affair for fear that other people could have misconstrued my behaviour if they had known about the little promise I gave Kudo three years ago. The intimate nature of it had surprised me myself the moment I said it aloud. I ought to have treated it lightly, telling everyone else about it as if it hadn't been anything special to me, as if it had only meant to be a reunion of old acquaintances trying to stay in touch after they parted. And above all, I should thank Kudo's forgetfulness and busy schedule for releasing both of us from what would have been an awkward long-term commitment. He sighs.
"Let's put this straight: Kuroba already knew your address, the date of your real birthday, and the fact that you didn't celebrate it even before he talked to me. It seems he had done a lot of research on you since the goodbye party in Osaka. I suspect he even managed to steal a look at your particulars by flirting with a secretary at university. When I said I was going to visit you, he immediately accused me of two-timing Ran. I told him I wasn't two-timing anyone and that we only made a deal to celebrate your birthday after I deleted the files on you at Pandora's Box. I suppose he decided to visit you right then, taking advantage of the fact that I couldn't leave before finishing the case!"

My anger vanishing, I almost feel sorry for Kudo, who was too innocent to be a match for Kaito with his an uncanny sense of when and how to push other people's buttons to get what he wants.

Since Kaito was free to leave whenever he pleased after giving his witness account, he was gone in no time, Kudo continues. Kudo went to the hospital since he had yet to figure out a few details of the case. Before my inner eye, I can see Kaito strolling along the streets, whistling and looking out for flower shops on the way to my apartment—and it strikes me once again how inconsistent and fickle people (Kaito and Kudo included) can be. How funny that Kaito had been so eager to pursue me just to return to his childhood friend in the end.

Kudo has followed me to the bar and is now watching my hands attentively while I'm filling the capsules. He too, is behaving strangely today even though I can't say what really bothers me about him. Perhaps—so I keep telling myself—he is only a little tired and subdued, which is natural considering how much he works. Any person with a less robust constitution would probably have died from lack of sleep and APAH-misuse long ago.

"Say, Haibara, have you ever heard the story of the ghost at twilight?"

I stare at him in amazement, wondering whether his question has only been part of my overactive imagination.

"Excuse me? I haven't been paying attention..."

"It's nothing," he says dismissively. "My brain isn't functioning properly these days. Must be either a side effect of your painkillers or the lack of sleep."

"Can't you simply repeat what you just said instead of insulting my painkillers?"

"Sorry... I just wondered whether you knew a ghost story." He looks almost embarrassed. "It's only something someone told me a while ago, nothing important... Let's just forget what I said!"
One thing I've learned about Kudo during my time as Haibara Ai is that it's no use trying to ask him about things he doesn't want me to know. Once Ran told me in resignation that the only way to find out what her boyfriend was hiding was to keep a weather eye on him and make an effort to guess his thoughts. An optimistic approach with which she succeeded at times but more often failed miserably! In my opinion, there is a better way to sound Kudo out.

"You're trying to save the tale for your beloved Ran-nee-chan, aren't you?" I smirk at him. "It sounds like one of these corny saccharine stories about ghosts that return to the world of living and eternal love that lasts beyond the grave, things you could tell her while watching cherry blossoms together in Ueno-koen. Or have you already told her during a beautiful sunset?"

"No, and I can't believe I almost told you about it!" He glares at me. "It would have been utterly wasted on your cynical ears."

"I think my cynical ears have already heard about it, anyway. So, which version do you think Ran will like more? The love at third sight or the love that kills?" I ask and instantly regret that I've mentioned both versions to him.

"I don't think we're talking about the same thing," he remarks tersely, without trying to elaborate. Too eager to lure him out of his reserve, I must have overdone it because he only shoots another brief, irritated glance in my direction before leaving me for the sofa.

Unsure whether I should be glad that he didn't ask me for my two versions of the story or whether I should be disappointed at my failure, I continue filling AHAH, telling myself that he is behaving like a diva tonight and that I pity Ran for having to deal with him.

However, curiosity tends to get the better of me whenever I'm bored, and there are few tasks more tedious than filling APAH...

"Well," I sigh. "What's so extremely cringeworthy about a simple ghost story that you can't tell me?"

"Nothing," he coolly says, "except that it's not the type of story you're interested in."

But I am interested in it, I assure him, especially because I think I know about it—or at least I do know a story about a ghost, which is also called "Ghost at Twilight".

I certainly would never have thought of telling Kudo about the ghost at twilight if he hadn't mentioned it on his own. And even now, after telling him that I know about it, I'm only recounting the stranger's version to him in exchange for his version, taking care to omit all traces of the version Gin had told me. Since I prefer talking to Kudo about his private life and not mine, telling him about my version of the ghost story would have seemed to me like revealing to him intimate details of my past.

"I don't know that version," he says after I've finished, "but I prefer it to mine. The one I know is much simpler and less optimistic."

"Since I've told you the story I know, aren't you going to tell me your story?"
From the corner of the sofa, Kudo flashes a half-victorious, half-mischiefvous smile at me. And for a moment—despite my poor memory for faces—the image of the stranger I met tonight suddenly appears vividly before my eyes.

"You're dying to know it, aren't you?"

"I am, not because I want to hear a fairy tale but because there is something so extremely embarrassing about it that you want to hide it from me."

He is not trying to hide anything, and there is nothing embarrassing about it, he vehemently protests, making me wonder whether I've accidentally hit a nerve while teasing him.

A person who has died during a special sunset can, if they're unable to let go of their past life, return to the world of the living for a day to say farewell to the person they loved, he finally tells me. The ghost stays for only one day, unnoticed by other people and its own love, and disappears during the following twilight. In a way, it's indeed about love beyond the grave if I wanted to take it literally...

"So... is it the sugary fairy tale you expected it to be?" he asks after an awkward silence. "Before you make fun of me, you should know that I didn't make it up."

No, I reply, thinking that hearing it feels anticlimactic after all the fuss he has made. It's only depressing and disappointing. "Why is it called 'Ghost at Twilight' if the sunset doesn't even seem to play an important role in it? And what's so special about that sunset, anyway?"

"Because the sun doesn't go down before the pair meets," he says as a matter of fact, wiping away an invisible speck on his jeans.

"How handy!" I laugh. "So, if they don't meet, the sunset would last forever?"

"Don't ask me!" He smiles at me in relief, and I finally have an idea why he didn't want to tell me. It probably would have been less distressing to him if the sun had not happened to disappear just when we met.

"Who told you the story?" I ask him, pretending to be too immersed in the process of filling APAH to notice.

"A client who claims to be a witch," he says in a deadpan voice. "Her housekeeper lost her magic book, which I retrieved for her. She was so happy about it that she told me the story, asking me to repeat it to the first woman I meet during the last moments of a sunset..."

"... who happens to be me. At least it seemed to have been an interesting case," I observe although I'm sure that he has definitely made it up this time.

"And it wasn't as easy as it sounds! Some lunatics have a special talent for misplacing things where you would never expect to find them. But who told you your story?"

Somebody I met in Ueno-koen while waiting for him, I tell Kudo. A stranger and I started a conversation, as it would have been awkward to sit on the same bench for hours without saying a word.

"What's his name?" Kudo asks, returning to the bar to help me clean up my utensils now that I've filled the whole bottle and closed the lid.

"I don't know. But how come you know it was a man?"
"Because of the ghost story." He smiles to himself. "It was most likely a man who told you. How old was he?"

"About my age, only slightly older or younger than me. I'm not sure, though. He had the type of face which will probably look the same in twenty years."

"He was probably interested in you," Kudo grins, "that's why he made up the ghost story."

"Very unlikely," I remark, thinking that you usually don't tell a woman you like about the other woman in your life in the first minutes of your conversation. "He wasn't interested in me at all, at least not romantically."

"Really? I don't think so. His version of the story is the ideal one to pursue a pretty stranger one has met for the first time. Just tell her a romantic fairy tale about love at third sight and then make sure to run into her two more times before the sunset of the following day ends. Seems very smart and manipulative to me!" Kudo happily snatchs his new batch of APAH out of my hand before I can hand it to him. "Thank you! I wouldn't survive if it weren't for these! Concerning your mysterious stranger..." He gives me an ironic smile. "At least his efforts show he was immensely interested in you even though you didn't seem much interested in him if you haven't even noticed. Was he so unattractive?"

"On the contrary!" I glare at Kudo, irritated by his insinuation that I would have been interested in a good-looking man I've just met. "He was much too attractive for my taste. I've never had a thing for pretty boys, not even for actors and idols when I was younger. But he also had a very beautiful voice and didn't say stupid things. I could have listened to him for days!"

"You are strangely defensive about a random guy you just met," Kudo thoughtfully remarks. "So he has run into you again after your first encounter?"

"No, he hasn't." I smirk at him, ignoring the fact that I only met the stranger tonight (which still leaves plenty of time until tomorrow night before the next twilight ends) and that the stranger actually did ask for my phone number.

"Are you disappointed that he hasn't?" Kudo asks with a chuckle. Luckily, he doesn't seem serious about it.

"Do I really look so desperate for a boyfriend to you?" I frown at him with the most indignant face I can pull without looking ridiculous.

"No, but you are completely smitten with someone you don't know," he says solemnly. "Unreasonable infatuation doesn't suit you! I'd have never expected you out of all people to fall in love at first sight."

We stare at each other in mock tension until I give in.

"Stop that nonsense now! It's getting ridiculous!"

"Sorry!" He smiles, giving my arm a friendly pat. "But it did sound real when you said you found him attractive."

"I did, and I've met plenty of other attractive people in my life. But beautiful people are to be looked at, not to be loved."

"I forgot that it's only his housekeeping skills which really count."
"How could you! Although I might sacrifice that for someone with a nice and relaxed attitude."

He would never have expected me to say that, Kudo exclaims in genuine surprise. Aren't I the one who said that there is no one who could meet my expectations?

Sure, but that doesn't have anything to do with the fact that I like laid-back people, and—unlike Ran—I wouldn't want a famous husband who is busy solving cases or infiltrating secret organizations all the time and whose mind is always occupied by things that are more important than me. If I had to give up my independence for someone—which I don't plan to!—I'd rather be with a man who is wonderfully inconspicuous, normal, nice, and easy to get along with.

Sounds rather dull, Kudo remarks, pouring himself and me each a glass of water. Knowing me, he thinks I would either die of boredom in no time or get a divorce.

"I've had enough suspense in my life, thank you!" I take the glass of water from him, thinking that he is right and that I would be bored to death. It seems even Kudo feels that I'm not made for a functional long-term relationship with a normal man.

"Say, during the time you were together... were you really in love with Kuroba?" Kudo suddenly asks while wiping an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeves. He always manages to surprise me with his unexpected fits of shyness, behaving like a teenager during moments which, in my opinion, are not even particularly embarrassing.

"Well, I wouldn't have gone out with him if I hadn't felt anything for him, would I?"

"No, probably not," Kudo agrees. "I only thought..." His voice trails off, and he walks over to his jacket in the corridor to put the bottle of APAH into his pocket, still lost in thought.

"What did you think?" I ask while instinctively following him into the corridor, wondering why he seems so curious and yet so evasive at the same time when it comes to anything concerning Kaito and me.

"Nothing," he cheerfully says, in a voice which tells me that any further questioning will be of no avail.

A glance at my watch shows me that it's already two a.m.—time to throw Kudo out of my apartment and go to bed. However, he doesn't seem inclined to leave, as he has returned to his favourite corner of the sofa and is now sipping leisurely at his glass as if it contained an alcoholic drink. After my nap at Ueno-koen, I'm still wide awake and therefore not in a hurry to send him away either. Furthermore, there is still something I want to ask him, something which has been at the back of my mind for the whole evening.

"You told me you visited the culprit after noticing I wasn't home that night two years ago. Does it mean you didn't solve the case before you came?"

"Why do you ask?"

Making myself comfortable next to him, I notice in surprise that he is blushing.

"Did you really come to my apartment before finishing the case?"

"It seemed like the best solution to me."
That case has been lost from the beginning because he arrived too late at the crime scene, Kudo informs me. Without any substantial evidence left, he didn't manage to find irrefutable proof for his theory and was unable to defend his deduction, which was based on circumstantial evidence alone.

"Since the culprit was living in your vicinity, I went to your place first."

"So you learned I wasn't home, but how did you get the idea that I was at Furuhata's?"

"I didn't think of Furuhata's at all. I only knew Kuroba must have visited you before me, and I thought you two had gone out, so I decided to pay the culprit a visit and return to your apartment later. I believed he was so reasonable that I could talk with him and ask him to make a full confession in front of the other suspects to clear up the situation."

"Apparently, you didn't succeed," I observe after a sidelong glance at his gloomy face. Now that I have enough information to deduce the reason why he is so evasive when it comes to Furuhata's, I don't even need to ask him when he actually returned to my apartment that night. It's embarrassing enough for both of us that he must have seen his double holding hands with me when we left Furuhata's or kissing me goodbye before going home. Kaito's disguise, on top of that, makes matters infinitely worse. The only way for me to save face is to forget it and move on—and divert his attention away from the memory of it to save both of us the embarrassment.

"No, I didn't achieve anything. He only escorted me out of his apartment with the statement that he didn't have anything to say about my theories. There was no confession and no attempt at defending himself either."

"It's not like you to give up like that," I remark. As long as I can remember, Kudo has always managed to wring a confession out of a criminal.

He only sighs in reply.

"And it's not like you at all to let a culprit get away so easily," I taunt. "What happened to the law-obsessed detective I knew? First you deleted my files at Pandora's Box, then you let a murderer go without getting a confession from him."

Kudo looks up from his glass to shoot an infuriated glance at me.

"So you think I'm a case-solving machine? Law-abiding or not, I'd never have handed you over to the police or to the FBI even if I had been sure that I could have negotiated with them. The cross-examinations would have been insufferable, especially since you would have had to lie about anything concerning APTX and Pandora's Box."

He jumps up from the sofa and proceeds to open the window, letting a gush of wind in.

"Sorry," he says curtly, shutting the window again.

"A bit of fresh air won't hurt," I remark and walk to the corridor to fetch his jacket for him. "I can put on a cardigan."

When I return to the living room, I see him stroll out of my bedroom with one of my cardigans draped over his arm.

"Thanks," he nonchalantly says, handing me my cardigan while taking his jacket from me. He must have perceived it as the ideal excuse to walk over to my closet and have a look at how I'm decorating my bedroom. As always, whenever his curiosity gets the better of him, he doesn't know
where to stop when it comes to the personal privacy of others.

Thinking that it's no use nagging at him because he never changes, I throw open the window and let the cool air in. The night is damp but eerily beautiful, with thick blueish clouds and a yellow moon.

To my surprise, Kudo switches off the light of the small chandelier above the sofa and proceeds to the bar to turn off all the other lamps as well.

"Because you don't have any curtains," he explains. "You don't want mosquitoes and moths to come in. And it's not a good idea to illuminate your apartment in the middle of the night like that. Potential voyeurs and stalkers might get interested in you."

Suppressing the remark that he has become even more paranoid than me, I walk over to the bar to boil water for another cup of tea while he plants himself on a bar stool.

"So why did you let the culprit get away?"

He doesn't respond immediately but only regards me with a thoughtful, tortured gaze. In the darkness of the room, which is now dimly illuminated by the light of the street lamps streaming in through the large window, with his pale skin and dark hair, he looks like a shadow of his former self.

"I used to ask myself the same question over and over again. One of the reasons was the fact that there was no conclusive evidence and I didn't want to plant any as a trap. He wasn't the type of murderer I wanted to put behind bars at all cost. From his point of view, he only got her out of a situation which was worse than death—despite knowing that his own promising future was at stake if he was discovered."

"So he didn't do it out of mercenary motives? At least you got that much out of him."

"I didn't get anything out of him, but it was obvious in the context of the situation. She would have been severely impaired—mentally and physically—for life after waking up from the coma. I can't even say I'd have wanted a future like hers for anyone I knew either, but..."

"But no one is allowed to end another person's life?"

"No, that's not what I meant... although we could discuss that topic to death if we wanted to. I wanted to say that there were three suspects and the unshakable truth that one of them must have pulled the plug. No matter how you look at it, that fact won't go away until someone confesses."

"So all of them have to lead the life of a suspect as long as the culprit hasn't been found?"

"Yes, and it's not fair! If you had done something out of the strong conviction that it was the right thing to do, you should have the gut to accept blame for it, at least in front of the people whose life you disturbed by your action, accidentally or not!"

"Kaito told me they were celebrities, which was why the police was so discreet while dealing with them. They were probably so famous that I suspect he invented false names for them when he told me about the affair. Did it affect their careers negatively?"

"No, because they weren't in the spotlight anymore at that time and because it was hushed up pretty well by Ami-san—" (Mizuno Ami is Dr Mizuno's daughter, a brilliant and yet diffident medical student of my age, whom Kudo and I met while visiting the Professor in the hospital.) "—but there is always the danger that, someday, someone will talk. Even you could easily find out their
identities if you wanted to. The press won't leave them alone afterwards. As it always happens with
rumours, things will be blown out of proportion... And after such an incident, I don't think their
friends can ever trust them anymore."

Why, after all these years, does it still hurt to hear that little word from his mouth, I wonder while
pouring boiled water into our cups, trying to maintain my composure and feign indifference as well
as I can. Never—so I told myself after the Professor's death—not even in my dreams, would I try to
rewind time and return to Pandora's Box again. There is no way for me to regain his trust once it is
lost, just as he can't take back the words which he meant wholeheartedly when he threw them at
me. I had prepared myself for the consequences before we opened the door to the cabin, knowing
exactly why it received its name. After making up at the Professor's funeral, we returned to being
friends in the end, which is more than I could have expected from him. Why should I dwell on the
past now? Even if I could turn back time, I would do the same things again. I have absolutely no
regrets...

"That only explains why you needed a confession from him," I place a cup of tea in front of Kudo,
"not why you let him go without accepting responsibility. You've never let your sympathy prevent
you from solving a case before."

...But perhaps, says a treacherous voice in my head, he will understand if I tell him parts of the
truth, which I might have told him three years ago if it hadn't been for Hattori's presence.
Afterwards, due to our quarrel, his illness, my wounds, and the Professor's accident and subsequent
death, I couldn't find an opportunity to do so. It's probably too late to bring it up now that it has
become a thing of the past.

"I asked myself what I would have done if I had found myself in the same situation—if, at
Pandora's Box, the first bullet hadn't missed your head but put you into a vegetative state instead."
Kudo tugs at his tea bag. "Perhaps even I would have considered the option."

"You would have pulled the plug to my life support system?"

"I don't know... Perhaps, in a weak moment, I'd have considered doing it if I had been sure that you
would have been mentally impaired after waking up."

"I certainly don't want to glorify what the culprit has done, but I know I wouldn't want to spend my
whole life in such a dependable state. If I ever get into such a situation, you're free to pull the plug
to my life support system for me."

"No, thank you!" He smiles. "Even with your permission, I don't think I could do it... Anyhow, I
could have given the culprit a hard time if I had wanted to, but I didn't. There are ruthless natural
killers and there are people who only stumbled into a situation they couldn't deal with and made
the wrong choice. I thought he belonged to the latter category."

"What about Mizuno-san's witness account? I thought she called you because she had noticed
something?"

"Mizuno-san asked me to stop investigating after that night. She said she had changed her mind
and wasn't going to give a witness account against him in any case. It seemed Ami-san, who knew
the victim and her brothers, thought that the victim wouldn't have wanted it. Without any
conclusive evidence, I'd only have created a scandal ruining the other suspects and Mizuno-san in
the process. It simply wasn't worth it."

"So the game ended as a draw?"
"A draw? I feel like I've lost! But you can't always win when everything is against you. It wouldn't bother me so much if there wasn't something wrong about the case."

"Wrong?"

"You see, he wouldn't have lost anything at all if he had confessed. I didn't even ask him to turn himself over to the police. And since it was obvious that he didn't do it out of mercenary motives, he would have been a hero in the eyes of the other suspects. Not even Mizuno-san would have minded."

"What's so strange about someone who doesn't want to talk about his crime?"

"Criminals always want to talk about their secrets, especially when they're easy-going and extroverted and like to express themselves. He is such a person. There was no reason for him to be so secretive about it after I had told him all the details I knew."

"But why should he trust you?"

"I told myself that's the reason he didn't let the cat out of the bag, but it's still bothering me. I wish I had learned about the case sooner, before all evidence had been removed."

"Why didn't you continue to investigate it if it bothered you so much?"

He didn't have time, he says, as a matter of fact. "I come across more cases than I can handle. Hence I was busy solving more important and urgent cases since then and couldn't continue such a lost case just for the sake of solving it. Sometimes I wish I had an assistant or a partner who can continue the case for me."

"Can't Hattori take over the case for you? I'm sure he would love to solve something you couldn't. Or the Detective Boys?"

"Hattori is drowning in work as well. Apart from that, he is a bad choice with his quick temper and his inability to please. The Detective Boys are too young. I'm thinking of someone who can sweet-talk the culprit into confessing... You know, I'd have asked Ran if she weren't so gullible. She is great at acting when she wants to, and I think it would be easier for him to reveal the truth to a pretty girl than to me. But, as things are, I'm sure he would need less than two minutes to convince her that he is innocent and turn her against me."

So that was the reason why he came to see me before finishing the case. While it's somewhat disappointing, I admit it was foolish to assume that he had postponed a case to visit me on my birthday. It seems that, if it hadn't been for Kaito, Kudo would have brought the mystery to me as a birthday present.

"Don't even think of asking me!" I warn him after catching his thoughtful gaze resting on my face. "I have better things to do as well, especially now that I know how you've been feeding on APAH for the past years."

"Oh, I didn't get that idea at all, knowing that you once succumbed to Kuroba's superficial charms," he mockingly retorts. "You could fall in love with the culprit and ruin everything!"

"So you mean the culprit has Kaito's charms? If he is also one of those men good at doing household chores, I'm willing to sacrifice a bit of my free time to have a look at him."

"And overlook the fact that he pulled the plug to his sister's life support system? You have an atrocious taste when it comes to men."
While he said it in a humorous tone, there was a hint of annoyance in his voice, which raises my spirits. Dear meitantei-san's ego seems more fragile than I thought.

"Not worse than Ran's," I laugh quietly. "Nobody is perfect, after all. And if I didn't know you better, I'd say you're jealous because you lack exactly that brand of charm."

"Very funny," Kudo grumbles.

The silence between us afterwards reminds me of the calm before a storm even though I can't say whether it's only my overactive imagination or whether he feels the same. Through the open door to my bedroom, the even, dispassionate ticking of the clock on my bedside table seems to be getting louder in the silence, mingling with various sounds outside... the wind, the trees, the sounds of cars passing by... I can hear a heartrending miaow on the other side of the street. It's probably Luna, Dr Chiba's black cat, again...

"Well," I say at last.

"Time to go to bed?" Kudo asks, rising from the stool.

"Not for me. But you should really go home now because you look dead!"

"I'm still very much alive, thank you," he yawns, "though not alive enough to walk home at this hour."

It wouldn't be the first time that we've spent the night in the same apartment. As Edogawa and Haibara, we've shared the same bed for many times out of necessity, and the last time we spent the night as Kudo and Miyano together was three years ago on Pandora's Box. We've never made a fuss out of it before, and perhaps he will think it idiotic and cruel of me to send him home at this hour, especially considering that he has to return in the morning for the check-up. But the time when we were close friends and partners in crime is over... And while nothing could be as ridiculous as the thought of either of us molesting the other in our sleep, I don't think it's acceptable to let the boyfriend of another girl spend the night in my apartment.

"You can't sleep here," I tell him frankly. "Just imagine what Ran would do to me!"

Kudo, who is on the way to my bedroom, stops at once and raises an amused brow at me. He is blushing, yet his face is looking as if he were going to crack up at any moment.

"I wanted to say... rather than walking home, I'd like to call a taxi now. Since mine is dead... May I use your phone?"
Part 03: How many faux pas...

How many faux pas... 

How many faux pas can one make during one single evening, I wonder, cursing myself for my mistaken assumption that he has actually asked me for permission to spend the night in my apartment. But then again, I wouldn't continually make a fool of myself if it weren't for Kudo sending out mixed messages, confusing me. Irritated and lost for words, I make for my bedroom to fetch my mobile phone for him while he takes off his jacket, murmuring something about not wanting to wear the heavy jacket now since it will take the taxi a while to come here.

"Don't you dare come into my bedroom!" I warn him, as he has followed me and is now standing at the door with one arm touching the frame above his head, his silhouette looking exactly the same as it was three years ago. Memory is surely an odd thing, storing all the unnecessary things you think you've forgotten, hiding them somewhere where you don't have any access to them. Then, out of the blue, all that is needed is just a little breeze or a familiar gesture, and it's all coming back to you, little unimportant details like the scent of the tea or the movie on TV... How come I can still remember the weather so clearly? The night he took the permanent antidote was just like tonight, cool and damp, starless with a full moon hanging lonely in the sky.

"Why not?" he asks in disbelief.

Ignoring his silly question, I pull my mobile phone out of a drawer and hand it to him.

"Here."

"It's still locked. Is the code Ayumi-chan's birthday?"

"No, wait!" I take it back to insert the four-digit code with my thumb while holding the phone upright and the screen away from him so that he can't see what I'm typing. It's already half-past two, probably time for me to go to bed as well if I've become so distracted that I even forgot to unlock my phone before giving it to him.

"You've received plenty of new mails," Kudo says, peering over my shoulder at the screen of my phone. Startled, I wonder how he has managed to sneak up behind me. In the years we didn't see each other, he must have acquired the uncanny ability to move as silently as a cat and appear where I don't expect him.

None of your business! Don't read! Just call the taxi, I snap at him in disconnected sentences, pushing the phone towards him.

"Of course I won't read them," he claims, puzzled at my outburst. "What's wrong with you?"

Wrong with me? Why me when he is the one snooping around in the bedroom of a woman who is not his girlfriend in the middle of the night?

I sigh, realizing that now I'm the one who is overreacting. With a vengeance, I can feel the typical post-antidote headache approaching and realize that I've foolishly given all of my remaining APAH capsules to him.

"I think I'm having a headache, too. Can you give me a capsule?"

Kudo fetches the bottle of APAH, generously hands me two capsules and a glass of water, and
takes out about ten to twelve capsules for himself, which he devours all at once. I should really find a new way to feed him APAH because there is no sense in filling those tiny capsules for him if he doesn't even count them.

Before my eyes, I can see an older version of him in ten years—haggard, with a beard, ruffled hair, and swollen eyes—talking to one child or two: "Daddy must visit Auntie Shiho now to ask for more painkillers before we go to Tropical Land together. Please wait for me for an hour, I'll be back in no time!" before running off and returning seven hours later. "I'm so sorry, I had to solve a case on my way. But we can go to Tropical Land tomorrow..."

"You know, I actually think it will be better if you make APAH on your own," I tell him after taking the two capsules he handed me. "If we need to change something about the formula, I can give you a new copy tomorrow after the check-up."

"Oh no!" he exclaims. "You know I could never mix it on my own!"

"If you can't mix it on your own, you will always depend on me." I try to be patient, reminding myself that I'm talking to a man who has been waited on hand and foot for the past three years. "The copy of the formula I gave you with the antidote... do you still have it?"

"Yes," he sighs. "It's in a drawer in my desk, or so I think. You just reminded me that I need to declutter my drawers because nothing fits into them anymore."

"What about getting a secretary? Anyhow, I'll print you another copy just in case you've lost the previous one. You can read it here and ask me if there is something you don't understand."

He impatiently waves my suggestion away.

"I already read it when you gave it to me. I could assist you and help you make APAH if you like. But you know what happens whenever I try to cook on my own... It's not like I've never tried to mix APAH before. I did it once." He shudders at the remembrance.

"Then try it again since it obviously didn't kill you," I comment without pity. "You're only lazy because you've been spoiled by Ran."

That's true, he admits. Still, he really can't prepare food for the life of him. And it's definitely not laziness, as he has no problems doing the laundry and cleaning the house. Cooking, however, is something entirely different. If he were single, he would have to visit the restaurants in Beika regularly.

Making APAH is not cooking, I insist. But if he wants to regard it as such, he should think of it as one dish. Anyone can learn to prepare one dish well if they've practised it long enough, and it will take him only half an hour in the morning. I hesitate for a moment before adding decisively, "You will have to learn it whether you want to or not because I'm not going to mix it for you anymore."

Ignoring his shocked expression, I disappear into my bedroom, open my laptop, and connect it to the printer while he paces up and down in front of the door, probably fretting about the thought of having to fill the hundreds of APAH capsules on his own.

"Are there still any good restaurants in Beika?" I casually ask, thinking that they all have had to make way for new shopping centres and fast food restaurants.

"There are still three," he says quietly, stopping at the door, "if you count the Poirot."

There is something in his voice—a nostalgic undertone?—which makes me pause to look at him.
He has seemed rather pensive ever since we arrived at my apartment, which I've blamed on his sleepless nights and APAH addiction. But now I wonder if something else has happened to him which he has yet to tell me.

"Just spill the beans, Kudo!" I prefer a blunt approach since we're running out of time. "What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me?" He pretends to be clueless.

"Listen, I can't put my finger on it, but something is bothering you. Unless it's something confidential you can't talk about, why don't you just tell me before you go?"

Kudo is gazing down at me with an intense stare, apparently wondering whether to tell me his secret or not.

"There is something, but I don't know if it's really the reason why I feel so utterly drained since my nap at home... Maybe I'm only getting sick."

"Anybody would get sick if they don't get enough sleep! But what's bothering you so much?"

A smile momentarily lights up his face before it disappears and he looks serious again.

"There is something in your hair!"

I raise my brow at him.

"Don't try to distract me with such a cheap trick, Kudo. Just spill it already!"

He bends forward and tugs at my hair with two impertinent fingers, removing a tiny petal, which probably belonged to a cherry blossom.

"I thought it was a bug," he says, apologetically. "Well, I didn't know if I should tell you before Ran makes it public, but you're going to learn it from Ran or Sonoko anyway. Ran is going to Osaka next month."

"For Hattori's wedding?"

"No, not only for that... She is going to teach karate there. She plans to stay there for a long time."

So that's the true reason for his melancholy—the prospect of a long-distance relationship for who knows how many years. Why Ran even considers leaving him for Osaka is a mystery to me. Hasn't she told Sonoko and me once that she wouldn't be able to wait for him again? Having had to wait for him for too long when he was shrunk, her capacity to wait for him seems to have been sucked dry after his return. Also, being with someone like Kudo means having to live in a state of constant worry about his safety whenever he is not present.

"Why Osaka and not Tokyo?"

Three years ago, on the bus to the hospital where Hattori, Kudo, and I had been admitted to after the downfall of the Organization, Ran protected an elderly lady from a thief who tried to steal her handbag, Kudo tells me. Afterwards they spent the rest of the journey chatting with each other, and it turned out that the husband of the lady was a karate master who didn't know what to do with his dojo after his retirement because, in his opinion, the few students of his who possessed the necessary skills didn't have the necessary strength of character to be his successor. Ran, who had been good friends with the wife since the incident, had visited the dojo a few times and taken a few
lessons from him. He seemed to be extremely pleased with her because, a few weeks ago, he asked her to take over the dojo.

While Kudo knew that it's quite an honour to receive such an offer at such a young age, he didn't expect that Ran would actually go. He had taken it for granted that she would stay in Tokyo because of him.

"I wouldn't have expected it either," I agree with him. "It's not only you, but she is so extremely protective of her father as well... I thought she would want to stay here to take care of him for fear that he would drink himself to death without her."

"Ah, that…" Kudo waves his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Her mother told Ran that, if Ran goes to Osaka, she would sacrifice herself to make sure that the fool didn't starve or drink himself into his grave. Needless to say, that only strengthened Ran's decision to go, especially now that Sonoko is going to leave Tokyo, too."

"And what are you going to do about it? I don't think it's good for you two to endure the long-distance thing. It usually doesn't work."

He slowly shakes his head at me.

"No, it's not that!" He abruptly turns away. "We've never considered a long-distance relationship at all," I hear his voice saying as he hurries to the sofa. "I'm actually going with her to Osaka."

The earth seems to have stopped spinning with just one sentence. And it suddenly dawns on me that I, too, have always taken it for granted that Kudo would stay forever in Tokyo. The thought of him going away has never, not for once, entered my mind.

People are moving all the time, says a voice in my head. It's not like you will never see him again. Also, Osaka is not as far away as London or New York. They will certainly come back to visit her parents once in a while, and friends who are not direct neighbours—you, for instance—probably won't even notice that they're gone.

A/N: This chapter has been split although I've merged two other chapters together so that the story will remain 77 chapters long. :)

In other news, I've left the CoAi server on Discord since I write too slowly these days and read less than I used to. I've also neglected work so that I'll have to cram in the next weeks. There are many reasons for my loss of focus in the past three months, but one of them is my habit of following (and backreading) the chats and adding my worthless two cents now and then when people talk about something I'm interested in). It's hard for me to resist even when I'm busy (it's a bit like eavesdropping on other people whenever I'm on a train, another habit I often succumb to even when I have other things to take care of). Maybe I'm going to return from time to time when I have more time and self-control although I don't plan to do it soon.

If you know me from the CoAi server and want to contact me for some reason but haven't talked to me in DMs yet, you can do it by sending me PMs on this site or on my Dreamwidth journal (on any entry you like). :) It was really fun to hang out on the server; but fandom breeds tons of little plunnies while starving the big ones I've fed for years, and I'm never going to finish "Encounter in Venice" if I don't return to plotting and writing in my free time.
To you…

To you, Kudo belongs to Beika like the cherry trees to Ueno-koen or the ducks to Shinobazu-no-ike, which is why you've always associated Beika with Kudo and vice versa. You've expected him to stay in Beika for life like an indigenous plant because, well, that's where he is supposed to be.

Judging from his frame of mind tonight, you deduce he isn't happy about leaving Tokyo either, which makes you wonder once again why Ran has resolved to go. If Ran had been more devoted to karate or if Kudo had been overjoyed at the prospect of going away, you wouldn't have had any doubts about their decision to exchange Beika for Osaka in view of such a rare opportunity. But Ran, according to her own words, has never intended to turn karate into a career. And since (this came from her own mouth as well) caring for her family and Kudo is her top priority, you can't imagine why she would want to leave Tokyo if Kudo obviously doesn't want to. It seems she naively believes that her parents would return to each other after she is gone, failing to think of the obvious outcome that such a pair would immediately split up again when the first problems arise. Fire and ice don't suit each other, you think. Accepting that fact will save everyone unnecessary heartache and time...

"...APAH... I'm going to visit you once in three months to fetch them..."

Lost in thought, you haven't paid attention to what Kudo said until he brought up APAH. But no sooner did you hear him mention its name than you snap out of your trance.

"So, after you've gone to Osaka, we're going to see each other more often than now?" You walk to the bar to pour yourself another glass of water. "But I told you I won't make you APAH anymore."

"Come on, you have it down to a fine art whereas I'm a hopeless case when it comes to those things." Resorting to bribery in his desperation, he adds with a smile which could melt ice, "I'll make it up to you on your birthdays. We can do whatever you want together."

The words which could have been mistaken for an outrageous double entendre sound from Kudo's lips like things a babysitter would tell the troublesome child they have to appease until its parents come home. Even Gin, exasperated by the ardent display of affection with which you showered him when you were three or four, had once told you something like, "If you're a good kid and leave me alone tonight, we can go out tomorrow and do whatever you like..."

"No matter how much you beg, my answer will still be 'No'. I'm only doing this because I feel responsible for your well-being. You can't forever depend on me!"

Thinking that it will be difficult for him to visit you on your birthdays when he is in Osaka if he already has a hard time doing it in Tokyo, you add in a sudden fit of selfless generosity, "In return, I can free you from our birthday-dinner deal if you like. Just keep in touch and give me a call from time to time."

Rather than agreeing with you as you would have expected, Kudo doesn't reply. In fact, he is so silent that all you can hear are the usual sundry sounds of the night, faraway steps and hushed voices of people walking on the other side of the street, the obnoxious ticking of the clock in your bedroom, and the rustle of the cherry trees in the wind…

Worried, you put down your glass and turn around to look at him, meeting his thoughtful and
strangely sad gaze.

"Didn't you mean to say that you'd like to free yourself from our deal?" he asks. "Spending your real birthday with me was your promise to me after I deleted the files on you, not vice versa. What is it about meeting me once a year that disturbs you so much?"

"Nothing. It's just the run of bad luck you always bring. My life is peaceful when you're not around."

"Mine is peaceful, too, when I don't see you," he calmly says, reminding you of his capability to sound composed and bitter at the same time. "You have a habit of turning my life upside down and messing with my mind every time we meet. One moment you're amiable and generous, the epitome of kindness, and the next moment you would suddenly decide to trample on my feelings with a smile. Do you really have to make it so obvious to me that you'd rather not see me again?"

Trample on his feelings? How could he say that to you if it's he who overslept your dinner, ruined your evening, and kept you up all night to fill hundreds of APAH capsules, which he could have made on his own—you ask in disbelief, skipping the part that he invaded your privacy by rummaging through your closet since he wouldn't understand what's wrong about it, anyway.

"I didn't know that's how you feel about tonight," he says quietly. With a pang of guilt, you gaze at him in frustration, wondering how an evening which has started with such a gorgeous sunset could have turned into such a bitter disappointment.

"Listen," you tell him. "I don't mind waiting for you on my birthdays as long as you really come. But this eternal waiting in vain drives me insane! You're always ruining my birthdays for me!"

"Not always! I spent your last birthday waiting for you in your apartment, too, because you intentionally stood me up. Out of the two birthdays I've missed, I only missed the first because I was held hostage by a mass murderer and the second because I had to meet up with Mizuno-san, who didn't have time later in the evening. When I came to your apartment, Kuroba had already taken advantage of the situation..." His voice trails off, and he frowns at the memory.

"But since I was waiting for you that night, I wouldn't have gone out with him if I had known that you would come," you reply quickly before he can dwell on the thought.

"I called you... But I can never get hold of you because you always turn off or misplace your Detective badge and your mobile phone."

"I think I've developed a hatred against it since the students at university began to bother me. But you could have sent me a mail. And you didn't only stand me up because of your cases... You forgot me during the first anniversary as well, do you remember? Later I learned that you had been watching photos and videos with Ran all day."

"What anniversary?" He stares at you in surprise.

The downfall of the Organization—you look at him in bewilderment, wondering whether he is being deliberately obtuse or whether APAH has erased parts of his memory. "Don't tell me you've already forgotten it!"

"I remember it very well," he darkly says, "and I remember you said that we could celebrate it together on the train to Osaka. But I didn't know you still wanted to celebrate it after what happened between us at Pandora's Box."

You two gaze at each other in dismay, realizing that, despite your efforts to pretend it never
existed, the incident at Pandora's Box is as ignorable as the elephant in the living room.

"Sorry," he says at last. "I don't know what's wrong with me tonight. The prospect of leaving Tokyo is getting to me."

"I don't know what's wrong with me either," you admit, sitting down next to him.

He smiles at you in relief, giving your arm a friendly nudge, and you smile back, thinking that you two have got worked up about nothing at all. Trampling over his feelings? Forgetting anniversaries? An outsider passing by your window would believe you were having a lover's quarrel.

"Perhaps I'm in such a bad mood because, on the way to Ueno-koen, I witnessed an accident," you admit, taking a sip from the glass on the table before remembering that it's actually his. "The victim was a boy, about nine or ten years old. I told myself accidents always happen... But then I saw his football lying there... And there were his little friends crying on the other side of the street, two girls and two boys of his age. Somehow, I was reminded of us when we were still with the Detective Boys. The boy looked a bit like you..."

Even to your ears it sounds desperate and wistful, resembling an admission of a hopeless love. The night he returned to his original size, you two had been sitting on the same sofa in the Professor's house together, discussing whether you should take the permanent antidote or not. How many pills did you make, he asked you, and it took you a moment to answer that, even though you weren't sure you would take the antidote, you had made two, one for him and one for you. Relieved that you, too, could return to your original body at once, he didn't notice the small pause before you answered... Or did he notice and didn't guess its meaning? By the look of things, he has never found out that you had been lying.

Inwardly cursing your vulnerability, you get up from the sofa to return to the bedroom. Jumping up as well, Kudo makes a gesture to hold you back but accidentally grabs your leg instead of your arm and, in his embarrassment, pulls his hand away so forcefully that he wipes the glass out of your hand in the process, causing it to shatter on the floor.

"Oh great, now I've even begun to wreck your apartment!" he says before you can say it, and you two laugh at each other, gingerly moving around the shards of glass and the spilled water.

"There are many memories for me in Tokyo, too," he admits, poking at one of the larger shards with a long finger. "I can't believe I want to stay in one city for life at my age, but I really don't want to go."

You know that he doesn't, but who are you to tell him what to do? Torn between one thing and the other, one can either choose the easy way out or the one which matters more. When you were small, Akemi-nee-san once showed you a method she always applied whenever she felt indecisive: Just toss a coin and let it decide on the outcome for you—then either act according to it or, if it feels horribly wrong, rebel against the decision.

And yet, how could you give Kudo the same advice, knowing that Ran is involved? While you aren't the most loyal person in the world, even you feel that you would be backstabbing Ran if you told him to consider an option which entails leaving her.

"I've run out of kitchen rolls, but there is a rag in the bathroom," you tell Kudo instead. "I'm going to print out the formula now because it's late."

"Does it mean I'm allowed to enter your bathroom again?" he asks in mock shyness.
"You're even allowed to use it if you want." You smirk at him. "Just make sure to keep things in order so that I don't have to clean up after you." Then, deciding to play the role of the coin for him, you casually add, "Just look on the bright side: You'll always find new cases even in Osaka. If you feel like coming back for a visit, it's only a few hours by train. Take care of yourself, and don't expect me to make APAH for you."

g.

Blinking at the screen with tired eyes, you print out the formula before disconnecting the laptop from the printer and shutting it down. Three o'clock in the morning and he is still in your apartment, you think, utterly exhausted by the ups and downs of the evening. You can't even remember whether he has called the taxi at all.

In the meantime, he has returned to his favourite corner of the sofa after wiping the floor and discarding the shards of glass, according to what you can hear. He is extremely efficient whenever he wants to be, using his terrific brain and quick reactions to excel at almost anything. Hence, to you, his weakness in simple things like cooking, along with his atrocious singing voice and his inability to communicate with you, will always remain a mystery.

"After taking the antidote, I often wondered what would have happened if you hadn't been able to create it," says his voice from the sofa, sounding huskier than usual as if he has either caught a cold or is falling asleep. "Sometimes I think I'd solve my cases faster if you were still around. Back then you were pretty good at making random remarks which put me on the right track."

If you weren't sure that his thoughts were wandering, you would have received the wrong impression and believed he just tried to say that he missed you. Since you've repeatedly misread his intentions tonight, however, you're not going to make the same mistake again.

"I don't have the impression that you've lost your edge, though," you remark. "Do you really consider the case you told me about such a dismal failure?"

He doesn't say anything in reply but only yawns and moves a little in the sofa, as you can hear the rustle of his jeans and shirt as they're rubbing against the sofa cover.

"Say, have you even called the taxi yet?"

"... Too bad you couldn't marry me?... but you were the one who..." he mumbles sleepily, apparently referring to your joke earlier when he told you that even he could make himself useful when it came to household chores.

Who what? Ruined it? At the Professor's grave, you had promised each other to carry on with your friendship as if nothing had ever happened. Something which didn't even last for a night didn't count, and it seemed easy enough for him to run back to Ran and pretend that he had never thought about another girl apart from her. Why does he have to touch on it now when it seems so far away, even further than your childhood crush on Gin, as if it had happened in the bygone days of a different era?

It's not like him to talk about the past so freely, but you know him well enough to see that he tends to let his guard down when he goes to sleep. Walking to the sofa with the formula in your hand, you are not surprised to see that he is indeed sleeping, lying on the side with his head resting on one arm of the large sofa and his long legs draped over the other, looking as lifeless as a corpse in the dim light.

Grabbing your mobile phone, which Kudo has left on the table, you check the call log to convince
yourself that he hasn't called the taxi yet. For a moment, you seriously consider calling a taxi for him, waking him up, handing him the formula, and sending him home. But when you touch his arm a few times and notice that he is sleeping so soundly that he doesn't even react, you automatically walk into the bedroom to get him a blanket instead.

It has become so late that the few hours more or less he spends in your apartment really doesn't count, you try to justify yourself while throwing the blanket over him, ignoring the thought that you should have foreseen this situation when he asked you to let him wait in your apartment. From past experience, you know that Kudo's exhaustion and lack of social skills (at least when it comes to you) could induce him to settle himself on your sofa and simply stay there. Although you can say with a clear conscience that you haven't encouraged him in any way, you must admit that you didn't make an effort to prevent this outcome. Deep down, you don't want him to go, perhaps because you're terrified of being alone and exposed to your own mind in a night like tonight—when all the ghosts of your past suddenly decide to come back, haunting you.

Yet having a sleeping person in your apartment is not the same as having a waking one, who can talk to you and distract you from pondering destructive thoughts. And you suddenly miss the stranger and his uncanny ability to tempt you into revealing your innermost feelings, facing the wildest waves while keeping you on the safe shore. He and you were like ships that passed in the night; and even though you didn't know each other, you were honest to him most of the time, and there was only one thing (or were there two things?) about which you lied.

_He is going out with a girl he has been in love with since they were six. You can be sure that he doesn't have any feelings for me._

Perhaps that wasn't a complete lie because you really believed that, after three years, that's all what remained between Kudo and you. Before you learned that the reason for his sadness was leaving Tokyo, you would never have guessed that a part of him might still be clinging to the past, just like a part of you.

_I know that's just wishful thinking, but it's still a very comforting thought_, the stranger said.

Who are you kidding, you think, smiling at the sleeping form on the sofa. Seeing him so seldom, you've almost forgotten what a pleasant sight his face can be. Want to spend a night at my place before you go away, you ask him, pleased that he can neither hear it nor reply. Then lets continue to pretend that friendship is all that ever existed between us, don't touch upon Pandora's Box, and let sleeping dogs lie.

Stepping onto the balcony to clear your mind, you let your eyes roam over the sky and the neighbourhood until you stop in surprise. In front of Dr Chiba's open door, two people are standing, talking quietly about something you can't overhear while Luna is sitting on the shoulder of the young woman, rubbing her head against the woman's long blonde hair. Illuminated from different angles by the lights inside the house, in the garden, and on the street, the profiles of both the woman and the man are clearly visible even in the middle of the night. As he pats her lightly on her blonde buns (odangos?) and she bids him goodbye with a smile before she disappears behind the door, you think who would have thought that they know each other, the blonde woman sitting next to you in the bus and the stranger you met at twilight.

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A/N: A rhyme this time since this is a special occasion:
Another edited chapter although I'm on vacation!

Aren't you all impressed by my dedication? *shot XDXD

These days I'm scribbling the last three chapters for "Becoming Conan" into my notebook while lounging in a roofed wicker chair on the beach, which is a great luxury although it slows me down somewhat (I tend to walk around and also have to apply sunscreen all the time.) XD Will post the new chapters as soon as I've finished writing them and typing them up.

Congrats to the authors/artists who have made it in time for the prompts! You're awesome! I'm sorry for being so slow. :(( Things came up and then I didn't have time to write anymore (I had to pack for the vacation and to take care of a few things before leaving; then the tasks accumulated and everything took me longer than planned).
What are the odds...

What are the odds that two people who met by chance for the first time during a sunset run into each other again at night in a different district of a city as large as Tokyo? Nevertheless, with this stranger and you, nothing seems beyond the bounds of possibility. Ayumi-chan would tell you that he is your personal genie or your fairy godfather, materializing in front of your eyes whenever he is needed.

But now that your fairy godfather has reappeared and is available for your use, you suddenly become conscious of the fact that there are social norms to follow when it comes to dealing with a man whose name you don't even know. As much as you want him to keep you company in a night like tonight, you can't possibly ask him for it without giving him a misleading impression of your intentions, not counting the problem of finding a bar in Azabu Juuban which is still open at such an hour. Inviting him into your apartment is out of the question even without Kudo on your sofa; and the last option—chatting with him on the street in the middle of the night—doesn't seem like a satisfactory solution to your problem either.

Will he regard you as impertinent if you run down and talk to him at such an hour on the pretext of inquiring about your handbag, you wonder, undecided about how to approach your mystery man without irritating him or waking up the whole neighbourhood. Starting a conversation with a nice stranger sitting on the same bench as you at six p.m. is certainly not the same as bothering the same man at three a.m., especially when he has just left the house of a married woman (Is their relationship really as platonic as he described it?) and is in a hurry to go home.

In the end, your worries turn out to be completely unfounded, for he takes the decision out of your hand as all good fairy godfathers do. Striding down the street, he appears lost in thought until he passes the azalea shrubs in front of your balcony. There, underneath the old lamp—and for no discernible reason—he suddenly stops dead in his tracks and turns round, looking up as if he had instinctively known that you would be there.

"I knew we would see each other again," he says, smiling at you across the fence, the azalea shrubs, and two branches of a cherry tree, "but I didn't expect that it would be so soon."

His beautiful voice, melodious and clear, resonates through the now deserted streets; and you discover in surprise that you're strangely delighted to hear it again.

"I didn't expect that we would meet a second time," you remark. "After all, you haven't even told me your name."

For a moment, the stranger only gazes at you in amazement as though you had said something out of the ordinary. He has completely forgotten about it, he replies in a matter-of-fact voice, as he can't remember the last time he had to introduce himself to another person. Moreover, he realized only after leaving that his private mobile number is not listed in the phone directory.

"I don't know what's wrong with me tonight. Forgetfulness is my second name."

"Now that you've told me your second name, what about telling me your first?" You raise your brow at him. "Or are you so infamous that you can't say your name aloud in public lest anyone hears you?"
There must have been something quite hilarious in what you said, as he only shakes his head and covers his face with his palms, his shoulders shaking slightly as if he were laughing.

"What's so funny?" you ask in bewilderment.

"Sorry," he chuckles, shooting you an amused, not-at-all-apologetic-looking smile. "Well, you look still wide awake just like me. Would you like to go out with me for a drink or a dance tonight?"

"Dancing at three a.m.?" you stare at him, aghast. "Is there anything open besides the lap dance night clubs? No, thank you."

"Two Lights' is still open tonight," he says. "There was a surprise party with a small magic performance by Kuroba Kaito. I think it will last until four or five."

"The performance?" Didn't Kaito tell you that it was supposed to be at midnight?

"No, the performance is over and Kuroba has already left. I meant that the party is still going on."

"How was the performance?"

"Impressive, although it was short and only meant to promote Kuroba's show next month. There were a few very nice card tricks between surprise appearances and disappearances of the magician. Kuroba is extremely talented..." He winks at you with a smile. "... if only he didn't have such a fear of fish."

Startled, you only give him an inquiring look, unsure about whether he could have guessed it so fast without knowing you.

"Kuroba is an acquaintance of mine," he explains. "We've known each other for a while. I can't believe I never noticed he has a fish phobia before tonight, but when I saw how he reacted to the fish we ordered, I immediately thought of you..." He flashes you a little wicked grin. "I should have guessed it before learning about his fish phobia. Kudo Shinichi and he are like two peas in a pot after all."

Out of all people in the world, you had to confide in this person, who can be curiously sensitive and yet indiscreet at the same time, with an uncanny awareness of how far he can go without pushing your button. Even his last line doesn't irk you as much as Kaito's accusation did, perhaps because it was the logical conclusion any bystander would have come to.

"Do you often go out to party all night?" you ask, changing the subject. He didn't seem like a party animal to you when you two first met.

"No, not so often. But I've just been dumped and don't want to sit at home alone, especially at night when I can't torture the drums for fear of disturbing the neighbourhood."

Despite knowing the emotional impact it doubtlessly has on his life, you can't help but marvel at the absurdity of the situation. Basically, he is asking a woman he barely knows for a rendezvous at three a.m. to distract him from thinking of his lamentable love life while the woman he asked has planned to do exactly the same to him.

"How have you been dumped?" you ask, wondering whether his unrequited love was in reality an illicit love affair.

For a moment, his face clouds over with sadness so deep that it tugs at your heart. But then he gives you an unexpected, dazzling smile; and you are suddenly reminded of Akemi-nee-san, who
had the same bright smile and carefree attitude and who also smiled at you like that when you saw her for the very last time.

"I was told that people had begun to talk and that we should no longer meet regularly. Now the setting has been changed, and we're going to meet up in cafés or ice cream parlours once in a blue moon, preferably with at least one of her friends as a chaperone... Moreover, it seems they're planning to become a little family. I'd only ruin it for her if this situation continues. But I don't think we should talk about it here where people might overhear us."

"I'm sorry to hear that," you say, helpless at the realization of how little your remark is worth in his hopeless situation.

"Why, you shouldn't be! After the initial shock, I was rather flattered by her fear that our walks endanger her marriage. It means a lot to me."

"That's even more depressing," you sigh, deciding that there is no sense in following convention with a guy like him. "You're treading on the line between optimism and lunacy."

"I'll take it as a compliment." He smiles. "So, if you feel awake enough to stay up all night... Would you mind coming with me?" A mischievous expression flits across his face. "Or shall we continue this balcony scene à la Shakespeare instead, with the part when you tell me that a rose would 'smell as sweet by a different name'?"

He has recited the quote in a soft, husky whisper, his attitude completely molded into that of the young girl in Shakespeare's famous play. Even his voice has become perfectly feminine, possessing a timbre which sounds completely different from the voice he used before and which even in your ears resembles your own. Staring at him in speechless astonishment, you realize that, despite flattering yourself that you wouldn't label him anything, you've pigeonholed him as "the cheeky stranger pining away for a married woman" right after your first meeting. The fact that he has amazing acting skills and can change his voice like Kaito confuses and disturbs you, making you wonder whether behind his carefree and boyish shell a much stronger personality is hiding.

A sudden creak from your landlady's apartment beneath your balcony breaks the stunned silence, and the stranger fixes his gaze at the source of the sound with an alert look. Another creak soon follows, accompanied by muffled sounds of movements, shuffling footsteps, and the familiar rustle of your landlady's crisp taffeta curtain. The stranger takes a cautious step away from the fence; and for a moment, you get the dreaded feeling that he will simply whirl around and disappear.

Much to your relief, he looks up and smiles instead, indicating with an airy gesture that he will be waiting for you under the other cherry tree in the corner of the garden, whispering something like "Come down..."

Retreating silently into the living room, you carefully shut the window and the door to the balcony. As expected, Sleeping Kudo is still stretched out on your sofa in a deep slumber, for once completely oblivious to the things happening around him. A few things about him haven't changed, you note in amusement. When he is really exhausted, one could steal his covers or even the bed or whatever he is lying on without him caring.

Proceeding to the sofa to behold Kudo's sleeping face for the last time, you stand still for what seems like an eternity, wondering whether you're doing the right thing. The peculiar sunset, the accident, Kudo's lateness, and the chance meetings with this charismatic stranger have brought about a few changes to your state of mind which, though still subtle and hard to grasp, are deeply unsettling.
When you come down now, will it be the second or the third time you meet him, you wonder and then decide that it would still be the second—not that it really matters to you. Second or third meeting, magical twilight or no magical twilight, despite Kaito's warning and Kudo's remark that the stranger has told you his version of the ghost story for a particular reason, you're desperate for company who can distract you from the old wound, which was supposed to have healed nicely but is in danger of being opened again.

From Kudo's face, your gaze drifts to the mobile phone, which you've left on the coffee table, as you've grown accustomed to leaving it at home instead of carrying it around. What would he say if he found out that the only souvenir you kept from Pandora's Box is still there, a vivid reminder of the fact that love doesn't conquer all?

... although I'm racked with guilt, the one thing I'm sure of is that I love you...

The pit-a-pat of the rain and the crashing of the waves mingle with his voice at your ear while on the screen of the black box on your lap, the "Delete" button is blinking rapidly, with the timer counting down "seven, six, five, four, three..."

... Despite our differences, can you imagine spending your life with me?... Wait, I hear Hattori coming. I'll be with you in a sec. Just stay there and wait for me.

In your memory, you can see Miyano Shiho hesitating for an instant before she finally taps on the blinking red button. The screen blackens before the deletion is confirmed and the wallpaper reappears: a Greek lady in front of a jar, whose lid is partly opened and out of which evil apparitions are flying...

All right, she replies calmly into the phone even though he has already hung up. Come down.

Perhaps it was a small price for freedom, security, and peace, and he would never have found out if you had not closed the lid of the laptop without noticing that the pendant of your necklace had got caught in there. It was an unbelievable run of bad luck that he had to appear right when you had removed your necklace in order to get the stuck pendant out. Of course one glance at the black box was all he needed to grasp the situation.

I knew there must be another Pandora's Box apart from the cabin, but I didn't expect that you were the one who hid it from me.

You should have thrown the old phone away after it died, drowned in the water which had seeped into the pocket of your jacket when you were washed into the sea that night. Instead, prompted by a masochistic desire to keep the recording without listening to it again, you had the data recovered and copied to both your laptop and your new mobile phone.

It is really so hard for him to guess the reason for your ever-changing moods when he is concerned? After the Professor's funeral, he stayed behind with you to talk, to exchange civilities and even apologies for all the wrong things both of you had done. Just like hurtful words, one friendly remark led to another until your previous friendship was prettily patched up. He was even fair enough to tell you in advance that he would be trying to make everyone happy by turning back time and return the old Shinichi to Ran, and you remember thinking that it was only poetic justice that you would ultimately lose to her what you had taken away from her in the end. However, the reconciliation left a bitter aftertaste in your mouth, and you're glad that you've had enough self-control not to listen to the recording again.

You know it was you who ruined it, but you don't know what else you could have done. Wasn't it right to decide that you would rather lose him and keep him alive than have him dead in your arms?
Even if he forgave you for the one thing which was the reason for your breakup, he would never be able to forgive you if he knew about the secrets you're still hiding. Unlike the childhood crush between Ran and him, the attachment between Kudo and you was an attraction between incompatible individuals poles apart.

How did he get the idea that you suffered less than him because it was you who betrayed his trust? Betrayal is a double-edged sword, but then in desperate times, one doesn't really have the luxury to choose one's weapon.

You're not the type to wait forever while nurturing foolish hopes. Tonight, sitting with you in your apartment, he might have become sentimental at the prospect of leaving Tokyo. But tomorrow night, he is going to fetch Ran from the train station and forget about you as he always does.

Why should you hold on to the past, you think, especially if, in relation to the present and immediate future, the past no longer has any meaning? What really matters now is how to shake yourself free from its clutch, and leaving him here to go out with a startlingly beautiful stranger at night doesn't appear to you like such a bad start.

Decisively, you slip your phone into the pocket of your cardigan, leave him a note saying you will be back in the morning, put on your sandals, grab your keys, and lock the apartment from the outside.

g.

A/N: No update last week since the Ritz had a migraine. But lo and behold, this has been the first chapter in which she didn't find any mistake (and we only rephrased a sentence since she thought it would be easier to comprehend that way). *happy dance
Part 04: Stepping out into the night...

Stepping out into the night through the front door, you are greeted by a rather picturesque sight. The stranger is standing under the cherry tree in the corner of the garden, surrounded by azaleas and cherry blossoms while the wind, which has risen since you left the balcony, is blowing around his ankles, whirling small leaves and sakura petals around him. Obviously, he has climbed over the fence and jumped over the azalea shrubs instead of waiting outside in the shadow of the cherry tree as you expected.

"Lovely garden," he remarks, walking towards you.

"My landlady is a passionate gardener."

"One of my brothers, too."

"I didn't know you have siblings."

"Well," he smiles, "now you do."

His little remark would have sounded incredibly rude if he hadn't said it in a friendly tone, you observe. Apparently, he is not a genius when it comes to small talk.

"Let's go," he says, smiling again, and offers you his arm in such a natural gesture that you automatically accept it.

Closing the gate to the garden from the outside, you can discern a slight movement of the curtain behind a window on the first floor and wonder whether your landlady is still watching you from behind her curtain at the moment. What would she think if she knew that Kudo is sleeping in your apartment right now? You can still remember her shock when, two years ago, she brought you rolls for breakfast and spotted Kaito.

"Who is living on the first floor of that house?" the stranger asks. "Your landlady?"

"Yes, I think she is watching us."

"I've noticed it, too. Did I get you into trouble?"

"I don't know."

"By now, your landlady's flight of fancy has probably conjured up an epic love story complete with balcony scenes and secret midnight visits between the stranger and you. "We shall see. Knowing her, she is probably going to bring me fresh rolls in the morning and try to sound me out about tonight."

"Sounds like a rather pleasant person." He laughs. "I wish I had a landlady like that who brings me breakfast in the morning."

"I'm sure she would love you so much that she would bring you breakfast every day. But unfortunately, you can't move in. The apartment on the top floor is already occupied by my landlady's daughter."

"But Reika-san is abroad, isn't she? I should send her a mail and ask her to leave her apartment to me!"

"How do you know her name?"
"Because she is the girlfriend of Furuhata Motoki-san, who happens to be the best friend of Mamoru-san, Odango's husband. And Odango loves telling me about all her acquaintances during our walks in Ueno-koen... The world is small, isn't it? Actually it's a miracle that we two have never met before—although I have the feeling we've already met somewhere and I only can't remember it."

"We met each other at about half past six on Friday night on a bench in front of Shinobazu no ike, don't you remember?" you ask him in a deadpan voice. "Why did you ask me whether my landlady is living on the first floor if you had already known it beforehand?"

He didn't really know it but he guessed it, he tells you. He has learned from "Odango" that "Reika-san" is the owner of an apartment in the house with the two cherry trees and the azalea shrubs Odango admires. And he deduced that it wasn't Reika-san hiding behind the curtain because she is supposed to be abroad at the moment, meaning that the person watching you must be either your landlord or landlady.

"Odango has the endearing habit of talking about almost everything that comes to mind so that I've heard about the whole neighbourhood by now. I'm surprised that she has never mentioned you to me."

"Because she has never met me. I saw her for the first time yesterday evening on the bus on the way to Ueno-koen. She was sleeping next to me. I didn't even know she was my neighbour until I saw you and her in front of Dr Chiba's door."

It is surprising indeed, but during the three years you've been living in Juuban, you've never seen her although you have often heard her high voice talking to Luna in the middle of the night. The black cat has the habit of waking up the whole neighbourhood by miaowing in front of the door three or four times a week; and now that you know about Odango's close friendship with the stranger, you wonder whether the miaowing has something to do with it. Perhaps the cat always waits for its owner in the garden and complains when she stays away for too long.

"So you saw us in front of the door? What do you think of her?" the stranger asks, fixing you with his expectant eyes. Like most extroverted people, he likes talking about his love interest even though, to put it in his own words, she has just dumped him.

"I didn't pay much attention to her face," you admit, "and I have a dreadfully bad memory for faces in general. But from what I've seen of her, I think she is lovely."

He beams at you, thankful for your favourable comment; and you smile to yourself, thinking that it's easy to make him happy. How exactly—you wonder—does she look in his eyes? You certainly wouldn't have expected her to be the "radiantly beautiful" woman he had told you about although she is cuter than average and—since you are in a generous mood—could even be called pretty. But beauty is known to be in the eye of the beholder, and you remember very well your unhealthy fascination with Gin's silver-blond hair and his emerald eyes.

"I've almost forgotten to tell you that I've lost my handbag. I think I left it in the bus next to her when I jumped out in a hurry. Since the afternoon was so drowsy, I had fallen asleep, too, and was still sleepy when I got off the bus."

"Really? I'm sure she hasn't noticed your bag at all, otherwise she would have mentioned it to me. But I can call her in the morning and ask her about it if you'd like. Did you have anything important in it? Papers, keys, love letters of snubbed admirers you would rather collect than throw away?"

"There is nothing of importance in it, actually. I keep my papers and keys in my pockets and throw
away all types of love letters. It's the bag which I don't want to lose... It's a lavender-coloured Fusae bag with a silver badge, very small and very lovely...

There was a map in it, too, you think in remorse. The hand-drawn map with the code Kudo gave you. His invitation to hunt for treasures together at Ueno-koen.

"Was it a present from Kudo Shinichi?" the stranger asks.

"Where did you get that idea?"

"You have the same wistful and infatuated look in your eyes when you talk about it." He throws you an amused smile. "As you see, I can read your mind. Don't ever dare to lie to me."

You chuckle and give his arm a spontaneous and affectionate squeeze, surprising yourself with the friendly gesture which is so unlike you that you don't know what to think of it. In the night, on the deserted street, you realize there is a familiar fragrance about him which you haven't noticed at Ueno-koen. Other scents of the evening must have mingled with it and hidden it from you.

"Have you met Mamoru-san, her husband, before?" he asks before you can remember the name of the famous plant, which is on the tip of your tongue.

"A few times. I only talked to him once, though."

"What do you think of him?"

"My first impression of him? The ideal gentleman, but you know, somehow a bit too perfect for my taste."

You've never felt the need to socialize with your neighbours, and Dr Chiba seems to feel the same as you. Sometimes, when you return very late from your part-time job at the pharmacy or get up very early for a walk before your morning classes at university, you can see him in front of his garage or in his small garden, watering the plants. When that happens, you would always greet him with a slight nod and a smile and he would do the same, neither of you feeling the desire to say more to each other than "Good morning" or "Good night". One could get the impression that you don't know each other at all, and yet you—or rather Kaito—one had an interesting conversation with him two years ago.

During your first evening with Kaito at Furuhata's, you noticed that your neighbour was sitting at a small table for three, apparently waiting for someone who didn't come. You remember Kaito teasing you about making eyes at another man while being with him and telling you that "at least your taste isn't bad", the guy was exactly what one would call "a really fine man". He looked like the perfect Mr Darcy indeed, with his dark brooding head and his quiet, reserved demeanour. However, what caught your interest was neither his handsome face nor his impressive height but his sombre attitude and the expression in his gaze when they met yours. Those eyes—so it seemed to you—were the eyes of someone who knew how it was like to grow up alone.

Later in the evening, Kaito managed to initiate a talk with Dr Chiba and invite him to your table. You've forgotten how Kaito did it, but you remember that you admired him for being able to strike up a conversation with other people wherever and whenever he wanted to. From food, the talk turned to books and then to medicine. And by the time Dr Chiba left, Kaito had squeezed all about his private life out of him.

Dr Chiba's goal was to lead an active, busy, and fruitful life helping other people, which is why his childhood dream was to become a surgeon and save other people's lives. His parents had died in a
car crash when he was six, and he wouldn't have survived if it hadn't been for a very energetic and capable surgeon who rescued him and gave him on-the-spot treatment before driving him to the hospital and operating on him. While studying at university, he fell in love with a young girl, who was still attending high school, and started a relationship with her. Despite being very much in love, he decided to spend two semesters abroad when he received a scholarship for the medical sciences division in Oxford. A year didn't mean anything compared to a whole life, he thought. After all, he had to grab the chance for their future.

Back then he didn't know, he explained, that even a harmonious relationship like theirs could fall apart if one wasn't sure whether one's love was being reciprocated. Growing up in an orphanage, he was a man of few words and couldn't express his feelings openly as she would have liked him to. In order to focus on his studies, he had kept their communication on a basic level, believing that it would make the separation easier for both of them until he returned. A letter from Furuhata informing him that his fiancée had been spending a lot of time with a classmate during his absence finally woke him up and reminded him that the most important person in his life was her. So he returned, and they were reunited just in time before she could be swayed by the romantic attentions of his rival.

"True love actually doesn't prevent you from falling in love with another person if the feelings are unclear on both sides," he said at last. "Actually, the deeper the love between two people is, the easier it can be replaced if another person can fill the void you've left in your lover's heart while you are away."

Despite the happy end of his story, both Kaito and you were strangely depressed after hearing it, and you remember thinking in annoyance that it was a pity she stayed with Chiba instead of eloping with that rival who wasn't so occupied with saving the world that he forgot about her. To be fair, it wasn't really Dr Chiba whom you disliked, as he was actually a pleasant and perfectly nice man. It was the sentence with which he ended his story which made something inside you rebel against him.

"Well, do you still consider ditching me for him?" Kaito winked at you after he was gone, whereupon you replied that you had never considered it, neither before nor after hearing Chiba's story. Dr Chiba was the type of impressive man whom you can admire but not love. Kaito, of course, asked you promptly whether he was one of the men you could love and you said he could always try to find that out, and the ruined evening turned into a rather enjoyable night until he brought you home...

"I've always thought Mamoru-san is frighteningly cool and composed, and easily depressed into the bargain," the stranger remarks. "The very opposite of her. But well, I guess it's the classical case of opposites attract. He is intelligent, cultivated, and down-to-earth. All in all, I think Odango is lucky to have him since he is a rather decent person."

"Now you only need to find yourself a pessimistic and pragmatic woman who can appreciate your happy-go-lucky attitude and your optimism bordering on lunacy, and everyone will be happy," you suggest.

"A pessimistic and pragmatic woman? A woman like you?" He laughs. "Let's fill out the papers together and get married in an instant!"

"Oh no!" You grimace. "In a weak moment, I might even sacrifice my freedom to help you out. But I don't think I'm made for any kind of close relationship, much less for something as steady as marriage. That woman can't be me!"

"Why don't you ever want to marry?" he asks in surprise. "It's not like I can't understand you since
I don't think much of marriage either. It ties up one's love with tiresome obligations and paperwork—all the things I abhor. But all the single women I've met in my life told me that they would like to marry."

Most women do but you don't, you tell him truthfully. You would rather stay single until you die. You've had enough trouble of all sorts with various men in your life and learned that the best way to avoid trouble is to stay out of it. Love alone is difficult enough to maintain even without the ties of marriage, and someone told you once that life will be simple if you keep things simple.

"Unless I find the ideal husband who worships me and gladly does all my housework for me," you tell him, "I don't think I will ever marry."

g.

After his remark that you're just as lazy as his Odango followed by your answer that you will take it as a compliment since it came from his mouth, you two walk together in companionable silence, both freezing in the cold wind, which has picked up even more. The full moon is now hidden behind a veil of thick bluish clouds, and you wonder whether it's going to rain.

"Is your cardigan warm enough?" he asks, looking down at your thin dress with an expression of concern.

"Yes. Warm enough for me not to accept your jacket, if that's what you were about to propose. Your shirt is definitely too thin for this weather. Why don't you at least button up your jacket now?"

"Good idea," he says and follows your advice.

"Your Odango and you surely had a special relationship if you could visit her at night like that," you remark when you two continue walking, wondering whether he had told you the truth about their friendship. After all, you haven't told him the truth about Kudo and you either.

"I didn't visit her at night—even though I don't think she would mind if she weren't living with him. She knows I would never try anything funny. But tonight I only brought her home after watching Kuroba's performance at Two Lights'. Mamoru-san had been called to an emergency case and couldn't go with her, leaving her a note saying she should go with me instead. So we departed again after I fetched her and brought her home after leaving you at Ueno-koen."

You've almost forgotten that he has watched Kaito's performance at Two Lights'.

"So, after bringing a woman home at night, you want to return to the same club with another? People will get the impression that I'm the latest of your many conquests. It's not flattering to me."

"No, they won't think that. There are a few rooms at Two Lights' which aren't available to the public. The only people who can see you there are my brothers and a few close friends of ours if they haven't gone home by now; and they all know me so well that they wouldn't even believe me if I told them you're a conquest of mine… You must know that, apart from my completely platonic dates with Odango, I've never had a girlfriend in my life."

You stare at him, incredulous.

"You mean you are... twenty-three or twenty-four?... and have never been kissed?"

"Twenty-four," he sighs, crestfallen. "Unless I count the one kiss I gave Odango on her cheek before she got married, I must admit I've never kissed anybody in a romantic context." Throwing a
sidelong glance at you, he laughs. "I know that's pathetic. But what's with that look on your face?"
He winks at you. "Do you pity me so much that you want to kiss me out of sympathy?"

"Don't even dream of it," you reply although you've been thinking that it's a shame because he has very kissable lips. "So you actually get VIP treatment at Two Lights'?" you ask him, realizing that he might be one of the rising stars you, indifferent to celebrities, haven't recognized. He definitely looks like a showman with his Kaito-like grace. Your theory would also explain his reluctance to tell you his name and his emphasis on "romantic context" when he talked about kisses, as he must have kissed plenty of women in front of the camera.

"Yes," he says without going into detail. "Thanks for coming with me. I've never had such good company apart from Odango since I went to high school. You're the first woman in years who I can really talk with and who doesn't immediately force her phone number on me."

You raise a brow at him, amused by his inflated ego.

"Is that the reason why you were wearing sunglasses in the evening? To hide your pretty face from normal human beings? Don't worry, there are plenty of other beautiful people in the world. Not every woman you meet will fall in love with you."

"Are you so sure?" he jokes before he flashes you a lovely smile and wraps his arm around your shoulder in an impulsive hug, pulling you close to him in a gesture which vaguely resembles Kudo's embrace three years ago. His scent, mysterious and alluring, awakes your memory of Gin's with the exception that it's finer and indefinitely more pleasant.

It must be either the lack of sleep added to the lack of food or some unknown side effect of APAH because you feel giddy all of a sudden, weak and incredibly tired.

"Say, what's the name of the eau de toilette you're wearing?" you ask without trying to free yourself from his grasp. You feel prone to cuddling in a cold and depressing night like tonight. And while he definitely seems like a flirt of Kaito's calibre, he doesn't seem like the type who would take advantage of your passive mood.

He gazes down at you with a puzzled expression.

"I'm not wearing any."

"An after-shave, shampoo, wash gel, deodorant? Of course I know the scent! It's sweet osmanthus, kinmokusei, isn't it? With a slight variation. I think it's kinmokusei and orange blossoms."

Kinmomusei and orange blossoms are really among the ingredients, he exclaims in surprise, admiring your amazing sense of smell. The scent comes from a perfume in his shampoo and wash gel, which his foster parents invented. They claimed that it was less destructive than the commercial shampoos for long hair, and he and his siblings have been taught to mix it since their early childhood...

There is it again, that strange giddy feeling along with a premonition of something painful you can't explain. The rustle of the trees around you seems to grow louder for a moment before it retreats into the distance and dies away, leaving only a dead silence and the fragrance of orange blossoms and kinmokusei. Ironically, the rich and lingering scent of sweet osmanthus reminds you of Kyoto and Osaka in October, bringing back memories of Gin and Pandora's Box, the same you wanted to forget in the stranger's presence. It brings back something else, too, another memory of another time. For a moment, the long-forgotten face of the red-haired girl with her peculiarly melancholic smile and her fragile, exquisite beauty appears clearly before your eyes. The Queen of
Spades, you think in confusion, wondering why the woman on Kaito's card reminds you of her. And while the world is spinning and you feel the arms of the stranger catching you, his bittersweet fragrance invading your nose with a sense of alarming closeness and warmth, your mind rapidly winds back to the time eight years ago, to another night in another man's arms...

A/N: I almost forgot to post this chapter after SN edited it since I'm feeling ill today. Am going to resume writing "Becoming Conan" when I'm better again.

E/N: lol what does kissing have to do with gf/bf?

A/N: Shiho thought kissing has something to do with gf/bf because that's the usual Asian (and also Western European) procedure. Americans are weird with their "dating" (partner shopping!) and smooching on the first date & clarifying the relationship status only after months of hook-ups! xd
Even before the scene materializes out of the darkness, you can already distinguish the sound of the rain, a pitter-patter of tiny droplets of water against the windowpane, and smell the damp air, which is heavy with the scents of the night. The impersonal tang of the detergent with which the new silk sheets have been washed, the sweet musky fragrance of fresh roses, Gin's new eau de toilette—an intriguingly different aroma compared to his usual one—and the occasional whiff of fresh tobacco...

On the screen, you can see fifteen-year-old Sherry sprawled across the double bed of a luxuriously furnished hotel room, her upper body propped against her elbows and her head cupped in her hands while her eyes are scrutinizing the roses on the bedside table. Gazing past the flowers, she throws a brief glance into the large mirror on the wall when, once again, you are pulled into the depth of the dream, where the boundaries blur between the observer and the observed. Now it is you who turns her attention back to the roses, admiring their deep scarlet colour, their distorted reflections in the sapphire-tinted bouquet vase, and the tiny water drops on their silky petals, which are shimmering mysteriously like tear-shaped jewels on red satin.

Feeling Gin's fingers in your hair, you pull yourself up into a sitting position, turn your face towards him, and placidly receive his kisses with the same mixed emotions you've had since your first date. It is rather enjoyable, the sensation of his lips on yours, warm and soft, with an underlying sincerity and affection you would never have expected from a man like him. Or this nostalgic feeling you always have when you run your fingers through his long smooth hair like you did in your childhood days before you were moved to the orphanage of the Organization. Even when you were abroad you always clung to those memories, promising yourself that—one day, when you were a grown-up—you would return to Azabu Juuban, where he lived, and find an excuse to run your fingers through his hair again.

During the moments when you can forget that the hands caressing you can also kill without hesitation, you feel like surrendering to these gentle hands.

Whenever you meet, he always smells of something pleasant, especially tonight when he has exchanged his usual eau de toilette for a more natural yet more seductive one. The intoxicating fragrance of orange blossoms combined with the languidly smooth scent of sweet osmanthus lace exotic charm with a touch of warmth, overwhelming you with a vague sense of sadness, whose cause you can't put your finger on. Nevertheless, you like the scent of his hair and his skin and don't even mind the smell of fresh tobacco, which always mingles with his. When he pushes you back on the bed and deepens the kiss, however, you taste the tobacco and hate it.

No, you tell him as he takes off your nightdress and his shirt. During the two months with him, you've developed the ability to recognize his intentions just by looking into his eyes. Even though you intend to put it off as long as possible, you know it can't be avoided if you want to stay with him. Sometimes you wonder why you're still resisting him now that there is no spot on your body he hasn't already kissed. But despite your own confusion about your obstinate refusals, which are trying his patience, you've always successfully managed to keep him from going all the way with you.

"Why not?" he asks as the clothes land on the floor.
"I don't know," you sigh as he kisses your breast. "Maybe I just don't want it yet."

He stops and brushes your hair away from your face to gaze into your eyes. In the artificial light, his green irises appear almost blue while his blonde hair seems almost silvery-white—a chameleon-like change that always fascinates you for no apparent reason.

"Still afraid of me, aren't you?" He smirks. "But don't be a hypocrite and pretend that you don't want this."

Grudgingly, you admit to yourself that he is right. And yet you aren't sure whether your desire to give in is only an unfortunate byproduct of your childish infatuation and raging hormones or rather the inborn curiosity of a scientist and your appreciation of his tantalizing perfume.

"I just don't like the idea of being used and then cast away like all the other women you've been with. Why don't you keep things between us as they are now and go get someone else for a one-night stand?" From past experience, you know that pretending to be jealous and insecure of his feelings is the best way to keep his hands off you without insulting him. Bored out of his mind by sentimental and clingy women, he usually loses all interest when you allude to the issue of commitment.

For all that... while a part of you sincerely wishes that he will get tired of you sooner or later and finally leave you for good, another part of you—unfortunately the stronger one—still clings to the fading hope that your love can conquer his malicious side, turning him inside out like a double-sided jacket and dragging him with you from the darkness into the magical twilight.

"I haven't been seeing anyone apart from you these days, which is exactly the reason why I can't wait any longer for this!" With a smirk, he rips off your lovely white silk slip, which you liked so much that having it destroyed in such a way fills you with indignation at the person who committed the heinous offence. Smiling at him in mock shyness, you gently run your hands through his hair and then jerk violently at it.

As expected, he points his Beretta at you and you smile again, obediently apologizing and pulling him down to you for a kiss.

"Nice scent," you tell him between two new kisses, wrapping your arms around him in an affectionate hug. "Orange blossoms, isn't it? With a note of sweet osmanthus, I think. Why are there so many names for the same plant? Sweet osmanthus, sweet olive, fragrant olive, osmanthus fragrans..."

"Kinmokusei, they call it here in Japan." He strokes your hair with his free hand and attentively examines it, wrapping a few short strands around his long finger. "In one or two weeks, the whole city will smell of it."

One or two weeks are too long, you realize, wondering how you're going to appease him with endless kissing throughout your whole trip without driving him crazy until he really uses his Beretta on you. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow at the latest it will be game over. Rolling to the side, you slide from the bed, hide behind the curtain, and open the window. The scent of kinmokusei outside is still barely noticeable; and yet there is a hint of it in the damp air, lingering there like a vague promise of an attainable dream.

With a shiver, you close the window, draw the curtain, and reach for your nightdress, whereupon he kicks it away and pulls you back into the bed next to him. Throwing his knee over your hips and shifting his weight to make sure that you can't escape him again, he raises himself up on one elbow, places your head into his palm, and smirks.
"You've been evading me for two months." He gives a small chuckle, fastidiously removing a reddish hair from your hip with his left hand, in which he is still holding the Beretta. "No woman has ever dared to do this to me. I've really enjoyed the hunt, my little Sherry, but even I have my limit!"

"Not yet," you insist, nestling your head against his shoulder. Pulling the cover over both of you, you give his neck a chaste kiss. "It's late and I'm tired. Let's postpone it until another time... tomorrow, if you like..."

Much to your relief, he doesn't throw a tantrum but puts the Beretta aside before he reaches out for the lighter and the cigarette case on the bedside table to light himself a cigarette with his free hand without letting you go. Now he is smoking silently while you've comfortably settled yourself half on top of him, arms and legs entangled with his, unscrupulously misusing his body as a pillow or a giant plush animal. Despite his violent character, he has enough self-respect not to force a woman into giving him what he wants, you acknowledge in satisfaction, breathing in his beautiful new scent. If it weren't mixed with this aura of cruelty you've begun to detect whenever you're in the vicinity of a codename member, you would love it. Without his unwanted advances, the atmosphere has become drowsy and pleasant.

"You've been acting strangely since the incident with the red-haired woman," he remarks between one pull and another, exhaling the smoke with obvious enjoyment. "Does it make a difference to you to know that she has survived?"

"Has she?"

"They both have... He with just a few scratches, she with a few more. The only one I killed that day was the guy who joined us for dinner and tried to blackmail me with the photos he had taken of us. I don't like the fact that you show so much interest in a complete stranger, though, and a woman, at that." From the corner of your eye, you can see his lips curve in a suggestive smirk. "I didn't expect that you swing both ways."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that I might not swing either way?" You turn away from him to avoid the smoke, and add in an attempt to account for your behaviour, "I don't like purposeless destruction. You told me yourself that one should save one's energy and stay inconspicuous. I didn't want her to get hurt since she didn't have anything to do with the Organization."

"If I had wanted to kill her, she would be dead by now just like the little traitor I took care of that night! As it was, she was only collateral damage. Your foolish sympathy would bother me very much if I weren't sure that it's only your well-developed sense of beauty. You wouldn't have cared at all if she had been an ugly dwarf like the one I shot."

"His looks didn't really matter because he deserved it." You yawn, relieved that he is in an agreeable mood despite your stubborn refusal. The person he killed was a greedy little leech who had been leering at you for the whole evening—a natural sadist and blackmailer who had joined the Organization of his own accord, hobnobbed with the codename members, and grossly overestimated his own abilities when he chose Gin out of all people as his next victim. His death didn't move you a bit, and the only thing which depressed you when you learned about it was the fact that the murderer was Gin, who uncaringly chose your first date to do away with him.

He has just put out his cigarette and is now kissing your neck again, stripping off his briefs before turning you round to face him. Trapped by the old mesh of fear and desire, you feverishly try to come up with another topic of conversation to distract him and yourself.

"Say, does it belong to your job?" you ask in a light-hearted voice. "Executing the traitors of the
Organization? You told me once your job is to handle the most important financial transactions."

"Hmm," he only mutters, gently grabs your knee to pull your hips towards his, and shuts you up with a kiss.

"Is it true that one can buy oneself out of the Organization as that man said?" You move away from him, inwardly congratulating yourself for remembering the conversation at the table when the "ugly dwarf" proposed buying Gin and you out of the Organization so that you two could "enjoy a lifelong honeymoon together" while he took over Gin's cocktail name and position in the Organization. "How much would one have to pay for the two of us?"

Gin instantly stops and gazes hard at you, his eyes startlingly bright and unreadable.

"I'm only curious." You give an indifferent shrug, surprised by your own boldness. "It's rather dangerous to let the members quit like that, isn't it? Someone could get the idea to go to the police and spill whatever they know about the Organization."

"Insignificant members can always leave whenever they want to... if they can pay a sum big enough to buy themselves out." He eyes you warily. "With all their personal data stored in our files, they can't do any harm to the Organization. No one in their right mind would risk their lives and those around them to go to the police without a shred of evidence. There is no such thing for people with cocktail code names like us, though."

"And how big is the sum one has to pay?" you ask, excited at the prospect that, if only you work hard enough and save up, Akemi-nee-san can be free one day.

"Depends on how much that person knows and how long they've been with us. It doesn't start under a hundred million yen, though. For those who've been raised by us and have relatives and friends within the Organization, it starts at a billion yen."

You can feel your enthusiasm shrinking. Nevertheless, the glimmer of hope his statement aroused is not that easy to extinguish. Brimming with youthful confidence, you tell yourself that, for a fifteen-year-old who is working on a project like APTX4869 and going out with Gin, saving up a billion yen may be a considerable challenge but not an impossible task.

"Too bad we two can't buy us out of the Organization," you joke, as he has begun to kiss you again and—which is even more unsettling—is working himself down from your belly to rather intimate spots. "I guess we'll have to go away without their consent."

He groans. Grabbing your wrists and pinning you on the bed, he towers over you threateningly, fixing your eyes with an intense green gaze.

"I know you love to play with fire, Sherry," he hisses. "But if you don't stop now, I'm forced to conclude that you're planning to leave us. It would be such a shame because I'd have to put holes into this gorgeous body of yours here and now."

"Didn't you ever consider it?" you continue, feeling strangely secure despite his threats. "We'd be working regular hours and then have the whole night for us, switching off the phones during our dates for once so that we wouldn't be disturbed all the time. No one would try to spy on us. I think I'd actually like it if we were free to do whatever we wanted."

That must be sufficient to ruin the mood for him for tonight, you think. Now he is going to launch into a tirade about your stupidity and forget what he has set out to do in the first place.

He stares at you, incredulous, before he lets himself sink down next to you and begins to laugh
"Freedom? You're still a naive little brat, after all," he sighs after his fit is gone. "Freedom... Don't make me laugh! One is always a prisoner outside the Organization or inside it. It's security and a good life which really matter. You've been sheltered by the Organization since your birth. A greenhouse flower like you can't imagine how it is... the realities of true freedom..."

Taken aback by the bitterness in his voice, you reach out a tentative hand to stroke his cheek, but he slaps it away and grabs your wrist again, looking furious.

"Don't ever dare to pity me," he says, his voice icy and cutting. "I don't mind your little games as long as you stay within the boundaries I set. Step on them and you'll get to see what happens. I swear you won't like it."

You stare at each other in silence until he pulls you on top of him, kissing you with unfamiliar harshness.

"It doesn't matter whether we belong to the Organization or to the FBI or to another group," he whispers, cupping your face with a dark smile. "The rules are always the same and it's the strong ones who survive in the end. The woman you liked and pitied so much... She belongs to the weak. There is no place in this world for people like her. Just accept it."

"I'm weak, too," you admit, feeling miserable.

"I'd like it if you were a bit weaker." He grins. "But since it's almost midnight and I've been waiting for so long, the few minutes don't really matter."

In answer to your inquiring gaze, he indicates the clock on the wall with a movement of his head and smirks.

"Tomorrow, you said. Don't go back on your promise!"

"I don't want to play games," you explain in a desperate attempt to free yourself from the trap you've dug. Lost for words, you don't know what else to tell him apart from the naked truth. "I've loved you since forever. I wanted a real relationship, not this... You don't really need me for this. Why are we together if you don't even trust me?"

"Trust?" he exclaims in surprise. "You think I don't trust you after I've told you about Pandora's Box and given you the key?"

"But that was a joke? Wasn't it?" You stare at him, incredulous, as you recall the wild story he told you last night when you two shared a bottle of sherry. "You were drunk. I'd never have thought Pandora's Box was real."

"It's just as real as the fact that I'm one of the crows guarding it. Don't let the other members know that you know about it, and don't sing the song to anybody."

He is now stroking your hair with a mysterious smile, singing the hauntingly sad song you heard for the first time last night.

"Fear and selfishness are the most reliable feelings, and knowledge is the key to power. All the information we've collected about the most powerful people in the world, all the dirty little secrets that should never be revealed, a tight-mesh net through which only a few of the politicians will fall... The Organization will always control the world as long as Pandora's Box exists, and it's my duty to guard it. Do you understand now why I can never leave the Organization? Pandora's Box
deserves my absolute loyalty—so does the Boss, who saved my life when no one cared whether a brat like me survived or died. Even if all of the other members were gone, the last one to stay would be me. You either have to stick by me for life or we two will be enemies."

"And we don't want to become enemies so soon, do we?" you joke in an attempt to turn away from the truth that you will never be able to live a normal life with him. "You should never have taught me how to use a weapon! As it is, our fight would end deadly, considering our shooting skills. Let's postpone it until I'm eighty."

Slowly and gently, he traces the outlines of your face with a grim look in his eyes.

"Don't fool around with this, Sherry." He smiles at last. "You think I can't kill you but I assure you that I can! I've never trusted a woman in my life but you. If you ever think of betraying me, it will be the end of us. Trying to hide from me would be futile because I will hunt you down and find you no matter where you are. I will kill you and all the people near you, without exception! Don't think I'd hesitate even for a moment because of love. Love is fleeting and insignificant. Loyalty will always be the most important thing for me."

"Your notion of loyalty is rather warped and one-sided, isn't it?" you retort in bitterness. "You mean you can mess around with other women while I have to sit in my apartment like a lovesick fool, waiting for you to come to me whenever you feel like it."

"If that's the only thing you're worried about—I swear I won't ever touch another woman as long as you don't betray me."

You blink at him in surprise, astonished by the simplicity of his words. While his eyes are still sharp and mocking when he smirks at you, there is also something staggeringly serious in them, something vulnerable and hopeful as if he genuinely felt some sort of emotional attachment.

"To be the only one for me... Wasn't that what you've always wanted? Let's do it for real, then. The papers can wait until you're old enough." Trailing the tips of his long fingers down your back, he wraps his arms around you, presses you to him with an almost boyish grin, and poetically adds, "In sickness and in health, till death do us part..."
The scene slowly fades out...

The scene slowly fades out as the pitter-patter of raindrops retreats into the realm of the past, chased away by the gradual advance of other sounds... the rustle of trees, the splash of water, the rhythm of regular steps, and a steady heartbeat, which has a strangely soothing effect on you. Something similar to smooth leather and a metallic round object (a button?) are patting against your cheek to the rhythm of the steps while a blustering wind is ruffling your hair. The air is damp and cold, causing you to shiver despite the warm arms carrying you, shaking you slightly in the fast but steady rhythm in which you two are moving towards an unknown destination.

Yawning and shifting your position to make yourself comfortable in his arms, you wonder for a moment where Gin is carrying you when you realize that the person you are leaning against feels and smells different. The fragrant base of his scent, while of the same lavishness, also possesses a freshness uncharacteristic of Gin's. Its luminous finish is softened by something your nose can't make out; and the combination of kinnokusei and orange blossoms is not blatantly seductive but teasingly piquant, its languid sweetness gently blended with a warm, velvety natural scent that is curiously provocative and inviting.

With a start, you force your eyes open and find yourself staring at the present in the form of a chin and a head which, for a fleeting moment and from the angle you are looking at it, reminds you slightly of Kaito's in the dim light. But in contrast to Kaito's, his ruffled hair is soft, slightly curly, and of a deep black, adorned by a light blue satin band wrapped around its bottom layer in the nape of his neck, hiding a ponytail whose existence you can only guess but not see.

"Well slept?" The stranger chuckles, putting you back on your feet with a sigh of relief while supporting your waist and your arm until you, having regained your balance, free yourself from him.

"How long have you been carrying me?" you ask in surprise, startled by the familiar sight of the weeping willows, the flat boulder, and the fountain with the harp-playing Gemini. Through the sweeping branches of a weeping willow, you can see the stairs to the main entrance of Dr Mizuno's hospital, at which you spotted Kudo three years ago when you hurried out of the taxi. The Professor's condition had worsened, Ami-san had told you on the phone. And the fact that Kudo had been waiting for you in front of the door despite your bitter quarrel, which—at that time—had not been patched up yet, was sufficient to fill you with a grim sense of foreboding.

"Only for a few minutes," the stranger replies, stretching his limbs with a languorous smile. "You simply fell into my arms and I couldn't wake you up no matter how I tried. So I decided to carry you to the nearest hospital since it's not too far away."

"I'm perfectly fine," you lie, wondering whether APAH has begun to reveal its side effects to both Kudo and you. "Just a dizzy spell, which is over now."

"You don't look like the type that easily faints," he observes and grins. "I didn't expect that my shampoo would have such an effect on you."

"Don't get your hopes up! Though I must say I do like the fragrance. What is it called?"

"'Search for your love.'"
"You're kidding me!"

But that's how they always called it when they were small, he insists. His parents simply accepted it and never referred to the fragrance by another name.

"Maybe they didn't give it a name at all," he muses while a roguish smile curves his lips. "I think we should have given it three names or more because I have the feeling we all made mistakes while memorizing the formula and ended up with three different scents. It's a shame since they were so proud of it. My poor parents..."

"So you have two brothers?"

Two foster brothers, who are only a few months older than him, he tells you. Most probably they are really related in some way, as they have similar features. It wouldn't surprise him since the three of them had been abandoned at the same shrine on the same day.

"Had you been in an orphanage before you were adopted by your foster parents?"

"No, we hadn't. My foster parents were friends of the priest and immediately took the three of us in, depriving us of the pleasure of seeing an orphanage from the inside."

"You didn't miss anything," you remark, startled by your compelling need to talk with him about your private life.

"So you were in one?" he asks as he settles himself on the boulder next to the fountain and gestures for you to sit down next to him.

"Only for a few years," you reply, ignoring his invitation to share the boulder with him. "But it was long enough for me not to like it." Angry at yourself because now he will certainly think that you're trying to pester him with the sob story of your life, you consult your watch and announce with an air of authority, "It's late! Let's go now! We don't want to waste time, do we? Which is the quickest way to Two Lights' from here?"

For a moment, he only fixes you with a curious gaze in which—much to your relief—you can't detect any sign of pity.

"My bike isn't far away from here," he says without showing the slightest inclination to get up. "We only need to cross the intersection behind the hospital and walk a few steps to the motorcycle bay where I parked it. But are you sure you're okay?"

"I didn't expect that we would go by bike!" You frown at him in dismay, pointing out your dress to him. "How am I going to ride a bike dressed like this?" Stealing a glance at the lean figure, whose legs are now comfortably stretched out on the gravel path, you wonder what sort of person would ride a bike with a long and wide jacket like the one he is wearing. But then again, he seems rather eccentric with his red and black silk shirt, his satin band, and his white gold earrings, somehow managing to look oddly stylish despite dressing like a harlequin.

"What's wrong with your dress?" he gazes at you uncomprehendingly, eyeing your legs and the hem of your dress with unabashed curiosity. "It's not like you're wearing a mini skirt! I've seen women on bikes in skirts and dresses much shorter than yours."

"Why did you park so far away?" you ask him in resignation, frowning at the mental picture of yourself on a bike with the wind tearing at your thin dress and blowing it up while you're fighting with both hands to keep it down during the whole ride. "Do you even have a helmet for me? I'm not going to ride a bike with you without a helmet!"
He didn't want to wake up the whole neighbourhood when he brought "Odango" home, he replies as a matter of fact. And of course he has helmets for both of you unless somebody has stolen them, which wouldn't really surprise him, as he simply left them on the seat tonight. However, he wonders whether you're feeling well enough to go to Two Lights' since you just fainted. "It looks to me like you're too sick to go out. If you want, I can bring you home now," he adds with a tinge of regret in his voice.

"No, I'm fine!" you refuse, irked by the fact that your voice sounds awkwardly desperate. Fearing that he might get the impression that you're desperate for his company, you sigh and admit, "I don't want to go home because Kudo is sleeping on my sofa right now."

The stranger stares at you, wide-eyed with surprise, whereupon you feel yourself blushing under his startled and inquiring gaze. "Since he was so exhausted, he simply fell asleep on my sofa while I was printing out a document for him," you elaborate, realizing how your defensive tone only makes matters worse. Noticing a slow smile spreading over his face, you glare at him. "Get your mind out of the gutter since all we did together was have tea—"

He bursts into laughter, a sound so exhilarating and infectious that you can't help but smile at him. "Look who's talking!" The stranger flashes you an amused smile with a hint of curiosity. "I swear the only thing I'd been thinking was: If he is there, why is she here with me?"

Just an innocent question which was inevitable given the circumstances. And yet it disturbs you because the reason which seemed obvious to you less than an hour ago is now suddenly just as obscure and elusive as the sunset during which you met him on the bench you had expected to find Kudo.

Sitting so close to him on the narrow boulder that your arms are touching, with your legs crossed and stretched out in front of you, you watch his feet play with the dead twigs and petals on the gravel path while you're filling him in on the happenings since Kudo's arrival. Despite skipping all the details like your conversations with Kudo, Kaito's card, APAH, and Pandora's Box—things he doesn't need to know about—you tell him in detail about all the things which really bother you: Kudo's outrageous lateness even though he wasn't caught up in a case this time (something that almost never happens because Kudo is a punctual and reliable person as long as he doesn't stumble over a case and forget the date), Kudo's melancholic mood, which you noticed although he had been trying to hide it from you, Ran's resolve to take over the karate dojo in Osaka, and Kudo's decision to leave Tokyo with her even though he obviously doesn't want to...

"That's why I don't want to be in my apartment tonight," you conclude. "It would seem to me as if we were betraying her. Also, going clubbing sounds much more attractive to me than sitting there and watching him snore. Hence I decided to go out and come back in the morning when he has already woken up."

"You mean you simply locked him up alone in your apartment like that?" He raises a brow at you in a half-amused, half-incredulous expression. "Why not? It's not like he is a helpless little kid. He can climb out of the balcony and leave whenever he wants to. There are few people in the world who are as independent and self-reliant as he is. Even if I handcuffed him to my sofa, he would find a way to free himself, I can assure you!"

"So that's why you don't want to stay in your apartment... but I can't see what the problem is
between you two," the stranger muses, balancing a twig on his shoe. "He doesn't want to leave. You don't want him to go. Why can't you two just be happy together in Tokyo? His girlfriend will suffer, I know. But it's better for her, too, if he leaves her now instead of seven years later, isn't it? I wouldn't like it if I found out that my girlfriend had been in love with another guy all the time and only forced herself to stay with me out of sympathy."

"No, that's not it!" you sigh. "Even if he were in love with me instead of her—which is certainly not the case!—it would never work out between us. They've grown up together and she is the loveliest thing alive, warm and caring and extremely tough in her own way. I bet she has been pampering him like a baby for the past three years, and he is the type of man who likes motherly women like her. I, on the other hand, have always misplaced and lost the things I liked, starting with my toys and stuffed animals since I was small. Maybe that's why I'm so angry about losing my handbag yesterday because I did it again!"

You break off, inwardly cursing the fact that he won't be able to understand your dilemma unless you tell him about Pandora's Box and what really happened between Kudo and you. As it is, you can only tell him a distorted version of the truth and hope that it sounds convincing enough for him to swallow it. With an impatient flick of your wrist, you wave away the memory of the last sentences Kudo threw at you during your quarrel and add truthfully, "Let's just say that he and I don't match at all!"

"You won't know it until you try. It would be nasty of you if they were happy together and you were trying to break them up. But it doesn't seem like that to me after hearing your story. You should at least tell him that you would like him to stay since he obviously doesn't get it. Aren't you only afraid of the mess and analyzing your relationship with him to death so that you won't have to deal with it?"

"No, it's not like that," you sigh in frustration, "although I admit that being able to analyze things to death does come in handy sometimes."

"In my situation, probably, if I wanted to forget her." He turns his face to you with a wry smile. "One can overanalyze everything to death if one really wants to. But in your case it's different. You're trying to ruin something which could work out, aren't you?"

There is an underlying sadness in his voice and his gaze which disappears almost immediately when you meet his eyes, making you wonder whether you've only imagined it. Mystified by your own muddled feelings and the troubled expression you spotted in his eyes, you shift your gaze away from him towards the blanket of dark clouds in the sky. The wind has just chased them away from the full moon, whose light is now reflected in the ruffled water of the small fountain to your left—the distorted, ever-changing shape of its reflection strangely evocative of Cinderella's pumpkin carriage during its transformation.

"I don't think he would have suggested that you two watch cherry blossoms together during a sunset if he weren't in love with you," your fairy godfather continues in a voice which could easily enchant the evil stepmother and stepsisters and steal Cinderella away from the prince. "He even told you he'd rather stay in Tokyo than go with her. How many signs do you need to know that the one he wants is you? Just hurry up and make something out of it before you miss the chance and either of you really falls in love with someone else. Right now he is in your apartment, waiting for you."

"True..." You smile at the memory of Kudo's silhouette against the twilight, furiously blinking it away before the ghost of your transient love at Pandora's Box can return to haunt you. "And this evening he is going to fetch his girlfriend from the train station and we won't see each other for
That's the extent of his love for me. It's definitely not strong enough for a serious relationship, if you ask me. And he probably slept so well in my presence because I'm not a threat to him in any way. He is infuriatingly clueless! I could even undress in front of him and he'd only worry about my health."

"I'd worry about your mental health, too, if you suddenly did that." The stranger chuckles. "Well, he probably doesn't know what he wants, sending out mixed messages. But don't you think that you're doing the same to him?"

"Sending out mixed messages?"

"If his presence really bothered you so much and you didn't want to tell him about your feelings, you could have asked him to leave your apartment, couldn't you?"

"It was difficult to kick him out," you claim in a wretched attempt to defend yourself. "We had been talking about a lot of things. I simply forgot the time." Giving in to the overwhelming urge to tell the stranger about your feelings for Kudo, you add, "I did have a weakness for him once, but it seems so far away now that I don't know if it's real anymore. Maybe I'm only affected by it because I'm in a strange mood tonight. I'll have forgotten everything by tomorrow..."

The stranger gives you a skeptical look before he silently shakes his head and turns his face away from you to gaze into the distance. His clear-cut profile, calm and serene, stand in marked contrast to the short loose locks of his bangs and the top layers of his hair, which seem to be dancing impishly in the wind, a contrast whose parallel with his character you find most intriguing.

"It really doesn't look like that to me," he says simply, silently beholding the curtains of sweeping branches to your right, which are now flapping in the gusty wind, waving their ghostly veil towards the two of you, until he shrugs and begins to tap a rhythm on the gravel path, humming a catchy melody with a faraway smile.

Even his humming is a joy to listen to, you think, marveling at the beauty of his voice, his acute sense of pitch and rhythm, and his exquisite sense of timing, which is apparent even when he is only walking through the streets, tapping his foot, or talking to you. Slowing down or accelerating the tempo according to the phrases with the confidence and boldness of a natural talent, he continues to hum the melody to himself with a smile on his lips, lost in thought until he suddenly turns and fixes his expressive, startlingly dark blue eyes on you.

With a feeling of utter bewilderment, you abandon yourself to the impossible dream of staying here with him forever, leaving your past behind and listening to the sound of his voice until the end of time, before you belatedly recognize the melody. In a way, it's a miracle that you still remember it although you've heard it only once—a song you would have forgotten if it hadn't been the only time in your life that you fell in love with the voice of a man whose face you never saw. You're now fifteen-year-old Sherry again, naive and fatally confident, waiting for your first date with Gin in your favourite café while listening to a song about an unrequited love, smitten by the beautiful voice you discovered on the same day you met the red-haired woman...

The memory of her has been stalking you all night, you realize. The accident which resembled the one Gin caused when the car crashed into the bike... the sunset during which Gin and the midnight blue car cornered her boyfriend and her... the Queen of Spades on Kaito's card... the scent of sweet osmanthus and the voice of the stranger, which—though less husky and even more refined—resembles the lead singer's voice you heard through the speakers of the café where you saw her for the first time... Like a vengeful spirit, her presence haunts you in your dreams and even outside your dreams in the night. And now that you can remember her face, you also remember clearly the expression in her eyes when she saw you through the window of the car, her horror, her disbelief
and—something you have tried to banish from your mind but can never forget—her sense of betrayal.

A/N: Thanks a lot to Ritz, who betaed this despite cancelling another piano lesson because she felt so dead she had to go to bed early. (Last week there was no update since she cancelled the last piano lesson, too.) I've been really tired as well, just like everyone I know. Maybe it's the weather or the moon, whatever...

In other news, I am working on *Becoming Conan* and *Encounter in Venice*, albeit very slowly.
Thankfully, your terror of tonight's string of curious coincidences passes as soon as it came although you need a moment to shake off the image of the red-haired girl lying on the pavement in a pool of blood, her frail body surrounded by a cloud of tiny green, pink, and white flowers. Not far away from her, her boyfriend was lying on the pavement as well even though he was still moving slightly, keeping a hand pressed against the side of his helmet as if he were in a daze or suffering from a concussion. Morbidly, among all the details of the scene engraved in your mind, the memory which disturbs you most is not that of her blood-drenched dress but that of her three radiant long-stemmed roses—two of which are slightly torn while the red one is still surprisingly intact—lying scattered around her head, whose dark reddish-brown hair and beautiful features might as well have belonged to an angel from a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

The stranger has stopped humming and is now smiling at you in silence, distracting you from your unreasonable fears with the intense curiosity you can see in his eyes. The red-haired girl has survived and has probably forgotten about you by now. Your strange obsession with her is the only thing you should be disturbed about. That, and your premonition of something disastrous when you think about the peculiar sunset, the stranger's intriguing eyes, and Kaito's warning...

"I already feel sorry for your future husband if you ever change your mind and marry," the stranger says in a light-hearted voice, interrupting your train of thought. With a start, you realize that you're not fifteen anymore and decisively free yourself from the spell his eyes and his voice have cast on you. Beautiful things are skin-deep and to be enjoyed but not to fall in love with. You're no longer so young and naive that you can't fight the moonlight. You know very well that you can resist.

"... It will always seem to him as if Kudo were lurking behind the corner to steal you away at the first opportunity. There are few husbands who can deal with that. If you ever consider getting yourself a slave who does all your housework for you, you'll need to lookout for a level-headed husband, someone who is just as cool and composed as Mamoru-san."

If he had said it before your talk with Kaito, you certainly wouldn't have minded. But after your conversation with Kaito, hearing the same from him is disquieting.

"Do I really behave as if I would throw myself at Kudo in an instant if he were free? It's not like I'm desperate for him because we almost never meet and don't even call each other. I've actually grown accustomed to the fact that he is never there."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about you," the stranger airily waves your worries away. "So Kudo and you seldom meet... But no sooner had your friends and his girlfriend left the two of you alone in Tokyo than he invented a treasure hunting game and even designed a map to ask you to watch cherry blossoms at sunset with him. After you two missed each other, he ran to your apartment, waited for hours, then walked to Ueno-koen in the middle of the night to find you. He talked you into letting him visit you—just to have a cup of tea together, I know—in the middle of the night after walking you home. To top it all he even fell asleep on your sofa so that he didn't have to leave." He pauses for effect before concluding, "A 'friend' like that would drive most husbands insane, you know... And it's even more maddening because Kudo is such a dangerous rival, the stereotypical shiny fairytale prince. You will have to dump Kudo some day like Odango dumped me if you want to save your marriage. Why don't you spare everyone the heartache by going back now and kissing Sleeping Beauty awake before proposing to him?" His long black eyelashes cast dark shadows over
his eyes as he gazes into the distance and adds mischievously, with a smile, "I'm sure he will enjoy it."

Without the links which prevent Kudo and you from going your separate ways—APAH, the Detective Boys, and the deal between Kudo and you to spend your real birthday together—the stranger's version of your alleged secret love story sounds so surprisingly convincing and excessively romantic that you forget your irritation and chuckle instead.

"Well, Kudo seems quite a danger for my future marriage, doesn't he? But we are absolutely not compatible, he can't cook, and I don't like the idea of love leading to marriage while he really believes in it. Three reasons not to go back and kiss him. I fear I'm not easy to please either. So, if I should ever hate doing housework so much that I consider getting myself a husband, I will look out for someone with an enormous ego who likes a real challenge."

"Someone with an enormous ego who likes a real challenge and who is masochistic enough to stick by you if the situation with Kudo and you lasts for years!" He raises a skeptical brow at you. "That combination is hard to find, I think. It's easier to make do with Kudo instead, no matter how clueless and boring he is."

"Masochistic? Someone like you, who was content with platonically wooing a married woman like a medieval knight for seven years?"

Since when has this become a running joke, you wonder, inwardly scolding yourself for thinking that marrying him for real wouldn't be much of a sacrifice.

"Almost eight years," he tells you with a wry, self-mocking smile. "When we met, she was already engaged to him without me knowing about it. I pursued her for one semester when Mamoru-san was at Oxford. I was dumb enough to think that she was my girlfriend just because she spent all her free time with me."

Before you can dwell on the thought that he is now depressed because your joke has brought back unpleasant memories, he flashes you another of his devastatingly charming smiles and draws you close to him again, with the difference that this time you're not only aware of his scent but also of his warm touch you can feel through your cardigan.

"You know what? Maybe we should really elope just to see whether it would work out." He chuckles. "Even if it doesn't, the expressions on their faces when they learn about the news would be worth it!"

Before your eyes, you can see Kudo inspecting your marriage license with his odd assortments of magnifying glasses, searching for a clue which proves that it is fake until he realizes it must be real and stares at you, incredulous.

"I must admit I'm curious to see the reaction. I might really consider your suggestion if you can clean and cook."

"I can do both really well," he brags. "Cleaning better than cooking, though. But I can make omelettes and chicken congee for you."

"If you call that 'cooking', I'll pass," you sigh, freeing yourself from his grasp. "Nobody can cook worse than Kudo, though..."

With his arm gone, you are once again aware of the chill night air and the wind, which comes in sudden gusts, swaying the trees and messing up your dress and your hair. Laughing at your futile
attempts to straighten out your dress, the stranger reaches out his hand to help you keep your hair out of your face while you only glare at him, indignant. But then you get distracted by the way how his dimples and laugh lines deepen and wonder how he would react if you kissed him just for fun.

"So you've already enjoyed Kudo's cooking?" he asks, eyes twinkling and lips curved by a suggestive smile.

"No, I haven't. And I really don't feel like tasting it after what I've heard from his girlfriend. She told me she had attempted to teach him a few times... It's a wonder they both haven't died yet."

"Odango's cooking is atrocious as well."

"So you've already enjoyed Kudo's cooking?" he asks, eyes twinkling and lips curved by a suggestive smile.

"No, I haven't. And I really don't feel like tasting it after what I've heard from his girlfriend. She told me she had attempted to teach him a few times... It's a wonder they both haven't died yet."

"Odango's cooking is atrocious as well." He laughs. "I wish someone had warned me about it before I tried her apple pie."

"She forced it on us and Mamoru-san stoically ate all of it. That was the moment when I realized how much Mamoru-san has to endure every day for the sake of their marriage," he remarks lightly, shaking off the mental image with a dismissive movement of his head and his hand. "I can't imagine giving myself up like that! I really admire him for it."

"Odango's cooking is atrocious as well."

"So you've already enjoyed Odango's cooking. Are there other intimate things between you two you haven't told me about yet?"

"Nothing," he sighs, crestfallen. "But it's still more than the things between you and Kudo because at least I managed to leave her with a kiss on her cheek when I gave her up."

"I win," you tell him in a fit of euphoria when you feel the back of his fingers on your skin as he pushes your hair out of your eyes again while you're busy rearranging your poor excuse of a dress.

"I received a confession and a proposal although there was, sadly, no kiss. But I wasn't disappointed because I knew it's no use expecting things like that so soon from a clueless mystery freak like him."

Astonished by the effortlessness with which you could touch on the memory which had been a lump in your throat for over three years, your mind winds back to Pandora's Box only to find that your fear of it has completely disappeared. How could it frighten you so much if it's just another wreckage under the sea, almost invisible in the impenetrable darkness like all the other remnants of your past? Buried under thick layers of sadness and resentment, the ghost of your love for Kudo is still there. But you no longer have to fear it since you've successfully locked it up where it can sleep alone, harmless and untouchable as long as it stays undisturbed.

"He proposed? And why didn't you accept it?" the stranger asks, fixing your eyes in disbelief.

"Weren't you in love with him at that time? Or are you that terrified of marriage?"

You sigh, fidgeting with the mobile phone in your pocket, whose presence can't be ignored due to its unfamiliar weight. Although you usually leave it at home, you've taken it with you this time for fear that, if he wakes up before you return, Kudo might get the idea to snoop around and will accidentally stumble over the file with his impetuous proposal, which he took back only a few minutes after he made it. Your computer should be relatively safe from him, but you're paranoid about him guessing your mobile phone password.

"I did accept it, even though I was terrified of marriage... But he bailed! In retrospect, I think I was lucky, considering how poor his cooking skills are and how little I like the word 'marriage' in general."

"And why did he bail?"
"That's a long story," you wave your hand in a dismissive gesture imitating the one he made when you two talked about cooking. "Maybe someday I'll tell you if you don't pester me about it tonight." Since you're feeling slightly guilty about the lie, you change the topic. "Has she ever told you that she had feelings for you as well?"

"No, never." The stranger leans back to gaze at the indigo sky with its dark blueish clouds that are continuously changing shapes, drifting with the wind from one place to another as if they had lost their direction. "I know I must be delusional... But there were moments when I was sure she did have feelings for me although she never said anything."

"You really believed she would leave her husband for you someday?"

A moment of silence passes until he turns and gives you a pained look as if your question had directed his attention to the reality he had tried to ignore.

"No, I didn't," he says at last. "But I often had the feeling that I could steal her away if I wanted... that she would let me carry her off to a place where no one can find us and make her forget about him for a while." A mischievous smile flits across his face as he contemplates the option. "For a few weeks or even a few months, it would be sheer bliss. But what would happen then?" Switching from mischievous to resigned and depressed within the split of a second, he sighs. "She is devoted to him and extremely loyal. If she abandoned him for me, she would never be the same again. Someday, she would feel guilty for it and despise herself. Ruining her life like that... I could never do it."

After three years, you can still hear Kudo's voice at your ear. I'm racked with guilt, he had said, telling you nothing you hadn't already known beforehand.

"Kudo is extremely loyal as well," you remark. "It's one of his best character traits, I think. His girlfriend is the same... Loyalty is so rare in this world. Is it one of the things you love most about her?"

"Yes, it is," he replies lightly, springing to his feet. "That's why it can't be helped." Throwing an attentive glance at the darkening clouds which are approaching, he says with a tinge of surprise in his voice, "'Suck it up and move on,' I'd told myself, wallowing in self-pity when she got married. Of course I didn't really mean it. But tonight when she dumped me, it was different." Turning round to gaze down at you with a mystified expression, he murmurs, "I've been feeling very strange since the sunset."

"Strange?"

"Yes, as if something important had happened to me without me noticing." His eyes fix yours with an expectant look. "Can you understand that?"

"I think so," you say flatly, no longer bewildered by the fact that he feels the same as you.

"It's the first time that I've realized I'm an idiot for not moving on, but, at the same time, I don't know what to think about it." His eyes are sorrowful when he bends down and distractedly removes for you a leaf which was caught in your hair. "I felt that something would change tonight but I hoped things would take another turn..." Frowning, he kicks a twig away in frustration. "I have the feeling I've reached my limit and can't take it anymore, and yet... I'm still clinging to my love for her. I really don't want to lose it!"

"Those feelings always fade with time, which is actually a blessing, in my opinion," you coolly reflect. "In contrast to you, I wish they could simply disappear without a trace just when I want
them to. It would make life much easier." Throwing a glance at your watch, you decide to get back to the more prosaic aspects of life. "I think we need to go to Two Lights' now if we still want to have a drink. And it's getting rather stormy here. We need to hurry if we don't want to get caught in the rain."

With a vengeance, you realize that you've left your wallet in your lost handbag and grudgingly admit it to him.

"Come on, of course it's on the house!" He smiles.

You raise a brow at him, amused by his choice of words.

"Didn't you want to say it's on you?"

He gives a small chuckle.

"You can see it like that if you want."

"Thank you."

A sudden gust of cold wind blows in your direction, causing a few sweeping branches of the weeping willow to brush against his head and get entangled in his collar and his hair above the satin band of his ponytail. Laughing and pulling at his locks with both hands to remove the branches from his hair, the stranger winks at you with a conspiratorial smile. "It doesn't matter whether the party is still going on or not," he declares. "We still have a few hours until you have to return to Kudo. Let's make a lot of fun memories together to dilute the bad ones! I'll bring you home in the morning."

"Good idea," you remark before you realize what he could have meant with making "fun memories together" until he brings you home in the morning. Even though his claim that he has never kissed anyone in a romantic context sounded truthful to your ears, he might belong to the type of man that doesn't count the kisses exchanged during a one-night stand. He himself has told you that women immediately force their phone numbers on him. Flirtatious, easy-going, and fun-loving as he obviously is, he might not have turned down all of them.

"Whatever you mean with 'fun'... I'm not the right woman for physical stuff with no strings attached," you warily remark, suddenly apprehensive about his impulsive hugs and his scent, which brought back your memories of Gin. "Don't even think of trying anything funny with me."

An awkward silence descends upon the two of you as he stares down at you in stupefied amazement. Seeing the flabbergasted and genuinely innocent expression on his face, it dawns on you that—despite his penchant for excessive flirting and uninhibited displays of affection—he has never been even remotely interested in having a one-night stand with you.

Embarrassed by the realization that he is now aghast at the thought that you might be contemplating the option—there is indeed an expression of mistrust in his eyes, which probably mirrors your own a few seconds ago—you add in an attempt to joke while wishing that the earth would open up and swallow you at once, "Besides, I won't marry you unless you impress me with your housekeeping skills. Don't forget that and fall in love with me!"

"Deal. Since I don't plan to spend the rest of my life doing housework, I wouldn't fall in love with you even if you were the only woman in the galaxy!" He gives you a gleeful grin. "Rest assured that the only physical thing with no strings attached I expect from you to do with me tonight is dancing."
Still visibly amused by your misinterpretation of his words, he extends his hand to help you to your feet. And once again you surprise yourself when you—even though you usually avoid needless hand contact—happily reach out to take it.

The sudden shift in breathing and heart rate comes simultaneously with the jolt of surprise and something close to recognition when your fingers touch. Without letting go of your hand, he stands still for a moment after pulling you into a standing position.

Like in a dream, the past and the present seem to merge into each other in a world frozen in time, and a confused silence falls between the two of you in which you're struck by the memory of Kudo holding your hand three years ago when Hattori and the two of you were going for a stroll along Quai Montebello with M Jean Black, the French agent of the FBI. Affected by the troublesome hormonal changes after taking the antidote, you had been walking on air despite knowing that Kudo was only holding hands with you because it was part of the disguise.

The hand you're holding now feels distinctly different from Kudo's, and yet the physical sensation you have when you touch it is exactly the same.

"I'm very much into dancing," explains the stranger and lets go of your hand, regarding you with bewildered eyes, whose deep blue gaze stirs vague and jumbled memories of violin and piano music and scarlet roses, Tenoh Haruka's lavender scarf, Kaioh Michiru's long flowing locks, Professor Tomoe's mad laughter, and the knowing wink of Akemi-nee-san...

"Thanks," you tell him with studied nonchalance, linking arms with him like you did before. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't dance at all. The few steps I learned in my dance classes... I've forgotten them long ago."

"Don't worry," he smiles, pulling you with him towards the intersection behind the gate of the park. "I'll lead. Probably you're only out of practice..."

The camera pans out, leaving the pair to show the motorbike waiting at the motorcycle bay, an extravagant custom-made model, which was one of the world's most expensive motorcycles seven or eight years ago. On the streets, several photos and posters of Two Lights are gracing the walls of the buildings and the advertisement billboards. Slowly and deliberately, in ominous silence, the camera zooms in to a poster, shifting the focus from Two Lights' long flying ponytails to the large roses in their buttonholes, one of a rich golden-yellow and the other of a sparkling white evoking the image of snow...

On an advertising screen next to the traffic lights at the intersection, a reporter has just announced Taiki Kou's and Yaten Kou's comeback as "Two Lights" when Seiya Kou's silhouette appears in a flashback of the movie clip for a fleeting moment. Imitating the spotlights focusing solely on the object in his right hand, the camera zooms in and reveals a long-stemmed scarlet rose—a gleaming red orb in the dim light—which is now flying through the air while the horde of girls under the darkened stage are hurling themselves at it, screaming.

Oblivious to the dramatic happenings on the screen, Miyano Shiho only looks up when the traffic lights have turned green and the scene has already faded out, replaced by the announcement and the trailer of the new romantic comedy starring Two Lights and Aino Minako. From another angle, the camera zooms in to the face of the nameless stranger, who is now gazing down at his companion with an expression of amusement and disbelief as he sneaks a few loose locks the wind has torn from his ponytail back beneath the collar of his long jacket.
As they are ambling together through the deserted streets, each of them wonder whether the other one has noticed it. Yet neither of them identifies it as the unexpected tingling sensation which accompanies the first stirrings of love or something akin to it... And both of them shrug it off as the spell of a fleeting moment, passing over the critical juncture where destiny threw the dice anew and reshuffled the cards as two strangers arrived at the crossroads between the easy rapport of kindred spirits and the gravitational pull of a more troublesome attraction.

A/N: Since I'd feel bad about making the (very busy and very exhausted!) Ritz beta this fic every week although she isn't into DC anymore, I've decided to edit GaT alone for now. This means no one will ask me to shorten my long rambling sentences or fix my prepositions, or tell me what sounds off in American ears. I also catch only half of the typos I've made after rereading a text for ten times. You've been warned! :D

In other news, I've been addicted to Overwatch for weeks although I think I'm slowly returning to a healthy rhythm. Hopefully this phase will last for a while so that I can continue my WIPs (and hopefully I won't start a fic with the DC crew as Overwatch characters: Mercy-Ran, Shinichi McCree, Ai Moira... :D Go away, plunny!).
Under normal circumstances...

Under normal circumstances, you might not have recognized the bike at all. Eight years is too long a time to remember a motorcycle you've only seen twice in your life. And even if you had noticed that it looked familiar (the model is one of its kind), you would have shrugged it off as a prop you had seen in one of your fashion magazines where it must have served as the background for two or three scantily clad girls presenting the new summer collection. But after being haunted by the red-haired girl all night, you immediately jumped when you spotted it: a blue-yellow motorcycle with two helmets—one white and one blue—on its seat, its back illuminated by a street lamp and its front looming in the shadow of a tree like a ghostly apparition.

"Are you all right? Feeling dizzy again?" your companion asks, supporting your arm. Judging from the look on his face, he fears that you're going to have another fainting spell.

"It's nothing... I only thought I've already seen your bike somewhere."

Maybe you really have, he muses, because it was a very famous model seven or eight years ago, featured at many motorcycle shows. People still offer him horrendously high prices for it, and he wonders why no one has stolen it yet.

"I didn't expect that you're interested in motorbikes, though."

"I could say the same about you. You don't look like a biker to me."

He wouldn't label himself as "a biker" either, he agrees with a smile, handing you the white helmet. To him, the bike is only a practical means of transportation in the rush hour even though he usually prefers the car, especially when he can be a passenger instead of driving himself.

"I prefer driving myself," you remark. "I like being in control of the vehicle."

"Can you ride a motorbike, too?"

"Of course." One of the benefits of growing up in the Organization was the seriousness with which those things were taught. Being able to use all modes of transportation was for an Organization member just as important as knowing the phone numbers of the closest associates by heart.

"You can give me a ride if you like." He hands you his keys with a mischievous smile.

"I'd rather not," you decline. "I don't know the way to Two Lights."

"I can give you directions."

"But it's your bike, and I don't have a license," you protest, refusing to drive without a license even though he doesn't seem to mind. You're sure you wouldn't be able to focus on the way since you would be fighting with your dress during the whole ride. What type of man would let the woman accompanying him give him a ride on his own bike, anyway, you wonder, bewildered by his unpredictable character. One moment he is carrying you through the streets, the next he is as girly as Sonoko can be, asking you to give him a ride on his own motorcycle.

"What a shame!" he sighs, climbing on the bike in mock disappointment. From behind and with the blue helmet in his hand, he reminds you almost of the blue-clad biker from eight years ago.
"Say, did you ever have a red-haired girlfriend?" you ask him in mistrust.

He shoots you a quizzical look through the rearview mirror, his eyes meeting yours in genuine surprise, and grins when his gaze lands on your hair.

"Not yet." He winks. "I already told you I've never had a girlfriend. Why do you ask?"

"Just forget it," you sigh, putting on your helmet, as he has just put on his. Making yourself comfortable on the seat, you reassure yourself that the probability of him being connected to the red-haired girl in any way is so tiny that it might as well not exist. What you're feeling can't even be called a premonition but only paranoia or superstition, fueled by an especially long sunset and a particularly intriguing perfume...

"I thought I could read your mind; but it seems I can't make you out at all." He laughs, starting the engine.

"I'm glad you've finally come to your senses!"

...And yet... there is this strange sense of déjà vu when you hear the familiar smooth sound of the engine, a deep tremolo which slowly rises and accelerates, growing gradually louder as it builds to a climax and then dies down like a mournful howl, the prélude to disaster for another couple eight years ago.

"What do you usually get up to at weekends?" you ask him in an attempt to make small talk while the colourful lights and blinking signs characteristic of Tokyo by night are flashing past you. After leaving the quiet southern part of Azabu Juuban for the more lively north, you've been overtaken by many other bikes and cars packed with people heading in the same direction, you observe, wondering whether they are all heading for Two Lights' even though the party has already started hours ago.

"Concerts, art exhibitions, museums... I'm a real culture vulture just like both my brothers although, sometimes, I prefer going out to town alone or staying at home to work. And you?"

"Cinema, shopping, reading in bed. Nothing interesting, really..."

"Not shutting yourself off in your basement to mix perfumes? I'd have expected that from you with your awesome sense of smell."

"I don't only have an awesome sense of smell. I have an awesome sixth sense as well."

"What exactly do you mean with 'sixth sense'?"

"Intuition? I often know when something is wrong, when I'm in danger or when someone I know appears in my vicinity without looking. Other people can do that, too, but I'm especially good at it."

"And? Are you in danger now?" he asks in a mysterious voice, which would have sounded creepy if it weren't for his low chuckle.

"Not with you. You're absolutely harmless."

He laughs.

"Somehow I'm really sorry to hear that," he sighs, flirting again although this time you're not sure
whether he has done it out of habit or out of gallantry towards you. "I can sense people as well," he continues in a more serious voice. "Back then, when I was walking past your balcony, I could feel with certainty that you were there. Strange, isn't it?"

"Hmm, strange indeed."

Vaguely wondering whether you still possess the aura of the Organization, you continue to stare past his shoulder at the illuminated streets until the two shooting stars announcing Two Lights' emerge from behind the tall ginkgo trees of Ichinohashi Park. Contrary to your expectations, it's a very picturesque two-storey building with a large patio and a roof garden, which are still bursting with guests at half-past four a.m. Driving past the just as crowded parking lot, the stranger turns to the left and instantly applies the brakes when he spots the group of people in front of the back entrance.

"There he is!" screams a high voice, and you two are suddenly engulfed in a sea of flashing lights, cameras, microphones, and fashionably dressed people while the stranger whirls the bike around and—much to the shock of the car drivers behind you—escapes with you through a small opening between two cars in the opposite direction.

"Why did you pull such a stunt?" you shout at him in dismay as you two are racing down the street. "Do you want to kill both of us?" His speed has made it increasingly harder for you to keep your balance with your hands on your knees, and you angrily grab at the back of his jacket in front of you, pulling a bit more forcefully at it than you intended to.

"Please let go of my hair," he groans in pain. "Can't you just hold my waist instead of jerking at my ponytail?" Sighing in relief when you let go of his back and grab at the pockets of his jacket instead, he chuckles and mocks, "You're such a prude, constantly straightening your dress and trying not to touch me even though you're about to fall from the bike. And that despite having at least two ex-boyfriends. How come?"

"Why did you suddenly pull such an idiotic stunt?" you ask, still breathless with anger since you can already see yourself lying on the street in a pool of blood like the red-haired girl eight years ago. At your age, you should have known better than to trust a man who asks a complete stranger for a rendezvous at night. Despite feeling like a complete mess tonight, you don't really want to die.

"Paparazzi and reporters are besieging Two Lights'," he explains, calmly evading a car, which has suddenly overtaken you two from the wrong side. "Unless you want to appear in the news as my latest girlfriend and be slandered by the gutter press by tomorrow night, we have to flee."

"Weren't they there when 'Odango' and you watched Kaito's performance? How did you get past them the last time?" you ask. His melodious voice has a soothing quality in contrast to his dangerously impulsive character, and you try to put yourself at ease with the thought that at least he seems a capable driver with quick reactions.

"Luckily, they weren't there the last time. Someone must have seen Taiki and Yaten entering the club and informed them. It's the first time that Two Lights have officially visited their own club, you know..."

"But they weren't there for Two Lights," you insist. "It looks to me like they've been waiting there for you."

"Maybe," he says thoughtfully. "Someone must have tipped them off about my bike. Otherwise they wouldn't have recognized me."
"So why are they so interested in you? Are you a famous actor or singer I don't know?" you ask. It might not be a coincidence that his voice is the same as the singer's voice you heard in the café eight years ago.

"I was once a bit of everything," he says, evasively. "Maybe the reporters still want to have my face in their gossip columns because they can invent so many morbid stories about me. I only sing for my own pleasure now although I consider returning to the stage with Yaten and Taiki. And what do you do?"

"I don't sing," you declare in a deadpan voice, wondering whether it's safe to assume that Two Lights' names are "Yaten" and "Taiki". "But I like listening to music. You can sing something for me if you want to."

"Not on the streets," he declines, sounding suddenly so distant that you feel obnoxious for asking him.

"It's a shame that we can't go to Two Lights' now," you remark, changing the topic. "So what are we going to do?"

"Anything you want to," he says, sounding accessible and cheerful again, "just say the word."

"I don't know. I'd have liked to know what's so special about Two Lights', though."

"I think the hype is more about Yaten and Taiki than about the club. What about driving through Roppongi for a while and then trying to go to Two Lights' again?" he suggests. "I have a key to the back entrance. Even if they close before we arrive, we can still empty their bar without anyone disturbing us."

"No alcohol," you warn him. "Only non-alcoholic drinks. I want you to be sober when you bring me home in the morning."

"Don't worry," he chuckles. "I never drink anything alcoholic when I drive, and I never drink more than a tiny glass of sherry even when someone else gives me a ride. You can drink as much as you like, though."

"Sherry?" you exclaim, astonished at the coincidence while, simultaneously, the thought that Two Lights seem to be very close friends of his is nagging at you.

"My favourite wine. Want to try?"

"No thanks. I've stopped drinking long ago... But two cars are following us." You tighten your grab at his jacket. "The paparazzi really love you. Step on it since we don't want to get caught!"

In the end, he managed to get rid of your followers without killing either of you so that you two are now drifting idly through the night in silence, both in a fairly amiable mood despite the appalling weather. Although it's spring, the night feels more like a gusty autumnal night with its strong, chilly wind and its freezing rain suddenly coming down in sheets. Through the wet visor of your helmet, the streets of Roppongi are only a blur of neon lights flashing up and running down in streams of garishly coloured water.

However, it's impossible to stay amiable when you are soaked to the skin; and a feeling of slight irritation once again rises to the surface when a few half-witted young bikers overtake you two with loud whistles and vulgar remarks directed at your now translucent dress.

"You were right when you predicted the rain," the stranger says. "I'm sorry I didn't take any
raincoats with me. What about staying in a bar or a game centre until the rain stops?"

"No, I'd rather not," you brush his offer aside. "I'm already soaked, anyway. Let's go back."

"Okay," he readily agrees, and you're strangely irritated by his obvious indifference until you see the sign with the shooting stars again and realize that he must have misunderstood you and is now heading towards Two Lights' instead of bringing you home. For a moment, you seriously consider coming with him despite your wet dress, but then another icy gust of wind makes you shiver and you sigh, resigning yourself to the fact that the weather objects to your overnight date.

"Why do I have the feeling that we're doubled jinxed when we're together?" you shout to him, peering past his shoulders through the curtains of pouring rain into the rearview mirror in a futile attempt to catch a glimpse of his face.

"It's only you who is jinxed," he laughs. "I love the rain. It reminds me that I have a cozy apartment to return to. Just look on the bright side!"

"Is there anything you don't love?" you ask in disbelief. "I'm so drenched that I can't go to Two Lights' in these clothes. We must go back now. Just bring me home! You can stay at my place until the rain stops."

"Isn't your detective sleeping on your sofa at the moment? We can't go to your apartment without waking him up. Apart from that, I'm really not in the mood to meet him."

"What do you suggest then? I'm not going to Two Lights' like this!" You pull mournfully at your thin dress, which has become perfectly transparent, clinging to your knees. If it weren't for the cardigan, you might as well have gone out naked.

"Let's go to my place. It's directly on the way between your place and Two Lights'. You can have a shower to warm yourself up while I wash and dry your clothes for you."

"Good idea," you hear your own voice saying, going along with his outrageous suggestion without thinking about it twice.

There are certain unspoken rules a woman should always stick to. Never talk about your love life with an attractive stranger, don't go out at night with a man whose scent you like, and don't stay overnight at his place unless you want the inevitable to happen. But once again, you find yourself ignoring whatever rules you thought you have learned in his presence. The stranger has a way of doing whatever he wants without thinking about it. And tonight you feel like tagging along.

Hence you follow him through the garage to the lift and enter his apartment on the twenty-third floor with the air of someone who is living there, distractedly slipping out of your dripping wet cardigan without remembering that your thin dress underneath is clinging to your skin before you notice his gaze.

"I'll get you a bathrobe and a towel," he quickly says and disappears behind a door while you're looking about yourself, taking in your surroundings with the curiosity of a detective on a crime scene. The wide corridor you're standing in is tastefully furnished with a large antique mirror, four antique coat hooks, and a long bench with an elegant parasol in the umbrella stand next to it, a sight evocative of a woman's presence. Apparently, the room the stranger has disappeared into is his bedroom, as you can discern through the half-closed door a small bed and an electric guitar before the door fully opens again and his dark head reappears.
"Here," the stranger smiles, handing you a bathrobe and a towel before he proceeds to take off his wet jacket and put it on a hanger. "You can have a shower now if you like. I'll make us coffee in the meantime. Or do you prefer tea?"

"Either is fine for me."

Following him to the large green bathroom, where he puts the hanger with his jacket on a hook and drops your cardigan into the washing machine, you stop in front of the door and thoughtfully behold his curly ponytail, which is much longer than you expected, swaying like a real tail with every of his movements and brushing against the floor when he kneels down to plug in the washing machine and to turn on the heater. Its silky smoothness and its layered style trigger a memory, reminding you of Two Lights' trademark flying ponytails, and all of his odd and cryptic remarks suddenly make sense when you realize that Two Lights must be his foster brothers and that you are in the apartment of Sonoko's favourite idol.

According to Sonoko, he was all the rage eight years ago, famous for his extraordinary voice and his air of reckless abandon. At sixteen, he had also begun to make himself a name as an actor and dancer and become one of the three most popular teen idols of his time when he suddenly disappeared from the public and never accepted a role again. His disappearance seemed to have made him even more interesting in the public eye, just like his penchant for pretty women, cultural activities, and extreme sports. Rumour has it that he had quit the idol business to spend his life as the modern-day Casanova, travelling incognito from city to city to visit the museums and seducing the local women. Last year, he was seen more than once in Venice or, to be more precise, waiting for Aino Minako in front of her dressing room at La Fenice during the new production of *The Beauty and the Beast*, in which she was cast in the leading role. There are also talks about him moving to Venice to be near Aino, who is said to be one of his more serious romantic entanglements. Just idle gossip and unsubstantiated rumours, Sonoko—the same person who told you all the gossip—has said, because she doubts he would ever get that attached to a woman. Still, those unsubstantiated rumours were enough for her to decide that she would study art history in Kaioh Michiru's private academy in Venice instead of going to New York like her mother wanted.

While you don't really want to give any credence to the rumours, you can't help wondering whether there is a grain of truth in them. Being unhappily in love with a married woman who is out of his reach doesn't necessarily mean that he is really leading a life of abstinence. Twenty-four and never kissed anyone in a romantic context, he has claimed, looking so sincere that you were completely taken in. The little cheat has most probably taken you for a ride! He has already demonstrated his cavalier attitude to the truth when he hid his identity from you.

"Is there something on my face?" he asks, rising to his feet with an infuriatingly charming smile. You don't want to know how many hearts he has already broken in his life. But he can rest assured that yours will never be a piece in his collection.

"I just realized I have information for which some people would kill," you smirk and, in answer to his inquiring gaze, tug at a strand of his ponytail. "I should have guessed your name when you said you had the key to the club. As a revenge for lying to me, I should make your address public on the internet for all your obsessive fans who are still hunting you."

He laughs without showing the slightest hint of surprise at the fact that you know about him.

"But you won't do it, will you? And why do you think I lied? I can't remember lying to you at all."

"You told me you've never been kissed, and I even fell for it. Or was none of the kisses between
you and all your affairs romantic enough to be counted?"

Romantic or not, he has never kissed anyone except Odango, the women in his family, and the few actresses he had to kiss in front of the camera for a few odd commercials, and that not even on their lips, he insists. He doesn't know who spreads all the rumours about him and all the women he is supposed to have been with.

"So one-night stands without kissing? Just spill it. How many women have you been with?" you ask, not believing him a bit. "Is the figure still in the double-digit, or have you already lost count of it?"

"None, I swear," he sighs, exasperated. "I only need to say 'Hi' to a woman and people will immediately claim that we're having an affair. That's why I'm usually in disguise when I meet up with Odango. They would make her life a living hell if they knew."

People tend to make a lot of assumptions about him, he tells you, and he has decided to take it as a compliment. After all, most rising stars are craving the media attention he gets, and even during his teen idol days, his scandalous reputation never harmed his career in any way.

Not very credible, you tell him, although in view of his air of innocence, you're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Leaning against the bathtub with his arms crossed in front of his chest, he contemplates you thoughtfully, almost coolly, as if he, too, has begun to see you with different eyes.

"The knowledge of a name does make a huge difference, doesn't it?" he asks at last. "You seem to have made a lot of assumptions about me, too, even though you've never met me before."

With a start, you remember the expression on his face when he told you that you were the first woman in years he could really talk with and who didn't immediately force her phone number on him. No matter what he might have lied about, your odd friendship—or whatever this is—feels real, and most probably he would never have told you about Odango and taken you to his private apartment while a hotel would have served the purpose if he only wanted to have his way with you as you had paranoiacally feared.

"It's not about you or your name but all the things that are associated with it," you admit. "But since I'm in a generous mood, I'll ignore them for now, stranger-san."

A glint of humour steals into his eyes before his distant gaze turns into the familiar smile you no longer want to miss. Winking at you as he breezes out of the bathroom, the stranger (he will always be the stranger for you now that you've decided to ignore his name) lightly tugs at a strand of your hair as if he were paying you back for what you did to his.

"You really need to get out of your wet clothes now," he remarks. "Just leave them on the floor or put them into the washing machine. I'll wash them later for you."

"And you?" you ask, indicating his wet jeans.

"Later," he smiles and cheekily adds, "You don't want to suggest that we take a shower together, do you?"

Dream on, you're about to say when you realize that this is the ideal chance to test whether he is really as pure as he claims.

"Why not?" You fix his eyes with a challenging smile. "We can save a lot of time that way."
He stares at you in speechless surprise, his face changing colour as he tries to visualize what you just suggested, and you think to yourself in amusement that he is not even half as cool as he pretends to be when a flicker of recognition in his eyes shows you that you've revealed your true intentions too early.

Much to your dismay, he gives you an impish grin, steps into the bathroom, and casually begins to unbutton his shirt. "Agreed. But don't try anything funny with me," he playfully growls, imitating your tone of voice perfectly. "I'm saving myself for an idiot who adores me so much that she will do all my paperwork for me."

Eventually, he ends up occupying the shower while you—for lack of a better way to save face—claim that you prefer a bath. Running a bath while trying to avert your eyes from the transparent shower enclosure directly next to the bathtub, you curse yourself for the stupid mistake of smiling a second too early so that he could guess that you never meant to shower with him for real. After stripping shamelessly in front of you and—wearing only a pair of black boxers—strolling into the shower with the air of a top model on the runway, the impertinent little wretch has flashed you a victorious smile over his shoulder and invited you to join him, an offer you should have accepted since you were the one who suggested it. And the fact that you didn't dare to—added to his knowing and self-satisfied smirk because he knew that he had won—irked you so much that you decided not to walk out of the bathroom but to stay for the bath. Stubbornly refusing to retreat, you tell yourself that there is no logical reason to be disturbed by sharing a bathroom with someone who obviously has the mental age of a kindergarten kid. And you stayed even after he successfully shocked you the second time by removing his boxers and throwing them with unerring accuracy into the open washing machine before shutting the door to the shower with a cheeky little grin.

Emptying your pockets on the sink table, you notice that Kaito's card is damp but still in a good condition and dry it with your towel before slipping it into the pocket of the bathrobe along with your mobile phone and your keys. For a moment, you wonder whether you should take a photo of your new friend to pay him back for his prank before you resign, deciding that you don't want your peculiar date to escalate even more than it already has.

"Do you have any bath salt or bubble bath?" you ask with a knock at the shower door (which is, luckily, in contrast to the rest of the transparent enclosure, only translucent), hoping that he has something which makes enough bubbles for you to hide in it.

He turns off the water, sticks his fragrant wet head out of the shower, and efficiently wrings the water out of his ponytail. After the shower, his ever-changing eyes are of a shockingly bright blue and, making a dramatic contrast with his deep black eyelashes, catch you off-guard again when they flash you a mischievous smile.

"Just my shampoo and wash gel," he shrugs and then chuckles, "Have you changed your mind and want to come in?"

Before you can reply, he has already turned off the water of your bath, grabbed your wrist, and drawn you into the shower, which is, much to your relief, large enough for both of you so that your bodies don't touch. Spraying the warm water all over you, he quickly massages his shampoo into your hair (while you, eyes clamped shut, are cursing at him under your breath) before he slips out of the shower, shaking with laughter at his own silly prank.

"I wonder what your fans would do if they knew what you're really like," you remark while rinsing your hair, stupefied by the discrepancy between his public image and his behaviour towards you. "I shall give them a detailed account of this when I make your address public."
"I can tell you what will happen afterwards: They're going to murder you before they start to camp here, and my agent will take care of it as always by evacuating us. But I wonder what Kudo would say if he knew that you've just taken a shower with me." He laughs, beaming at you while drying himself. "If you tell anyone about my address, I swear I'll break his heart by giving him a call!"

"I doubt that he would care," you remark, convinced that Kudo must be accustomed to taking a bath with Ran.

"Let's tell him then," he dares you. "I bet he won't be able to solve any cases for weeks." In a sudden fit of decency or shyness, he wraps his towel around his hips before turning on the water and letting it run into the washing machine, adding a small cup of laundry detergent.

"Don't worry, I won't peep," he says, extending his hand towards you while demonstratively averting his eyes. "I'll only run the washing machine before I leave you alone. Just give me your clothes."

Slipping out of your wet clothes, you roll them into a small bundle and—imitating what he did with his boxers—aim at the open washing machine, accidentally knocking your elbow against the open shower door in the process. Alarmed by the sound, he swiftly turns round while rising to his feet in one single movement, catches your arm before you can throw the bundle, and stares when he realizes that you're not wearing anything at all and that his towel, too, has just fallen on the floor due to the sudden movement.

An awkward moment passes in which the two of you are only standing there wide-eyed at the compromising position and in which you are torn about what to do: to kick him into unconsciousness, rob him of some clothes, and leave his apartment immediately or to steal his first kiss as a revenge for his pranks on you. Luckily, he takes the decision out of your hand by letting go of you to retrieve his towel so that, in the end, you only toss the bundle of clothes onto the floor and shut the door to the shower with your heart pounding in your chest.

"I'm sorry." He lightly knocks at the shower door. "When I heard the sound, I thought you were dizzy again."

"It doesn't matter, just forget about it."

Smiling at the ridiculous situation, you proceed to shower with regained composure. A man who doesn't even try to lock lips with you under these conditions is someone you can trust to keep his hands off you for the rest of his life. Despite his reputation and his shameless flirting, he is depressingly innocent, and you grudgingly admit to yourself that he would probably flee from you if you just walked out and kissed him as you wanted to do since he pulled you close to him the first time on the street two hours—which seem to you like two years—ago.

It must have been the last thought which suddenly turned on the light in a dim corner of your mind, reminding you of something Kudo jokingly said to you during the course of the evening when he was sitting on your sofa, telling you about the case that prevented him from coming to your birthday two years ago—the one he has never managed to wrap up due to the obstinate refusal of the extroverted but stubborn culprit who has Kaito's charms.

What are the odds that there are three other celebrity brothers in the vicinity, you wonder, feeling your head spin as your suspicion grows. The owners of Two Lights' were only trying to support his career without telling him, Kaito said. Kuroba is an acquaintance of mine… It's directly on the way between your place and Two Lights’… I once met a detective… a very famous one… But the circumstances were not so favourable then, you can hear the stranger's voice in your head as you replay all the things he has told you since you met each other for the first time. Nevertheless, you
still have the overwhelming feeling that there is a very important detail you've either blocked out or missed, and you aren't sure whether you really want to know what it is.

Turning off the water, you give up the detective work, deciding that you neither want to jump to conclusions nor probe into other people's private affairs which don't concern you. Everybody has a secret one had better not touch, so why shouldn't the stranger have one, too? Oddly enough, you like him even more now because he, too, has lost a sister he loved.

g.

A/N: I wanted to post this chapter on Tuesday, but I felt too dead to do anything (but murdering the bots in Overwatch between naps). *catching up on sleep after months of sleep deprivation

From now on, updates will be irregular again, hopefully in the good way (I'll try to post two or three chapters every week to make up for the slow updates in the past months).
The first faint glimmer of dawn...

The first faint glimmer of dawn is seeping through the translucent patterned curtains, casting intricate purple shadows on the white covers of the bed and the left side of the stranger's face while he is blow-drying his gorgeous hair with a black monstrosity of a hairdryer (will he give you the formula for his special shampoo if you ask him?), quietly humming to himself a melody you can't identify because the sound of the hairdryer partly drowns it. Much to your relief, he has exchanged his skimpy towel for another pair of jeans and a white cardigan, and you vaguely wonder whether he is trying to mock you with his choice of clothes or whether he has—consciously or subconsciously?—decided to match his outfit with yours.

"Nice cardigan," you innocently remark when you meet his thoughtful eyes, whereupon he turns off the hairdryer and gives you a faraway smile.

"Birthday present?" you continue intelligently, gesturing towards the red roses on the bedside table. It's difficult to treat a man who has seen you naked as a man who has only seen you clothed, and embarrassing memories usually have the inconvenient quality of being more permanent than they should.

"Ah, no," he distractedly replies, holding out the hairdryer to you. "I often receive flowers from my fans. Taiki must have brought them tonight since he has the spare key to my apartment. I bet the dining room is already stuffed with flowers so that he had to leave them in my bedroom."

"Taiki is your flower-loving brother?"

"Exactly that one. Yaten would only have trashed them. Sorry for earlier, by the way."

"I already told you to forget it," you sigh, thrown by his troubled gaze and his contrite apology since you can't comprehend why a man who can strip in front of a woman he just met without batting an eyelid should fret about a silly little episode during which nothing happened. There is no doubt that he is one of the most carefree and light-hearted specimens you've ever met, and it would be more in character for him to shrug it off as an embarrassing incident which, in retrospect, was at worst awkward and at best amusing.

Noticing that you don't show the slightest inclination to take the hairdryer out of his hand, he turns it on again and casually proceeds to dry your hair while you, deciding that you might as well accept his gesture as a remedy for the juvenile prank he played on you, settle on the bed next to him. The memory of Kudo and you sitting on the queen-sized bed in your shared hotel room in Paris (another part of the disguise you should never have accepted), comparing the conduct of French couples to the conduct of their Japanese counterpart while you were blow-drying your hair, emerges from the back of your mind and numbs you for a moment with its vividness. However, the moment instantly passes as the stranger shifts his position and you catch a faint whiff of his scent, reminding you that your hair smells distinctly different from his although you've used the same shampoo.

Are you the same woman who has snapped at Kudo—a friend you've known for years—for snooping around in her bedroom a few hours ago, you wonder as the stranger continues to dry your hair in silence. Assessing the situation, you realize that right now you're making yourself comfortable on the bed of a man you just met, letting him blow-dry your hair for you at the crack of dawn while you're only clad in an oversized bathrobe, a behaviour you would have found
unacceptable a few hours ago. Social norms seem to have lost their importance for you whereas
marking the passing of time has taken on a new profound significance; the distinction between
"tonight" and "last night" has become a blur as reality is interspersed with surprisingly vivid
dreams; and hours seem to stretch into years while the whole situation seems so natural and at the
same time so unreal to you that you almost expect to wake up soon.

"You surely like bizarre things," you remark in an attempt to bring yourself back to reality with the
sound of your own voice. "I've never seen a hairdryer this extravagant."

"I didn't buy it," he laconically says before adding as an afterthought, "I don't like it either, but it
was a present."

From whom, you're about to ask—wondering whether it was from his late sister—when you're
distracted by his warm fingers running slowly through your hair like a lover's caress. The situation
has begun to get out of hand, and you vaguely wonder whether Kudo would be amused or rather
disturbed by your immediate and intense interest in a person you might never have met if both of
you had not been waiting for someone else on the same bench during a particularly beautiful
sunset. After going through the agony with Kudo once, it's easy for you to detect all the alarming
signs of a foolish attraction that could escalate within a night and mess up your peaceful life by the
end of the week at the latest, ruining an emotional bond which could otherwise have lasted for a
lifetime.

"What would you have done if I had wanted to shower with you for real?" you ask, scrutinizing his
reflection in the wardrobe door mirror in an attempt to analyze your muddled feelings Kudo has
jokingly labelled as "unreasonable infatuation".

"Nothing," the stranger admits. "I knew you didn't want to, though."

"So you ended up doing something you didn't want to just to spite me? You surely have a self-
defeating tendency!"

He turns off the hairdryer without removing his hand from your hair.

"Why do you think I didn't want to?" he teasingly asks. "Don't you have an instinct for self-
preservation? I'm not your best girlfriend just because you treat me like one." The back of his
fingers slightly—and deliberately?—brush against your neck as he removes his hand from your
hair. "I could have misused the situation."

"Could have? You did misuse it, in a way," you remind him, "And you should question your
instinct for self-preservation instead of mine. You've forgotten that I could either have taken a few
photos of you with my phone or file a lawsuit accusing you of exhibitionism and sexual
harassment."

"Nobody would have believed you," he chuckles, "and you would never have taken a photo of me
because you didn't even dare to look at me. So you never got to see Kuroba naked during your two
weeks with him?" In response to your disapproving scowl at his indiscreet question, he only flashes
you a disarming smile.

"No," you sigh in mock disappointment, "although at least he did kiss me unlike a certain clueless
detective. Kaito isn't the type that casually takes off his clothes in front of a woman he hasn't
known for long." Remembering the scandalous reputation of the person next to you, you darkly
remark, "You, on the other hand, seem accustomed to doing it."

"Not at all," he asserts and continues to dry your hair, twirling each strand around his fingers with
the same smile he wore on his face when he watched the squirrel yesterday evening, making you wonder whether he is comparing you to the squirrel (because your hair and its furs are both reddish brown?) or whether he regards your hair as one of the "beautiful things" he enjoys looking at. "I only did it in front of you. Do you feel honoured now?"

"Incredibly! Even though I'll have to burst your bubble if you think you're the first naked man I've ever seen. You just happened to take me by surprise, that's all."

"So how many guys have taken their clothes off for you before me? I promise I won't be shocked even if the number is enormous."

"Just one," you coyly reply, leaving out all the countless naked patients, human guinea pigs, exhibitionists, and male models for the life drawing classes at Infinity (you had an all-round education at Professor Tomoe's exclusive academy before taking over the development of APTX 4869) your everything-but-innocent eyes have seen. Telling him the truth is impossible without revealing to him that you once belonged to the Organization, a detail you don't want him to find out so soon. The details of your brief romance with Kaito (luckily, Kaito and you never got past the kissing and cuddling-on-the-sofa stage) are the last things you want to mention to him since they're acquaintances. The almost-kiss at Pandora's Box with Kudo was a mistake Kudo and you have agreed to erase from your minds. And the sight of Kudo changing his clothes after Hattori and he fished you out of the sea doesn't count either since he obviously thought you were asleep. After all, your ability to feign sleep has greatly improved over the years...

Trying to ease your guilty conscience with the thought that you can't tell your new friend the full truth without touching on the Organization and Pandora's Box, you conclude that there is no sensible reason for being clumsily honest. After all, what would a woman be without her white lies and her little secrets?

"Your first boyfriend?"

A reasonable guess.

"Unfortunately yes—although I wish he hadn't."

"Why?" The stranger gives you an incredulous look. "Was he so hideous that it was a traumatic experience?"

"On the contrary. But it led to other things I'd rather have avoided, especially since I knew that he was a cold-hearted bastard who would choose his beloved Porsche over a human life at any time."

Tell him about the Organization now, says a rebellious voice in your head. Ruin the mood by letting him know that you were once a member of the infamous syndicate Kudo and Hattori brought down three years ago. He must have heard about it because it was everywhere in the news.

"Why did you go out with him if you loathed him so much?" the stranger inquires, apparently not in the least interested in Gin's Porsche.

"The usual childhood dream that developed into a teenage crush, and I really hoped that he would change for me. Those were the days!"

"But some people do change for the person they love."

"Maybe, but neither of us belonged to those people. Perhaps we were both too obstinate to be an item." Pulling your legs onto the bed and turning your face towards the window so that he can dry your hair on the left side of your head, you decide to grill him about the women in his life instead
of letting him squeeze all the details of your private life out of you. "So how many naked women have you already seen?"

"Quite a few," he nonchalantly says and laughs when your eyes meet his. "Are you jealous?"

"Why should I?"

"I don't know. You seem somewhat competitive!" He thoughtfully twirls a strand of your hair around his fingers. "They were all actresses whose love scenes I had to watch during the silly acting classes my first agent forced me to attend. So you win again when it comes to experiences."

"Are you still claiming that you've never had a girlfriend?"

"It's the truth," he declares, "and I have a theory about why you always think I'm lying." He cocks his head and narrows his eyes to scrutinize you with the air of an investigator. "You are lying to me all the time!"

"You're making groundless accusations."

"You told me Kudo and you were only friends, that you weren't in love with him at all, and that Kuroba left you for his childhood friend." He lightly knocks the hairdryer on your head with each of his statements. "Three lies immediately after we met. Who is the liar now?"

"Kudo and I are only friends, I don't think I'm still in love with him although there are lingering feelings, and Kaito did leave me immediately when his childhood friend wrote to him that she would return to Tokyo. I wasn't lying to you at all."

"So Kuroba and you went out with each other only one or two months before his marriage?"

"A year! He married her over a year after leaving me. They naturally didn't invite me, but I heard about it from a mutual friend."

"See, you're lying to me again! I actually attended their wedding, and they told me they had been dating for two months before their marriage. She returned to Tokyo about two months before they started going out with each other. It's their words against yours, and I don't know why they should lie about such a harmless thing. It's also hard for me to believe that Kuroba left you for her after only two weeks. He is the type that knows exactly what he wants and sticks by his decisions."

"And why, do you think, should I lie to you about Kaito?" You frown, simultaneously piqued by his impertinence and astonished by the things you've just learned.

"Because you dumped him for Kudo?" He takes a wild guess while distractedly twirling another strand of your hair around his finger with obvious pleasure.

"I didn't. Kudo came first. A year before Kaito. Don't you dare give me locks or I'll cut off your ponytail!" You shoot him your deadliest glare.

"Kuroba was only his substitute? No wonder the poor guy couldn't take it longer than two weeks. He must have thought you had been kissing Kudo instead of him."

No, he wasn't, you sigh. You wouldn't have gone out with Kaito if his personality hadn't been different from Kudo's. There was no sense in repeating the same mistake for a second time, and Kaito had everything you liked about Kudo while lacking all the things that made Kudo and you incompatible. If he hadn't fled just when you began to feel a bit attached, you would most probably have ended up marrying your charming magician someday although you won't complain because
you had, once again, narrowly escaped marriage. Nothing is as important and underrated as independence.

In the end, Kaito's face and voice turned out to be more of a hindrance than a help because it was impossible for you not to be reminded of Kudo when you were with him, you conclude. So much for the theory that you had been using Kaito as Kudo's substitute!

"It must have been extremely confusing," the stranger contemplates you with sympathy, "a bit like biting into a chocolate cake that looks exactly like a glass of vanilla ice-cream—"

"—which is taken away from one and served to another customer just when one has begun to enjoy it! Just like what happened with the vanilla ice-cream one liked so much... I'm glad you finally understand what I've been going through. That's why I'm on a diet now. No cake and no ice-cream will ever tempt me again! I want a type of food that belongs to me alone and that I can enjoy regularly without ruining my health."

"But what type of food am I for you?" the stranger asks with his most dazzling smile. However, this time you're deeply irritated by his casual flirting, as you can suddenly imagine him saying the same to all the female celebrities and fans he encounters and forgets as soon as they are out of sight.

Nothing edible, you tell him in a friendly voice. Something which might look tempting at first glance (and smell delicious at first sniff!) but is most probably poisonous the first time one takes a bite. He is to women in general and to you in particular the equivalent of a carnivorous plant to an insect—not that you would ever get the idea of comparing yourself to an insect. It's only an example to illustrate the kind of food he resembles—

"Thanks a lot," he gloomily retorts, removing his hand from your hair even though he is still aiming the hairdryer at your head as if it were a weapon. "If I were a carnivorous plant, you'd be fully digested by now, you moody little butterfly!"

"Oh, I was never stupid enough to fall into the trap. I'm the cautious and prudent type."

"What have I done to you?" he asks in disbelief. "Why couldn't you at least compare me to some type of sweets like Kuroba and Kudo?"

"You absolutely wanted to know the truth. It's not my fault if you can't handle it! Although they both dumped me for lame reasons, they are both people who can commit, marry, and probably raise kids, albeit with women other than me. You, on the other hand, are the type that can't ever settle down."

" Aren't you the one that never settles down?" He raises his brow. "You told me yourself you aren't made for any kind of close relationship."

"I'm not. I've never pretended to be the nice girl-next-door men can marry and have kids with. But at least I don't have a reputation that would have made Casanova blush. You wouldn't have such a reputation either if you weren't flirting with any female you meet."

He usually doesn't flirt with strangers, he insists, and he has never told anyone so much about himself as he has told you. A ridiculous assertion, which only strengthens your belief that flirting is so natural to him that he couldn't even stop if he wanted to.

"Apropos flirting," he chuckles, and you've already sighed inwardly when his following remark completely throws you off balance. "Did you once belong to the Black Organization?"
He has asked you the question in the same tone in which people ask you for the time, and you discover to your surprise that you don't feel even the slightest fear of him, only a strange sense of relief because you no longer need to hide it.

"I grew up in it. But what does the Organization have to do with flirting?" you ask him, stupefied.

"Infinity." He turns off the hairdryer with a victorious smile. "I think I saw you there once although it was so long ago that I needed a while to figure out where I met you. After seeing the scars on your body—bullet wounds, aren't they?—I knew you must have led a more dangerous life than I thought, because your scars are of different sizes and a few are already fading whereas others looked as if you had received them at a later time. So, when you mentioned your boyfriend who would have chosen his Porsche over a human life, I thought of the Organization and Infinity immediately came to mind."
Infinity... The name evokes images of infinite luxury and beauty, a golden cage so spacious, magnificent, and comfortable that the exotic birds in it never felt the wish to escape. Infinity was also the crème de la crème of the world's private academies, the place where only the best were good enough and where telling your fellow classmates they were "pretty good" was considered a back-handed compliment because the students were said to be prodigies. Rumour had it that there was only one exception, a non-prodigy, who was not admitted into this exclusive academy because of her humongous talents but because of a signed letter from an immensely powerful person and the persuasiveness of a loaded Beretta (which didn't belong to Gin but to another of the "seven crows", whose task was to monitor each and every of Professor Tomoe's movements). Calling to mind Infinity's mahogany desks, ornamental fountains, and white marble stairs, you remember hating Infinity with passion because, notwithstanding the fact that you excelled in every single class in contrast to the prodigy brats who were usually experts in their own fields but morons outside of them, your classmates never let you forget that they considered you not good enough.

You also remember the sound of torrential rain and the biting cold air on your skin, Kudo's warm arms and the thick blanket he put over both of you (accidentally rubbing against your new wound in the process), the blinding mist of tears you tried to hide in the nape of his neck while he coldly, almost harshly, reminded you that there was no reason to cry over two well-aimed bullets because "your prompt reaction saved Hattori and me". And then his cheerful, ringing voice trying to distract you from feelings he thought to be shock and guilt: "By the way, Haibara, back at Infinity... Were you one of Stinger's guinea-pig prodigies?"

It's no use dwelling on those memories, you decide, chiding yourself for thinking of them because Pandora's Box didn't have much to do with Infinity. Infinity was only one of the many projects whose files were stored in the main computer along with the particulars of all the codename members. The computer itself, a huge device filling the whole cabin of the seemingly decrepit ship, was only the fake Pandora's Box, harmless and insignificant compared to the real one.

Your memories of Infinity are vivid but all topsy-turvy and jumbled up like tiny photographs in a giant cardboard box. Sorting through them in search of the stranger's face among the junk, you discover that you remember more about your time at Infinity than you believed although most of your recollections are hopelessly random. Decorating your high floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows overlooking Azabu Juuban with purple silk curtains, working for two days and nights in Professor Tomoe's lab with only a few short breaks to visit the bathroom and to devour two croissants you flushed down with ten or more cups of coffee, watching Kaioh Michiru and Tenoh Haruka's pillow fight at six p.m. while trying to make chocolate with rum or rather rum with chocolate for Gin (your kitchen window overlooked Kaioh-san's bedroom)... Infinity was a time of first experiences: The first black cocktail dresses and the first fitting lab coat, the first high-heels that almost landed you in hospital, the first self-made (and probably inedible) rum-filled chocolate on Valentine's Day you ended up giving Tenoh-san as a revenge for snooping around the lab and sounding you out about the Organization, the first long nights in jazz bars sharing a bottle of sherry with Gin, the first time you heard the stranger's voice, Kudo's face you saw for the first time in the newspapers, the incident with the red-haired girl, the first kisses and the first feelings of guilt, the first trip with Gin to Osaka... But in your memory, Infinity itself stays elusive, as if—while collecting so many experiences outside of it—you failed to take notice of Infinity as an institution.
"Infinity... Don't tell me that we once flirted with each other there because I absolutely can't remember it." Stealing another glance at the stranger's face, you ponder how you could have forgotten him if you had talked with each other at Infinity. Most probably, he was one of Stinger's treasured celebrity prodigies whom the mad professor had told about his pact with the "seven crows". It wouldn't surprise you since the lunatic had a special interest in talented musicians, actors, and athletes with quick reactions and was so talkative during his laughing fits that Gin more than once asked the Boss for permission to do away with him.

"No, we didn't." The stranger smiles. "We met after a Christmas concert, don't you remember? I was standing in the queue to Michiru-sama's dressing room, chatting with your sister when you came and dragged her away from me."

Michiru-sama... The only Michiru at Infinity was Tenoh Haruka's Kaioh Michiru, the gifted violinist, swimmer, and painter, whose illicit affair with Tenoh-san was overlooked by the school because both Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san were Stinger's so-called guinea-pig prodigies. Envied by all the girls at Infinity who either begrudged Kaioh-san her unmatched grace and unmatched beauty or adored Tenoh-san's long athletic legs and distant teal eyes that bewitched almost every female in "his" vicinity (Tenoh-san's real sex was a secret only few people could guess), "Michiru-sama" always stayed the embodiment of serenity, elegance, innocence, gentleness, and perfection at least outside the walls of her penthouse apartment of the dorm. Inside her apartment, however, she happily dropped her angelic mask and surprised you more than once with her choice of lingerie and her choice of movements when she danced wildly for Tenoh-san on the bedside table until they collapsed in a heap into the mess of crumpled clothes beneath them. That and other embarrassing episodes convinced you to keep the curtains of your kitchen window shut after five p.m. for fear of discovering too many things that are not meant for your eyes.

You could have attended the only Christmas party during which Michiru-sama and her "best friend" Tenoh Haruka performed at Infinity (Beethoven's Violin Romances—Akemi-nee-san's favourite pieces), but instead you were busy slaving away in Stinger's lab, completing long reports on apoptoxin and injecting a hundred white mice with the first prototype of APTX 4869, the one whose formula had just been found in the backup of your parents' files. It was your first task as Sherry and of such paramount importance for your future in the Organization and at Infinity that you consoled your sister with the promise to take her out for dinner and shut yourself off in the lab instead of watching the concert. Half an hour after the concert ended, the hall was still dotted with students in green and brown school uniforms (Infinity's colours) and people in black suits (the Organization's scouts often attended Infinity's parties and events in search of prospective fresh recruits)—and you didn't need long to discover the only two colourful people in the dark crowd: Akemi-nee-san and a young man, who, at second glance, was a boy about your age you had never seen before.

"You were the guy with the scarlet roses?" You let your eyes roam over the stranger's face in search of the person with a midnight-blue fedora, a long burgundy trench coat, and a thick white shawl that looked like a beard—a ridiculous sight evoking the image of Santa Claus disguising as a secret agent or vice versa. After eight years, the only features you can still recognize are his high cheekbones and his intense eyes scrutinizing you inquisitively with an expression which, unlike Gin's calculating interest, resembled the unintentional and purposeless curiosity of a child.

Slightly irked by Akemi-nee-san's thoughtless introduction ("Here is my gorgeous workaholic sister I just told you about...") and infuriated by the mocking smile which had stolen into his eyes, you threw a "Hello" and a "Sorry, we're in a hurry" at him before dragging your sister out of the hall. Shooting him a last glance over your shoulder, you noticed that he had already directed his attention to Professor Tomoe aka Stinger, laughing and carelessly waving the red roses in his hands as if he had forgotten about their existence.
"I remember your sister and I talked a lot about you." The stranger smiles. "She suggested that I ask you out on a date to distract you from your work."

"And what was your response?"

"I said I was so busy I had to pass." He grins. "But I would find a way to make time if it was her who wanted a date with me."

"You tried to flirt with my sister?" you exclaim, enraged by the mental image.

"Just kidding!" He laughs, pulling you into his arms again as if he has grown used to it. "I only flirted with Michiru-sama that night. But your sister even forced your phone number on me, imagine that!"

"I should have known it!" You free yourself from his arms with a sigh. Kaioh Michiru was easily the most beautiful girl you had ever seen, turning the heads of all the boys (and the heads of a few girls) at Infinity. It would have surprised you if he hadn't hit on her immediately after they met. "So you were in love with Kaioh-san before Odango?"

He wouldn't call it love, but he was her number-one fan, the stranger gushes. In his whole life, he has never met another violinist who can move him more than she did, and he was devastated when she left the stage and abandoned the violin to focus on her paintings.

"She is one of those people who have too many talents. If she hadn't dedicated herself to one, she wouldn't have excelled at anything." You thoughtfully behold the lavender raindrops streaming down the window glass, thinking back to the umbrella Kaioh Michiru offered you on a rainy afternoon. Intrigued by the sincerity in the stranger's voice, you throw him a quizzical look. "So you were in love with her irresistible music and not her irresistible eyes?"

"Certainly not her looks. Michiru-sama is always so extremely elegant and flawless, so overly refined." He gives a dismissive wave. "She is not as harmless as she looks, though." His lips curve up in reminiscence. "I found her mysterious and very interesting, and I still think she is one of the nicest women alive, but I wasn't sad at all when I found out that she was Haruka-san's girlfriend. It was nothing compared to what I felt for Odango."

"I see," you remark, meaning you understand now that he prefers the cute type although he seems to have had some sort of history with Kaioh-san as well, judging from his words and his smile. But while you were curious a few minutes ago when you tried to grill him about the women in his life, the last thing you want to hear him talk about now is his fling-or-whatever-it-was with Kaioh Michiru.

"So you were so busy at Infinity that you didn't even have time to attend the Christmas concert with your sister?" He leans towards you with interest. "You were wearing a lab coat when you fetched her. How old were you at that time? Sixteen, seventeen?"

Fourteen, about two years younger than "Michiru-sama"—you tell him—although you looked a bit more mature than your age. You were fourteen when the Organization sent you to Infinity to complete your education and get some hands-on experiences in Professor Tomoe's lab, and the Christmas concert with Kaioh Michiru and Tenoh Haruka was the last one at Infinity before Professor Tomoe went berserk the following summer and burned down his own academy.

"Tomoe didn't go berserk," the stranger protests. "He burned it down because he realized that his prodigy-project was a complete failure and that he should never have sold his freedom to the Organization to fund it."
"So it was Professor Tomoe who told you about the Organization?" you ask, realizing that he is fond of the mad scientist.

"He approached me on the same evening I saw you and asked me to come to his academy. It was easy to put two and two together, hearing him talk about cocktails as if they had a life and seeing all the people in black who never took their eyes off him while he was talking to me."

"Was he interested in your musical genius? Or was it your skill of throwing your clothes into the washing machine without consciously aiming at it?"

"I think he was actually interested in my conspicuous lack of inhibition!" He winks. "And what type of prodigy were you?"

"The prudish type." You demonstratively straighten your bathrobe. "He was intrigued by my violent dislike of flirtatious long-haired men! What I don't get is: You're only one year or a few months older than me. Why did I never see you at school?" A part of you—the serious one—wonders why he hasn't heard of the rumours surrounding you at Infinity while another part of you can't help but grin at the mental picture of him in Infinity's bourgeois green-and-brown suit.

You've completely misunderstood. Tomoe asked him to come to Infinity but he declined. He only went to a few parties at Infinity afterwards and still visits the self-proclaimed Nero in his mental hospital from time to time. Tomoe has an offbeat sense of humour he likes.

"Why didn't you want to go to Infinity?" It was no wonder that you two never met since you never attended any of the parties.

Because he disliked Infinity's elitism and abhors all types of uniforms. Even in Juuban high school he only wore Three Lights' suit, and the teachers never managed to force him into a school uniform.

"Three Lights' suit? Isn't it a type of uniform as well?"

No, it isn't, he claims, smiling. Matching clothes are a display of affinity between people who feel a sense of belonging to each other, not a type of uniform. Three Lights was his family and, at that point in time, family was for him the only thing that mattered.

And why did the band split up, you would have liked to ask. But since you remember very well his reaction when you told him to sing for you, you decide not to give in to curiosity. Whatever the reason was, it's most probably gone by now if he considers returning to the stage with his former band members.

"I'd never have recognized you if you hadn't told me," you tell him instead.

"So you were fooled by my brilliant disguise? I borrowed the clothes from the set of the Detective Boy Holmes live action we were filming."

"Who was Holmes? No, let me guess: Detective Boy Holmes was, of course, you."

"Sadly no, since Taiki was Holmes. Yaten said he would take any role they gave him because he didn't care, so he ended up as Watson, which was the worst casting ever. You can't imagine how much he hates it when fans remind him of that role. Back then the gutter press claimed that he had great chemistry with Taiki, which started all sorts of rumours."

"Don't tell me you were Lestrade or Mrs. Hudson."
"I hate to disappoint you, but I was actually Moriarty after filming the one episode in which I played Godfrey Norton. They only changed my outfit and my hairstyle, which prompted some Sherlock Holmes fans to write fanfictions about Irene Adler marrying Moriarty without Watson’s knowledge."

"You don't look like a criminal mastermind to me!" You skeptically behold the laugh lines around his smiling eyes.

"Is it meant to be an insult or a compliment?" He raises his brow in mock annoyance. "It was a very loose modern adaption, and looks are deceiving, as Akane-san, our director, always said. She liked to bully me and often kept me on the set for hours even when everyone else had left. Maybe she insisted on casting me as Moriarty just because she wanted me to be the villain."

"Was her special weakness for you her reason for making Moriarty resemble Santa Claus?"

"Why Santa Claus? She thought a true villain had to wear a fedora, a long trench coat, and a turtleneck. For Infinity, I only added the scarf to hide my face."

"And the red roses as a shield. Or were they supposed to be a weapon?"

"No, the roses were a present."

And? How did Kaioh-san react to his confession, you ask him. You gather he wasn't very successful, considering his claim that he has never been kissed and the fact that she is still with Tenoh-san, according to the press...

What confession? He stares at you, apparently oblivious to the meaning of your remark.

"Your giant bouquet of red roses. Any girl would take it as a declaration of love, or was it only an expression of your ardent admiration?"

Those roses were actually a present for him from a fan of his! He smiles, visibly delighted by your misunderstanding. Shizuka-san—his present agent, the daughter of his late first agent—started a hype when she came up with the concept of letting Three Lights throw three giant roses into the crowd before a concert. Since his colour was red, he often received scarlet roses from his fans.

"All the three of us were weary of throwing roses after a few months. But the girls loved the idea so much that we had to uphold the tradition. Yaten tried to rebel by 'accidentally' dropping his yellow rose until the girls climbed on the stage to get it. Afterwards he tossed his rose as far away as he could just like Taiki and me, preferably at a girl who didn't look as if she was going to stalk us."

"So that's how you learned to aim so well? Do the colours of your roses mean anything, or did Shizuka-san choose them randomly?" Examining the poster you saw of Two Lights again in your mind, you try to guess the reason why Shizuka-san has chosen yellow for Yaten-san and white for Taiki-san. If they have kept the same colours from their time as Three Lights, Yaten Kou must be the short silver-haired man with the yellow rose on his suit while the tall man wearing the white rose must be Taiki Kou. You would have swapped Yaten-san's and Taiki-san's roses since the white rose would have matched Yaten-san's looks more. In contrast, it's easy for you to comprehend why Shizuka-san's chose to assign the stranger the red one. Perhaps, so you surmise, Shizuka-san assigned the colours to Three Lights according to their personalities.

Because of the _san hikari_, the stranger explains. Since their family name means "Light", Shizuka-san presented their family name and their first names in the Western name order and called the
band "Three Lights", alluding to the *san hikari*, the three lights of Shinto.

"The roses represent the three lights. Yellow is supposed to be the colour of the stars while white is supposed to be the colour of the moon—"

"And you're the sun for your agent's daughter? You should be ashamed of yourself for turning the head of the poor girl," you remark, frowning because something about the colours of their roses bothers you even though you can't really put your finger on the reason why you should give a damn.

Shizuka-san is anything but a "poor girl", the stranger claims, and he thinks she only loves his singing. But you will know why she chose the sun for him after meeting Yaten and Taiki since neither of them can be called "warm" at first glance.

"On the other hand, some people are definitely too warm for their own sake!" You glare at him.

"So, are you getting burned?" He brings his face dangerously close to yours until you can feel his breath on your skin and instinctively close your eyes. In the silence, you can discern the sound of a suppressed chuckle and open your eyes just in time to see him pulling away, lips curved by a mischievous smile and eyes still half closed.

Admittedly, you had been struck by his easy manner and his sense of fun at first, but now you're irked by his frivolous treatment of you and his inability to take this (date, friendship, prospective love affair or whatever it is) more serious. Trembling with rage and determined to pay back the inveterate flirt for his increasingly annoying pranks, you grab his ponytail, wrap it around your hand, and bend down in an attempt to tie it around a leg of the bed. Contrary to your expectations, he doesn't resist at all but immediately yields to the movement of your hand, wraps his arms around your waist, and pulls you down with him as he lets himself fall on the carpeted floor.

"Jerk at my hair like that again and I'll take this off!" he threatens, his hand toying with the belt of your bathrobe. In the ensuing silence, you're acutely aware of your entangled limbs and the closeness which has become strangely familiar, the sound of his heart beating wildly against your chest and the feeling of his fingers stroking your arm in an almost involuntary caress. Encouraged by the sight of his gaze resting longingly on your lips, you stay glued to his body and wait (fixing his eyes in eager anticipation and mentally preparing yourself for giving this platonic friendship a beautiful funeral) until his bewildered eyes meet yours and you realize in crushing disappointment that the clueless fool—instead of kissing you—is waiting for a response.

"I dare you!" You grudgingly roll down from him, prop yourself up on one elbow, and yank at his ponytail again. "I've won this round, you harmless little kid! You don't even dare to kiss me, much less undress me like that!"

Still disgruntled and humiliated by your victory, you regally plant yourself on his bed, readjust your bathrobe, cross your legs, toss him the hairdryer, and demand, "Finish drying my hair for me now, loser!" when he suddenly pulls himself to his feet with the belt of your bathrobe, undoing the knot in the process.

"Let's call it quits," he says, letting go of the belt, and brushes his lips against your hair. "I fear I've already broken a promise tonight, and your detective is waiting for you at home."

"What promise?" you ask, distracted by his gesture, whose meaning you can't grasp (did he mean to say he likes your hair even though he doesn't want to kiss you?) before it dawns on you what promise he must have meant.
"Oh, come on!" he exclaims in exasperation, shooting you a wry smile while the unnerving wish of breaking the other promise with him as well flits across your mind.

But naturally, you know better than propose such an outrageous thing to a person who—for a reason you can't comprehend—doesn't even dare to peck you on your cheek. Either he has taken those "promises" too seriously and sticks to them now with idiotic firmness or he has scruples because he is afraid of ruining your (non-existent) chances with Kudo. At least it can't be shyness or the fear of rejection, you think to yourself. As bold as brass and undoubtedly observant, he must have noticed by now that you're not averse to kissing him. In any case, it seems you will have to kiss him first because he obviously won't kiss you. But unfortunately, you have never learned to initiate a kiss either because all the other men in your life had started it.

Before your inner eye, you can already see the two of you spending a lifetime together in his apartment or yours, sharing the shower with each other, hugging and flirting and cracking suggestive jokes while dry-blowing each other's hair every day for about sixty to seventy years without either of you daring to step on the boundaries of friendship. But as much as you want to do it, you can't bring yourself to kiss him for fear that, being the unpredictable idiot he is, he might really reject you for some obscure reason.

Helpless in view of this Catch-22 situation and for lack of words, you fail to say anything in reply to his confession (was it really a confession or did he only try to tell you in his flirtatious way that nothing will ever come out of this?) and only let him dry your hair for you in silence while, outside, the rain is still coming down in sheets as the world is still warmed by the first light of dawn.
Part 06: Kudo Shinichi, too...

Kudo Shinichi, too, was once a complete stranger—a fact which seems unimaginable to you now that Kudo has become an integral part of your life despite his conspicuous physical absence. Claiming that you miss him would be a bit of an overstatement since you've grown accustomed to not seeing much of him during the past three years. Nevertheless, there are moments when the sight of a skateboard, a pair of black-rimmed glasses, or a football would suddenly bring a lump to your throat. In those ludicrously sentimental moments which, luckily, have become rare at last, you would recall that you were numb with shock when you saw Kudo in his grown-up form for the first time. Back then, the thought hit you that Edogawa Conan never really existed because he was only a shrunk version of Kudo Shinichi, a stranger with piercing grey-blue eyes and an aura so extraordinarily brilliant and pristine that it almost offended you.

Stealing another glance at the stranger, whose extremely kissable lips appear even more tempting with every passing second (while people claim that the eyes of love are blind, your infatuated eyes (and ears and nose) are surprisingly sharp), you wonder how your first meeting with Kudo would have been if the two of you had only met by accident in a park like you and "stranger-san". Would Kudo and you have felt an instant connection with each other as well? Or would he only have shot you one of his typical brief analytical glances, mentally splitting you up into thousands of tiny particles and then piecing you together again to put on you the stamp "Potential culprit/witness/victim, registered and analyzed in Ueno-koen on Friday night at 6:30 p.m." before filing a miniature version of you away in a drawer of his perfectly ordered mind?

Most probably, Kudo would never have developed any feelings for you at all if you two had met outside the setting of a mystery because you are simply not his type. Similarly, you, too, would never have seen more in him than an impressively smart stranger with observant eyes. And before he could explain to you how he had deduced your occupation and educational background at first glance, the woman he would have been waiting for would already have interrupted your little chat because she certainly wouldn't have got lost on the way to Ueno-koen.

Whatever... Even if you two—caught in the crossfire of the clash between the Organization and the FBI—had stumbled across each other without being shrunk, you reflect, you would never have seen anything else in Kudo but your ticket to freedom. You would have found him good-looking but not attractive, charismatic but not charming, brilliant but not witty, friendly but not endearing. And the fact that he was, all in all, pretty much a girl's perfect knight in shining armour would probably have bored you.

On the other hand, your interest might have been ignited by his passion for mystery and his childlike exuberance. When you saw him for the first time in person, Edogawa Conan didn't immediately stand out among his classmates as you had expected. As long as he could maintain enough self-control to hold back his deductions, Kudo could effortlessly blend in with the children who weren't even half of his age, and you remember you found the contrast between his essentially rational character and his unguarded emotional outbursts intriguing. In fact, you remember you thought his smug boyish face was oddly interesting the first time you saw it.

"Are you thinking of your detective again?" the stranger asks, interrupting your train of thought.

"How did you get that idea?" You stare at him, unnerved by his ability to read your mind.

With a sigh, he turns off the hairdryer, gives your hair a final stroke, and gazes dreamily into the
mirror before he raises his brow at you and haughtily declares in a flawless imitation of your voice, "How did you get the idea that I'm thinking of Kudo all the time? I admit I had a weakness for him once... but I'm really not in love with him anymore!"

"Who taught you to impersonate other people like that?" You remain undecided about whether you should be irked by his impertinence or impressed by his acting.

He has been doing it since he was small, the stranger declares, glowing with pride. Taiki and Yaten don't appreciate it when he imitates them, though.

"I can imagine! But if you think I've been fantasizing about Kudo's beautiful eyes, you're dead wrong this time."

"So you've been fantasizing about something else? If it was about his beautiful lips you didn't get to touch because he bailed without a kiss, it's the same to me."

"Actually I have been thinking of kissing," you remark, surprising yourself with your boldness. "Do you want me to tell you about it?" Unfortunately, you don't really know how to continue. "Since holding your hand gave me the same feeling as holding Kudo's hand, I wondered what kissing you would feel like," would be the truth but would also be the perfect beginning to ruin your chances of getting a kiss from him for good.

"So you did kiss him?" the stranger asks, misreading your intention completely.

"No such luck," you sigh, wondering how a clueless guy like him could have gained such a notorious reputation. "He was about to kiss me when a friend of his walked in on us."

"When it comes to love, you're cursed just like me," the stranger jokes. "Just follow my example and give it up already."

"I've already given it up long ago. But you should at least have feigned sympathy!" You shoot him a disapproving look. "Haven't your parents taught you how to behave when a woman tells you the sob story of her life?"

"They did. They also taught me not to ask a woman who is in love with someone else to go out with me at night, but I've never been good at following their advice."

He surely has flirting down to a fine art, managing to flatter you and keep you at arm's length at the same time. After letting you know that nothing will ever come out of this, he thinks he can pretend that you are tantalizingly out of reach and woo you like a Petrarchan lover now without having to fear that you will take him at his word.

"So, do you regret it now? Even the weather is against us. You should have asked another woman who is not jinxed to go out with you at night."

As if it were trying to illustrate your statement, the torrential rain outside pelts down even faster, lashing against the windowpane, and both of you turn your heads when a gust of wind rattles the window. Somewhere in the darker recesses of your mind, you can still feel the irrational old fear that Gin's ghost will haunt you at twilight.

"No, not in the least." The stranger smiles. "I'm glad I asked you although I can tell you're thinking of Kudo again, judging from the look on your face. Perhaps I should consider making a living of my mind-reading skills instead of my singing."

"You'd starve because your mind-reading skills are unreliable. I've been thinking of someone else
this time."

"Some other ex-boyfriend? You had this nostalgic ex-boyfriend look on your face."

"The one who told me about the ghost at twilight. I used to have nightmares about him dying a sudden death and then coming back to life to haunt me."

"Were you terrified of having to confess to him or just afraid of his ghost?"

"I was terrified of being responsible for his death. After all, I knew I could never have forced myself to confess. There is something extremely humiliating about this whole confessing and making a fool of oneself. As long as one doesn't know for sure one's feelings are being reciprocated, one should refrain from doing such a thing to spare both sides the embarrassing situation."

In your mind, you can see the scene as clearly as if you had never forgotten that night... the strips of moonlight on the yellow-ochre sheets, the deformed teddy bear in your arms, Gin's long ponytail and his sharp profile in the soft light... while a feeling of unease suddenly comes over you when you think of Kudo's silhouette against the ending twilight.

"Are you all right?" The stranger slightly touches your arm.

"Perfectly," you tell him, dismissing a peculiar thought which has just flitted across your mind. "I've only forgotten to tell you that both Kudo and Kaito know the story of the ghost at twilight as well although their versions are different from yours and mine."

"And how are their versions?" he asks, pulling the blanket over your naked feet. To your surprise, you realize that you must have been freezing without noticing it.

"Kaito's version is about a spirit trying to steal a heart during a magical twilight while Kudo's version is about a ghost returning to life for a day to say farewell to the person it loved. Two completely different versions of the same story again!"

"Since there are already so many different versions, we should make up our own version of it," he suggests. "I don't know how yours will end, but I'm definitely going to give mine a happy ending."

Even though many memories of your time as Haibara Ai have become blurred over the years, you still remember distinctly the school play during which Kudo played Ran's knight and carelessly removed his helmet in front of everyone's eyes to solve the murder while you were impersonating Edogawa to allay Ran's suspicion. Seeing them in their costumes onstage together, the thought suddenly occurred to you that Kudo and Ran must have grown up with different fairy tales than you did. Theirs were most probably about noble knights who rescued and married their beautiful princesses—stories about secure, requited, and everlasting loves—whereas the fairy tale you grew up with was a ghost story which denied the feasibility of enduring love. At that moment, you realized that Kudo and you were galaxies apart.

The stranger, too, apparently belongs to the people who have grown up with happy endings, and you perceive for the first time the gaping gulf between the two of you which you haven't noticed before. Regrettably, the rules of magnetism don't really apply to human beings. When it comes to love, opposites usually attract but also tend to push each other apart in the long run.

"And, how does that happily-ever-after look like?" you ask, feeling exhausted and sleep-deprived again. The euphoria of the last hour is wearing off, and you remember the same happened in Paris when you tried to picture a future with Kudo and came to the conclusion that your story with him..."
would never have a happy ending.

"I don't know it yet. But of course everybody is going to live happily ever after. Fairy tales are supposed to end like that."

"Real life never ends like that." You rest your head on his large pillow and bury yourself up to your shoulder under his fluffy blanket. "Unrequited love might be agony as long as it lasts, but I think it's the requited one which actually kills one in the end. The only fair thing in love lies in the fact that one will always suffer no matter whether one gets or doesn't get what one wanted."

"Why?" He gives you a skeptical look. "Getting something you want or not getting something you want usually makes an enormous difference."

"Not when it comes to love because it's impossible to have such an intimate relationship with another person for long without giving up yourself. After a while, the differences can't be ignored—or you manage to ignore them but that would be the end of love as well. Long-term relationships are built on never-ending sacrifices and disenchantment. Sometimes, when I see old married couples together, I almost pity them! Infatuation only lasts for a couple of weeks. Afterwards it's like dealing with a car crash in slow motion..."

You don't need to be a prodigy to know that this is definitely the wrong approach to ask the stranger for a kiss. What's more, you can't understand why you couldn't resist the urge to bore him with your tedious introspection. You can't even make out what you actually want from him after the kiss you're craving despite not believing in long-term relationships. Although you don't want a fling with no strings attached, you can't believe that two freedom-loving people like he and you will ever end up in something as suffocating as marriage either.

Meanwhile, the first glimmer of dawn lazily lingers on just like the last gleam of twilight, bathing the stranger's small bedroom in a nostalgic reddish glow, and you distractedly note that love seems to sneak up on you whenever you believe to have evaded it. Capricious, uncommitted, and perpetually kindling desire which can never be satisfied, the unreasonable passing fancy seems to impose its tyrannical reign on you when you are least expecting it just out of spite.

"There are many cases like that, but they're certainly not the rule. I think Mamoru-san and Odango are genuinely happy with each other despite their occasional tiffs, and they've been together for nine or ten years by now." Odango... There is something about the way he pronounces the little nickname which wakes you up from your impossible dream that this unexpected spark of fascination between the two of you could actually develop into something serious.

"Since you believe that I'm thinking of Kudo all the time, I bet you're always thinking of Odango, right?" you observe with as much nonchalance as you can muster.

"Almost always," he admits. "I just wondered what she would say about this."

"About what?"

He gives you a look of exasperation and disbelief.

"Don't tell me you really didn't get what I told you earlier."

"I didn't," you cast him a confused glance, "or at least I'm not sure about what you wanted to say."

"You must be kidding me," he murmurs, looking so crestfallen that you begin to wonder whether
he is really so naive and fixated on the idea that you're still in love with Kudo that he is missing all of your hints.

"So, what would she say about this?" you ask, feeling your eyelids drooping and your limbs growing heavier with every breath you take. His soft murmur combined with the rhythm of the falling rain in the background sounds almost like a lullaby to your ears, and his tiny bed is so comfortable that you feel like curling up next to him and go to sleep in an instant—social norms be damned!

"She'd tell me that I'm even more of a masochist than she had thought," he says with a smile. "But you're tired. I can leave you alone now and wake you up in an hour or two if you like."

"Don't!" You sleepily force your eyes open. "You should try to keep me awake instead."

"What about coffee? I made us some while you were still in the bathroom." He puts the hairdryer into his wardrobe. "Or would you rather go to Two Lights' now? I can lend you my clothes since it will take our clothes a few hours to dry."

Coffee, you decide without as much as a second thought, because going to Two Lights' in his clothes isn't really an option. The reporters would get a wrong impression if they spotted the two of you together again at Two Lights' and noticed that you had changed your clothes in the meantime, apart from the fact that you would look weird in his clothes because he and you don't wear the same size.

"I think everyone has already gone home by now," he says in an attempt to dispel your fears, "and people will always think whatever they want to. Not changing clothes will probably give them the same ideas although I wouldn't really mind if you—"

"Of course I would mind!" You shoot him a black look. "The last thing I need now is appearing in the news as the latest conquest of an infamous womanizer like you."

"So you're afraid that Kudo will get the wrong impression about us?" he laughs, eyes bright with excitement. "Now I feel like taking a photo of you in my bathrobe and mail it to him just to see his reaction."

"He wouldn't be fooled by it. Knowing him, I'm sure he will deduce everything within a few seconds."

"You mean the only way for us to shock him out of his apathy is getting married? When, do you think, are the hours of business of the municipal office? Do you have time on Monday?"

Although you know he is only joking, his voice sounded so convincing and honest that, under different circumstances, you would have sworn that he is serious.

"Since I don't mind having someone who does all my housework, you should be more careful with your jokes or you will really end up marrying me. And I must warn you that I'm not an easy woman to be with."

"I'm looking forward to seeing your face when I drag you to the municipal office next week." He flashes you a challenging smile on the way to the door. "Will you dare to sign the papers or will you try to bail like you did with the shower?"

For a moment, you're tempted to take on his challenge just to see his face when he realizes that he has shot himself in the foot. But then you decide against it, partly because you're tired and partly because you're not in the mood to tease him.
"I thought we wanted to call it quits," you remind him instead.

"I'm not joking," he asserts. "I'm sure Kudo will explode as soon as he hears that you're married to me, and I promise that if you want to be free because he tells you he'd like the two of you to start anew, I won't cause any trouble for you but divorce you immediately."

"If you think you can turn me into your short-term affair that way, I'll pass." You reluctantly leave his cozy bed to join him at the door. "Since he won't ever come back to me, I might get the idea to keep you as my house slave for life if we really married."

He blushes at your accusation.

"I only meant to sign the papers although I'd be the last one to complain if you ended up marrying me for real," he laughs, pulling you by your elbow with him into the corridor. "But why do you think Kudo won't ever come back? As things are, I bet he is going to sabotage our wedding if you let him know about our engagement beforehand. I'm really looking forward to that."

"I hate to disappoint you, but I've already given him a good reason to break up with me once. Kudo is not the type who makes the same mistake again."

"A few minutes ago you still claimed that Kuroba and Kudo both broke up with you for lame reasons," the stranger wickedly remarks. "It wouldn't surprise me if Kudo's version of the story is very different from yours and that the one who bailed was in reality you."

"No, it was him who left." You glower at the insolent wretch, who has dared to tell you to your face that he doubts your credibility, "although it doesn't matter who broke up with whom because it's all water under the bridge now. I don't think either of us wants to revive something which has been dead for years."

For a brief moment, he hesitates with one hand on the door handle, scrutinizing you with his probing eyes as if he were about to cross-examine you about the breakup. But then he apparently remembers that you've told him not to touch on that subject tonight and only gives you a strangely enigmatic smile before ushering you into his living room.
Proceeding to the large...

Proceeding to the large single window, where the first light of dawn is reflected in the streams of water running down the blue-tinted glass, you realize that one can see the street where you live from the stranger's window, as it overlooks the southern part of Azabu Juuban.

"It's unbelievable that I've never seen you through this window, isn't it?" The stranger smiles, following your gaze. "Or maybe I've already seen you many times without noticing. Everyone looks almost the same from this height except for Odango, whose hairstyle I'd recognize everywhere."

"Maybe we weren't supposed to meet," you observe, consulting your watch, whose hands say six o'clock. The second hand seems to move slower than usual, a strange phenomenon, which can only be explained by your heightened awareness of time since yesterday's twilight.

"You mean fate had something against us?" he asks in mild amusement, pouring espresso into two small printed coffee cups. "If it had, it must have changed its mind last night."

Don't run away from your destiny, Kudo once told you, surprising you, as you hadn't expected someone like him to believe in fate. To you, destiny is a path one can only recognize in retrospect, an illusion of order which materializes out of the mess of life when a series of coincidences have led to an inescapable conclusion. Six years after Kudo's remark, it appears to you as if the "destiny" he referred to has chosen you to betray him and to deactivate Pandora's Box. But at that moment, it was only a sentence which moved you because you realized that the detective who just impulsively risked his life to save yours was so pure and naive that he would never stand a chance against the Organization...

"Why should I blame it on fate?" You join the stranger at the round coffee table in front of the window. "You were the one who turned down Professor Tomoe's invitation to come to Infinity."

"I still think it was a good decision." He smiles, placing a cup in front of you. "If I had come to Infinity, we wouldn't be here together now."

"Most probably. Or we would but many things would be different."

Whether it would be for better or worse if he had come to Infinity, you do not know. Nevertheless, you have a funny feeling that he is the person you've always missed. And the fact that you suddenly encountered him at twilight on the bench where you expected to find Kudo simultaneously thrills and disturbs you.

Afterwards you both watch the rain in comfortable silence, for the scent of coffee or the previous subject of your talk has put the stranger into a contemplative mood. Letting your eyes roam the cream-walled living room where large bouquets of red roses, fastidiously wrapped presents, and fan letters in colourful envelopes are scattered haphazardly over the carpeted floor, you draw the analogy between his life and this room, where one can't move about freely without stumbling over unwanted tokens of love.

Turning your gaze back to his face, you catch him watching you with friendly but unreadable eyes.

"If there was really something like destiny, I'd certainly fight it." He smiles. "I've never liked the
idea of predestination. You?"

"I don't like it either. But if there was something like destiny, it would be futile to fight it. After all, the main tenet of the whole destiny theory is that you can never escape your fate..."

You know many people who believe in the idea of destiny—you tell him between two sips of the espresso his coffee maker has kept so hot that it almost burns your lips—and you can imagine why destiny enjoys such popularity. It gives happy people a sense of security and eases the pain of unhappy people by offering them the perfect scapegoat. You yourself have sometimes indulged in it when the burden of responsibility for your own failures and mistakes became too heavy for you to bear.

"But have you ever really believed in it?"

"Only to a certain extent... I still believe in it, in a way. I think we all start under conditions that influence the course of our lives more than we'd like to admit—but I don't believe in things like the red string of fate."

"I've never believed in it either." He wraps his hands around his cup as if he were trying to warm them. "It's a handy tool against jealousy, though. Just label your present partner your 'true love' and you'll be able to convince yourself that they will stay with you for life."

Jealousy... The word triggers memories of an afternoon at the aquarium with Rye and the following night in Professor Tomoe's lab with Gin, of pain, handcuffs, suffocating cigarette qualms, and gleaming cigarette butts... And you hastily take a huge gulp of the hot espresso to mask the unpleasant taste the memory has brought to your mouth.

"Are you often jealous at Chiba-san?" you casually ask.

"At Mamoru-san? Not at all." The stranger languorously sips his espresso in contentment. He doesn't think one can call it jealousy because he only regarded "Mamoru-san" as the main obstacle to what he wanted. All in all, he isn't the jealous type even though he wouldn't ever go as far as sharing his girlfriend or wife like people who believe in open relationships do.

You can't help but laugh. He has just talked about sharing a lover as if it were only an alternative way of life or a personal habit, convincing you that, in a way, it is.

"I doubt you will ever have to. With all your obsessive female fans in mind, I think it's your future girlfriend or wife who will have to share you."

His vivid eyes follow the movement of your hand to rest on the bouquets of roses on the floor.

"I only got so many since the announcement of Taiki's and Yaten's comeback." He gives a dismissive wave. "People are trying to convince me to return to the stage as well."

"And? Will you?"

"I don't know yet," he evasively says. "It depends..."

Without continuing his sentence, he suddenly leaps from the sofa and changes the topic after a glance into the fridge.

"Would you like a piece of cake? I have tiramisu and chocolate cake ready to be served. Judging from the size of the pieces, Taiki was in a good mood."
"So your flower-loving brother can bake as well?"

"Oh, there is nothing Taiki can't do. He is great at anything: housework, cooking, baking, gardening, music, poetry, art, sciences... I'm glad he isn't here since he is exactly your ideal house husband type. That would ruin my chances of tricking you into marrying me someday." He raises his hands balancing two china plates. "Which one do you want, chocolate cake or tiramisu?"

"Either is fine for me. But you see, there is a world of difference between what we think we want and what we're really gravitating to... I've just discovered I have an unfortunate weakness for reckless and clueless men who can't even cook—"

"—men like Kudo, I know." He gives you a wry smile. "But you're somewhat slow yourself." Leaving the plates on the kitchen table, he rummages through his drawer in search of the ideal spoon before settling with two forks. "Any other woman would have understood perfectly what I told you earlier and at least given me a response. But you're so fixated on your detective that you wouldn't even get what I meant if I repeated it to you!"

There is no limit to his unparalleled idiocy, you realize. Nevertheless, it's quite apparent to you now that he would immediately kiss you if he weren't convinced that you aren't interested in him because you're still clinging to your feelings for Kudo. The thought of Kudo leaving for Osaka still upsets you for no logical reason—as if these new feelings of yours haven't extinguish the old ones at all but simply coexist with them, sharing the same host in the same easy way in which the stranger breezes through life.

"So which one looks more tempting," he asks again after returning to the table. "Chocolate cake or tiramisu?"

"I don't care." You eye the two plates full of empty calories you expect to find on your hips soon. "They both look delicious. Just give me the one you don't want. Either of them will do."

"Fine." He chuckles and places both plates in front of himself. "If you really don't care, I will keep both." Smirking at your undoubtedly stupefied face, he arms himself with a fork and smugly adds, "Since you can't decide which one you want, it's only fair that you don't get either."

"At least I won't be the one who puts on weight," you testily remark, watching him sip coffee and eat both cakes at the same time with contagious appetite.

"What about burning the calories together?" He winks, shoving a large piece of tiramisu into your mouth when you open it to ask him what he was actually suggesting. "I hope you remember you agreed to dance with me as long as I stick to my word and keep my hands off you."

As much as you would like to keep your word, there is no way you can go with him to Two Lights' now—you discreetly direct his attention to the oversized bathrobe you're wearing lest he has forgotten about it. Also, you will have to go home when your clothes are dry since you don't want Kudo to investigate your disappearance and find you in the company of a man you've only known for a few hours at Two Lights'. Before your inner eye, you can already see Kudo crouching in front of your landlady's azalea shrubs, inspecting fresh footsteps on the grass and a strand of long black hair his hawklike eyes have spotted in the maze of blazing red Azalea blossoms...

Who knows what Kudo will be capable of if he decides to treat your private life as a new case out of sheer boredom—apart from his gift for attracting murders wherever he goes! You can also imagine him rolling his eyes at your instantaneous and intense crush on a stranger of dubious
reputation while comparing it to his own steady relationship with his devoted and faithful future wife. Perhaps he might even feel a slight pang of jealousy at seeing the old friend he had been in love with for a few weeks so completely smitten with the same culprit who once evaded him with style. And you inwardly grin at the thought of him fishing for his APAH bottle in the bulging pocket of his short leather jacket, taking out ten to fifteen APAH capsules to fight the beginnings of a new migraine...

"I actually have a lot of work to do as well," you continue, rapidly calculating the time you will need for Kudo's check-up in your mind. Taking account of the possibility that you might have to alter the formula for APAH to suit Kudo's requirements, you surmise that you will be working like a maniac for the whole afternoon.

"Ah," your imperfect but devastatingly attractive stranger (Does he really look like this in reality or does he only look like this in your eyes?) gives you an understanding smile and innocently remarks, "You will be working until Kudo leaves to fetch his girlfriend from the train, I suppose."

Since you don't know how to tell him about APAH and APTX4869 without giving him the impression that you're as mad as a hatter (or as a certain white-haired professor, who once believed that he could create a superhuman race), you only shrug—hoping that you come across as delightfully enigmatic—and ignore his implication.

"I'll be free after six at the latest. We can have dinner together and go out for a dance afterwards if you have time."

Or in other words: What about repeating our rendezvous on a daily basis? Not even a clueless idiot of Kudo's calibre can miss the hint that you would like to give this puzzling relationship a clearer definition.

"I do have time tonight, but I don't get why we can't dance together here and now," he responds in an elegant attempt to pass up your offer without hurting your feelings.

"You can't be serious!" You try to mask your disappointment by emptying your cup of coffee. He is disturbingly hard to read, tempting you with impossible suggestions while obstinately keeping his distance at the same time. Haven't you yourself categorized him as the type that will never commit? Blaming his evasiveness on his naiveté would be self-deception since it's indisputable that you've just asked him for a second date and have been coolly dismissed with a polite rejection.

"Why not?"

"No space?" You smile at him in bewilderment. To all appearances, he really intends to dance with you right now regardless of your unconventional attire and the fact that you two can't turn on the speakers in his apartment for fear of disturbing the neighbourhood.

"There will be enough space if we move the flowers into the corridor and the kitchen." He gracefully rises from his armchair and gives your shoulder a gentle nudge. "Come on, give me a hand, will you?"

After dividing the bouquets of roses between the corridor and the kitchen adjoining the living room, the two of you proceed to inspect his presents and fan letters, as you refuse to throw away so many lovingly wrapped boxes unopened into the trash bag he has placed on the floor.

"Trust me, I know exactly what they usually contain," he claims, "which is why I'm going to dump anything which is wrapped in red or black or has a heart on it unopened to spare us the embarrassment."
In spite of your prudish character, you don't easily get embarrassed by love letters no matter how impertinent and corny, you retort. Since he seriously wishes to get rid of all his fan letters and presents, you will consider them yours and open all of them to have a look at what he is so afraid of.

"Don't forget that I've warned you!" He sighs in defeat, shaking his head at your obstinacy.

"What do you usually do with all your fan mails which aren't red or black and don't have a heart on them? Filing them away to publish them in your memoirs as a postscript?" You give the letter he is now reading a skeptical look.

He smiles at you while casually ripping the letter apart. He only keeps a few he likes and throws away the rest, he claims. When he was still a teen idol, he sometimes replied to the fan letters he liked on the radio.

"How nice of you!"

"I actually like this one." He hands you a small watercolour card he has just decided to keep because he thinks one can call it art. Yaten dumped (and still dumps) all types of fan letters without reading them while Taiki used to keep all of them for purely intellectual reasons. Taiki also used to answer to most of the fan letters in his spare time, claiming that he only did it because he was fascinated by the workings of the human mind.

"But back then Kakyuu was still alive." The stranger turns away to place the two letters he intends to keep on the coffee table. "She used to choose the ones she liked most and ask us to reply to them first." Taking a giant lace bra and a pair of heavily perfumed panties out of a red box to throw it into the trash bag, he explains to you that "Kakyuu" was his lovely foster sister, who was one year older than him and whom Taiki, Yaten, and he had been in love with during their early teenage years.

"In retrospect, I think one can say we had been sharing her," he admits. "Somehow it worked without any complications since we all got along extremely well."

"You mean you lied to me when you said you didn't have a childhood friend?" You shoot him a withering look.

"I didn't consider her a childhood friend since I seldom saw her—she went to a private all-girls school until she was ten—and because she was my sister... well, sort of."

"'Sort of?' It makes a real difference, doesn't it? If she had been your real sister, it would have been incest."

"That's exactly why I added the 'sort of'—"

"—You also told me you would never go as far as sharing your girlfriend!"

"She was never really my girlfriend. It was a purely platonic love. We only held hands and hugged. I was never jealous of either Taiki or Yaten."

"Say... did you 'sort-of' kiss her, your sort-of sister/girlfriend/childhood friend?"

"If you consider a peck on her cheek as 'sort-of-kissing,' yes."

Life became increasingly insufferable at home due to the overprotectiveness of his foster parents (and their fully justified worries about their children's unconventional love life?), he tells you while
quickly ripping apart a long letter from another fan after skimming it. Perhaps that's why Yaten, Taiki, and he rebelled when they were fifteen, leaving home with the declaration that they were going to take Kakyuu with them as soon as they could take care of themselves.

"It took us only a few weeks before we realized we had bitten off more than we could chew." He opens a box of chocolate-coated praline and offers a heart-shaped piece to you. "There we were, three spoiled teenagers running away from perfectly nice foster parents, who were begging us to come home because they could already see us ending as burglars or hired assassins. Taiki considered going home but Yaten and I would rather have died than admitted that we had failed. If Shizuka-san's father hadn't discovered us during one of our street performances, we would still be working in the circus for food and lodging."

"So you convinced your foster sister to leave your parents and live with you after you became a teen idol?" you ask with a glance at the white bench and the parasol you can see through the open door.

"Yes. She shared the apartment with Taiki, Yaten, and me for a few months. Then she discovered this apartment and suggested that we should move here..."

"...and that the four of you share this apartment." You scrutinize the four antique coat hooks in his corridor from afar. The four coat hooks suddenly seem to carry a deeper meaning to you now that you consider the difference in height at which they've been fastened on the wall.

"No, it was only her and me. She was living with me here while Yaten and Taiki were sharing the apartment above us. Of course they still often came down since we four always cooked and ate together." He gazes at you with troubled eyes. "I loved her in a purely emotional way, which was probably too little for her since our relationship wasn't going anywhere. Things became increasingly more awkward between us... Before one of our last concerts as Three Lights, she got into an accident and fell into a coma."

Taken aback by the implication and the sudden break in his voice, you wonder whether Kakyuu had made a scene when she noticed that he had fallen in love with another girl. Judging from the timespan it has lasted, his feelings for Odango seem to have been more serious than his feelings for Kakyuu, which were probably protectiveness and admiration he had mistaken for love.

You can hazily imagine the scenes of his life before his path crossed yours: the empty apartment after Kakyuu's accident, the mob of angry fans protesting against Three Lights' band break-up, Odango's wedding and their meetings at Ueno-koen after her marriage, his unmoving figure at the hospital bed of the comatose woman he once loved, pondering whether he should or should not pull the plug to her life support system...

Kakyuu died in her coma two years ago, he continues. Taiki dealt with her death by starting to write morbid poems while Yaten became an even more antisocial person than he already was. He himself was the only one who continued his life unscathed after a phase of mourning.

"A friend told me once that I'm the most resilient person on earth," he says, his voice cool and slightly ironic.

"It's something you should be proud of." You furrow your brows in concentration, pretending to occupy yourself with a particularly outrageous fan letter. "Whenever someone close to me died, it was hard for me to continue living. I always wished I had been the one who died so that I wouldn't have to deal with it." Ripping the shameless love letter apart with the air of a possessive long-time girlfriend, you add, "If that situation ever happens again, I don't think I will be able to bear it."
"That situation is hard to avoid." He calmly helps you collect the paper scraps. "Two people who love each other seldom pass away at the same time under normal circumstances. Unless you distance yourself from all the people you love, someday you will have to deal with the death of a loved one or vice versa."

"The 'vice versa' is exactly what I want." You let a red-and-black striped box (whose contents were short dyed-blonde curls and a photo with the capture "You can have me at any time!") fall into the trash bag. "I want to be the one who passes away first, as selfish as it sounds."

"Really?" He smiles at you across the pile of unread letters he has placed between you and himself. "I'd liked to be the last person left so that no one will have to mourn for me."
Death, so commonplace...

Death, so commonplace and inevitable, was at the same time so surreal and inconceivable that fifteen-year-old Sherry had no real interest in pondering the matter. Naturally, the thought often occurred to her that her sister and Gin were most likely to pass away before her and that she would sooner or later have to mourn their deaths. But thinking of death as an abstract entity differs significantly from seeing it with one's own eyes—and Sherry only associated death with carcasses of lab rats, fading photos of strangers she called parents, anonymous faces on the Organization's annual reports of collateral damage, and a dark ghost story about a secret love until she witnessed the "death" of the red-haired woman.

Before Gin told her that the young woman had survived, Sherry automatically assumed that she had died. In the two months following the stranger's death, unprecedented emotions began to stir inside Sherry—sentiments whose profound impact on her she never fully grasped because she considered them too irrational and unsettling to dwell on. Unwelcome and unacknowledged, they were soon forgotten after she learned that the girl was still alive. Nevertheless, when two years later she was given the task to investigate Kudo Shinichi's disappearance and discovered that the detective had been shrunk by her drug, Sherry found herself facing a dilemma she might never have had if she had never met the red-haired girl.

In fact, choosing her own safety over Kudo Shinichi's life should have been easy enough. Being familiar with the ways of the Organization, she knew perfectly well that the penalty for treason was either torture or/and death depending on the gravity of the offence. Moreover, Kudo Shinichi was a stranger she had only seen on the news and never met, a law-abiding and unduly zealous private investigator who would have no qualms about escorting her in handcuffs to the police station if he knew whom she was working for. On top of that, saving a famous sleuth like him also meant taking responsibility for the difficulties which would undoubtedly arise if he continued to snoop around. In short, there was no reason why she out of all people should risk her life to save his, she concluded and inwardly groaned at her own idiocy when five seconds afterwards she did exactly the opposite from what she considered sensible by declaring him dead in her report.

Your fatal tendency to rebel against common sense from time to time (an innate antipathy against a sheltered life?) becomes apparent in situations like the one you're trying to assess now. If Kudo were here, he would warn you that your growing attachment to this stranger spells trouble because a serious relationship with such a person is doomed to failure right from the start. Instead of a reliable man who can give you a feeling of security and peace—the only halfway viable alternative to a perfectly independent life devoid of the emotional turmoil love always brings—you had to crush on a rebellious idol with a disturbing sister complex, the reputation for being disgracefully promiscuous, and the ability to lie fluently, without batting an eyelid...

"We should really put them aside for now," the accomplished liar yawns, leaning against the wall behind him with a pained expression. "Why do you want to read all of them to me?"

"Don't be such a snob! This one is really good, I think. She even wrote you a poem:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

She wants to love you until she dies—you should really accept her love."

"I'm touched! But she has copied everything from Shakespeare. I'm sure it's from one of his love
sonnets. Taiki could even tell you from which one."

"At least her letter meets a certain intellectual standard unlike most of your other fan letters. And I
remember you quoted Shakespeare as well when you asked me out tonight." Undisturbed by his
impatience, you proceed to the postscript on the other side of the card. "I see it's not addressed to
you but to Taiki-san: 'Taiki-sama, please give me a chance. I love you more than I can say.
Eternally yours, Misa...''"

"Taiki must have got the letters mixed up when he brought them here. I should have known it! My
fans seldom write poems for me."

"Maybe they don't expect a guy like you to understand love sonnets?"

"Now I know what you really think about my mental capacity!"

Oddly enough, you feel perfectly at ease with him as you're growing accustomed to his presence,
secretly enjoying his nearness and revelling in the sense of beauty and even in the conflicting
emotions the last hours have stirred inside you. Trying to dispel the treacherous sense of
belonging, which has caught you unawares, you mentally compile a list of good reasons why this
will never work out in the long run: First, two freedom-loving people with a deep-rooted fear of
long-time commitment like he and you are most likely to part after the first exhilarating spell of
infatuation wears off. Second, a serious relationship or a marriage is quite impracticable, as you're
thoroughly sick of the downward spiral which always manifests itself whenever love turns sour
while he has told you in no uncertain terms that he is not at all interested in being tied down by
"tiresome obligations and paperwork". Apart from that, you can't read his real intentions at all due
to his evasiveness and his casual flirting, not to mention the fact that you two don't have much in
common and are drawn to each other for obscure reasons.

On another day, you would have listened to the voice of conventional wisdom and immediately
retreated. But the sunset last night seems to have awoken a hidden side of yours which has lain
dormant since Pandora's Box—a willful personality bent on throwing caution to the winds to get
whatever she has set her heart on.

"Which ex-boyfriend of yours are you thinking of at the moment?" The stranger contemplates you
with a quizzical look.

"Why don't you use your mind-reading skills and try to guess it?"

"My mind-reading skills only tell me that it's an ex-boyfriend again, a particularly pleasant one,
according to your smile."

"I haven't been thinking of any ex-boyfriend. I've been trying to lay down the quality standards I
want my future house husband to meet, wondering whether there is a man on earth who can satisfy
the basic requirements because I'm tired of doing all my housework alone."

"I can meet any requirements," he promptly asserts, "and the few things I can't do I can always
learn."
"You mean you're applying for the job?" You shoot him an intentionally calculating glance. Unfortunately, your solemn tone of voice sounds not exaggerated enough even in your own ears. And in a sudden bout of self-consciousness, you worry that he might miss the subtlety and mistake your joke for a rash proposal.

He laughs (as he has apparently taken notice of the nuance), carelessly opening another letter with his long graceful fingers while keeping his eyes fixed on you.

"Well, I have been applying for it for quite a while by now, haven't I?"

Conscious of taking pleasure in watching his hands ripping up the envelope and handling the paper with practiced gentleness, you turn away from him in a flash of unprovoked anger.

"You were only so bold because you expected me to pass up your offer. And your offer was a fake marriage, if I remember correctly."

He eagerly leans towards you with a shade of amazement in his eyes.

"Would you have considered marrying me for real if I had seriously proposed?"

"You will never know it because you won't ever dare to."

"I hereby apply in all seriousness for the position of your future husband," he declares. Despite his humorous choice of words, the expression on his face is perfectly sincere.

"Unfortunately, you lack the requisite qualifications," you gravely reply, illustrating your decision with a dismissive wave.

"And what exactly do I lack?" He looks almost disappointed.

"Housekeeping skills! Apart from that, I don't want to be assassinated by your crazy fans on the day of our wedding." To demonstrate your point, you pick a card at random and read aloud, "Thank you so much for the awesome night! What about staying in Venice for a whole season? Love you to bits! Mina—" You abruptly stop and hand him the card in embarrassment. "Sorry, I thought it was only a fan letter like the others."

"Minako-chan is one of Odango's best friends," he explains as if spending a night with the friend of his unrequited love was common courtesy.

"So the rumours about you and Aino Minako are true?" you gloomily ask.

"No, 'the awesome night' in Venice was harmless," he quickly denies. "I only gave Minako-chan a private singing lesson she liked so much that she insisted I stay in Venice until she didn't need me anymore."

"And? Why didn't you stay? She seems to like you a lot."

"Oh, she likes everyone!" He grins before continuing on a more serious note, "There has never been anything between us, but I found Venice very beautiful. I liked it so much that I considered buying an apartment from Michiru-sama to spend my free weekends there."

However, Venice turned out not to be as enjoyable as he thought, he admitted, especially when one is single and stumbles over couples kissing in public all the time, continually reminding one of what one misses out in one's own life.
"And?" You narrow your eyes to scrutinize his infuriatingly innocent face. "Is it the truth this time? Or is it just one of your lies?" Meanwhile, the suspicion that he might be not only a fan but also a close friend of "Michiru-sama" and, in consequence, might know Tenoh-san personally begins to gnaw at the back of your mind.

"Why are you always so mistrustful?" he asks, accidentally throwing Aino Minako's card into the trash bag.

"Because prudence is a virtue and because I absolutely can't make you out." For a moment, you consider leaving the card in the trash bag before you grudgingly fish it out for him and put it on the table.

"I'm flattered! But I think you're making a virtue of cowardice."

"Cowardice is actually a virtue in the face of challenges too daunting to deal with. But now that you've told me about your first girlfriend, you can tell me about all the others as well. Was Odango one of your affairs, or was it really only a platonic friendship?"

"I already told you I've never had a girlfriend—"

"—And you've been lying! Now that I know you've been lying to me about your childhood girlfriend, I wonder what else you've been lying about."

"I told you Kakyuu wasn't my girlfriend in the traditional sense of the word," he emphatically asserts. "She was my foster sister!"

"Did she consider you her boyfriend?"

"I don't think so. She always introduced me as her foster brother. I know it sounds absurd to you but it was perfectly normal to us."

He claimed the only time he kissed someone in a romantic context was when he gave up Odango, you remind him. Naturally, you came to the inescapable conclusion that he had lied to you when you learned that he had kissed Kakyuu as well.

Those kisses weren't in the least romantic, he protests. He casually pecked Kakyuu as a greeting just like he used to kiss his foster mother. Before he met Odango, he was blissfully clueless and never even dreamed of romantically kissing anyone.

"That's not kissing for me!"

"All right," he sighs. "Then, according to your definition of kissing, I didn't kiss her at all."

"You also said puppy loves were boring. But your sister-complex was infinitely worse." You throw him a perplexed look. "Why did you think you were in love with Kakyuu if you didn't even want to kiss her?"

Because he wanted to spend his life with her and protect her forever. To him, she was the personification of kindness itself. He casts a fleeting glance at your lips. "Kissing her would have seemed like sacrilege. If I had wanted to kiss her, sharing her with Yaten and Taiki would have been torture."

"In that case, I don't think what you felt for her was love in the traditional sense of the word. It must have been idolatry, admiration, whatever. Love is completely different."
But what is love, you suddenly wonder. Is love an intense attraction, which leads to an enduring attachment, or is it the wish to protect the person you care about from harm? You can talk condescendingly about all the manifestations of love that don't seem right in your perception of the world, but who are you to assume that you know the right ingredients for the elusive thing called 'love' everyone talks about with the general consensus that the thing which means 'love' for one person also means 'love' for another?

"Everybody has their own idea of love," he reflects as if he has read your thoughts. "It's hard to avoid misunderstandings, which is why it always amazes me how well people in love get along—"

"—But they usually don't get along well. They sometimes even kill each other over the pettiest quarrels! That's why I don't believe in long-time relationships."

"You mean you don't only oppose to marriage in general... You don't even want a long-time relationship?" He looks at you aghast.

"That doesn't have anything to do with what I want," you sigh. "I'm only trying to listen to common sense and not to expect too much from life, that's all."

"Leaving common sense aside, what do you really want?" he asks, his smile and his low voice unmistakably seductive.

"Someone who does my housework without bailing at the first opportunity." You wisely omit to mention the tantalizing prospect of kissing him, knowing it would only complicate matters.

"What about moving in with me?" he suggests. In answer to your inquiring gaze, he continues persuasively, "I really don't mind doing all our housework."

"Just take your time to think about it." Propped on his elbows behind his back, he turns his face towards the window and wistfully observes, "Have you noticed the sun has been behaving strangely since we met? It didn't want to set last night. And now it doesn't want to rise at all."

"It's very much like you and doesn't know what it wants."

His eyes light up with a humorous glint.

"I know exactly what I want. The one who can't make up her mind is you."

"Say, when you told me you've already broken a promise tonight, what did you actually mean?" you venture, fearing that—unconventional as he is—his definition of love is to hold hands and hug and dance together while sharing an apartment, which isn't quite what you have imagined but would still be pleasant enough for the time being.

He doesn't answer but only stares at you in speechless incredulity as if you had asked him whether he had twenty arms and twenty legs.

"You are the slowest woman I've ever met," he groans at last, shaking his head. "Kudo and you are
All in all, the fan letters were at best boring ("We love you so much please return to the stage at once!") and at worst outright abusive and threatening ("If you don't come back I swear I'll sabotage your brothers' concerts!")... There were a few explicit proposals ("I'll be waiting for you at seven p.m. at ...")—the place of the rendezvous is always a restaurant, a love hotel, or even a private address) just as rather weird gifts like used lip balms, hair, full-body photos, and laced lingerie. Among all the atrocities the stranger and you have also found beautiful little tokens of love: homemade pralines and chocolate cakes, teddy keychains and lucky charms, surprisingly candid sounding love declarations and rare flower seeds, exquisite watercolour drawings and love jewellery.

"You'd have thrown away all these things?" you ask, beholding a locket pendant. Kudo once accidentally gave you a love necklace without knowing what it was, and you can still recall the agony when it slipped out of your hand and was instantly swallowed by the waves below.

"Why, none of them were in red or black wrapping papers with obnoxious hearts on them, weren't they?" the stranger points out as he returns to your side after depositing the trash bag on the kitchen floor. Holding out his hand towards you, he smiles. "Now we have enough space."

"Wait, I'd like to have a look at all the things you're going to keep!" You turn away from him, careful not to show your mild but rising panic.

He chuckles.

"Just admit that you're stalling for time because you're afraid of our dance."

"All right! I admit I'm not looking forward to making a fool of myself since I don't remember anything from my dance classes anymore—" You pause in surprise when you notice his eyes wander down to your legs with unconcealed interest.

"Your bullet wounds, how did you get them?" He indicates the small round scar directly underneath the hem of your bathrobe.

Not in the least disturbed by his tendency to awake your memories of both Kudo and Gin—the two romantic disasters of your life—you shrug away the stab of pain you still feel at the memory.

"Just a display of affection from my first boyfriend and then from his imbecile subordinate during our 'reunions'. They were only flesh wounds, though, nothing serious. I told you he had a macabre sense of humour."

"Since you always talk about him in the past tense, I gather he is dead?"

"Yes, and I doubt that anyone grieved over his death because he wasn't a particularly pleasant person."

"And how did he die?" He leads you by your arm to the sofa. "Slowly and painfully, I hope."

Taken aback by his question, you hesitate for a moment, choosing your words with caution. No, you don't think your first ex-boyfriend had to suffer very much because he always had an incredibly high tolerance to pain, you tell the stranger as you two settle on the sofa and he places a cushion behind your back in a quaint gesture of chivalrousness. The heartless jerk bled to death because the idiot who shot him managed to miss all the vital organs. But for all that, you're sure
your first ex didn't feel much but a sense of frustration at the prospect of leaving this world without being able to take all his enemies with him...

"Say, Haibara, back at Infinity... Were you one of Stinger's guinea-pig prodigies?" Kudo had asked, trying to distract you from feelings he believed to be shock and guilt... Three years after the incident, it strikes you as ironic how Kudo told you over and over again that it was self-defense, emphasizing that your "well-aimed" bullets weren't the only reason for your ex-boyfriend's inglorious ending. All the while, you couldn't help wishing that you could turn back time and fire the two bullets again because there wouldn't have been a reason to cry if your hand hadn't shaken and you hadn't missed! If you hadn't only wounded Gin but killed him at once, things would have ended differently back at Pandora's Box, and last night you would have been sleeping peacefully in Kudo's arms.

It's useless to dwell on bygone days of the dim and distant past, you chide yourself, pushing away the time-worn thoughts, which have adopted the characteristics of troublesome old acquaintances one has grown heartily tired of seeing. The thought of spending a night in Kudo's arms has completely lost its appeal to you after three years of complete stalemate and continuous divergence. But every so often, you would be assailed by unwanted memories of Edogawa and Haibara walking together and the kiss you had been craving but didn't get. And with a pang of regret, you would linger over theories of what might have happened if Gin hadn't activated Pandora's Box or if Tenoh-san had managed to come to your assistance, indulging in fantasies about all the unattainable things which might have been...

"And you met Kudo like that?" the stranger steers the conversation from your first ex-boyfriend to the second as he fills your coffee cup. "During a case in which you were the victim?"

Skipping all the details of your escape—a feat which you can't explain without touching on APTX4869 and which always sounds more impressive in narration than it was in real life—you answer in the affirmative, reluctantly leaving him with the assumption that your encounter with Kudo has induced you to walk out on your abusive first love and to betray the Organization.

From the expression in his eyes, you can tell he is pondering questions as to how you escaped the Organization's clutches. But in view of your obvious reticence, he holds them back after a moment of careful consideration.

"I met Kudo during one of his cases as well," he tells you with audible detachment in his voice. "But I wasn't the victim—I was one of his suspects."

"Really?" you cautiously respond, waiting for him to expand on the subject.

"And? Are you afraid of me now?" Intrigued by your nonchalant reaction, he gives you a faintly mischievous smile, studying your face with his probing eyes.

Not in the least, you truthfully reply, dithering over the question whether you should pretend to know nothing about the case or admit to him that you've already learned about it from Kudo. Even if he had been the culprit, you elaborate, you wouldn't feel the slightest fear of him because you're sure Kudo would have put him behind bars if Kudo had considered him dangerous.

"Ah, so you trust Kudo and not me." His voice is playfully sad.

"Of course, why should I trust you?" You give him a teasing smirk. "If anyone can be called a modern Sherlock Holmes, that person would be him. I don't believe in many things, but I trust his judgment and his deduction skills implicitly."
For an instant, you can discern in his eyes the wish to turn back time to the moment before he impetuously decided to mention the case. But then his gaze softens again and he leans back, regarding you with a resigned smile.

"Well, it seems even your Sherlock can fail because he didn't solve that case, as far as I can tell."

"Now you've made me curious."

"Maybe someday I'll tell you if you don't pester me about it tonight," he mimics you with an air of finality. Evidently, you've just squandered your chance of hearing the whole story from his point of view by telling him about your unshakable trust in Kudo, and now he might never confide to you why he ushered Kudo out of his apartment without as much as an attempt to justify his actions.

But was he really the culprit, you wonder, or has he just tried to tell you that Kudo's deduction was wrong? Once again you've jumped to conclusions when you automatically assumed that he was Kudo's culprit only because he matched the description given by Kudo even though you've never met Yaten and Taiki, who are living in the same house. Additionally, it seems odd to you that the stranger had refused to admit a crime like the one Kudo described if he had really been the culprit, as it would have been more in-character for him to come clean about it so that he could finally let go.

If the stranger is really the man Kudo told you about, you can't come up with a plausible reason why he hadn't denied the charge if he had been innocent. On the other hand, you doubt Kudo was talking about Yaten or Taiki, who are sharing an apartment, as Kudo's narration has given you the impression that the culprit was living alone. Didn't Kudo himself tell you that something about his deduction wasn't right and that he had only given up the case for lack of time and conclusive evidence? Kudo would certainly appreciate it if you present him the answer to the little mystery as a goodbye gift.

However, no sooner did you decide to play detective than you realize you had better leave it, as digging too deeply into Kakyuu's death and spilling all the details to the same investigator whom he (or one of his foster brothers?) had denied an explanation would also mean to betray the stranger. To know or not to know, is it really important? You two have resolved to distract each other from unhappy memories by making pleasant ones, not to open old wounds out of idle curiosity.

"It seems you have much more to hide than I thought," you can't help saying.

He visibly reddens, looking guilty all of a sudden.

"I admit I've held back one or two things." He laughs. "But I'd dare say the one who has much more to hide is you."

"Well, unlike you, I've never claimed to be an open book. If I were a book, I'd be a personal diary, locked."

He smiles at you across your coffee cups.

"Is there a key to the lock? If there isn't, I will refine my mind-reading skills and try to guess all your thoughts on my own."

"Well then, good luck with that," you gaily consent.

"I'm actually getting better at guessing." He fastidiously places his cup on the table before turning to you with an air of determination. "Do you mind if I show you?"
"No, go ahead!" You smile at him in amusement.

"The car crash in slow motion you talked about... Was it your relationship with Gin?"

Taken by surprise, you wonder for a moment whether you should answer his question in the affirmative or not before the realization hits you that his knowledge about your "car crash in slow motion" can't only have been a wild guess since you haven't even once mentioned Gin's code name to him. Most probably, he has already known about Sherry and Gin before last night (he said Stinger had "talked about cocktails as if they had a life") and put two and two together at some point of your conversation.

"Professor Tomoe has told you about me," you state soberly. The lunatic apparently knew more about Gin and you than you suspected.

"After we met, I asked Tomoe why you were the only student who didn't wear Infinity's uniform. He told me that you were a scientist and 'Gin's protégé' and that I'd be asking for trouble if I didn't leave you alone... But he didn't tell me how you were called. I actually guessed it on my own." He pauses for effect.

"Sherry was your cocktail code name, right?" He flashes you a victorious smile. "That's why you reacted to it when I told you about my favourite wine on the way to Two Lights'."

"Don't be so smug about it! You needed hours to figure it out while Kudo would have deduced it in an instant. Moriarty doesn't match you in the least! Akane-san should have cast you as Watson."

"It's not fair of you to compare my deduction skills to Kudo's. I bet I win when it comes to singing or acting skills... But why are you laughing?"

"I'd rather not elaborate. I only remembered I actually like Kudo's singing, as bad as it is."

You've almost forgotten how much you liked Kudo's voice, its huskiness and even its sharp edge, which, set against its subdued warmth, always faintly intrigued you.

"Well, I know more about you than I thought," he continues, giving you the same enigmatic smile you saw on his face when he ushered you into his dining room. "Or at least I know a lot about Sherry and Haibara Ai..."

"Haibara Ai," you echo in disbelief. You've always suspected that Stinger knew more about APTX4869 than he should, but you would never have guessed that he was also well-informed about Haibara Ai. The only person at Infinity who knew was Tenoh-san, who would never have spilled it to the mad professor because she knew that he suffered from random laughing fits during which he was dangerously talkative.

"Haruka-san told me," the stranger explains. "I needed a while to make the connection because I didn't expect a girl like you to do such kind of research. Haruka-san's use of suffixes is at times misleading, and I automatically assumed that Sherry was at least ten years older than us. But when you said you had given Kudo a good reason to take back his proposal, I remembered Pandora's Box and thought maybe you were Sherry, the scientist who was shrunk by her own drug and who tricked both Haruka-san and him."

"I'm as old as the hills when it comes to my mental age," you quip in an attempt to recover from your shock. Small details aside (for example you already took the antidote before visiting Pandora's Box and didn't plan to trick either Kudo or Tenoh-san but only improvised), he knows too much about the story to be only one of Tenoh-san's casual acquaintances. Tenoh-san doesn't belong to the
loquacious type of people who would tell a friend about dangerous projects which don't concern them. Also, she has a deeply ingrained mistrust against men.

"That's a great asset in life, isn't it? Luckily, your drug didn't affect your mental age at all." He grins. "You were the one who continued Hell Angel's research and developed APTX4869, right?" The question is purely rhetorical. "Haruka-san always called it 'the Silver Bullet'."

"You're one of Tenoh-san's 'close friends'?" you ask, trying to see him with pre-infatuated eyes.

"Friendship" isn't the right term for that, he replies, as "Haruka-san" hates him for unknown reasons. But since they share the same group of friends, they are desperately trying to get along. They also like each other's music and sometimes manage to work together without either of them being killed, which is no mean feat for both of them owing to Haruka-san's bad temper.

"It makes sense for Tenoh-san to hate you if you really flirted with her precious girlfriend. When it came to Kaioh-san, she was always extremely jealous." You draw a deep breath and empty your espresso in one gulp before placing the cup on the table.

"So it was Tenoh-san, who told you about me?" You give a mirthless laugh. "What did she say? Nothing pleasant, I suppose."

"Nothing disturbing, actually. She said Sherry was one of the nicest girls she had ever met although she usually didn't like bad-tempered redheads."

"You're taking me for a ride!"

He chuckles, beaming at you with visible enjoyment.

"You seemed nervous."

As you feared, he knows all about your role in the Black Organization just as he knows about your connection to "Haruka-san's" radical group. And yet he doesn't show the slightest sign of horror, disgust, or loathing. He will not shrink away from your hand or call you a traitor or a murderess. To him, you're only a normal, nice reddish-haired woman...

With a lingering glow of pleasure in his eyes, he readjusts his position on the sofa and then draws you into his arms, places your head on his lap, and supports your back with a cushion. "If you think Haruka-san is mad at you, you're dead wrong. When we talked, I had the impression she admired you for having the guts to ruin all her plans."

"If she really thought that, she never told me." You comfortably settle into his embrace, stretch out your legs, and bury your face into his soft cardigan. Even through the thick fabric of the bathrobe, you are acutely aware of his fingers caressing your arm in hypnotically slow movements, hesitantly brushing against the back of your hand like an unspoken question.

For an eternity, you two lie there together in complete silence, watching the fine mist of rain outside as it comes down soundlessly. In the deep stillness of dawn, the air is throbbing with warmth, enveloping the two of you like an invisible blanket of universal affection...

You and I, we can be partners, Kudo had sleepily said, pulling the blanket over both of you. We can solve cases and live together for a whole lifetime. When this is over, I want to live without regrets and do whatever I think is right... I've been thinking a lot about us in the past three weeks... I want you to stay with me for life.

All at once, a pang of sorrow shoots through you at the thought that this is disturbingly reminiscent
of Pandora's Box, added to the certainty that something is surreal about yesterday's sunset, about the sudden intimacy between strangers and the irregular flow of time. Logically, you can't explain why you fear that this won't last for longer than a night, or why you can't forget the story of the apparition which appears at sunset and wanders on earth for only twenty-four hours, disappearing forever as the second dusk falls.

  g.
Part 07: Just like three years ago...

Just like three years ago...

Just like three years ago, the situation doesn't culminate in a kiss as it would undoubtedly have if it hadn't been for a minor disturbance. Startled by the sudden ringing of his mobile phone, you abruptly draw away from him in the same way as you hurriedly slipped out of Kudo arms at Pandora's Box when you heard Hattori's steps in front of the door to the cabin. The parallel between the two situations throws you for a moment off balance; and with the peculiar feeling of waking up from a long deep sleep, you suddenly wonder how you could let yourself be swept off your feet like that by a complete stranger.

"Your phone," you explain when you notice his wondering gaze. Simultaneously, you realize that his ringtone is a quote from the song you heard in the café where you encountered the red-haired girl. Hearing it when Odango called him must have triggered the old memory and caused you to dream of the girl again when you fell asleep on the bench...

"Is there something wrong?" he asks, holding you back by your hand when you get up from the sofa. The little gesture lightens your mood more than you would have expected. Half-annoyed and half-amused at yourself, you realize you've even begun to find his toing and froing between exasperating shyness and outrageous boldness endearing.

"I'll tell you after you've answered it."

Throwing you perplexed glance, he lets go of you and walks swiftly in the direction of the bathroom, where his jacket is still hanging. At the door, however, he turns on his heel, returns with a smile, takes your elbow, and decisively pulls you with him.

"Too late," he points out the obvious while fishing in his jacket pocket for his mobile phone with his free hand. The washing machine (or, to be precise, the combined washer dryer) has finished washing your clothes for some time as well, as evidenced by the blinking zero on the display. However, the machine hasn't even started to dry your clothes yet.

"Only because it took you forever to answer the call," you remark. "Were you afraid I would go home in your bathrobe?"

"Yes, my mind-reading skills told me you wanted to flee and shift the blame onto me afterwards!" He grins before continuing on a more serious note, "You did consider it for a moment, didn't you?"

"I absolutely don't know what you mean," you unscrupulously deny, whereupon he only glares at you, resigned. Without a kiss, you still have the chance to pretend that nothing has ever crossed your mind, that all the things happening between you two in the past hours have been only part of a harmless flirt, and that you've never, ever, even considered kissing him.

It would be hypocritical but also be the smartest way to get yourself out of this flirt-gone-too-well without leaving a mess, you reflect. The only catch of this solution is that you don't feel like listening to the tedious voice of reason at all. Beyond doubt, one of the most disturbing things about the first delirious stage of love is the fact that it invariably kills the last ounce of common sense, you realize, shuddering at all the sappy thoughts which crossed your mind when you were lying on his lap a few minutes ago. A blanket of universal affection? The air throbbing with warmth? You were obviously mistaken when you believed you had finally overcome your sappy side after your quarrel with Kudo. If you were writing your memoirs now, in your present mental
condition, this episode of your story would be classified as a mushy romance! Admittedly, an overdose of sentimentality can be excused in your situation, as the lack of sleep and a series of strange coincidences—added to the shock at the accident you witnessed yesterday evening—have joined forces to loosen a few screws in your head. This feeling of déjà vu, however, is simply absurd since the situation with Kudo then and the situation with stranger-san now don't have much in common...

Pandora's Box, as you remember it, was in essence the type of dilemma one wants to read about but not to experience. This situation, on the other hand, is in comparison completely harmless although it feels oddly similar. The thing you have rashly and imprudently labeled "love" is probably only a physical attraction or romantic illusion supported by a few very lucky coincidences. How could you get the idea that you are in love with him if you don't know anything about him but his name and the reputation inextricably linked to it? As much as you would like to trust your feelings because this feels perfectly right, you know from past experiences with Gin that emotions are essentially unreliable.

"What are you thinking?" he asks with audible apprehension in his voice, slightly loosening his grip on your arm as if he can guess the direction your thoughts are taking.

"Nothing," you lie, faking interest in his old washer dryer combo, which, with its blinking zero, has brought an element of the mundane back into your unreasonable instant romance. "I've only noticed you've forgotten to turn on the dryer. What about turning it on now so that I don't need to spend the whole day in your bathrobe?" Deciding that you might as well turn it on yourself since it doesn't contain only his but also your clothes, you quickly choose the delicate setting.

"Sorry, it seems I was too distracted back then—"

"Just erase that memory from your mind and don't ever dare to mention it again!" you darkly cut him off in the middle of the sentence. "May I ask who has called you at such an ungodly hour as six in the morning?"

To your annoyance, you can feel yourself getting possessive even though you two are only at the hands-holding stage. If the call was from a female acquaintance trying to lure him to Venice or somewhere else for another "awesome night", you will friendzone the little lying cheat and deny all feelings of attraction just to put a damper on his disproportionately big ego.

"It was Yaten," he informs you. "But since he hasn't left a message, I bet he is mad at me for leaving Taiki and him alone at Two Lights'."

Apparently, his oldest brother has already tried to reach him twice without either of you two hearing it due to the sound of the washing machine and the hair dryer. The sound of his mobile phone doesn't seem to carry far and the door of the bathroom was closed.

"What about calling him back now before he calls again?" you suggest in slight irritation. You've always hated the tendency of mobile phones to ring at the wrong moment.

"Good idea," he agrees. "Although, knowing him, I fear he has already turned off his phone or thrown it away in an angry fit."

"He sounds like the nastier of your two brothers."

"Only if he is in a bad mood, but then he is absolutely insufferable."

Giving your arm he is still holding a reassuring squeeze, he flashes you a fleeting smile and you
smile back, relieved that things have returned to normalcy. It's difficult to explain why your mood continually alternates between euphoria and despondency, and nothing can account for these sudden spells of irritation and anxiety, which have been troubling you since last night. In the corridor, the large bouquets of red roses the two of you left on the floor are shimmering mysteriously in the dim light. Distractedly noting that the apartment above this one must be overflowing with the white and yellow roses Taiki and Yaten Kou must have received from their fans in abundance, it strikes you that you've never given much thought to the colours of the flowers of the red-haired girl.

Most probably, her boyfriend had surprised her with tickets for a Three Lights concert, which would explain why he didn't bother to wear a formal suit while implying that the evening would be special to make her put on something fancy. You can imagine him telling her about the plans for the evening while racing through the crowded streets, throwing one or two worried glances through the rearview mirror at the midnight-blue car, which had been following them to the flower shop where she insisted on buying three roses for Taiki, Yaten, and Seiya...

The sheer thought of the stranger's name disturbs you for a peculiar reason, as if giving him a name would either erect a barrier between him and you or ultimately change the nature of your nebulous relationship. For a few hours, it had seemed perfectly natural to talk with him about his and your private life and to ponder the question of whether to kiss or not to kiss while ignoring the other aspects of his life you wouldn't ever want to be a part of: the press, the paparazzi, the reporters; the celebrity friends, the female admirers, and the obsessive fans, who would disclose any little detail from your past they can dig up to the public if they knew about you. Now that you've sobered up a bit, you remember you've hated publicity, parties, celebrity talks, and the whole narcissistic film business in general ever since Vermouth discovered the pseudo-marriage Gin and you tried out after Professor Tomoe burned down Infinity and gave up his prodigy project. No matter from what angle you look at it, getting romantically entangled with a person like dear stranger-san is not a very good idea to start with...

"I hope all your clothes can be tumble dried," he remarks while waiting for his brother to answer the call. "Your dress looked pretty flimsy to me. Shall I take it out and dry it on a hanger?"

"Actually, my dress shouldn't be tumble dried. But since I can't go home in your clothes, there is no other option."

"You could simply stay here," he suggests with a perfectly straight face. "I'll even pack your luggage for you if you move in with me."

"No, thanks," you respond with the same fake seriousness. "Your housekeeping skills still need further improvement. As we've just seen, I can't even trust you with a tumble dryer."

Since he is confident about his learning skills, he will interpret your "No" as a "Not yet", he declares before turning his attention to Yaten Kou's answering machine. Something unexpected has prevented him from returning to Two Lights', he says. But if they can hold on until the rehearsal instead of barging in on him during the next few hours, he is going to tell them everything in detail.

"The short version is that I've found the ideal woman to take care of my paperwork," he chuckles. "But even though I've been trying to seduce her all night, she is continually eluding me."

Irked by his apparent compulsion to share all the details of his love life with his family and friends, you're about to shoot him a withering glare when you realize that, before leaving the message, he has already ended the call.

"That's what you've been thinking, right?" he frankly asks. "That I've planned this all along."
"Your innocence is bordering on stupidity sometimes!"

"What have you been thinking then?" he asks in surprise. "Why did you flee from me all of a sudden?"

Did you really flee from him as he claims? Or were you only hyper-reflexive and paranoid as you always are whenever you're reminded of Pandora's Box and the downfall of the Organization?

"When things are going too well, I'm sure that it won't last," you tell him to your own surprise, stepping out of the bathroom into the corridor.

"It never lasts," he gravely agrees, stops, and kneels down to fish for a pair of slippers under the bench next to the umbrella stand with the parasol. "Good moments always seem to pass much faster than bad moments do."

"It's interesting how you can promise a woman lasting commitment one moment and claim that love is ephemeral the next," you coolly remark.

No, that's not at all what he meant since he only said that good moments will always pass, not that one can't simply make new good memories with the same person, he protests, gazing up at you with an expression of disbelief. You surely have the most destructive mind. How did you manage to live for so many years with it?

"So many years? I'm twenty-three," you darkly point out. "Younger than you, actually."

"It doesn't matter since you sound like half a century—" he impertinently quips and winces in pain when you spontaneously kick him in the ribs.

"I think I can get used to that," he tells you after a moment of silent contemplation. Placing the shoes in front of you, he cheekily asks, "What about going on the balcony for a few minutes? Maybe I can cheer you up in another setting."

"You know, I'm sure someday I'll be thoroughly sick of your childish pranks," you tell him later when you're standing on his balcony, letting your eyes roam over the part of Azabu Juuban where you live. Kudo must still be sleeping, as he would have noticed that your mobile phone is gone and would have given you a call if he had woken up. For a moment, you wonder whether you would be able to see him clearly if he were standing on your balcony.

"I know," the stranger agrees. "Taiki and Yaten are already thoroughly sick of them."

"I'm sure you will hate me with time as well. I'm controlling, destructive, and perfectionist to the core. I'm going to nag at you every day about the smallest things."

"All right," he replies with a smile, carelessly leaning against the wet balustrade. "I'm going to deal with it somehow."

"Due to my upbringing in the Organization, I also have a hidden violent streak," you continue with growing enjoyment. "I'm going to kick you, hit you, and rip your pretty earring off whenever I feel like it."

He beams.

"Since I'm a closet masochist, I'm looking forward to it."
"It seems thinking is not your forte, isn't it?"

"Nobody's perfect." He smirks. "No normal man with the sufficient amount of brain cells would let you abuse him as much as I will."

On the surface, neither of you is taking this half-hearted Some Like It Hot parody seriously. But to you, this moment feels like the turning point. Standing under the roof while the wind is blowing the fine rain past you so that it barely grazes your face before landing on the balustrade, you feel like laughing because all of your oh-so-sound objections to this beginning relationship suddenly seem forced and wholly immaterial. Perhaps the real problem stems from the fact that, for all your brazen behaviour, both of you are painfully shy and have been tiptoeing around each other like thirteen-year-olds during their very first date? The way you two met has also complicated things. If he and you hadn't befriended each other by talking about your respective love interests, there wouldn't have been any misunderstandings and awkwardness and you two would have kissed hours ago.

After showing you Juuban Highschool where he met Odango and her friends, your stranger/friend/almost-boyfriend proceeds to pointing out all the other places he, his siblings, and their friends had frequented after school.

"...There is Hikawa Shrine, where Rei-chan, a good friend of Odango, lived and where Odango and her friends always met up to study. There—you can't see it well from here because it's kind of inconspicuous—is the little flower shop where Kakyuu always bought her roses. She used to buy a bunch or two every week and dry them for her incense burner..."

By coincidence, Kakyuu's favourite flower shop is the same where the red-haired girl and her boyfriend bought her bouquet of roses, and you can't help but wonder for the nth time since the accident how she is doing. What actually happened to her and her boyfriend after they both recovered from the accident? Did they simply repeat their date as if nothing had happened? Or did she break up with him because she realized that he wasn't the harmless guy she had thought him to be?

You recall that, years ago, after waking up from another dream haunted by her, you had been lingering over the same thoughts. Next to you, Gin had been smoking, staring into the distance with something like petulance on his lips while clutching his mobile phone. From what you could hear, the Boss was expecting him to pay Pandora's Box a visit to justify his actions towards the blue-clad biker, who had only been supposed to receive a little warning and not a full-blown accident. Back then you thought that it took the Boss unnaturally long to reprimand Gin for what had happened. Apparently, Gin had managed to hush it up for over two months before his surrogate father got wind of the unfortunate affair...

"Why do you have to go to Pandora's Box?" you remember asking him. "Can't you all meet up in a normal conference room to talk it over?"

The meeting was scheduled at Pandora's Box for a symbolic reason, Gin had answered. After all, the files the traitor had stolen were a backup of Pandora's Box's top-secret files about the first days of the Organization's foundation. A normal member would have had their fingers and head cut off if they had done what the seventh crow did. But the other crows handed down such a ridiculously lenient sentence because they were all cowards when it came to "that person" and "the little rat" was unquestionably one of his favourites.

"Say, the accident... Did I cause it?"

"Ah, don't flatter yourself! Stop obsessing over her and forget it already!"
With a pang of conscience, you recall that you had often wondered whether your interference had only made it worse. In one of your worst nightmares, you found out that Gin had only intended to scare the red-haired girl to draw her boyfriend's attention to the fact that Gin could kill his girlfriend whenever he wanted to. Your haphazard and emotional reaction, which caused the car to skid and turn at a wider angle than expected, might have caused the accident instead of saving the girl's life—a hypothesis which would explain why Gin wasn't beside himself with rage as he certainly would have been if he had really been trying to kill them and you had hindered him.

To Gin's credit, he had always brushed off your question when you asked him to tell you the truth, claiming that he would naturally have killed her if it hadn't been for you. As much as his evasiveness irritated you, he certainly meant well when he tried to protect you from something you couldn't deal with. He had always complained that he didn't like how you were prone to empathize with outsiders, people like the red-haired girl, who, if the situation had been reversed, would certainly not have spared a thought for you.

Just idle speculation, you think to yourself. Challenged by unanswered questions, your ungovernable mind is groping for a solution no matter how preposterous and fanciful. Hence—to fight your unfounded anxiety by turning your attention to a matter of more serious concern—you ask the stranger in passing whether he belongs to "Tenoh-san's little group".

A delicate question asked in a perfectly indifferent voice. This, you congratulate yourself, is a sensible approach to a problem! Instead of abandoning yourself to the emotional chaos, you might as well conquer it by exchanging the role of the anxious ex-criminal for the role of the imperturbable detective. An undertaking which is more difficult than it seems, as falling in love and thinking clearly are sometimes mutually exclusive.

He has never belonged to any group other than Three Lights, the stranger replies after a second of hesitation. Even if he had wanted to risk his life to fight for a better world, Haruka-san would have been the last person whose orders he would have followed because she was (and still is) such an obnoxious, bossy person.

"I did help them out a few times, though," he admits. "Odango accidentally revealed so much about them to me that Haruka-san decided to turn her weakness into strength. Actually, she managed to talk me into financing her hare-brained schemes more than once. Haruka-san always knew how to turn a mistake to her advantage, and she never had any scruple to do so." With a shrug, he cheerfully adds, "Back then I was always broke. I don't know what I would have done without Taiki and Yaten."

Odango... The cute little blonde was someone you would never have expected to be part of Tenoh-san's group. Dulled by your peaceful life in the past three years, you've forgotten that the most dangerous agents were often the most harmless looking.

"It seems you have a dangerous taste," you remark. "And you yourself have financed private counter-terrorism. Is there anything else about you I should know?"

"Oh, I think you have a much more dangerous taste than me. And you can't seriously expect me to make a declaration against myself." He gives you an enigmatic smile and, indicating the azalea shrubs in the distance, inquires, "Was Pandora's Box really the only reason why Kudo left?"

"Yes." You frown, searching in your memory for the one truth, which always seems to change its shape whenever you think you've grasped it. "It seems pretty petty, doesn't it? But I can't even resent him for it since I ruined three years of work and got rid of the perfect tool he needed to sacrifice himself for humanity and justice."
"Keeping it would have been suicide," the stranger agrees. "Did he really plan to do that?"

"Of course he did. Kudo would never pass up the chance to save the world even at the cost of his own life. In that aspect, he is sadly predictable."

You can still remember clearly the moment Kudo told you he knew about Pandora's Box. It was on one of those days in late autumn when the wind grew chill and the scent of kinmokusei began to fade from the air. You had been walking next to each other in silence, strolling through the woods behind the Professor and the Detective Boys until he finally began to fill you in on what had been happening. An eccentric FBI agent—Mr Black's cousin, a fencing teacher of Franco-American origin, who was still more or less affiliated with the FBI despite leading a secluded life in France—had insider information on Pandora's Box he was going to disclose to Kudo if Kudo could prove his dedication and his skills during a meeting at Quai Montebello.

"Quai Montebello... How are you supposed to go there without papers?"

Liar, you thought to yourself. In reality, you had already finished the permanent antidote months ago. Furthermore, you had only pretended to be surprised by the place of the meeting to cover the real reason for your astonishment when Kudo described the FBI agent...

"Just like last time when I went to London. You will give me a few of your temporary antidotes, won't you?"

"Doesn't it bother you that you're growing immune to it?"

"Not in the least!" Kudo grinned. "I'm positive that, in that case, you wouldn't give it to me."

"You mentioned Pandora's Box once," Kudo continued as you two slowed down, losing sight of the Professor and the Detective Boys in the more heavily vegetated part of the woods. "Why were you so terrified of it?"

The children had been busy inspecting various plants for a school project and were preoccupied with themselves, as you two had already finished the assignment and they—getting more independent with age—didn't want any help from you. Without them around, this moment was the ideal one for a heart-to-heart. However, although you had been struggling with this issue ever since Kudo and you met, you realized you weren't ready for this conversation.

"I was shocked that you would have been stupid enough to ask the police to investigate their headquarters. Since we need a plan before walking into the Boss' favourite refuge as if we were visiting a new fancy restaurant, I was against you informing the police about such a dangerous number."

Much to your surprise, he suddenly stopped and turned you around to face him. Even in his child form and with his nerdy glasses on his tiny nose, he managed to look serious, almost imposing.

Mr Jean Black—or Monsieur Jean Black—claimed that Pandora's Box wasn't really their headquarters, he said. It was a storage of files containing information like the names of the Organization's members, affiliated groups and institutions, the details of your parents' research, and the history of the Organization. Since the FBI and the CIA seemed to have been infiltrated by the Organization's moles, Kudo and Hattori had decided to ask Kaitou Kid for help to secure Pandora's Box on their own.

"Since it's dangerous, I don't expect you to come with us. But if you tell me everything you know
about it, it will make things much easier."

Naturally, you could simply have given him the key and wash your hands of it. But it dawned on you that there was another choice you had failed to consider. Since the odds were against two Jean Blacks of Franco-American origin being both fencing teachers living in Paris, you deduced M Jean Black must be the same man you had seen with Tenoh-san once. And rapidly going through the pros and cons of having an ally of Tenoh-san's calibre who wasn't particularly averse to resorting to radical measures whenever it suited her purpose, you agreed to assist Kudo, his Osakan friend, and the phantom thief on one condition...
Part 08: Who, do you think, is more important...

Who, do you think, is more important...

Who, do you think, is more important to the government—Tenoh-san asked you when you demanded that she clarify her standpoint—the Boss and the Seven Crows... or Kudo Shinichi, a consulting detective intent on fighting corruption?

You two were sitting together in the study on the second floor of Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san's luxurious seaside house, drinking tea and eating Hotaru-chan's homemade cake as if you two were old friends meeting up for a chat and a jam session. The salty air was filled with the scents of green tea, vanilla, chocolate, and a touch of wild roses and kinmokusei, Tenoh-san's current fragrance. From two large speakers in a corner of the room, a lyric soprano was singing *The Phantom of the Opera* with tedious perfection...

Noticing your undisguised irritation, Tenoh-san quickly walked over to the small laptop on the desk and turned off the music.

"Sorry for that." She smiled. "I've almost forgotten what sensitive ears you have... Professor Tomoe told me once he was fascinated by your overdeveloped senses and your almost infallible intuition."

"Pity he has never told me!" You decided to take her assertion with a grain of salt. As much as you liked the thought that Stinger was impressed by your acute senses, you doubted the mad professor would have accepted a non-prodigy like you into his prestigious academy if it hadn't been for the sight of the loaded Beretta.

Returning to her chair, Tenoh-san poured you a new cup of tea and casually carried on with your previous topic. Impatient as she had always been, she didn't even bother with a transitional phrase, giving you the impression that someone had propelled the two of you back into the old topic by flipping an invisible switch on her.

"Even if we leave 'the Silver Bullet' out of the equation," she soberly stated, "I can tell you what would happen if Kudo managed to bring down the Organization and steal Pandora's Box as planned: Turning a deaf ear to all your warnings, he'd immediately open it and use the information."

"I know," you flatly commented. "It's not like he is making a secret out of it." If there was something Kudo couldn't resist, it was the urge to solve mysteries and bring criminals to justice.

Letting her eyes roam over your ten-year-old face, Tenoh-san smiled and calmly took a sip of her steaming tea. Oddly enough, she gave the impression of having just stepped out of a Victorian painting despite her usual blue jeans and blue cotton check shirt. Back at Infinity, you had often stolen curious glances at her tall slim figure picturesquely framed by the antique window and softly silhouetted against the mellow artificial light, wondering how a person who was the ideal illusion of male beauty actually felt about the reality of being a girl.

"Well, I said 'if he managed to steal Pandora's Box' because it's highly unlikely that he will get past the Seven Crows." Tenoh-san always talked about the seven crows as if the little euphemism for the seven highest codename members with access to Pandora's Box were the name of a separate group. "Even without them, I doubt either of you will walk away from the cabin alive or survive for longer than three days without being sniped by a hired assassin." She impatiently waved the idea
away as if she were flipping through a boring passage of a book. "But let's assume that things go well, that all the 'bad guys' get arrested and that you manage to get past the Night Baron and secure Pandora's Box without anyone's knowledge... If the Boss and the Seven Crows don't commit suicide in prison as Jean predicts but are actually cooperative—which, in my opinion, they will be since they know that their survival is crucial to a future revival of the Organization—they will be protected by the government they end up working with until they're either freed or secretly assassinated by one of their paranoid multimillionaires or politicians."

"I doubt they will commit suicide," you agreed.

"There will be a subsequent scramble for power in which independent people and small groups like us will have to step back so as not to get crushed in the end." Tenoh-san frowned while you noted in satisfaction that, to all appearances, she hadn't "retired" yet. "Anyhow, I can tell you from personal experience that our beautiful black birds will be treated like new-born babies after their arrest while people like you and me won't ever be able to sleep in peace anymore."

"I fear you're right," you calmly concurred in answer to her questioning gaze.

"Even if he hides Pandora's Box, Kudo will be the first one to be disposed of." She shot you a curious glance. "Kudo doesn't know when to back off. He will demand justice for all the innocent victims. And incorruptible as he is, he won't even feign cooperation..." Fastidiously removing a long black hair from her chair and letting it fall on the plush brown carpet, she continued with growing certainty, "Maybe Kudo has an outside chance of survival in his present disguise. But if he insists on resuming his normal life, he won't be able to hide that the files are in his possession. Not when everybody who has a secret to hide is frantically searching for them. And we're not talking about harmless little secrets like drug addiction or clandestine affairs."

"I know."

Gin had told you about it one evening when you two discussed the goals of the Organization, marveling over the brilliant future you two would be able to witness if you really managed to conquer Time itself by developing the ideal drug. Humans—he indicated the tourist group passing by your window—obviously needed a new way of organizing themselves since the world's most "civilized" countries weren't different from savage tribes when stripped down to their essentials. The most civilized and educated people born with a silver spoon in their mouths didn't possess much more humanity than cannibals devouring the flesh of their enemy. Pain only mattered when it had an immediate impact on one's own life. And the comfortable, sheltered existence of one privileged group wasn't founded on ideals like equality and justice as publicly proclaimed but on the pain of other groups less favoured by what the lucky ones would cynically call "providence" or "destiny."

One could lose one's belief in humanity after reading the files in Pandora's Box—when one had to face the truth about war crimes, drug abuse, human trafficking, and terrorism. "It's inevitable in this world, though," he had claimed, opening a new packet of cigarettes and reaching for his lighter. "You're always either the prey or the predator... whatever you've become depending on your talents and your luck. People who don't want to face reality are hypocrites living in their cute little fantasy world. They don't want to see that—to provide them with the small everyday things they always take for granted—many other people on the same planet are being sacrificed out of necessity."

Contrary to popular belief, there was simply not enough to feed the whole world. Even if the wealthy would voluntarily give up all their material possessions, there wouldn't be enough resources to provide for everyone's basic needs like shelter, food, and education. The world was overpopulated with dumb, passive, and selfish people multiplying at lightning speed—which was
why the weapon industry was thriving and it really didn't matter who survived and who got killed. Whenever an idiot would finally kick the bucket, ten other useless idiots would volunteer to take that dead idiot's place in a meaningless fight over some abstruse problem.

The more gruesome the news on TV became, the less the anonymous sufferings would make an impact. Actually, one couldn't care less about the victims because living standards would always improve after a war when less people had to compete with each other. "It's almost impossible not to succumb to this all-pervasive air of corruption and apathy since it's the one world in which we're all struggling to survive. But all these things will change if you can complete your parents' research and develop the perfect cure..."

"Knowledge and time is what our organization needs," he had smiled, giving your earlobe an ardent kiss, which, despite the scent of tobacco, charmed you enough to settle on his lap and lean your head against his comfortable shoulder. "With the perfect tools to exercise absolute power over the world, the Organization will slowly change the inhabitants of this planet until the utopia of 'eternal equality and happiness for all' will be as real and as familiar as humiliation and pain are to us now. In contrast to all the silly human rights organizations, the Organization doesn't waste time solving petty problems and discussing philosophies. Using all the resources and mechanisms of this pitiful world to our advantage, we're going to rise above the limitations of time and space, rule over the whole universe, and change it forever for the sake of humanity..."

g.

Tenoh-san, who had lapsed into a glum silence for an unbearably long minute, finally emptied her cup of tea and decisively pushed it aside before scrutinizing you again with her clear, hard eyes.

"I've been watching your detective for years and admire him immensely," she said, her husky voice gentle and soothing as if she were about to sing you a lullaby. "He is one of the few who really live up to their own moral standards." With a nonchalant flicker of her wrist, she added, "Unfortunately, Kudo's biggest weakness is his compulsion to be fair and good. Once he has opened Pandora's Box, he'll be an eyesore even for me. I'm going to take him out myself if his sense of justice endangers my family."

Having finished her speech, she leaned back into her chair with her arms folded in front of her chest, studying you with polite curiosity.

"I've already thought of that," you admitted in resignation. None of the things she just said came as a surprise, as you had pondered over the matter for the whole night before you came here. It was perfectly clear to you that, even though Tenoh-san seemed to pursue a private vendetta against the Boss, her sense of justice would indubitably clash with Kudo's in the long run.

"I'm sure you have," Tenoh-san chuckled. "If you want my honest opinion, I think the only thing you can do is not giving Kudo the key although, now that he knows about them, he will find a way to get the files with or without your help. It's just as pointless trying to stop him. If he deems it necessary, he'll use his fancy tranquilizer watch on you and that's it." She fixed her eyes on you with interest, perhaps because she couldn't tell why you had come to her out of all people.

"I know. He has already used it on me once."

"And, did it prevent you from following him?"

"No. But I messed it up. I'd be dead by now if I hadn't been saved by... a lucky coincidence."

"You'd better not count on such dumb luck this time."
"No, I'll count on my survival instinct instead."

"Your survival instinct will be useless because it's the Seven Crows you're up against."

Again you two lapsed into a sudden silence although it felt strangely comfortable this time.

"I'm only so candid because I like you a lot, koneko-chan," she smiled at last, changing the topic as quickly as the wind changes its direction. "Maybe because you were the only girl who resisted me back at Infinity. You were perfectly immune to my charms! And that despite all my efforts to steal your heart—"

"To break it, I suppose. Just because I was one of the three girls who didn't get brainwashed and didn't watch your races screaming, 'Tenoh-sama, Tenoh-sama, please marry me'," you remarked, wondering whether you would have developed a crush on her if you hadn't noticed that the tall handsome blonde giving you outrageous winks when you passed each other in the long corridors of Infinity was a cross-dressing girl. "How you managed to casually kiss so many people and still enjoyed that happy relationship with Kaioh-san completely evades me."

"Michiru knows the one I love is her." After all, it was impossible to love two people with the same intensity. And no matter whom she found cute enough to kiss, Michiru would always be the one who really mattered, she elaborated.

"I suppose that's why she's still staying with me."

"I wouldn't be able to put up with someone who makes out with other girls! After a while, the jealousy would be unbearable."

"The lovers and spouses of film stars have to put up with those things all the time, but most of them wouldn't be able to stick by a sociopath for three years," Tenoh-san calmly retorted. "What did you call it? Loyalty? Playing his perfect little wife juggling career and housework while hiding the relationship from your own sister in the hope that the brute would change for the better as time passes... That seems much more silly to me than staying with a partner who truly loves you although they indulge in a few insignificant flings from time to time."

"I was a brainless teenager back then." You bite back the remark that Tenoh-san herself was a borderline sociopath in the making. "I admit the only good things I got from my so-called 'marriage' are my caution and my excellent shooting skills. Kudo is a very good shooter as well. If you can cover us at Pandora's Box, I'm sure we can get past the seven crows. I'm going to delete the files on your family if you help us out."

"No, thank you very much," Tenoh-san dryly remarked. "I'm sure Kudo will never really shoot anybody, not even out of self-defense. Apart from that, I won't put any of my friends in that kind of danger for something I can get in another way. Didn't Gin tell you that the Seven Crows call the laptop 'Pandora's Box' because they believe it contains all the tools humankind needs to destroy itself? Since I'll be caught in the mesh sooner or later, anyway, I'm going to step back and enjoy the glorious spectacle."

And strike in a flash at the right moment, you mentally added. That was undoubtedly what Tenoh-san was going to do. Like a vulture, she would be waiting patiently until she could take Pandora's Box from Kudo's corpse. Growing up in a harsh world where the means justified the ends, Tenoh-san had learned to fight for her own justice using her own methods, intuitively bending the rules to her advantage without caring much about lofty ideals like Kudo.

She and you were, without being romantically linked, what some people would classify as "soul
mates,” you thought in detached amusement. If you two were characters in Ayumi-chan's favourite fairy tales, you both would be dark creatures secretly longing for unattainable freedom and salvation. But while you had always resembled the little mermaid, who struggled with her own emotional turmoil and hesitated until her moment passed, Tenoh-san—cool and unscrupulously decisive—possessed an amazing swiftness of reaction.

"According to the things I know, I doubt your shooting skills will be of any use to you two if you really have to deal with the Seven Crows," she continued. "The best way to get rid of them would be poison or a bomb although you probably don't know who they are and I won't ever reveal their identities to you."

"Even if you did, Kudo wouldn't ever poison anybody! He will always make sure that everyone survives to get a fair trial."

"His pacifism will kill him in the long run."

"I know..."

This, among many other reasons, was why you were still apprehensive about giving Kudo the permanent cure. As long as his name wasn't connected to you and Pandora's Box, Kudo could return to Ran after the downfall of the Organization and continue his life under his real identity in peace. Once the name "Kudo Shinichi" had been linked to the Silver Bullet or Pandora's Box, however, there would be no chance left for Kudo to continue his normal life. You would naturally have preferred Kudo to stay in the background and let the FBI do all the work. But since the Organization's moles had already infiltrated the FBI and—to paraphrase Tenoh-san—the FBI's little secrets were also stored in Pandora's Box, Tenoh-san's prodigy group was your only hope left to get Kudo alive out of this situation.

"I do believe you're an excellent shot and won't miss a target if you get the chance to draw your weapon." Tenoh-san jumped from her chair and gave your shoulder a friendly pat. "And I'm sure Gin will let his emotions get the better of him when it comes to you. But I can assure you that you won't have a chance against the other five. I'm not sure about whether I really want Kudo to succeed either. So... If you value your own life, I recommend that you stay out of this." Pacing the room with the air of a beautiful Bengal tiger in confinement, she stopped in front of her small "family photo" on the mantelpiece near the grand piano.

As much as she would like to do it, she couldn't offer you her assistance, Tenoh-san continued with an air of regret. After hearing from her informants about Jean's plans, she would have tried to convince Jean not to contact Kudo if she had believed that she out of all people could have changed Jean's decision. Indicating the photo on the mantelpiece, she added almost apologetically, "And now that I have so much more to lose than seven years ago, I'm not going to sacrifice myself for a lost cause."

"I'm aware of that."

Intrigued by your comment, Tenoh-san smiled at you with renewed interest.

"I'm sure you're smart enough to have anticipated everything I've just told you before you came here." She appeared genuinely puzzled. "But I don't know why you still asked me for my assistance although you knew I was going to refuse. I can't believe that you missed me so much that you needed to see my face before getting killed. So... what do you actually want from me?"

You had arrived at the point of no return, and it was crucial to maintain your composure so that Tenoh-san wouldn't guess the real reason of your visit before giving you the information you
needed.

You were curious as to whether her computer experts had found any virtual security loopholes since you were trying to find a way to disable the Night Baron so that Kudo could open Pandora's Box before the system sent off the mail alerts, you told her without pausing for breath. "Afterwards we can leave the cabin before the bombs go off. And all the blackmailed people can content themselves with the thought that whoever tried to open Pandora's Box has died in the explosion."

"There is no security loophole!" Tenoh-san sighed. "It's not so easy to snoop in their cloud with the Night Baron around. As I said, I have too much to lose now. I'm also not suicidal."

Your spirits sank. Either she had seen through your attempt of grilling her about their Night Baron copy or she had really given up the project.

"Once was more than enough." She absent-mindedly took a few pages of sheet music on the piano music stand into her hand and then put them down again in frustration. "We're still working on it, but right now there is no way to deactivate their top-notch alert system without erasing the whole disk before the time runs out."

Wonderful, you thought to yourself. So they did have the Night Baron copy you needed. You could proceed to the next step now.

"It's a pity Kudo can't wait for twenty years since the second generation will be easier to deal with than the first," Tenoh-san said. To your surprise, she was getting rather talkative.

"The second generation has doubts?"

"Of course, just like you yourself didn't support the Organization fully when you were working for them." She smiled with a hint of derision. Time had shown that any tight-knit community with strict moral codes like the core of the Organization would be undermined by the generation gap. As time passed, chances were that even the legendary Seven Crows would no longer share the same deep conviction...

Swinging a long leg over the piano stool, she let her short neat nails glide over the white keys for a perfect pearly upward glissando.

"The first generation is always the heroic one," she asserted, "willing to make great sacrifices for their community and their ideals. The second generation already has serious doubts as to the methods of the Organization although they're still pursuing their parents' goals. The third will definitely be the downfall of them." She gazed at you with calm confidence. "In contrast to Kudo, I can wait. I wish he could wait as well. Four of the seven crows are so old that they're going retire in ten to twenty years at the latest... Replacing those first-generation members with second- or third-generation members will dismantle the whole system."

But ten to twenty years were much too long, you thought. In ten to twenty years, Ran would probably have married someone else. Even if Ran could wait, Kudo and she would have lost thirteen to twenty-three years of their lives they could have spent with each other in perfect bliss if it hadn't been for you. Robbing three years from them was more than enough. Taking twenty years would be a crime.

"But I doubt we can make Kudo wait for twenty years," Tenoh-san reflected.

"No, I don't think we should even try."

Closing the piano lid, she once again lapsed into a sullen silence before shaking her head with an
"No one can dispense justice all over the world on their own. And I suggest that you leave the Sleeping Kogoro and the police out of this matter since it doesn't come within the purview of the police. The more people know about this, the messier the aftermath will be. It's best to avoid unnecessary bloodshed." Strolling to the open window to gaze down to her large garden brimming over with the seven autumn flowers, she leaned against the windowsill for a moment and gave a fleeting smile as the wind ruffled her short blonde hair.

"I'm sorry I can't assist Kudo and you," she proceeded. "The odds that you two succeed and survive are practically zero, and I really don't want to back the wrong horse. I'll have enough trouble to deal with the aftermath of your heroic actions... Sucking up to authorities, flirting with secretaries, paying intermediaries... as if my current tasks weren't tedious enough, now it seems I'll have to deal with blackmailers and paranoid big names as well."

Winking at you, she joked, "You can't imagine what a pain it is to deal with them while preparing for a concert! The quality of my performances will surely drop, you see."

"Your poor fans... According to what you know about the Night Baron, the alert mails will only send the data of the person who used the key to the cabin, right?" you asked, not caring a bit about her busy schedule.

"Yes, but even if you were in disguise, it wouldn't help you much. I'm sure Gin must have told you about this. You voice, your fingerprints, your bone structure: everything will be saved and compared to the data in their files before you enter the cabin and will be sent off to all the addresses on the Organization's lists the moment you open the real Pandora's Box. If one can get past that identification procedure with a disguise, I would have done it long ago." She chuckled. "Whatever, maybe I'd have been mad enough for such a stunt if it hadn't been for Michiru."

Time to proceed to the next step, you thought to yourself. Since Tenoh-san was still immensely interested in the files, you were positive that she would agree to what you were going to propose to her.

"If you don't give Kudo the key, he will try to get Pandora's Box by luring Gin into a trap," she continued. "It's the only way for him to obtain Pandora's Box without activating the bombs. I must admit I'm curious about the showdown: The notorious second crow versus our chibi detective... If the other five crows don't show up and end the fight within a second, it might be something worth watching."

Despite her dark humour, you knew Tenoh-san was anything but sadistic. It was interesting how words were often used to disguise the truth instead of revealing it.

"No, there won't be any showdown," you disagreed, wondering why she had said "five" instead of "six" for the second time. "I think I've been avoiding this much too long." In answer to her alarmed gaze, you smiled. "You can congratulate me if you like. I've found the antidote although I don't know how to get rid of its side effects. Nothing that won't be gone in a few years, though. But why only 'five crows'? Shouldn't it be six?"

"Side effects again?" She raised a skeptical brow. "It's only Gin and five other crows because I know the seventh won't interfere. Third-generation member who is more or less on our side."

"Only physical pain this time... Well, strong migraines which drive all the rats insane. But I've developed a very efficient painkiller against them. And the pain doesn't seem permanent." You had just taken your coat when you remembered that the seventh crow must be the same biker whom
Gin had given the red card. "I can't let Kudo wait any longer. It's time to give him his life back."

As expected, Tenoh-san was at your side within the split of a second, grabbed your arm, and angrily flung you back into the chair. Her skin smelled very pleasantly of a velvety wild rose fragrance. A unisex perfume with a quite sensual, warm touch of (white?) musk but—contrary to what you had thought—no kinmokusei.

"You've never intended to walk away from this alive, haven't you?" She slammed her fist on the coffee table, causing the spoons to clink against the china plates. "That's why you sounded me out about the Night Baron." She was seething with rage. "You think everything will be all right if you open Pandora's Box and offer yourself as a scapegoat, serving Kudo the files on a silver plate and leaving it to others to clean up the mess after you. But things aren't that easy, koneko-chan. A sacrifice like that is only an easy way out. I won't accept it!"

"Things will be easy," you set her straight. "I'm not going to give Kudo but you a copy of the original Pandora's Box. You can do whatever you want with it. The second one I'm going to keep in a computer where Meioh-san's Night Baron imitation is installed. The files will be deleted as soon as someone tries to get the data without a password. And I promise I'd rather die before anyone can make me talk." You meaningfully indicate the cage-shaped locket around your neck. "That way, no one will get hurt. You will certainly use the information within limits, won't you?"

"No one will get hurt... What about you?" Tenoh-san gave a dry laugh. "But I suppose that little locket implies a perfectly painless way to leave this world. You've always enjoyed the little luxuries of life, haven't you?"

"It's one way to redeem myself for creating APTX. Also, I've already had a great time with the children and the Professor. Any life has to end some day. And as you said, an easy way out can be considered a treat as well."

"So you were really going to ask Setsuna-san for the Night Baron copy?" Tenoh-san returned to her chair and demonstratively folded her arms. "That's wonderful, koneko-chan! Sacrificing yourself and offering me a bait I can't resist to protect your beloved detective... It's formidable self-defeat, in my opinion—but compared to your behaviour last time when you insisted on staying with your scoundrel of a 'husband', this is definitely a dramatic improvement. You can be proud of it."

"He is not my detective," you remarked, as Tenoh-san seemed to have mistaken Kudo for your boyfriend. "In any case, you'd have taken Pandora's Box after he has been assassinated, wouldn't you? No need to do that now."

She rubbed her temples in exasperation.

"You and your sister... Always devising grand self-destructive plans and sacrificing yourselves for your loved ones. I really doubt that your scheme will work out well since it will only appease the blackmailed people but won't erase the fact that Kudo is simply too nice to be a match for the Seven Crows. Even if I helped you and gave away their identities, Kudo would only try to arrest them, wouldn't he? And things would proceed exactly as I've told you. They will take revenge on us before we can even plant flowers on your grave. And it will be difficult for me to take them out because they will be under witness protection."

"That's why I need your assistance," you insisted. "Six people aren't that hard to take care of if you really know their identity." Mildly amazed about her remark regarding Akemi-nee-san because you didn't know that Tenoh-san and your sister knew each other, you asked, "But why did you mention my sister? Did she talk to you as well?"
"She also came to me before planning the robbery. She knew about us because Setsuna-san had contacted her to grill her about Pandora's Box. Since you didn't tell Akemi-san anything, she didn't know what we were talking about. But since she liked me so much, she wanted my opinion on how to buy your freedom."

"That was impossible." You frowned. "She knew codename members couldn't buy themselves out."

"That's what I told her. They would never let you go since codename members couldn't buy themselves out unlike normal members. I even told her that, if she requested it in front of the Seven Crows, chances were she would immediately be shot for treason. After the Rye affair, I was sure they'd already have executed her if you hadn't been their top scientist. I told her to stay inconspicuous and to do absolutely nothing to incur their disapproval. But the stubborn girl simply wouldn't listen to me!"

"So she had to die because of me?" you calmly asked. You had known this since the moment Gin showed you the newspaper article.

"No, you can blame yourself as much as you want but that was not how things were! Of course she wanted you to experience a happy youth instead of wasting your life in the lab. But she also told me she knew very well that her death would affect you negatively... Although she had a bad premonition, I'm sure she wanted to believe that she had a chance to survive. She even told me she was looking forward to going out with her 'Dai-kun' for real if her plan should work out. She was a sensible girl, though. I think if it hadn't been for your scheming ex-husband, she'd have listened to my advice."

"Gin?" Your head began to spin as the truth sank in. "What did Gin have to do with it?"

Equally taken aback by your reaction to her words, Tenoh-san threw you a wary look as if she had just realized that, in telling you the truth, she had put herself in an invidious position.

Since people always shot the messenger in a fit of rage, she wouldn't have told you if she hadn't expected you to know all about it, Tenoh-san said at last. But according to your sister, Gin was the one who promised her that she was allowed to buy you out of the Organization if the sum was large enough. Deep down, Akemi-nee-san must have known that it was a trap—a hypothesis which would explain why she decided to hide the money after the robbery. But since she desperately wanted to use the chance to give you the freedom you wanted, she gambled on the Seven Crow's greed and agreed to rob the bank.
Part 08: After a short spell of...

After a short spell of fine rain, the wind has picked up again, bringing new thick black rain clouds. Within only a few minutes, another thunderstorm blows up and the rain comes down again in torrents, lashing against the balustrade, where the two of you are standing. The moist air is heavy with the earthy smell of rain mingled with the scent of the stranger's shampoo and the fragrance of azalea and spring roses. Unconcerned about his white cardigan and his hair he has just washed, the stranger asserts in amusement that you seem to share a distinctive characteristic with the weather...

"... or with a cat that purrs but runs away the moment one begins to stroke it," he remarks while the wind is tearing at his hair and his clothes. "Odango once showed me a few alley cats like that. Some of them even scratch or bite even though—in Odango's words—they appeared 'perfectly cuddly'."

Startled by his statement, it takes you a second to digest that the disrespectful cheeky wretch has just compared you to a savage alley cat.

"It's your problem if you misinterpret the situation." You take a few steps back so that you don't get drenched. "I can't remember asking you to cuddle me."

"Would you have preferred a certain detective to cuddle you instead?" He obligingly pretends to be irritated.

"Maybe." You try to bruise his ego a bit because he apparently needs it. Deducing from his wounded gaze that you've succeeded, you generously add, "But since he won't ever do it, I'd have made do with you if it hadn't been for your phone ringing at the wrong moment. Your siblings are abnormally attached to you, by the way. Getting so much love all day must be a burden."

"I should be hurt but all I can hear is that you'd have made do with me..." He winks. "What about turning back time and continuing where we left off?"

Turning back time... The phrase triggers memories of other people who have used the same words in another context. Meioh-san, for example, told you once that one had to pay a price for messing with the Stream of Time when she learned from Tenoh-san that you were continuing your parents' research. And Kudo said he would be trying to "turn back time" when he told you he was going back to Ran...

"All right, let's go back and drape ourselves on your sofa again," you suggest without the slightest fear that he will take you literally. Just like you, he knows that it's futile to do the same thing again in a pathetic attempt to recreate a moment that has passed.

"No, thanks. Odango told me one should stop when cats show that they've had enough of petting." He gives an insolent smirk. "If one leaves them alone, they will come back the next time they want it."

Despite the rain, he is still leaning against the wet balustrade as if he enjoyed getting soaked.

"Besides, it wasn't really the phone since you could have ignored it. You said Kudo was the one who left, but it wouldn't surprise me if it was you who actually bailed, fleeing from Kudo just like you've fled from me." He furrows his brow in mock concentration. "That theory doesn't explain
why you gave Kuroba a chance, though. Maybe you didn't like him enough to consider him a
danger to your independence?"

You grimace, shivering slightly in the icy wind.

"Your theory is absurd! I told you I even accepted Kudo's proposal despite my fear of marriage,
didn't I? I'd never have left him if he hadn't told me that we were so different we might as well
have belonged to different galaxies. Also, the first thing he told me after we made up was that he
was going to return to his childhood friend to make everyone happy. It was him who broke it up,
not me."

Even the weather is the same as three years ago, you distractedly note. Nevertheless, you can no
longer feel any guilt or sorrow. A part of you is still waiting for a punishment because you would
have liked to believe in divine retribution for criminals who have evaded human justice. But after
years of waiting, you no longer believe in it.

"I think there is much more to the story than the files you deleted," the stranger remarks. "All the
things you've told me until now simply don't add up. According to Haruka-san, you tricked both
Kudo and her and erased the files on the real Pandora's Box—I don't mean the main computer in
Pandora's-Box-the-cabin, which only served as a decoy, but Pandora's-Box-the-tiny-laptop-like
thing, where the seven crows kept their most important files... In that case, wouldn't it have been
easier to leave it exactly where it was—on Pandora's-Box-the-ship, which was going to explode,
anyway—instead of messing with it? Why did you activate it so that the only option for you to
survive was to erase it completely?"

He is the first person you know who is actually making fun of Pandora's Box. And you wonder
why it has never struck you as ridiculous that the ship, the cabin, and the "real" Pandora's Box all
share the same name.

"Since thinking is not your forte, you should let it be." You laugh, watching the raindrops running
down the balustrade with the absurd feeling that—if you commanded them to stop in the middle of
their movement—they would actually obey you. Pandora's Box has never seemed as harmless as it
looks to you now after it has been reduced to a "tiny laptop-like thing" not worth any sacrifice. If
you were less inhibited, you'd already have smothered stranger-san with kisses, as he has just
protected you from your own mind without knowing.

Noticing your good mood, he flashes you a spontaneous smile. And the wave of euphoria which
has been undermining your ability to think clearly during this completely messed-up date is
sweeping over you once again as you carelessly abandon yourself to the unaffected warmth of his
startlingly blue eyes.

"Why do I have the feeling you're getting more abusive towards me with time?" he observes with a
chuckle.

"What shall I say? You're asking for it."

"It's your way of showing affection, isn't it?"

"Don't flatter yourself! If I'm in the mood, I can be just as mean towards others as I'm towards
you."

Contrary to your expectations, he doesn't respond with a joke but suddenly contemplates you with a
troubled look similar to the ones he gave you a few hours ago when you two were sharing the
boulder in the park.
"You're especially mean towards Kudo, aren't you?" he belatedly quips. "You're doing your best to keep him at a distance. But Kudo's behaviour seems odd to me as well... I certainly wouldn't have broken up an engagement so soon after the first serious disagreement. I think he'd have stayed if you had let him." Almost reluctantly, he adds, "This somehow reminds me of the misunderstanding between Mamoru-san and Odango when he went abroad. They almost split up because he is an idiot when it comes to communication."

"In our case, you are the idiot," you blurt out, trembling with anger at the realization of what he is trying to say. Despite the impetuous confessions on both sides, you two are still trapped in a web of mistrust and misunderstandings. But why "still" if you've only known each other for a few hours? Has it been really only three and a half hours since you met him for the second (or the third?) time since yesterday's sunset? It seems to you like three and a half years in an alternative timeline...

"Why me? It's Kudo who passed out on your sofa and you who ran away and locked him up in your apartment. I'm the only sensible person here. You should solve whatever problems Kudo and you have because you'll never forgive yourself if you let him go to Osaka like this!"

Since he apparently believes that you would immediately leap into Kudo's arms if only Kudo would take pity on you and dump his lovely girlfriend for your sake, you will have to nip the silly misunderstanding in the bud before it jeopardizes everything. To his credit, he doesn't seem particularly happy about what he has just suggested. Eight years ago, you might have been flattered by the thought that he has only suggested it because he thought it to be in your best interests. Now, however, it irks you that he (like all the other men you were once in love with) treats you like a princess who needs the noble knight to help her make the right decision.

"I don't need anyone's forgiveness," you sharply retort. "Neither mine, nor his, nor yours! Since you weren't there, you don't know anything about what really happened. And even if you did, you wouldn't have the right to tell me what to do."

Taken aback, he apologizes for his obnoxiousness. In return, you grudgingly admit that you've been absolutely insufferable.

"The most insufferable woman I know." He playfully bows as if he had just paid you a compliment by using the superlative. "I hope you won't mellow with age."

"If that's a compliment: Thank you."

The two of you smile at each other in silence, as if words have become redundant and ineffectual means to express what you both are feeling. Just like him, you know perfectly the direction in which this troublesome attraction is heading without knowing what to do about it. You've lived long enough to know how difficult it is to find true emotional connection and unconditional friendship. Exchanging such a bond for something as fragile as a romantic relationship will, if things go wrong, seem to both of you like a rather foolish act, especially since it won't be only destructive but also irreversible.

And yet it's futile to fight against this never-ending morning twilight, against the intoxicating scents and sounds which delight your senses and colour your world whenever you are with him. In retrospect, it seems to you as if the promise of love has been hiding in the first unsuspecting gaze and the first innocent touch—as if loneliness had forged a link between you and him the first time you met without either of you two noticing.

Behind him, the rain is still pelting down in streams, splashing against the balustrade and soaking through his cardigan. Noticing that he shows no inclination to move away from the wet balustrade, you extend a hand to pull him away from it. Your gesture must have caused a lucky
misunderstanding, as he unexpectedly leans in and quickly brushes his lips against yours, drawing away just when you're about to return the first fleeting kiss that fills you with a sudden rush of excitement and pleasure.

For a moment, he pauses to gaze at you in silence, apparently unsure whether he is allowed to kiss you or not while you're still mute with amazement at the unfamiliar sensation. Trying to hide your confusion by avoiding his eyes, you wonder why all the other kisses in your life seem in retrospect completely harmless, charming you with their undeniable pleasantness without kindling desire.

"Now you can tell Kudo that we've kissed, can't you?" he chuckles, his low voice barely audible due to the sound of rain in the background. "That will wake him up if nothing else will."

Startled out of your stupefied with a vengeance, you could have kicked him for ruining the mood with his inappropriate joke when the thought hits you that the inveterate flirt only regards the peck as an element of casual flirting. After Kaito and Gin, you should have known better than to read too much into a simple kiss. In order to save your pride, you pull yourself together and defiantly meet his eyes. But your anger evaporates as you discover genuine sadness in them and realize that he has mistaken your silence for a rejection.

"Come on," he gently says, removing his hand from your cheek. "Let's go inside since you're frozen."

You would have liked to tell him that he is the one you, for purely selfish reasons, really want. Does it really matter that you've known him for less than a day if the attraction is mutual? For once you feel like abandoning yourself to what might be blind passion because you feel with certainty that love is finally within your grasp. But you don't tell him, as words always fail you in the face of strong feelings. And as you remain silent, he hesitantly turns away and the moment passes...

Or at least this is what would have happened if something in you hadn't snapped at that very moment because you were thoroughly fed up with the never-ending vicious circle of reticence, self-denial, missed chances, and unfulfilled yearning. No sooner had your fingertips touched his lips than he impulsively swept you into his arms... And now—uncountable kisses and caresses later—after you two have stumbled blindly through his corridor, barely sidestepping the vases of roses with the restlessness of lovers who haven't met for months, you have to laugh at your own sentimental impulse to run your fingers through his hair and to whisper his name as he lets the bathrobe join the guitar on the floor and you two proceed to remove the last barrier between strangers in a yet unknown dance.

"Unknown" is, of course...

"Unknown" is, of course, a complete lie, just as "dance" is a rather unfitting and ridiculously tame euphemism for what you two have been doing in the last two hours. But is there any word in your vocabulary which could describe it without stirring unwanted emotions or conjure up offensive images? And as for your choice of word when it comes to the adjective: if one doesn't take things too literally, "unknown" is actually a perfectly fitting word, for the things which just happened between the two of you on this much too small bed do not in the least resemble the bothersome and sometimes painful physical stuff you always dreaded when you were with Gin.

Some people would call it love while others would classify it as fascination or contemptuously
label it lust, considering that he and you have known each other for such an outrageously short time. But in this world where any single word one utters can have sordid connotations and where the most sincere statements can be mistaken for platitudes and lies, giving the thing a superfluous name wouldn't do justice to its essential purity. Between him and you, a kiss is still a kiss, and caresses are only meant to give pleasure without being part of any power games. Not even once has he tried to dominate you or take possession of you except for the few mad moments in which you wanted it. And waking up from the hazy mist of exhausting yet exquisite sensations, you're almost surprised to discover that you do not in the least regret the past two hours because you're still filled with indescribable feelings of tenderness for him.

Laughing about your futile attempt to free yourself from your intertwined limbs without falling off his narrow bed, he slightly shifts his position to make space for you so that you two can look into each other's eyes now, amazed and bewildered by what has happened. Meanwhile, the storm outside has abated, leaving a moment of perfect stillness, which seems even calmer in the soft changing light of the rising sun.

"For someone who had never been kissed until two hours ago, you surely catch up fast," you say at last and lean in to kiss him again, trying to etch the feeling of his lips on yours into your memory as if you feared that he could disappear at any moment.

In response, he only smiles against your lips and sleepily runs his fingers through your hair before he wordlessly places your head on his shoulder.

"Does this count as a kiss in a romantic context?" you jokingly ask, raising your head to peck him on his chin. It seems perfectly natural to you now that he will stir up all the irrational and embarrassingly sentimental feelings you believed to have successfully expunged from your mind. Ayumi-chan, the hopeless romantic, would proclaim that in contrast to the one true love in normal fairy tales, true love has given you a second chance when it entered your life for the second time.

"Any kiss with you counts." He smiles. "I have the feeling I've known you all my life although we've known each other for how long?" He turns your wrist around to check your watch and announces in disbelief, "Only fourteen hours."

"Only eight if the hours during which we didn't see each other don't count."

But of course they do count, he asserts and closes his eyes again before he grins and slips your watch off your wrist with the effortless proficiency of an experienced thief. If they didn't count, couples wouldn't know when to celebrate their anniversaries, would they? With his eyes still closed, he slowly extends his right arm over your body and lets the watch drop onto the carpet in a gesture you like so much that you would have liked to film it.

"Maybe we should celebrate our anniversary, too," he murmurs, breathing deeply as if he were drifting into sleep, all the while gently tracing the outline of the scar on your side with one finger before distractedly tapping a slow rhythm on your skin.

Hearing him talk about anniversaries, you realize you two haven't yet agreed on how to continue. Now that the harmless flirt which started this has got out of hand and developed into something neither of you two have anticipated, it dawns on you that—due to his tendency to flirt and to joke without a break—you can't know for sure whether he really intends to commit or whether this has been only an outburst of long suppressed passion originally meant for another woman.

"You know you've just broken a promise?" you tentatively address the subject. "I only wonder which one."
He snaps his eyes open at once to cast you a worried look and you inwardly sigh, scolding yourself for ruining the mood by asking the right thing at the wrong time when you see in his gaze that he has grasped what your question implied.

"But I already told you I'm not into things with no strings attached!" He teasingly pokes at your cheek. "Will you take care of my paperwork from now on?"

"No, but I will rip up any love letter addressed to you into tiny bits as long as you clean the apartment and do the laundry for me."

"Why not cooking?" He looks genuinely bewildered. "You said cooking was the thing which really mattered."

"Because you can't cook! Chicken congee and omelette are like ramen. That's not 'cooking' in my dictionary."

"You mean you have to lower your standards because of me?"

"Exactly. I always end up kissing the wrong men, so it seems. I should have waited until I met your perfect flower-loving brother."

"My place or yours?" he asks after kissing you again to make it up to you for your eternal bad luck.

"Your place or mine?" you echo, wondering whether he is being serious.

"Who is going to move in with whom?" he rephrases his question. "You can't seriously expect me to clean two apartments regularly for the rest of my life—"

He can't continue, as you've already assaulted him with a series of ardent kisses in a new fit of euphoria.

"My landlady is the nosy type," you tell him later, after you two have abandoned his bed for the more spacious carpet, where he and you can stretch out next to each other. "Hence it can't be my apartment. But I really don't want to live with you in your apartment either."

"Because Taiki and Yaten are directly above us?"

Because this is the apartment where Kakyuu was living with him, you explain. Curiously enough, you feel slightly guilty about kissing the man she loved in the same apartment she had chosen for them although she has already been dead for two years.

"What about searching for another apartment we both like?" he suggests.

"Was that a proposal?" you joke, falling into the old pattern with ease.

"No, it wasn't." He smirks. "Since I know how much you despise the word 'marriage', I'm never going to ask you to marry me."

"All right," you accept with fake nonchalance, wondering whether you would have preferred rejecting a marriage proposal to not getting one at all.

"I will definitely say yes if you propose to me, though," he suggests in a fit of mischievousness.

"Maybe I should," you think aloud, not really meaning it because there is no way you're going to swallow your pride and propose to a man. "It's only a piece of paper, after all."
It is, he agrees. As long as you are with him, he couldn't care less about the bureaucratic stuff. He will sign it if you want and make do without it if you don't want him to. He must warn you that he has a terrible memory, though.

"What's that supposed to mean?" you darkly inquire. "Have you already forgotten who I am?"

"I meant I need a lot of practice because I'm so forgetful," he brazenly smiles, grabs you by your waist, and kisses you again.

Afterwards, when he has fallen asleep and you are listening to his regular breathing and the wind rustling the leaves of the spring roses and azalea shrubs outside, you realize that—just like three years ago—you want to follow a special person around forever, share his life and endure all his annoying little quirks until either (or both?) of you die. Smiling at the thought that yesterday's sunset has propelled you into a parallel universe where lovers can meet as strangers without the shadows of the past, you decide that no matter what the future brings, you will definitely make it last this time.

And yet a growing sense of unease creeps up on you when you drift into sleep and dream of his bike, of Three Lights' roses and of the warm fragrance of kinmokusei, which simultaneously captivates and saddens you. You can see Kudo's silhouette dissolving into the night and Tenoh-san's blonde hair flying in the wind as she is racing through the wet streets of Paris. *How many pills did you make*, Kudo asks you one more time, whereupon you confess in resignation that you've made twenty-six. And there is an almost indiscernible, peculiar, repetitive beep in the background when you run through Ueno-koen, searching in vain for your stranger at twilight while, on Kaito's card in your hand, the Queen of Spades smiles...
Only seven hours...

Only seven hours, a voice in my mind mocked as I was climbing the stairs to my apartment. Ironically, you're back at the same point where you started off seven hours ago. In your pathetic attempt to avoid unnecessary heartache, you unknowingly ran right into it when you descended these stairs which you're climbing now, laboriously trudging up stair by stair with the memory of the last seven hours haunting you...

In front of the door I stopped for a moment to behold the flower in my hand, a light lavender rose he had bought me on a whim in the same little flower shop where Kakyuu always bought her flowers eight years ago. "Because you like their petals so much," Seiya (who really shouldn't be called "the stranger" anymore after all the kisses we've exchanged) had smiled, referring to the moment when I appreciatively brushed my palm over the roses on his bedside table.

What were the odds that Kudo was still asleep and would let me suffer in peace for a few hours until I was in the mental condition to face him as if nothing had happened, I wondered and immediately found my hopes crushed by the sound of my electric toothbrush when I entered my apartment. He must have woken up only a few minutes before my arrival and was probably brushing his teeth with the spare toothbrush head he had snuck from my drawer. The first thing he did after waking up was rummaging through my belongings, as expected!

After removing my sandals and my cardigan, I placed the box of gyoza Taiki-san had given me on the table and walked to the bar to fill a glass with water for the rose I hadn't been able to throw away despite considering the option. No need to cry over something which was doomed from the start, I told myself as the urge to slump onto the floor and weep like a lovesick fourteen-year-old threatened to overtake my more sensible side. But no sooner had I decided to wipe out the last hours from my mind than the memory of him pouring espresso into our cups and asking me whether I believed that fate had something against us appeared vividly before my inner eye. And—in my unbalanced state of mind—I ended up doing the one thing I had thought I would never do again… When Kudo appeared at the door, beaming at me with a smile which could brighten Azabu Juuban during starless nights, I clung to his shirt, buried my face into it, and cried.

Now, after pouring me a glass of water and handing me ten capsules of APAH (because I half-lied to him by claiming I was suffering from a splitting headache), Kudo silently fetches me a few tissues, drags me into my bedroom, and insists that I take a nap.

"It helps every time when the migraines get too bad," he remarks, quickly fishes a nightdress out of my closet without even having to search for it, and throws it at me.

"Don't be silly!" I flee into the bathroom to dispose of the wet tissues. "I'll be all right in less than three minutes."

After combing my tousled hair and washing my face, I enter the living room with renewed composure, poise, and the resolution to treat my temporary nervous breakdown lightly so that Kudo wouldn't have to deal with a drama which has nothing to do with him. The sun (which has been rising at snail's pace for the whole morning) seems now eager to hasten to its zenith—an odd occurrence, which almost convinces me that something is unnatural about today and that I'm going to wake up soon.
"Are you sure you don't need a rest?" Kudo comfortably ensconces himself in his favourite corner of my sofa and looks me up and down with his inquisitive gaze.

Cheerily waving a blood culture bottle I've just taken out of the cupboard in front of his face, I tell him in my most casual voice, "No, I'm perfectly fine now although our APAH addiction is worse than I've thought. Why don't you just roll up your sleeves and give me your blood so that I can analyze the results this afternoon?"

Throwing me another piercing glance before looking away, Kudo doesn't say anything in reply but lets me measure his blood pressure and take his blood in silence. As I need to give my undivided attention to the few simple tasks which, in another situation, would have seemed to me easier than solving a first-grader's homework, I'm grateful for Kudo's consideration. His blood pressure is unusually high, which worries me because he had low blood pressure the last time I checked. But since I don't want to appear paranoid (and because, perceptive as he always is, he must have noticed it himself), I decide not to mention his high blood pressure to him.

"Beautiful flower," Kudo huskily remarks after we're finished and I've removed the blood culture bottles from our sight. "And the colour is extremely rare. As far as I know, there is only one little flower shop in Azabu Juuban where you can find a rose of this size and colour without ordering it beforehand."

"I just bought it there," I lie, as there is no way I can tell him the truth without making it sound like I just came home from a one-night stand.

"How much does it cost?" he inquires without looking at me. As I already feared, he is interested in every little random detail whenever he is not engrossed in a case.

I don't know. I've forgotten. (This time, it wasn't even a lie because, preoccupied with the devastating truth I had learned from Two Lights about Kakyuu and their parents, I didn't pay attention to the price.)

Slouching on the sofa with an expression of deep mistrust on his face (he usually never slouches, and I can't figure out why he is doing it now), Kudo shoots me a rare dark look and gloomily devours about fifteen to twenty new capsules of APAH, downing a whole glass of water in the process. Absorbed in his own train of thought, he has simply poured himself water into my glass instead of taking a new glass out of the cupboard. If my eyes are not playing a trick on me, I can also tell that his hand is shaking slightly as he gingerly puts down the empty water glass. For reasons I cannot guess, he is simmering with anger and suffering from a new migraine attack himself although he looked relaxed and refreshed, almost exuberant, a few minutes ago.

"You know, your headaches can't be blamed on my antidote alone," I observe. "They also stem from your lack of sleep and your general abuse of your body. I know you think you have superpowers but the truth is that you're seriously overworked. At this rate you will die before you're forty. You should really try to take things easy once in a while."

Much to my surprise, Kudo ignores me, takes the rose between his thumb and index finger, and begins to inspect it with a grim expression on his face as if it were a venomous insect a murderer has misused as a weapon.

"I didn't know you're that interested in flowers," I remark, stupefied by his action.

"I'm very much interested in this one." He calmly turns the flower in his hand to inspect it from any possible angle. "A half-bloomed thornless lavender rose with a very pleasant scent. Does it mean something in the language of flowers? What's its name?"
Contrary to his neutral words, his voice is conspicuously cool, with a razor-sharp edge, as if he were interrogating me and I were the number-one suspect of his latest case.

"I don't know," I truthfully reply. "I chose it because I liked the colour." The last statement was a lie because it wasn't me who chose it but Seiya who spotted it when we passed the flower shop. Fidgeting with the key in my pocket, which is continually poking at my leg as if it was trying to remind me of its existence, I wonder whether calling him by his scandal-ridden name will make it easier for me to forget the way his thumbs brushed against my cheeks when he told me to wait for him outside because he had—so he claimed—just found the perfect flower for me...

"Do you know the sad thing about lavender roses?" Kudo continues in a matter-of-fact voice. "As stunning as they look, they're not very winter hardy. Growing them is a pain because they're so fragile and susceptible to diseases. Maybe you want to buy one for your vase once in a while because you like their scent or their looks." He scowls at the flower with a feverish gleam in his eyes. "But they aren't something you would want to grow in your own garden. In the long run, they're so high maintenance and so expensive that you will discover that they're not really worth it —"

"You know, I think it's you who needs a rest," I impatiently interrupt his lunatic ramblings, convinced that he must have taken too much APAH and has lost it completely. "You're so out of character it's disturbing! Or maybe it's the hunger." With a pang of guilt, I begin to unpack the gyoza. "Look, I've brought us breakfast."

"I've slept about seven hours," he remarks, gently taking my hand from the gyoza box. Looking up at him in surprise, I'm once again struck by the peculiar intensity of his gaze when it hits me that he must have deduced more than I want him to know. "Much longer than you, I bet," he calmly continues without letting go of my hand. "Where have you been? Who have you been with? And what have you done?"

I blink at him, taken aback by the suppressed fury in his voice. He is absolutely livid, and I don't know why, as he has never shown that much interest in my love life before.

"Rubbing shoulders with three celebrities." I free myself from his grasp while wondering at the same time why I actually bother to answer his questions. "Since you were asleep and I was bored, I decided to go out for a while to have a look at Two Lights'."

"Are you sure that it was three?" he coolly asks, removing a black hair from my dress. "I would recognize this scent everywhere! Since it's a personalized perfume, it's unlikely that my guess is wrong. If I had time, I could write a dissertation on how you usually iron your dress because you're very particular about it. I can tell at first glance that it was someone else who did it this time because it looks conspicuously different, much more amateurish, I must say. It has also shrunk a bit after he washed and dried it, hasn't it? Or have you gained weight so fast that it seems smaller to me than it was yesterday?"

"A few centuries ago, you would have been burned," I nonchalantly comment in answer to his challenging gaze.

For a moment, his face falls, and he looks vulnerable, almost broken, before he victoriously adds with his usual smugness, "Although you've tried to comb it, your hair is completely tousled and slightly curly, making me wonder whether it was really you who blow-dried it. I think that, while you might have met three celebrities, you spent last night in the immediate vicinity of only one of them. And the fact that you ended up taking a shower at his place and letting him dry your hair really throws me. You've never been the type to seek out one-night stands..." His voice trails off, and he turns away from me to stroll to the balcony door before he quietly continues, "Hence I
deduce this has been going on for quite a while although I can't tell why you lied to me yesterday and pretended not to know him when we talked. As usual, I couldn't tell that you were lying because your acting skills are disturbingly good. You should really make a living out of them after finishing your studies."

"It's not like that!" I lean back into my armchair with a sigh. "Since parts of your deductions are completely wrong, I'm afraid you've really lost your touch."

At times like this, his uncanny deduction skills are less of a blessing and more of a curse, and I can feel my headaches returning with a vengeance because I seriously don't know how to explain the events of last night and this morning to him. But then I feel anger surging inside me because there is no logical reason why I should justify myself to him and why I should even care about his opinion on this. It's me who is suffering at the moment! Kudo should give me a break instead of showing off his deduction skills and interrogating me as if I were a wayward kid and he were my guardian.

"Really? Which parts of my deductions are wrong? Tell me... Why didn't you at least wake me up and send me home if you were so attached to him that you couldn't stay away from him for even one night?" Kudo—who is still turning his back on me—continues in a voice which could have frozen Infinity during the fire. "Besides, your landlady mistook me for your boyfriend when she came to borrow your scissors this morning... I fear I've created unnecessary misunderstandings! But I don't get why you couldn't simply wake me up and ask me to go home if you absolutely had to see him..."

Oddly enough, he is behaving like a spoiled little kid who is angry at the realization that his playmates have a secret they won't share with him. And while I don't understand what's wrong with him and why he suddenly jumps to conclusions (as he usually never jumps to conclusions), the fact that my busybody of a landlady has found him in my apartment this morning disturbs me enough to distract me from his petulant behaviour.

"You opened the door for her although I wasn't present?" I look at him aghast. "Couldn't you have stayed inside and waited until she has given up?"

The ringing was so obstinate that he thought it was "something important," he explains, and I must admit that, since Kudo is accustomed to having people drop dead around him on a regular basis, it's only natural that he would expect to encounter a new case at any time. From the things my landlady said, Kudo infers that she already saw him last night in front of the garden although he is surprised he didn't see her. Even though he tried, he couldn't quite convince her that we are only old friends, he apologetically adds.

"But maybe it doesn't matter because she thinks we two are a nice couple." He sounds almost nostalgic, which must be a misinterpretation of my ears.

In the darkness, my landlady must have mistaken Kudo and Seiya for the same person—a realization which immediately calms me down, as absurd as it sounds. Having one male visitor at night is something I can still get away with. Having two would have complicated my life because my landlady doesn't only belong to the nosy but also the conservative type who doesn't tolerate such kind of escapades from her tenants and who is also never too shy or too considerate to voice her opinion.

"So, how long have the two of you been seeing each other?" Kudo nervously taps his fingers on the window glass. "And why did you tell me you didn't know him when we talked about him yesterday?"
Squinting against the bright light from the window to frown at his white figure as he is leaning against the door frame, I'm momentarily distracted by the clear azure sky, which looks as if it belonged on one of Kaioh-san's watercolours while she was in her expressionist phase. Resigned, I come to the obvious conclusion that it's impossible to explain the happenings of last night to Kudo in this weather.

"I really didn't know him yesterday." I decide to tell Kudo the truth nonetheless. "Or at least I didn't know that it was him. He had been hiding his ponytail beneath his jacket so that I couldn't even guess—"

"So the stranger who told you the ghost story was him?" Kudo abruptly turns round to shoot me a disbelieving look. "I should have known it when you mentioned his voice. How many times did you see him since yesterday's twilight?"

"Two, or three times, I'm not sure... It depends on how you count. I was on the balcony when I saw him walking down the street, and since he asked me out for a drink at Two Lights', I—"

"I warned you!" Kudo snaps at me in a sudden outburst. "I told you he was extremely interested in you. I thought it was enough of a warning!"

"For your information, I'm neither your daughter nor your girlfriend!" I snap back, tired of his childish antics. "I don't know why you behave like an overprotective father or a jealous boyfriend all of a sudden."

"I'm only worried about you!" He returns to the sofa to eye me with professional interest. "What has he done to you to make you cry like that? If I had known it was him who told you the ghost story, I'd have informed you about his reputation."

"He hasn't done anything. I told you I had a migraine attack." I hold my head in despair as I'm assailed by the memories of the past hours. Leaving the armchair for the bar where I continue to unwrap the gyoza box, I grope for words in an attempt to clear up the confusion. "I think you've completely misunderstood. It's not a one-night stand gone wrong although it certainly looks like that. You must know I'm not into such things." Smirking at him, I add in jest, "And he is actually a clueless late bloomer. Much more innocent than you, actually." At least until a few hours ago, I mentally add, feeling my stomach drop at the thought.

"So I've misunderstood?" Kudo looks almost hopeful when he throws a glance at my sandals in the corridor. "You were caught in the rain when you went out last night. But why did you shower at his place? Why didn't you just come home when it started raining?"

This—I could hear Taiki-san nagging at his younger brother when I was in the bathroom—is the most clichéd thing which could have happened. As an actor, you should have known that this happens in every movie or novel when the main couple gets drenched and needs to get changed somewhere. If you weren't such a naive idiot, you would have known that she intended to seduce you right from the start. Nobody else could have fallen for her ridiculous claim that she didn't know who you are! Your face is everywhere it's impossible not to know it. It wouldn't surprise me if she turns out to be one of your mad groupies. Come to think of it, Yaten says something is seriously wrong about her although he doesn't know what it is.

"I don't know," I murmur, for once trying to tell the honest truth. Why did I accept a stranger's offer to shower at his apartment? Didn't I know exactly what could happen if two people like us were alone with each other? In retrospect, it seems to me as if the intention has been hiding in a dark corner of my mind since the first time we met. But isn't this how love always starts? When we begin to believe that fate has brought us together and torn us apart and that the seemingly random
coincidences were all parts of an invisible chain.
It's not like I've never...

It's not like I've never heard of them before, these improbable and eerie stories about two people getting struck by love at first (or second or third) sight and planning to stay with each other for life without caring the least about the sheer insurmountable difficulty of the task. But the protagonists of those stories have always struck me as being somewhat undiscriminating in the choice of the object of their so-called "love". And if anyone had asked me whether I could imagine the same thing happening to me at any time of my life, I would have replied with conviction that, no, Miyano Shiho is not reckless enough to dash headlong into heartbreak and not foolish enough to contemplate building a future with a person she doesn't know!

Yet here I am, utterly miserable and racked with regret after leaving a man I would undoubtedly have spent my life with if it hadn't been for his and my past. Contrary to my expectations, the thought that ending it after one night precludes the agony of having it crashing down on us after four or five years of cohabitation is no consolation to me at all now that I've broken it up.

Accepting Kudo's water glass and APAH capsules with the resignation of a drug addict who has given up on therapy, I try to think of a sensible solution of what to do about the key in my pocket. Keep it, throw it away, send it back to him per post, go back to his apartment and shove the key under his doormat, ring him out of his apartment under the pretense of returning the key and kiss him again...

The obnoxious ringing of my doorbell startles me out of my hopeless contemplations, and it takes me a moment to deduce that my landlady must be trying to return the scissors she has borrowed in her sneaky attempt to get a good look at my overnight visitor.

"Your landlady," Kudo points out the obvious and asks when he notices my reluctance, "Don't you want your scissors back?"

"I don't want to listen to her ramblings right now. Just let her ring. She will think that we've gone out."

"She could wait downstairs and waylay us when we go out for lunch," Kudo predicts. "I think it's better to open the door for her and get over it now than to run into her later."

He is right, as always, and I grudgingly relent even though I still refuse to see my landlady.

"Since you've given her my scissors, you open the door for her. Just tell her I'm having a migraine and have gone to bed." I proceed to devour the APAH capsules in my hands while Kudo stalks to the door with the air of an exhausted husband who has been disturbed by the same door-to-door sales person for the third time in a row. From the living room, I can hear my landlady chirping about how thankful she is that Kudo has lent her my scissors because she had misplaced hers. But just when I believe that she has left after Kudo's "It doesn't matter" and "Have a nice day", she lets out an indignant, earsplitting howl, which makes me jump.

"How could you put such a gorgeous lavender rose into a normal water glass?" She gasps, leaping towards the bar to admire my rose while Kudo, who is now standing behind my armchair, gives me a faintly amused grin.

"The vases are all in the closet so that they don't gather dust," he taunts, whereupon I fight the unhealthy urge to strangle him in front of a witness by flashing him a sickeningly sweet smile.
"What a shame because you have an absolutely wonderful specimen here, as blue as a rose can be without a dye!" My landlady bubbles over with excitement. "It's even in the same shade of lavender as the colour of your dress." With a sidelong glance at Kudo, she mutters under her breath, "Your boyfriend is very attentive and romantic. It's extremely rare these days now that all the young people have become so jaded and cynical."

Young people have such a jaundiced view of life and relationships these days, she suddenly breaks into a rant. It must be the sheltered life and the success and the money. Without hardships, they take all the things they have for granted and quibble about trifles like spoiled little kids. Life, she asserts forcefully, is only worth something when you have nothing and need to fight for it!

Wondering whether she has ever had to fight for her life, I quickly take the scissors out of her hand for fear that, if she stays any longer, she might get the idea of making herself comfortable on my sofa. While I don't mind chatting with her from time to time and even find her quite amiable on normal days, today her presence alone is enough to make my blood boil.

"Where have you found it?" she turns to Kudo with her fingers still resting on the stem of my rose. If it had leaned more towards purple instead of blue—she continues without waiting for an answer—she would have wondered why he had given me a lavender rose although we two have already been going out with each other "for, uh, how long by now? Almost two years?"

Owing to my usual secretiveness about my love life (I've been rather vague whenever she asked me how the charming young man she once found on my sofa was doing) she has mistaken Kudo for Kaito and believes that we two had never broken up during the past two years. For a split second, I can see on Kudo's face that he wisely considers leaving her in the mistaken belief that he is my longtime boyfriend and that he has bought me the flower. But then his innate curiosity triumphs over his (usually non-existent) sense of tact.

"It's not from me but from another man she is dating at the moment," he tells her in misplaced honesty. "But what does a lavender rose mean?"

Lavender roses, especially pale lavender roses, are usually given to a love interest before or at the beginning of a romantic relationship as an expression of enchantment and love at first sight, she explains, darting puzzled glances at Kudo and me alternately. However, since this special flower is of a very blue shade, one could interpret it as a symbol of the mysterious and the unattainable.

But "unattainable" has a connotation of finality I can't accept, I realize in dismay. It's almost as though time had rewound so that I'm sitting at the window of the small café once again, watching the restaurant on the other side of the street where Ran is waiting for her long-distance boyfriend, who, after three years, had finally returned to her.

"At least he is right in that aspect. The way your brain operates is an unsolvable mystery to me," Kudo wryly remarks, whereupon my landlady beams at me with delight because she has mistaken it for a declaration of love.

"Your boyfriend has a very peculiar sense of humour," she whispers into my ear as she leaves. "But it's impossible to be angry at a man who is that good-looking, isn't it? He almost looks like Kudo Shinichi, the famous detective."

"How did you open the door for her this morning?" I grimly ask Kudo after shutting the door behind her. After all, I had locked the door from the outside when I left.

"Tools," he curtly replies, indicating his jacket with a sidelong glance. "I can open your lock within less than ten seconds. You really need to have it replaced with a better one."
"Why should I? It's only a question of time until you crack open the new one as well."

Studying his face to evaluate whether my landlady's effusive praise is justified, I notice for the first time since my return that he has shaved (apparently he even carries a razor in his jacket!) and is looking radiant, especially compared to yesterday.

"My sofa seems to do you good," I observe. "If it weren't so clunky, I'd have considered giving it to your Ran-nee-chan and you as a parting present."

He doesn't answer but only throws me another dark look before he aimlessly walks around and picks up random things (the water bottle, the glass with the rose, the tissue box on the table) just to put them down again seconds later.

"You're making me nervous with all that fidgeting," I remark. "Let's have breakfast instead."

"Did you... spend the night with him?" he asks me out of the blue, shocking me with his indiscretion and his ill-timed bluntness. He also appears exhausted again as if asking me that one question has completely drained his energy.

"Only the second part of it." I calmly take a sip of my water and jokingly add in an attempt to lighten the mood, "The first part of it I spent with you until you fell asleep. Do you remember it now?"

"You know exactly what I mean," he obstinately insists, stopping at the sofa to fix his intent gaze inquiringly on me. Noticing that his insatiable curiosity is a pest I can't avoid by being evasive because I would only fuel it, I decide to chide him for it instead: Yes, but it really doesn't have anything to do with you. As I said, I'm perfectly fine with it. Even if you're bored, don't turn this into a case unless you want me to tell your pretty karate champion that you almost cheated on her with me once. She will break every single bone in your body before you can count to ten...

To my bewilderment, I can talk about our history with ease now that I'm too preoccupied with another equally disastrous love to fret about our past. Closing the distance between us, Kudo silently takes a few strands of my hair into his hand while his eyes are glued to my lips with an intensity I find most unsettling.

"You said I've misunderstood because it's not a one-night stand gone wrong... So you actually meant you're going to continue seeing him?" He abruptly lets go of my hair and turns his attention to the gyoza. "Did he tell you to bring me breakfast? Or is the food from Taiki?" While he is trying to keep his voice down, he looks like he is going to break into hysterical laughter at any moment.

"What's so funny about that?" I testily ask, hurt by his open contempt. "It's not like he only wanted to hook up for a night to kill time. Even if you can't believe it, we're actually serious about each other!" Realizing that telling Kudo our relationship is already over would greatly complicate matters because I can't tell him the reasons, I prefer to leave him in the belief that Seiya and I are still going out with each other until he leaves for Osaka.

"You're usually prudent and prefer to take things slow," Kudo coolly remarks, walks over to the bar, settles on the bar stool directly in front of the rose, and gazes down on me in disapproval. "This... carpe diem mentality... doesn't suit you at all. He is a disastrous influence on you."

Due to my usual reticence and his own naiveté, Kudo seems to have a rather docile mental image of me, which I have to destroy because I'm sick of comparing myself to the pure and chaste ideal of a woman he has grown up with. "Don't you know that our society still wants all women to be perfect angels so that they can be conquered by their great and irresistible husbands in their
wedding night?” I remember lecturing Seiya when he asked me in stupefaction why I refused to meet his foster brothers. In response (and much to my delight), he only chuckled and told me between two kisses that he had finally realized why people indulged in extramarital affairs because no one in their right mind could really enjoy making love to a cold angel.

"On the contrary, it seems I'm a disastrous influence on him." I smile at the remembrance. "But since it wasn't with no strings attached, I'm positive he didn't mind it a bit!"

"Even with strings attached, I don't think this is a good idea." Kudo slowly shakes his head. "You two don't have anything in common. This will never work out!"

For a moment, I'm speechless.

"Why are you trying to talk me out of it?” I leap from my armchair and angrily occupy the bar stool next to him. "Not everyone can start as childhood friends and needs to rip off flower petals for over ten years to know that their feelings are real." Placing my water glass beside my flower, I mournfully watch the distorted reflection of the lavender petals in the water and the light delicately refracted by the blue-tinted glass. "This is the first time in years that I've felt a real connection to somebody..." My voice dies out, and I stop because I don't want to continue rubbing salt into my own wounds.

"He is not for you!" Kudo firmly insists. "I'm only telling you my honest opinion because I'm worried. Didn't you tell me you wanted a perfectly normal nice husband? He is the complete opposite."

"I can remember you were the one who said that it would be dull and that such a husband would bore me to death." I take a new glass for him out of the cupboard, as he has just poured himself water into my glass again. Throwing a puzzled glance at his gloomy face, I jokingly add, "If I didn't know you better, I'd say you look really heartbroken over this. Don't you think that throwing a tantrum just because I've left you alone for a few hours makes you look like a spoiled kid?” I'm not aware of having done anything wrong. After all, I did come back in time for the tests, I did leave him a note, and I did take my phone with me so that he could reach me.

Since he only stares into his empty glass and doesn't react, I decide to take it up a notch to lure him out of his reserve. "Or are you a bit jealous because I just got myself a new boyfriend without warning you beforehand?” I ask, preparing myself to say, "Just kidding!” the moment he begins to stutter a reply.

"A little bit," he says to my astonishment, as this was the last answer I'd have expected to hear from him, "but not really." He turns to me, crosses his legs, and begins to bounce his upper leg with his usual exasperating confidence. "After all... Isn't this the same as last time? You either stand me up or get yourself a new boyfriend every time we meet. One could almost think it has something to do with me, as silly as it sounds." Pushing the glass with the rose between us aside, he softly asks me with a straightforwardness which, if it hadn't been for the hint of sadness in his voice, would have bordered on impertinence, "Am I right?"

Irrational as it sounds, it seems to me that Kudo is dead right and that everything which happened since last night is connected to him because I would never have gone out with a stranger at night and broken up a relationship after a few hours if it hadn't been for Kudo and his influence on me. But since the theory is too depressing to be dwelled on any further, I push it away from me and turn my attention to the other thought which is now uppermost in my mind.
"It's not the same as last time," I begin, wondering how to explain to Kudo that "this time" doesn't in the least feel like "that time" to me.

"No?" Kudo glumly pokes at the half-unwrapped gyoza box. "Last time it was Kuroba and this time it's the same type of guy again. You have a certain weakness for men who are absolutely no husband material."

Perplexed but somewhat pleasantly surprised by his talkativeness, I recall that he seemed strangely happy after seven hours of sleep and that, even though he is in a rotten mood at present, he is much more open and accessible than he was yesterday.

"Why were you in such a good mood this morning?" I ask him with mistrust, knowing he is not a morning person. "Is it only because you're well rested? Or did you have a particularly pleasant dream last night?"

"I've come to terms with Osaka." He smiles. He wanted to tell me about it when I came home. Despite myself, it is hard for me focus on his words because it has just struck me why "this time" is not like "last time" at all...

"Fine," I distractedly comment. "Your Ran-nee-chan will be thrilled when she learns about it tonight. After all, she wouldn't be able to enjoy herself in Osaka if she felt that you didn't really want to go with her."

...Last time was like a short pleasant fantasy which couldn't last, but no matter how charming and lovable Kaito was, losing him didn't feel like having my whole world crashing down on me. In spite of all the magic tricks and romantic dates in zoos and parks and cuddling on the sofa and kissing under the moonlight, there were no excessively sentimental feelings or dramatic breakdowns after it ended. I wasn't haunted by the way how he touched my cheek or how his eyes slowly opened to look at me, unfocused until the first flicker of recognition stole into them and he gave me his perfectly blissful smile assuring me that, for someone in this world, I could be a source of happiness instead of pain.

*She has the aura of an unlucky charm*—Yaten-san has claimed. *It's natural that she thinks she loves you since all depressed people are drawn to you like the moth to the flame. They all try to throw themselves at you and live off you like bloodsucking vampires. And when they're done they'll throw you away as if you had never been more than a nice shiny toy for them. It was almost the same with Chiba-san, wasn't it, with the only difference that she wasn't such a loose girl? She literally fell into your arms because she was neglected by her clueless boyfriend. But when her beloved "Mamo-chan" returned from Oxford, she simply dumped you and ran back into his arms again.*

"Concerning our previous topic, this time is not like the last time at all," I tell Kudo in a conspiratorial voice. "He is the only man I've ever allowed to iron my dress." The remark which was supposed to be a joke sounds shockingly candid to my own ears, and Kudo gives me a blank look asking me to elaborate on the reasons as to why I let Seiya iron my favourite dress although I've always been fastidious even when I was posing as the Professor's little girl.

"Well..." In answer to Kudo's silent question, I helplessly grope for words. "I don't know why but he stirs all these... emotions... in me."

I trail off, shuddering at the ruthless honesty in my voice. If I hadn't wept so much after my return that my tears have completely dried up, I would go to bed and continue to cry about this disproportionate revenge of fate, which has come so late that it might as well have come from *that*
person himself, whom even Gin—his most loyal crow—had described as petty and spiteful.

"You can't imagine how scary such a confession sounds when it comes from your mouth!" Kudo leaves the bar, sinks into my armchair, and drops his head into the cup of his hands. If he weren't so motionless, I would think that he was laughing about the situation.

"This is even worse than I've thought," he sighs instead, keeping his palms over his eyes so that I can't guess whether he is on the brink of laughter or whether he is just fighting his migraine. "You're completely out of your mind. Let's calm down a bit and assess the situation before you slip into a serious relationship with a guy like him."

"A guy like him? He's perfectly decent and harmless. It's not like he has forced me into anything."

"You've just met him, Ai!" Kudo looks up to shoot me an irritated look from his bloodshot eyes. "So what?" I burst out before I notice to my amusement that he has accidentally called me Ai again. "Even I succumb to these nasty neurotransmitters once in a while. Don't pretend that you were less ridiculous when you were moaning about the permanent antidote so that you could properly declare your undying love to your angel in that posh restaurant without having to crane your neck to see her reaction."

"I've known Ran for all my life while you've known him for a few hours," he coldly retorts. "One can't really have anything which could even be called 'a relationship' in such a short time."

"That type of 'relationship' needs to start at some point." I shrug. "It's not like we wanted to stare into each other's eyes forever before making a move. The older one gets, the faster things happen."

"Not at this speed if you try to look at it from a more sensible point of view. You only don't see how rushed this is because you're completely besotted. He should have taken it slow as well, but considering his reputation, it's—"

"Stop being such a prig!"

Seeing Kudo's crestfallen face as he laconically mutters an apology, my anger subsides, and I walk to him to curl up on the sofa so that we're now sitting with each other in stony silence, lost in thought until he gets up and fetches us the water bottle and our glasses from the bar.

"Maybe I'm only paranoid because of all the scandals I've heard," Kudo gives my arm a conciliatory pat before he sits down next to me. "But one usually doesn't get that kind of reputation without a reason." In a more cheerful tone, he adds as an afterthought, "I can look into it for you if you want. Let's find out whether he is really so clueless and harmless as you think or whether he has been lying to you all along."

"Even if he had been lying about it, his reputation or past affairs would be the last things I care about at the moment." I give a desperate chuckle, wondering when my nerves are going to fail me completely. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in the accepted notion that, once you've cracked up completely and given up on your life, you will repeatedly crack up again during times when the sheer act of being alive seems too much of an ordeal. I can still remember the first time it happened, when I read the newspaper article featuring the outcome of the "One Billion Yen Robbery" over and over again and the truth slowly dawned on me that, in this world, there is nothing which justifies the compulsion to be nice and good. History is written by survivals. Justice is a human construct. Morality is a fancy thing for the people who can afford it. The rules of the game are always made by the ones who have won and not the ones who have lost. And when success and "the community" are the only things which count, no one really cares about "collateral
"You know, I would never have expected you to cry because of a man." Kudo's voice takes on an edge of suspicion, and I can feel myself stiffen under his searching gaze.

"Love brings out our most sentimental and vulnerable side." I give him a playful smirk. "At least it seems to bring out mine."

"I don't know what your notion of love is." He knits his brows. "But I've seldom seen you so unhappy. Do you want to tell me what really happened?"

Naturally, I don't want to. And even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know where to start.

"Nothing happened except that I can't stand Shortie and Stick and they openly despise me. Apart from that, he is going to return to the stage soon. I'm sure I will hate his friends, I will hate his fans, I will hate his job, and I bet I will hate his agent as well although I haven't met her yet. From what I've heard of her, I think she will hate me just as much as Shortie does. They're all passionately in love with him and fiercely jealous of me..."

Unleashing a torrent of rants on Kudo's sympathetic ears, I try to remember all the lame excuses I've conjured up for myself in an effort to lessen my regrets à la "The Fox and the Grapes" when I broke up a perfectly functional relationship because I'm convinced that what we've gone through in the past teaches us about what we can anticipate in the future. But was it really right to leave him for the sake of keeping the memories of last night intact? Or should I have stayed because, if I hadn't been a coward and hadn't feared the day his love will turn into hatred so much that I bailed, it could have worked out between us?

"See, you can't even imagine how a life with him will be," Kudo tentatively starts.

"Oh, but I can imagine it perfectly. I'm going to elope with him to some stereotyped city of love, Paris or Venice or Rome or even better: to some isle where no one... well, no one apart from you, Sherlock... will ever find us."

"Paris?" Kudo sharply asks.

"No, maybe not Paris," I admit with a twinge of guilt, avoiding his disbelieving gaze, whose underlying despair confuses me. Certainly not Venice either, I mentally add. But where is the place where no phone call and no mail will ever be able to inform Seiya about his girlfriend's past? And even if it were possible to flee from his friends and acquaintances, it would still be impossible for me to flee from myself. Breaking it up was undoubtedly the most sensible decision under these circumstances, but doing "the right thing" once again turned out to be unbearable.

There is no excuse for not doing the right thing. Kudo once said in Paris, leaning against the railing of the moonlit veranda after our hilarious attempt at dancing. There are always sacrifices one needs to make and risks one needs to take to achieve one's goals. But from a moral point of view, it's of primary importance that the people who risk their lives are doing it of their own accord. I can risk my life but not yours. If you're not sure that coming with Hattori and me is really what you want, please give me the key and stay with the Professor in Tokyo.

But what would you do if doing the morally "wrong" thing would produce the outcome you want while doing the morally "right" thing would ruin your life and the people close to you, Kaioh-san has asked you after you refused her offer to get you and your sister out of the Organization in exchange for Pandora's Box. In certain circumstances, there is no other way out. So, what are you going to choose when the price for achieving your goals is guilt while the price for choosing the
morally right path is sorrow?
"If that's the case, I choose neither..."

"If that's the case, I choose neither of the two options. Trying to manipulate me won't get you anywhere. Step aside, please!"

The first frame of this old movie is a medium closed up shot of a cascade of long turquoise locks spilling in waves over the bare white shoulders of a very young woman. Her ethereal, unworldly beauty assaults the senses of the audience like a spectacular waterfall and, just like a waterfall, leaves them shiver from a cold, unpleasant aftereffect that can be attributed to awe, envy, or shame.

At this time of the story, sixteen-year-old Sherry is already in possession of dramatic dark-circled eyes, the same complexion as those of the white mice she regularly kills during her experiments, and the desperately optimistic air of a middle-aged woman who has just divorced her thirteenth husband and is now looking forward to marrying husband No. 14. She, or you (as you seem to exist twice again) are also one of the few girls who don't resent Kaioh-san's gorgeous looks or her perfectly happy relationship with her wildly popular ex-motocross-racer-turned-pianist. Nevertheless, you envy Kaioh-san her freedom to go anywhere she wants and to do whatever she pleases. And with a vague sense of dread, you realize in your most lucid moments that after the past three months of what should have been "marital bliss", the word "marriage" will never carry connotations of romance and love again.

In response to your reply, Kaioh Michiru obligingly moves away from the entrance of the aquarium while giving you a sympathetic smile. Her angelic gentleness contrasts so sharply with the suggestion she just made that you can feel your goosebumps raise at the thought that she would dispose of her enemies with the same imperturbable efficiency and grace with which she tunes her violin.

"I think you haven't really grasped the situation you're in," she quietly says as you pass her again at the shark tank. "The FBI is close on Gin's heels. It's only a matter of time until he drags you and your sister down with him."

"I think you haven't grasped the situation I'm in." You watch the whale shark gliding slowly through the opalescent water, whose pearly lustre gives the creepy sea creature an undeservingly majestic look. "The Organization feeds me, clothes me, and pays my rent. I've been raised and educated by them and am living with Gin. Accepting your offer would mean to betray all the people who've made me the person I am."

"Not accepting our offer would mean to stay in a burning house until the roof collapses. You're walking into your own downfall with your eyes wide open."

"Going down with my eyes wide open is still better than stabbing the people I owe everything in the back. I could never live with my conscience if I did that. Even sharks like us need to preserve their sense of dignity."

"It's easy to sacrifice oneself for one's sense of dignity, isn't it?" Kaioh-san's voice seems to drop a few degrees. "But can you do the same to your sister?"

"My sister will be fine." You take out your notebook to jot down a few observations you can use in your next experiments. "She has never done anything for the Organization, not even a small 'assignment'. The FBI will take care of her if the Organization falls." Even though you know Rye
only used her to approach you at first, you still believe he cares enough about her to protect her from the law.

"I'm sure that's what the seven crows think as well." Kaioh-san tentatively points out, and you abruptly turn to look her in the eye as the pen drags a long ugly streak across the creamy paper.

"I'm their only scientist who can continue my parents' research at the moment," you declare without conviction, hating yourself when your voice quavers and your fingers tremble. Any attempt at dissimulation on your side is at once snuffed out by Kaioh-san's knowing gaze—the reason why you always dislike her a bit although you find her immensely imposing. "They know that I'd stop the research immediately if anything should happen to her."

"Right now," Kaioh says gently, in a low, pleasant drawl. "But how long, do you think, will you stay indispensable?"

As much as you would like to protest, you both know too well that she has a point.

"Let's go to the dolphins to continue our talk," you suggest in resignation. "I can't stand these sharks... They're too much like me."

"There are actually similarities between sharks and dolphins." Kaioh-san elegantly saunters along the tanks on her dancer's feet as if she could defy gravity whenever she pleases. "They are both trying to survive by adapting to the world they've been born into. Those who can't adjust always die out when the environment changes. You will perish in an environment you can't adapt to no matter whether you're a shark or a dolphin."

"No, they aren't the same." You give a wan laugh. "If I could choose, I'd rather be a dolphin."

"There is nothing wrong about being a shark," interjects Tenoh Haruka, who, after shaking off the man she addressed as "Jean", has just returned to join Kaioh-san and you. "They're sensitive and independent creatures, who die in confinement."

Giving you a suggestive wink, she wraps her arm around her girlfriend's bare shoulders and publicly pecks her on her temple. "Sorry for taking so long, Michiru."

"But there is a huge difference in how they're treated by humans," you counter while inwardly congratulating yourself for your recovered mental balance. "Sharks are feared and hated while dolphins are loved."

"So, do you prefer to be feared and hated and be free or to stay in confinement, be other people's pretty little puppet, and be 'loved'?" Tenoh-san asks, letting go of Kaioh-san to usher you away from the shark hall towards the dark tunnel tank.

Notwithstanding Tenoh-san's harsh and obnoxious manner, resisting Tenoh-san has always been harder for you than resisting Kaioh-san, a fact which you don't ascribe to Tenoh-san's attractiveness but to your secret admiration of her unconquerable spirit and her tremendous courage. Always the one who leads and never the one who follows no matter whether she is on the track or in the concert hall, Tenoh-san possesses the type of charm which makes it hard for other people to dislike her even when her will to exert influence on others regularly crosses the border between goodwill and presumptuousness.

Have you ever thought of the possibility that it's less dangerous to leave than to stay, she continues as you remain silent. Gin already had to defend himself at Pandora's Box once because he went overboard in giving a fellow crow a red card. Apart from that, Gin has also been targeted by the
FBI owing to his connection to you. "I wonder what will happen when your boyfriend finally makes a serious mistake and the Seven Crows need to get rid of him. As his live-in girlfriend, you know too much. You'll be the first one they go for after finishing Gin."

Smiling away a tug of guilt at the thought that Gin would never have been officially rebuked if it hadn't been for your clumsy attempt to help the red-haired girl, you resume walking while returning your pen and your notebook back to your handbag.

"So you want to say you're interested in my safety?" You sling your bag over your shoulder with studied nonchalance. "Assuming that I can give you the key to Pandora's Box—who I can't!—what, do you propose, shall we do next to die as heroes without digging the grave for everyone near us? Getting blown up with the files after scattering the information all over the internet?"

No, she says. We're going to sail the ship away from the isle, deactivate Pandora's Box using a scapegoat—for example the brainless secretary of your boyfriend is the perfect choice for the part! —and escape on a boat with the backup of the files, leaving the dope behind in the middle of the sea with the time bombs and a bit of alcohol to drink his worries away.

"Before that, we naturally need to eliminate the Boss and the Seven Crows with the help of your undetectable poison," she adds as an afterthought. Seeing your reaction, she smiles. "I admit it sounds radical but I think it's the only option. Drastic times call for drastic measures. We're dealing with extreme circumstances. And that's what we do to fanatics because it's no use trying to talk sense into them."

"In other words, you suggest that I let you 'eliminate' my boyfriend and the people who raised me in exchange for my freedom."

"For your freedom and your sister's freedom," she corrects you. "I'm sure Gin and all the other 'people who raised you' wouldn't hesitate to burn you alive for the sake of the Organization."

Exchanging a glance with Kaioh-san, who has just clasped her proprietorial hands around her upper arm, she adds, "Have you already forgotten what Gin did to you last month in the lab just because he found out about your date with your sister's boyfriend?"

"We only talked." You wearily cross to the dolphin pool in search of your seat for the show. "Rye only tried to get information on my research." A quick glance at your watch shows you that Gin, being the paragon of punctuality he is, will join you in exactly twelve minutes.

"Which was enough for Gin to 'punish' you in those handcuffs," Tenoh-san follows you with Kaioh-san in tow, talking to you with such intensity that a bystander would have misinterpreted the dynamic between you three if someone had cut the sound out. "And you'd have stayed in the basement over the weekend, drinking sherry, singing drunken songs, and wetting your pants if I hadn't found you."

"Listen, I really appreciate that you picked that lock for me, but I'm not going to help anyone 'eliminate' the man I spend all my nights with no matter how nasty he can be at times. Even if he were always such a monster—which he isn't—I would never do it. There is something like loyalty."

"'Loyalty'?" Tenoh-san narrows her eyes. "Koneko-chan, you're kidding me!"

"Yes, loyalty. Or maybe it's love." You try a laugh. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you that I actually love Gin?"

"What people call 'love' is in most cases only a lucky combination of lust and narcissism. You don't
look as if you're very much in love with him."

"You don't need to believe me but I do care about him."

"I thought you care about your sister." Tenoh-san eagerly bends over your seat as if the two of you were about to kiss, unknowingly drawing the attention of other people in the vicinity with her gesture. "Setsuna-san told me you meet up with your sister once a month at Tsukino-san's café and that you two absolutely adore each other."

"You out of all people should know that it's possible to care about more than one person at the same time," you remark with deliberate viciousness, as you don't like the way Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san drag your sister into the discussion.

"You can't love two people at the same time if those feelings are mutually exclusive," Tenoh-san retorts without batting an eyelid. "Are you really aware of what you're doing? You're choosing him over her."

"I'm not choosing anyone!" You defiantly fold your arms. "As I already told your girlfriend, I absolutely object to emotional blackmail."

"I see you're choosing the easy way out!" Tenoh-san coolly straightens herself. "One day, you'll live to regret that you haven't grabbed the chance to make your choice instead of letting life decide over the outcome for you."

"Why are you so sure—"

"I know the type!" She grips hard at the back of your seat while Kaioh-san seizes her free hand as though she is about to draw her away. "If your sister and you threaten to harm the Organization, Gin won't hesitate to execute you both. Even if nothing happens, I can't see a future for you two. The more clingy he gets, the more you're likely to flirt with danger, as evidenced by what happened last month, she asserts. "You can't live with a husband who brings out the worst in you!"

Gin will appear in a few minutes, you distractedly think, fighting your growing sense of panic. You need to get rid of the fairytale couple before he notices their interest in you, misinterprets it (or worse: correctly interprets it) and handcuffs you to the heater again.

"You know I could tell Gin about our conversation, right?" you ask Tenoh-san in a dismissive voice and turn your attention to the pool. "Without Pandora's Box, you can't do anything to the Organization. It would take them only a few days to eliminate your whole group.

"Maybe." Tenoh-san chuckles, giving you an unexpected warm smile, which reaches her eyes. "But you've probably noticed that I know about your sister although you've never introduced her to me... And I can assure you that I'm not the forgiving type."

"I see you're not that different from the crows you despise." You return her smile and behold her fine features with a deep sense of sadness, lingering for a moment on her perfectly shaped ear and her simple gold earring. You've learned the hard way that roses usually have thorns and that beauty cannot be trusted. Apart from a few rare exceptions like Akemi-nee-san, all the beautiful people you know are essentially cruel and selfish, willing to swim through a sea of blood to reach their ultimate goal.

"Really?" Tenoh-san's smile doesn't waver although a wistful expression has stolen into her eyes. "If I were like them, I wouldn't ask you at all but simply make you give us the key in exchange for your sister's life. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has noticed how easy it is to use her to approach
you after the disaster with Rye! Please think about my offer again and consider the consequences before you pass up the chance of a lifetime.

The scene fades out as the couple slides out of your view while the hall is rapidly filled with anonymous faces of strangers—men, women, children, toddlers, babies—who have come to watch the ever-smiling dolphins perform the same tricks as yesterday and the day before yesterday. Taking a few deep breaths and straightening your dress, you anticipate Gin's arrival in five minutes with renewed optimism. Neither Tenoh-san nor Kaioh-san has guessed the second reason why you insist on staying with a man you can no longer love. And before you've accumulated at least one billion yen on your private saving account, you're not going to tell anyone.

It may be a slow, tedious, and painful way to freedom but the only one which feels perfectly right. In only four or five years at the latest, you will be able to buy Akemi-nee-san out of the Organization. As you've made your bed and have to lie in it now, you don't feel much pity for yourself although you sometimes wonder in morbid amusement whether you will end your so-called "marriage" by giving your "husband" your undetectable drug. Many a night you've stayed awake and listened to the sound of his breath, wondering how pleasant the silence would be if the hated sound would magically stop before your dreaded eighteenth birthday. Sometimes you still have muddled feelings for him when you remember his irresistible perfume of last autumn or the childish joy you once felt when his long hair spilled over your hand. But such a phase usually lasts only one or two hours until he pouts about your neglect, complains about your cooking, or rants about the Organization's bureaucrats and you're deadly tired of him again...

This, you surmise, is the "love" most people experience. A slow and gradual suffocation after the first phase of infatuation when lovers can no longer maintain the illusions they've had of each other. And yet, when he appears on the dot in his ridiculous coat and his even more ridiculous hat, reeking of the hated cigarettes he chain-smokes and a new overpriced eau de cologne which can't hold a candle to the scent he once used to seduce you, you habitually take his elbow and habitually enjoy the familiar sensation of his kiss. Without a strong incentive, you can't free yourself of this twisted attachment, and you are certainly not going to betray him for something as elusive as freedom.

Eventually, the anxiety dissipates and you successfully reconcile yourself to the future you've conjured up for yourself and for the two people close to you. You're going to buy Akemi-nee-san a normal life, contribute to humankind's eternal fight against Time by continuing your parents' research, and turn your grumpy, jealous, controlling, and abusive assassin-husband into someone moderately pleasant you can share your life with...

"She thought she could buy your freedom, the credulous little fool!"

The little parting remark, whose deeper implication you only grasped after Tenoh-san's information on why your sister was executed, was also the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back. In this case, to know or not to know makes all the difference—and it's fascinating how one seemingly unimportant small detail can turn a dead puppy love and fear into implacable hatred...

You're taking this way too personally, says the voice of reason in your head. But when it comes to Gin, you've never felt such overwhelming and urgent desire for love as for revenge.

Six votes for Akemi-nee-san's execution and only one against it, Tenoh-san's informant has said. The seventh crow or "blue-clad biker", as you've dubbed him, was the only one who didn't see any sense in executing an insignificant member like her.
The first time a gun feels disturbingly right in your hand is just as unforgettable as the very first kiss, you think with a smile as you pull the trigger and the bullet once again hits the target with impressive accuracy. Kudo, or Edogawa-kun, is on a trip to Hitachi seaside park with his wife- and in-laws-to-be (the eternal optimist is once again trying to reunite her quarreling parents) and thus won't be back before the week after next. The Professor is away as well, visiting an old friend he has met again somewhere on the internet. Grabbing the chance with both hands, you've asked him to tell the Detective Boys that you're going with him because you "need some alone time to work". Of course it was a whopping great lie because the antidote is long finished and you're here at Tenoh-san's place again, brushing up on your terrific shooting skills, as you seriously lack practice although you are, to quote Gin, "exceptionally gifted".

"I suppose I don't need to tell you the basics like 'don't shoot only once'," Tenoh-san comments, visibly impressed by your prowess. "I dare say you're a much better shooter than me!"

"I had the best of mentor!" You smirk as the bullet once again hits the tiny red dot.

"And the best of mentor-student relationship if one can believe the Classical Greek," she jokes, raising her hands apologetically when you—after missing the target in a wave of nausea—groan in exasperation.

"But I see your skills aren't very reliable. Have you ever had a living target?"

"I once shot a dove under instruction before I decided that it was arbitrary killing, and I shot the hat off a woman's head once. I haven't shot anything or anyone since then." You intentionally leave out the bunch of red roses you shot at Kudo with the Professor's toy gun because it's completely irrelevant.

"Then I'll repeat to you again what I've been preaching for the whole week," Tenoh-san sighs, carrying Kaioh-san's easel back to the porch before she returns to join you on the beach with her Beretta. "You don't stand a chance against one crow, let alone six of them with their secretaries and, in a few cases, their sniper-spouses. If they all decide to use the occasion to visit Pandora's Box for a reunion, it's game over for Kudo and you before you can even draw your weapon."

"Of course I don't plan to shoot them if I can help it. Kudo would never let me use a weapon in that way." You hand her the empty Browning in exchange for the loaded Beretta. "This is just for self-defense in case something happens." Turning to her after another good hit, you sigh. "Don't refuse my offer when what I propose is exactly what you've dreamed of all these years. I know right now you have too much to lose. But I'll take the blame if anything goes wrong. You can step back whenever you want. No one will ever learn that you've assisted me unless you can't keep your mouth shut."

She doesn't know whether she should be glad or regret that she has told you the truth about your sister's death, Tenoh-san regards you with a slight, nostalgic smile. "You see, koneko-chan... You've changed more in the last years than I expected. But I doubt you have the right nervous disposition for your grand plans. I fear that, if you pull this off, you will bitterly regret it because no one can assure you that the blackmailed people won't come for Kudo and your Professor after eliminating you." With a gentle pressure on your wrist, she pushes down your hand holding the Beretta. "If something should happen to you—or if you commit suicide all of a sudden—Kudo will investigate. He will get into trouble sooner or later because he'll never stop! Offering yourself as the scapegoat won't really solve the problem."

"So, what do you suggest, should I do instead?" You glare at Tenoh-san, as she has taken the Beretta out of your hand and casually hit the target at lightning speed over and over again without missing it even once.
"I'm not such an accurate shooter but I make up for it with consistency and speed." She gives you a rare boyish smile and motions you to follow her into the house. "If you can let go of your heroic self-sacrifice and turn your attention to the goal of staying alive, I think I have a much better plan."
In one aspect, Kudo is right: Infatuation must be annoying to watch even when it's still in the exhilarating stage during which the beaming faces of the lovestruck victims illuminate their surroundings like the 400-candela Super Bright LED lamps the Professor once installed in our cellar. It goes without saying that detached observers who haven't been infected with the love virus usually wish that the sick ones would finally recover and carry on with their daily lives instead of oscillating perpetually between ecstasy and distress. There are only few things which are more humiliating for me than crying into Kudo's shirt. And now that I've realized that, once aroused, Kudo's curiosity can't be stopped until it has been satisfied, I bitterly regret not having denied all allegations when Kudo used his deduction skills on me.

"... The main tenet of his life philosophy is to live happily and creatively," I blabber on in the silliest fashion I can muster, hoping that Kudo will be so revolted by my unusual chatty mood that he won't probe into me further. "It will be a real challenge to keep him for long, though, because he told me he won't marry me for fear of tying up our love with tiresome obligations and paperwork."

"He doesn't sound like the marrying type to me," Kudo remarks. Giving me a pitying look, he grimly deduces, "So he left you after only one night?"

Don't be silly! I scowl at him, my fragile ego wounded by his conviction that I must have been used and thrown away by a womanizer who got tired of me after a few hours. Everything is fine between us, I obstinately lie, as I can't tell him I've already broken it off in the worst way possible without divulging an episode of my past which I'm hiding from him as well. "He worships the ground I'm walking on without smothering me. It's a pity he can't cook, but no one is perfect, after all. The only snag of this is that Shortie and Stick hate me almost as much as I hate them. But since we're going to elope, anyway, I won't have to suffer their bullying for long."

Hearing myself talk about the ambitious plan so casually, I can almost make myself believe that it could have worked if I'd had the guts to try it out. I could have persuaded Seiya to hide our relationship from all his friends for years in the hope that my murky past would never catch up with me. Given time, the lie would have been forgotten and even the gravity of the offence would have expired. And for a moment I get lost in the world my own words have conjured up—that alternative universe in that other space-time dimension in which I was tough and unscrupulous enough to lie to the man I live with for a lifetime...

As I'm staring into space in an attempt to imagine a life with someone who would eat tiramisu at the crack of dawn and dance at three a.m. until hordes of reporters, paparazzi, and fans force him to flee via car/boat/bike, Kudo bends forward and gingerly touches my forehead with the back of his hand as if to check my temperature.

Something is seriously wrong with me today, he asserts, and it wouldn't surprise him if my painkillers had a few very nasty side effects we both aren't aware of.

If that's the case, he must be more affected by them than I am considering how much he gobbles every day, I retort. And if he dares to belittle my painkillers again, I'll take back the formula I've given him so that he can try to fight his next migraine attack with regular painkillers and find out how long it will take until he begs on his knees for either APAH or a loaded pistol or morphine.

The threat seems to have worked, as he only dares to utter a few unintelligible mumbled phrases
among which I can make out "your hard work" and "not intended to". Generously accepting it as an apology, I silently pour him water into his glass, which is the nicest gesture he can expect from me in my present mood.

In response, his face instantly lights up. And as he rapidly morphs from "repentant boyish Kudo Shinichi" to "smug unapologetic consulting detective," I suddenly perceive a certain similarity between him and Seiya or—to take this thought a step further — all the previous men in my life. I always fall in love with the unruly type that would destroy my hard-earned peace as if I were secretly seeking a counterpoint to my sense of order. Regrettably, one of the things my upbringing in the Organization didn't prepare me for was the fact that one needs a hobby to escape the traps of solitude.

"You didn't cry when you were shot multiple times or when you took the antidote." Kudo begins to swing his full water glass from one hand to the other, fidgeting as he always does whenever he begins to tackle a mystery. "Hence I can't buy the story that you've cried because of a migraine no matter how severe." He turns to me with narrowed eyes while I—unimpressed by his strict demeanour—quickly snatch the glass out of his hand for fear that he will get the idea to use it as replacement for a soccer ball. "No one cries when everything is perfect." His frown deepens. "And I don't think you're so unhappy just because you've been bullied by Taiki and Yaten. I really can't make head or tail of this! What has the jerk done to you?"

Nothing I didn't want him to, I think, feeling my face heating up at the memory, and hasten to assure my overprotective detective friend once again that no one has even tried to do anything to me. Look, my life is in a glorious mess right now, I admit, but since there's nothing you can do to help me, you should keep out of it...

"If the mess has a ponytail and sings, just stop seeing him and your headaches will stop immediately," Kudo suggests with a smirk while handing me ten APAH capsules for "the next migraine".

Why are you so spiteful to him, I sigh, putting the APAH capsules into the pocket of my dress, where they slip out of the hole and fall on the floor. One could almost get the impression that you're nurturing a personal grudge against him.

I've barely finished my sentence when I remember the case on my birthday two years ago, the mystery surrounding Kakyuu's death, which Kudo couldn't solve because Seiya flatly refused to cooperate.

Misa professes her love for you through Shakespeare sonnets, Seiya handed his middle brother the impassioned love letter, which—unbeknown to him—would later become the first clue to make me suspect that he was innocent.

Misa... That Misa? Yaten-san—"Shortie"—lifted his pretty head to peer over Stick's shoulder at the pale pink card, which the sophisticated recipient was reading with a frown. "How many letters has she already sent you since you gave her that private performance?"

Hundreds—over two thousand, was the muted reply. Despite Taiki-san's rejection, "Misa" writes him once or sometimes twice a day.

So she is really Misa-chan, the little girl who was so sick she couldn't watch our concerts? Turning to me, Seiya explained with a hint of sibling pride that Odango had told Taiki about the sickly girl and asked Taiki to visit Misa in hospital because Misa had expressed the wish to see her beloved idol once before she died. Long story short: Taiki secretly skipped a rehearsal to give the girl on the deathbed a private performance. And nobody would have learned about it if Odango hadn't
But it seems "Misa-chan's" sickness wasn't as serious as she claimed since she obviously didn't die afterwards, interjected Yaten-san. And here I thought girls only take advantage of Seiya because he always has too much sympathy for strangers. Pleased with himself for the jibe, he flipped his well-groomed silver ponytail and shot me a malicious grin showing off his pearly white fangs without knowing that, in my eyes, he closely resembled an aggressive, jealous kitten.

No, she was really sick, Taiki-san uneasily protested. She didn't feign it at all.

Ah, just accept her already so that she finally stops spamming. Shortie rolled his beautiful opal-green eyes. The silly girls. I trash all their letters in front of them and they'll tell me I'm adorable, just imagine!

"'Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come," I recite from memory.

"Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom."

Smiling at Kudo (who is now fully convinced that I've taken complete leave of my senses), I curiously ask, "What would you think of a woman who sends you such a poem?" I carefully omit the additional information that she also sends those love letters once to twice a day for eight years, as I'm not sure whether I want Kudo to reopen the old case or not.

That she's utterly besotted, Kudo says through gritted teeth, darting me an exasperated look. That she needs time and professional help to come to her senses and realize what a fool she's been!

"Don't tell me you're going to write him love poetry," he murmurs in disbelief.

"I'm flattered that you think so highly of my literary skills." I chuckle. "But those lines are actually Shakespeare's."

I think you need a rest! He eyes me warily. You're reciting Shakespeare now? This is unbelievable! He doesn't even try to conceal that he is positive I've been brainwashed. To Kudo's credit, however, he also doesn't have the heart to tell me that he believes my gentle smiling boyfriend is a murderer and thus belongs to the category of people he considers the lowest of the low. Instead, he picks up the APAH capsules for me, throws the gyoza box at the bar a look conveying his love-hate relationship with it, and exclaims with an expression of mild reproach, I'm absolutely ravenous, let's go out and grab something for lunch.

"But the gyoza—"

My half-hearted protest is cut off in mid-sentence as he leaps to his feet and reaches the bar in one stride to dump the gyoza box into the trash with a look of tremendous satisfaction.

"Since you said that Seiya can't cook, the gyoza must be from Taiki." Kudo stoically wipes his hands at a paper towel. "One should never eat the food prepared by people one can't stand."

He is really jealous, it hits me all of a sudden, although the whole concept of him feeling possessive of me is so preposterous that I would dismiss it at once if it weren't staring me in the face as I replay the scenes since my return from my overnight rendezvous. In response to my
Medusa-like stare, Kudo only smiles and hands me my cardigan, which he has just taken from the hook with the air of the husband who has just learned that his wife has finally found a nice babysitter for their three-year-old twin devils.

"Let's go to Furuhata's," he says. "My treat since I overslept our dinner." In a softer voice, he adds on the way to the corridor, "If everything is really fine between you two, you'll get to see him as often as you want from now on. Hence you might as well spend a few hours with me." He flashes me his most persuasive smile. "Come on!"

It has always been impossible for me to resist Kudo whenever he activates his suave, smooth-talking side. Hence I wordlessly accept the cardigan—all the while trying in vain to push away the memory of the other man who helped me into it less than three hours ago—and open the door for Kudo.

"I hope you'd have eaten the gyoza if they had been from him," I remark in a sharp voice as my nightly visitor passes me at the door.

"Why?" Kudo nervously rummages through the bottomless pockets of his leather jacket for his wallet and breathes a sigh of relief when he finds it. "I don't think he'd have given a hoot about whether I'd eaten them or not."

"But I do bloody well care," I insist, let the door fall shut, and descend the stairs without looking at him so that he won't be able to read my thoughts. "After all, I always had to eat the food your Rannee-chan prepared for me as well."
Who would have thought...

Who would have thought that I would run—run as if Vermouth was hard on my heels!—just to answer a call from a man I had dumped a few hours ago with the words "Don't write, don't call, and don't stalk me" because "I don't want this to turn into a case of fatal attraction"? But no sooner had I heard the barely audible ringing through the closed door of my apartment than I dashed upstairs, rammed the key into the keyhole, turned it until it gave an ominous sound signaling that something was going to break if I continued the mistreatment, and hastened to my bedroom to grab the receiver.

"Let's meet up for a chat and a cup of tea," said Tenoh-san's seductively husky voice. Kaioh-san was toiling away at twenty giant seascape oil paintings for her next show. And since it had become impossible for a non-artist to breathe in such an environment, Tenoh-san had returned to Tokyo to "catch up with old friends like you"...

Overcome with disappointment, I remembered that the person whose voice I had expected to hear doesn't have my number, that I'm not listed in the phone directory, and that—after such shabby treatment—no self-respecting man would even consider phoning me.

You could at least feign enthusiasm, Tenoh-san pouted. Although you pulled a fast one on me and deleted all my files, you could at least pretend to be touched by my gesture to renew acquaintance with you out of common courtesy.

Contrary to her words, she didn't sound offended. The magnificent Tenoh-sama, self-proclaimed ruler of heaven and earth, doesn't give a damn about fake politeness or common courtesy. She only teased me as she always did whenever she was in a good mood. And I wondered for the first time whether she disliked Seiya because of Kaioh-san as I had thought or whether they only clashed because they were too alike to abide each other.

"I'm so moved I can barely speak," I complied, whereupon she gave a small chuckle. Curiously enough, I realized I had missed the sound, the laugh of an acquaintance who, despite knowing what I'm capable of, still likes me enough to give me a call.

Hence I'm now perching on the edge of my bed, listening to Tenoh-san's "concise" summary of the last three years while a plan is forming in my mind, kindling a spark of hope which Tenoh-san, as I know her, is likely to snuff out soon.

"How's life?" she finally asks me after listing the hundred-forty-odd works Kaioh-san has finished during the past years (a proof that Tenoh-san feels neglected by her life partner and is proud of her at the same time). "Has your detective come to his senses and asked you out already?"

"No." I jump from the bed and proceed to the balcony to appease Kudo, who has just thrown a few pebbles at my window in revenge for abandoning him and locking him out of my apartment. "But other men have."

Five minutes! I sign to Kudo to wait for me in front of the gate. Five, or maybe ten. I wave a hand in a gesture of uncertainty when he ruffles his hair in exasperation.

"I'm sure they have," Tenoh-san gallantly says, misapprehending my statement. "Babies stopped crying whenever you smiled. If only that had happened more often!"
I've met someone." Since the roundabout way doesn't work, I have no choice but to spell it out for her.

"Great!" Tenoh-san sounds genuinely delighted. "Your detective will be so horrified he'll propose to you by the end of this month. Sometimes we can only appreciate what we had after it's gone."

"Ah, no." I frown at the receiver. It's not a fling, I inform her. "I'm... in love, so to speak. I have all these ups and downs." I distractedly poke at my pillow a few times before I give in and bury myself up to my chin under my blanket. "And the worst thing is, I feel like expressing them."

"Is it that bad?" Tenoh-san laughs. "Well, it must be if you feel like confiding in me."

"It has something to do with you, actually." I try to shake off the outrageous feeling that I'm recounting my story to a girlfriend like schoolgirls suffering from a hopeless crush usually do whereas, in reality, my talkativeness with her serves a specific purpose.

"Ah, koneko-chan, you know I'm already taken."

Knowing Tenoh-san's narcissism, I suspect this was only half a joke.

No, seriously, it's just like back then in Paris with the difference that I didn't even take the antidote this time. Kudo says I'm out of my mind... I thought you could help me out a bit...

Although my dramatic tone comes across as self-mocking as intended, my voice betrays my anxiety with a quiver, which Tenoh-san, alert as always, immediately detects.

"How can I help you?" she asks, stupefied, before it comes upon her in a flash of intuition: "Who is it?"

"He says he was always broke because you talked him into supporting your hare-brained schemes."

A moment of stunned silence passes until she lets out a frustrated sigh.

"There are only three men in Tokyo who are for you—under all circumstances!—off limits, and you managed to fall in love with one of them. At least this is unrequited love, I suppose. In this case, it's a blessing."

Unfortunately, it is requited, I admit, which makes it much harder for me to resist temptation.

"So that's what you meant when you said other men have proposed to you. Don't tell me you've seduced the clueless kid." Tenoh-san sounds incredulous.

I wince.

"Please, don't put it that way."

"I'll take that as a yes. That's extremely bad news... I gather he has told you everything?"

"He has, but it was already too late by then."

"It's never too late to break it off," she asserts. "Just invent a plausible reason and flee as fast as you can! People have been murdered for much smaller offences."

I have already fled, I tell her, one hand supporting my head and the other hand clutching the receiver. But now that it's over, I wonder whether I've done the right thing...
"You have," she reassures me. "Don't hold on to something which will never work out! This would have ended in tears, for all I know."

"How many people know about it?" I inquire, trying not to sound too eager although I'm about to snap.

"Not many," Tenoh-san coolly replies, having guessed my transparent intentions. "But even if I were the only one, I'd still prevent you from deceiving him."

Ironically, Tenoh-san seems to care about Seiya (whom she is supposed to "hate") much more than about me. Or is it only her frank nature which objects to lies and deceit in a romantic relationship?

"You're knee-deep in this yourself," I remind her. "You can't tell him anything."

Hope, no matter how frail, is hard to extinguish once it has been fanned. From Tenoh-san's answer, I surmise that only her closest allies (only Kaioh-san and Meioh-san?) know. Kaioh-san is an incurable romantic while Meioh-san generally keeps to herself and doesn't interfere with other people's private lives. Would Seiya gladly invite me in if I just turned up on the doorstep? Certainly he'd believe me to be the most fickle woman he has ever met. But the memories of last night and this morning would still be so fresh that he would give me a second chance instead of turning me away.

She can tell him the truth and she will, Tenoh-san assures me. Nothing can happen to her except that he would hate her—what he already does, anyway. "He is a decent guy even though he is perpetually stuck in adolescence. I won't let you wreck his life in such a spectacular fashion!"

"It's ironic that you're so protective of him," I observe with bitterness. "You almost behave as if you're only a good friend who doesn't have anything to do with it."

What she did, Tenoh-san claims, is not to be taken personally. Apart from that, Seiya and she are only acquaintances and colleagues. But what I'm about to do is totally wrong because one devotes a lot of time and energy to a committed couple relationship, and it would be really low of me to deceive him as I obviously plan to do.

"I'm not asking you for your permission." I reluctantly kick off the blanket, arduously push myself into a sitting position, and slip into my sandals. "And I think I can make do without your approval."

"But you want me to look away and keep my mouth shut," she returns, "which is exactly what I'm not going to do."

As I feared, Tenoh-san is unstoppable whenever she is in her self-righteous mood. One of her few great faults is her missionary zeal for her conviction about what is "right" even if she had to step on her best friends' corpses on her way. Michiru and she had made an agreement, she once told me eight years ago when she pestered me about the key to Pandora's Box. If either of them fell behind for some reason, the other one should focus on the greater cause and move on.

"Why can't you let it rest?" I snap, hurling the pebbles on the balcony back at Kudo, who has begun to harass me with them again. "It's over now and he doesn't need to know anything about it. I'm sure we'd be deliriously happy if it weren't for this... coincidence." This twist of fate, I would have said, if I didn't deny the concept of fate in general.

Because you can't ever be happy with each other considering the circumstances, Tenoh-san gently explains. Because it doesn't matter what it could have been if it's not meant to be. We all have to live with the consequences of our actions. I'm going to put an end to it for you if you can't do it...
yourself. But it's better for all of us if you don't force me to burst his bubble.

Just let go of it, she advises me with the chilling cruelty of a despot who is firmly convinced that she is in the right. He will keep fond memories of you if you stay out of his life from now on. You, too, will eventually get over it. It will only hurt for a short while.
Part 11: After accepting...

After accepting Tenoh-san's invitation to lunch with her in Tsukino-san's café on Sunday, I settle on a bar stool to stare at my lavender rose with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the knowledge that Tenoh-san is probably the only person who could leak my secret to Seiya has given me a glimmer of hope. On the other hand, I know from past experiences that Tenoh-san's obstinacy is an impregnable fortress in every sense of the word. For better or worse, Tenoh Haruka always keeps her promises and carries out her threats. And I don't doubt for a moment that she would selflessly incriminate herself to separate Seiya and me for good if she deems it necessary.

If I were the devil-may-care type, I would simply elope with my "stranger at twilight" in the hope that Tenoh-san values our tentative on-again, off-again friendship so much that she will cast her moral objections to the wind and keep her mouth shut. However, I know very well that there is no place where I could hide him from her if she wanted to find us. False hope, unleashed by Tenoh-san's call, only prolongs the torture by making the situation bearable enough for me not to give up. And if I'm honest to myself, I know Tenoh-san was right when she told me that I can't ever have a future with Seiya with or without her approval.

Even if Tenoh-san didn't disclose my—and her—secret to him, I would never manage to forget. After a few years, the mounting pressure would become so enormous that it would ultimately ruin everything we have built up together until then. I would either distance myself from him or confess... Or I could step back now and let go in the hope that this, too, will pass...

Peeking through the balcony door into the garden in search of Kudo, I discover that he has miraculously disappeared. After giving up attracting my attention with his pebbles, he must have embarked on a Juuban exploration all by himself or been abducted by my infatuated landlady.

Contrary to my expectations, neither Kudo nor my landlady are on the stairs or at the main entrance when I leave my apartment. Further inspection also shows that Kudo is nowhere to be found, neither in front of Furuhata's bar nor on the side streets in the vicinity. Unable to wait for me for a few minutes despite letting me wait for hours, he must have run off to solve a new case or (and this is a horror scenario I don't even want to think of!) to interrogate Seiya...

On the way back home I'm struck by the startlingly brilliant sunlight. The midday sun is blazing down and the air is fresh and damp after the torrential rain. Cherry blossoms, azaleas, and spring roses of various colours are all blooming, as spring has come earlier than expected. In view of the splendour around me, the realization hits me that it is most comforting to see how the outside world keeps moving no matter what happens to myself. In a way, it's liberating to know that I'm not really needed and that no one depends on me so much that my absence would make a damaging impact on their life. Well, no one but my unfortunate "guinea pig" Kudo.

Just when I decide to go home and wait for Kudo in my apartment, I spot him at the gate to the garden. Apparently, he has really been abducted by my landlady, as he is now coming towards me with a gloomy expression on his face and his new admirer in tow. Beaming with pleasure like the sun through the white clouds, she is obviously so taken with him that I'm positive I can kiss my peace goodbye for now. Back then when Kaito visited me every night in succession for two weeks, he had to use disguises and enter my apartment through the balcony because the busybody had been watching the entrance to the house like a hawk.

"Your detective has just solved a case for me," she announces. She had been "terribly distraught"
because she had the feeling someone had entered her apartment last night, a suspicion her husband brushed off as baseless paranoia. It has turned out that the mysterious visitor was her daughter Reika, who had suddenly returned from Egypt without writing her parents in advance (and who had to ransack her parents’ first aid kit in the middle of the night because she had hurt her foot and needed a plaster). The young archaeologist had been sleeping in her apartment on the third floor when Kudo and her parents rang her out of bed and is now taking a shower to freshen up after ten hours of flying.

"She only came back to see her beloved Motoki and will only stay for a few days," my landlady sighs. The girl is so restless it's impossible to keep her in the same city for longer than a month if there is no dig or important archaeological finds for her to study! But she can't stay away from Tokyo for long either since she would miss her long-distance boyfriend. The two of them have been dating for almost ten years in this haphazard fashion.

A serious relationship between two people who are essentially opposites and therefore incompatible is the perfect recipe for an unhappy life, my landlady claims. Emotionally unstable women like Reika sell themselves short in impossible romantic relationships with men they find attractive while smart women choose a partner who is more suitable for them... "You said you were starving. Let's go out for lunch!" I impatiently cut her off by dragging Kudo by his arm with me. Wishing my landlady a nice day with her husband and daughter, I flee with Kudo in the direction of Furuhata's bar and only let go of him when we're standing in front of the Crown, the game centre on the first floor of the large house where Furuhata's bar and his sister's coffee shop are located.

"Great, we've shaken her off," I observe in satisfaction.

"We have." He throws me a disapproving look. "But she only tried to be nice. What's wrong with you?"

Everything is wrong with me today! What's wrong with you, I'd have liked to retort. But since it's useless to argue with him, I decide to ignore his question and wordlessly open the door to the game centre.

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Furuhata's bar is already full when we arrive although we manage to get a table for two near the window in the left corner of the room—the only table which hasn't been reserved in advance. No sooner did Furuhata Motoki-san see us than he rushes to my side with the menus, replaces the single pink rose on our table with a red one, and lights us a scented candle.

Where have you been? Why did it take you so long to return? It's good to see you again! You've become even more beautiful in the meantime. By the way, I sometimes see you on your way home when I visit an old friend of mine, Chiba Mamoru, a neighbour of yours...

Turning his blonde head towards Kudo, he exclaims, "As I can see, you two are still inseparable! It's good to see you, too!"

"Do we really look that alike?" Kudo asks me after Furuhata has left.

"Except for your hair, you two could be twins or even the same person."

"Did you mistake him for me?" he asks, belligerently.

I look up from the menu to show him a raised eyebrow.
"If that had been the case, I wouldn't have gone out with him."

"I thought so!" He nonchalantly shrugs. "Your taste in men has always been atrocious!"

"That's true since they're all as reckless and as arrogant as you," I quip, and we laugh at each other for the first time since I cried into his shirt.

The food is absolutely delicious, as expected. But despite the excellent weather, comfortable chairs, pleasant surroundings, good company, and the first-rate service from Furuhata-san, it's almost impossible for me to swallow anything. I'm not hungry at all and don't even crave sweets. Since my thoughts are running around in circles (How can I return to Seiya under these circumstances?), I try to distract myself from the constant anxiety by checking messages and mails on my phone.

"Aren't you hungry?" Kudo, who is also only poking his rice and fish with his chopsticks, asks. "Or would you like to order something else?"

"I'm still full from the gyoza," I tell him truthfully and earn a dark look in reply. He hasn't forgiven me for having breakfast without him yet. And I'm growing tired of his sullen mood, as I can't understand either his jealousy or his resentment against Seiya.

Ayumi-chan has sent me a detailed account of their school trip while Tsuburaya-kun has taken a whole photo gallery's worth of shots for me. Childhood crushes can be troublesome when they outlive their estimated longevity by years. And Tsuburaya-kun's love for me, which I once found flattering and adorable, has become another headache-inducing issue.

"Mail from Mitsuhiko?" Kudo asks with a knowing grin. I don't know how he has deduced that again. Perhaps Seiya was right when he claimed that my face is an open book whenever I'm not making an effort to hide my thoughts.

"Yes, photos from their school trip."

"How often does he write to you?"

"A few times a month," I lie. In reality, Tsuburara-kun writes to me almost every day even though I only answer his mails once a week.

"I think you should put a stop to this before he learns about your new boyfriend." Kudo puts his chopsticks aside.

And how, does he suggest, should I do it without hurting the poor boy, I ask him. Knowing the woes of unrequited love and rejection at first hand, it's hard for me to inflict the same pain on another person. It's one thing not to call back the obnoxious men who try to pick me up at the cafeteria of the university. It's another thing not to reply to the mails of a perfectly nice boy who has been nurturing a crush on me for years.

"He is almost fourteen. In one or two years, he won't be a 'poor boy' anymore," Kudo points out. The age gap is only turning smaller in Tsuburaya-kun's perception as he grows up. In fact, in a few years an age gap of ten years won't be an issue anymore.

Naturally, the age gap won't be an issue for me either since Gin was considerably older than me. But the problem with love is that it cannot be forced. While I like the boy and would have thought him to be a great boyfriend for anyone else, the very idea of dating him is for me unimaginable.
"Some unrequited loves can last for life. Thirteen is also a difficult age. If you don't discourage him before he finds out about Seiya, he will think that you've been leading him on."

I can remember Taiki Kou's face when he read the sonnet. The expression of sympathy, guilt, and apprehension on it immediately intrigued me. He must have replied to her letters at first without knowing what he had brought upon himself. Being loved too ardently can be a never-ending curse—especially when one is adored by the wrong type of person.

Love can show its vicious face when it's obsessive and unfulfilled or unrequited. It carelessly wrecks lives and breaks the toughest people more often than it elevates them. Few people manage to step aside gracefully when their feelings are not returned. In the most extreme cases, rejected lovers end up committing suicide or murder.

"Some women can't stay away from their smartphones even when they're on a date," I hear the voice of the tall man at the table on my right saying, whereupon his companion, an attractive lady with long nails, cheekily remarks, "I wouldn't be staring into my phone if I were dating him." And together they launch into a discourse on internet addiction and relationship-wrecking mobile phones, much to Kudo's enjoyment and my exasperation.

"Just my luck!" I remark. "I almost never use my phone and the first time I use it in years, I have to draw the attention of technophobic hypocrites aka Mr and Mrs Know-It-All."

"You usually don't use your phone." Kudo presses his fingertips together and gives me his Sherlock-Holmes gaze. "So why are you so attached to it now? Don't tell me you're messaging or googling him during our lunch!"

No, I glare at him, omitting the fact that I have to fight the urge to google Seiya and save his photos. I've just answered Ayumi-chan's mail ("I miss you all, too"—an uncommonly sentimental message from cynical yours truly, which will seem to her like the end of the world) and am now reading the background story to Shakespeare's Sonnets to extend my literary education.

Why are you so obsessed with the sonnets? Has he been reciting sonnets for you, Kudo sighs in annoyance.

"Just shut up and listen!" I give him a stern gaze.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*

*Admit impediments. Love is not love*

*Which alters when it alteration finds,*

*Or bends with the remover to remove:*

*O no! it is an ever-fixed mark*

*That looks on tempests and is never shaken;*

*It is the star to every wandering bark,*

*Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.*

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks*

*Within his bending sickle's compass come:*
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
"What do these lines mean?" I wonder.

An idealistic depiction of love in its purest sense, Kudo analyzes, his colour deepening with embarrassment. Eternal, boundless, indestructible despite the passing of time and even the betrayal of the unfaithful lover.

"Impressive," he dryly comments. "He dares to woo you with eternal love although you two have known each other for less than a day."

But is the sonnet really a candid and straightforward declaration of everlasting love? Or is it rather a spiteful jibe against a rival whose love can't be called love according to this poem? Is it a reproach addressed to an unfaithful lover or an accusation, a desperate rebellion against all the forces which prevent love from resembling this idealized image? Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets as a sonnet sequence portraying a tumultuous and destructive love triangle, the passionate and persuasive tone of Sonnet 116 turns against itself and refutes its own claim...

While I don't really care about what Shakespeare thought when he wrote the sonnet, I'm curious about what Misa thought when she sent it to Stick, her worshipped and idolized Taiki-sama.

I try to imagine her… A sickly girl, pale and skinny, with large soulful eyes that light up feverishly whenever she talks about Taiki-sama, literature, or music. Sophisticated, smart, hard-working, and stubborn, frequently torn between intense love and consuming hatred—hiding a passionate nature one would never expect after seeing her quiet, unobtrusive demeanour. She only met Taiki Kou once but overcame her supposed terminal illness after he came to her hospital room and sang for her alone (did she know that it was Odango's suggestion?)—a nice gesture, which was also grand because he didn't only sacrifice his precious free time for her but also did it in secret. After that seemingly fateful encounter with her beloved star, she worked hard and (despite her frail health) got an internship in a renowned little private hospital.

The same where Kakyuu was being treated.

She must have been watching them in secret. The three brothers who always came at least once or twice a month to pay a visit to the comatose sister. Some day, while she overheard them talking, she realized that they weren't blood-related and that their feelings weren't exactly the sibling love brothers usually felt for their sisters. She also found out that Yaten Kou and Taiki-sama both loved Kakyuu, who more or less dated all the three brothers (platonically, non-platonically?) while sharing an apartment with Seiya…

An outrageous arrangement, which must have been unacceptable in the eyes of a girl who has dedicated her life to the goal of conquering the one man she adored. Taiki-sama, who visited Kakyuu almost every week to read her poems, seldom replied to Misa's letters and probably didn't even recognize Misa at first when he saw her again. He only remembered who she was after she had told him...

Kakyuu, as I remember her, looked like the ideal princess who, like Kaioh Michiru, seemed to possess everything—health, intelligence, beauty, humour, and grace. In Misa's eyes, Kakyuu must
have been the expensive, luxuriously beautiful type of girl that would always take everything she wanted without giving anything in return. And this spoiled woman had been leading Taiki-sama on, breaking his heart by living with his youngest brother, whom he had such a close relationship with, while keeping Taiki-sama at arm's length for intellectual companionship!

But why am I so mistrustful of a girl I've never met? Just because she was obsessively in love didn't mean that she was hateful and violent. Perhaps the truth was completely different, and Misa belonged to the few people who rose above their passions and who would never even think of hurting the object of their affection.

"What are you thinking of?" asks Kudo.

For a moment, I wonder whether I should tell him the truth.

"Your case two years ago, which you didn't finish because he threw you out of his apartment," I tell him bluntly. While I don't want Kudo to reopen the case, I'm eager to find out what really happened.

"So he has told you about it?" Kudo pushes the fish between us away to bend towards me and almost flings the bowl of soup onto the floor in his excitement. "What did he say?"

"Not much! He only said he was once a suspect of yours and asked me if I was afraid of him, which I wasn't."

"The puzzling guy is as secretive as always," Kudo groans. But if I can find out why Seiya didn't confess his guilt, he would be glad if I let him know.

"Maybe he didn't confess because he was innocent," I reflect and immediately regret saying it aloud. Knowing Kudo, he is going to reopen the case now and not rest until he has brought it to a satisfying conclusion.

"I said I didn't have time to solve such an unimportant case but I just realized that I do have a bit of free time today." Kudo swiftly pulls a battered notebook out of his pocket. "Let's solve the case together if you're privy to information I don't have."

I don't know anything I can tell him about, I lie. But I'd like to hear about the particulars of the case if he doesn't mind.

There isn't much to tell, Kudo sighs. Someone disabled the life support system so that Kakyuu died in her sleep. Ishihara Misako, the young intern whose task was watching over Kakyuu, discovered the dead woman in the late afternoon when she checked on her for the last time before leaving the hospital.

On the same day after lunch time, Kaito paid the hospital a visit to inquire about Seiya's whereabouts, as the latter, who is usually punctual, had asked him to meet up with him in the Crown game centre but didn't turn up at all. Kaito visited Kakyuu but only stayed for a few minutes before he left to help Hakuba renovate his new apartment. Kakyuu was still alive after he left, according to Mizuno-san's witness statement. Five minutes after he left, Yaten Kou, who had been chatting with Kaito about Seiya, entered Kakyuu's hospital room and stayed there for half an hour. Afterwards Yaten Kou spent the rest of the afternoon at the hairdresser's and then went home to practice the guitar. Meanwhile, Taiki Kou, who had spent the whole morning at the computer to take care of his and his brothers' finances, visited his sister about half an hour after Yaten Kou left. He, too, stayed for about half an hour, rearranged the flowers in Kakyuu's room, read her poetry in the hope that she could hear him, and left at two p.m. to go to the library and borrow all the
available editions of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. This was quite normal for him, so Mizuno-san told Kudo. Her daughter Ami, who was a friend of Taiki Kou's, said that the well-read idol liked English and French poetry and had also begun to write sonnets in Italian.

Just when Taiki Kou left, Seiya appeared and visited Kakyuu with a pot of cyclamen. This was unusual, as he never brought her potted flowers. It was also unusual that he stayed for half an hour, then went out just to return again. In fact, he visited her three times in a row and appeared to all the witnesses distracted and mournful.

He also asked Mizuno-san once again whether she was sure that Kakyuu would be severely impaired after waking up. Being a professional who couldn't give the relatives of her patients false hopes, Mizuno-san told him what ten other doctors had already told him before: that once certain organs and all the important parts of the cerebral cortex had been damaged beyond repair, it was almost impossible to regain the functions associated with them…

"Is everything all right with you?" Kudo breaks off his story to study me with concern. "You're very pale."

"I'm all right. Just horrified by the life she would have led if she had survived. So what happened next?"

Seiya left for the third time at four fifteen p.m., half an hour before Misako-san's shift ended. At half past four, when she checked on Kakyuu for the last time, she noticed that the life support system had been unplugged and the alarm system had been tempered with. Kakyuu couldn't be revived despite Mizuno-san's attempts. There were no fingerprints on the equipments at all.

"It could have been any of the three brothers or even Misako-san," I point out. Even though I feel bad for her, she is my number-one suspect after reading her love letter.

"Exactly," Kudo agrees. However, Misako-san didn't have a motive. She had already been caring for Kakyuu for half a year and was looking forward to a permanent, well-paid job, so she was more interested in preserving the hospital's good reputation. She was also a fan of Three Lights and was proud of caring for their foster sister, whom normal fans didn't know about.

Igarashi Shizuka, Three Lights' agent, fought "with the ferocity of a hungry wolverine" (Kudo loves absurd similes) for her protégés. And the case was closed due to the lack of conclusive evidence and the lack of witnesses, who were all fans of Three Lights and wholeheartedly supported euthanasia in secret when it was committed by their gorgeous Seiya-sama. Since it was obvious that Seiya must have been the culprit but the tiny probability that it was Yaten, Taiki, or Misako-san did exist, Kudo decided to pay Seiya a visit.

Seiya was in a singularly dark mood when Kudo arrived. Nevertheless, he confirmed Kudo's theory that Kakyuu was still alive when he visited her. After hearing Kudo's analysis of the case and Kudo's conclusion, however, he only ushered him out of his apartment without a word about the case. Thus Kudo left and planned to return on the next day, after Seiya had slept on it.

"And then you gave up because Mizuno-san withdrew her assistance and you came across more urgent cases... But what was the detail she didn't tell the police but you?" It seems to me that Kudo has (surprisingly!) jumped to conclusions by pronouncing Seiya the culprit while Shortie and Stick could have pulled the plug as well.

"She liked Seiya very much and wanted to check whether he was all right after their talk since he hadn't shown much emotion, which was uncharacteristic of him." Kudo thoughtlessly balances a spoon on the back of his hand for lack of a ball. "When she opened the door, she saw him sitting at
the bed with a handkerchief in his hand. At first she thought he had been crying so that she left the
room immediately to give him his privacy. But since there were no fingerprints on the life support
machine, as she learned afterwards, she naturally inferred that he must have wiped them away."

"You have no evidence that he did it," I insist.

"None at all, which is why I gave up the case," Kudo admits. "One can't solve a case without
sufficient evidence. But if you look at the whole picture, he was the most suspicious. His silence
was a tacit admission as well. He didn't even try to deny it when I confronted him."

"Perhaps he only tried to protect one of his brothers."

"Very unlikely." Kudo puts the spoon aside and leans back in his chair. "Mizuno-san claimed that
she couldn't remember. But I think she would have noticed if Kakyuu-san had been dead when she
opened the door to check on Seiya. Even so, I knew that it was a lost case. And since I thought it
wasn't necessary to lock him away, I decided not to waste my time with him and work on other
cases instead."

As always, it's hard to argue against Kudo's perfectly sound reasoning, and I've already decided to
change the topic when he sneakily adds, "Unless you've found out something interesting at his
place, I'll stick to my theory that he was guilty."

He is eyeing me with the alertness of an eagle watching its prey before an attack. And it takes me
all my self-control to feign boredom.

No, nothing, I assure him. Seiya didn't talk about the case, and I didn't want to remind him of it
because he was very attached to Kakyuu.

"Not attached enough to let her live," Kudo coolly concludes. "To be honest, I wouldn't have
known how to tell you about the case if he hadn't mentioned it himself."

"But even if he was the culprit, I could understand his reasons perfectly well. You could
sympathize with him, too. You said it yourself."

"I can understand his train of thought, which doesn't mean that I can condone what he has done. If
you had been in her situation—"

"I would have wanted him to pull the plug for me." I arduously sip at my drink, frowning. "That's
not living, Kudo! It's worse than death for most people who aren't geniuses of your caliber."

"I wouldn't have been able to do it," he continues, ignoring my interjection. "I would never have
ended your life like that. I would never have given up hope! Instead, I'd have done anything to
make your future bearable."

Oddly enough, his self-righteous speech sounds like a love declaration owing to the intensity in his
voice and his eyes. And I would have dwelled on the thought for a little longer if his next remark
didn't enrage me.

Did you know that he loved her? They weren't blood-related. They had been living with each other
although it was hushed up by his agent. He is not someone you can rely on…

"Of course it's your personal decision—but a man who can pull the plug to his girlfriend's life
support system can't be trusted!"

"I suppose that men who take back their proposal only minutes after they made it are more
trustworthy," I rejoin with irony while he visibly flinches.

That was something totally different—his voice is shaking with suppressed anger. I accepted that it was impossible because you never committed! You never even said yes, if I remember correctly. I never knew what to think about your unexplainable actions, and then you stabbed me in the back the moment I depended on you!

I thought we were partners. I trusted you completely. But you… You've misused my trust and betrayed me!
If I…

"If I hadn't betrayed you back then, you'd be dead by now."

A different answer to the same accusation he threw at me three years ago. Or was it the same answer only in other words? For a split second, time seems to have stopped as I'm catapulted back to Pandora's Box. I can feel the wind changing as the masses of black clouds are scudding towards the ship, obscuring the stars above like a funeral veil. The scene has been indelibly imprinted on my mind as if it was an intriguing pattern Kaioh-san has expertly engraved on an intaglio plate. But while the sensations have all been preserved intact, the emotions which once choked me are gone. I can watch the whole episode as if I were watching a movie, with the same amount of emotional involvement and distance. While it's possible for me to care about two people at once, it's impossible for me to equally distribute my capacity of suffering to both of them. Now that my broken relationship with Seiya has left me with the feeling of being run over by Tenoh-san's Ferrari and then by Gin's Porsche hard on Tenoh-san's heels and then by Tenoh-san's car again, it has become impossible for me to agonize over Pandora's Box or Kudo's imminent departure as much as I'm mourning my recent loss. Therefore I'm watching almost curiously the young woman, who is now leaning over the ship's rail—how she frantically tries to rip open the lid of the box, whose mechanism has been (pathetically!) rendered useless by the locket pendant stuck in the damned container…

If only she hadn't been so fatuously sentimental and had simply sacrificed the replaceable piece of jewellery in time before he arrived, the movie would have ended differently. And in an alternative timeline—in a remake, spin-off, fan work—they might be lunching together in another restaurant (probably that smart restaurant where he intended to propose to Ran), bickering over who should do the laundry and who should do the washing-up (not the cooking, which she always does since he can't cook without poisoning her).

Finally—much too late, as he has already stepped on the deck—she decides to separate the necklace from the pendant even though she still hesitates to throw it away.

What are you doing? he asks. And at the remembrance of those four innocuous words which preceded the break between us, my wall of detachment crumbles, Pandora's Box slips out of my hands, and the present—represented by the once steaming and now cold fish and soup on the table—seems to fade away, making way for the unrelenting past…

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"What are you doing?" asks Kudo's inquiring voice.

Startled by his appearance and another jerky movement of the ship, you let go of both the necklace and the deactivated Pandora's Box, which is now only a harmless little laptop after all the files on its hard drive are gone.

The answer to his own question dawns on Kudo only a second after the box slipped out of your hands. And he instantly rushes to your side to stare into the waves, bending over as if he seriously considers throwing himself over the rail.

"It's no use jumping after it unless you're itching for a nocturnal swim. I've erased all the data and
reformatted the disk."

It's elementary, really. Your plan would have been perfect if you had been less sentimental and more determined. No sooner had you touched the blinking Delete button than Pandora's Box erased the files, disconnected itself from the Organization's cloud, and reformatted the disk without any complications. When you rose from the floor and noticed that your locket pendant was stuck between the laptop and the box covering it, you weren't alarmed by the small inconvenience even though you knew you would have to take off the necklace to get it out. In a run of bad luck, the blasted lid of the box snapped shut when you kneeled down to remove the chain from your neck. Freeing the pendant from the box seemed a sheer impossible task. And since you could already hear Kudo's eager steps, you didn't have time to continue trying.

Since Kudo had been going through the piles of papers in the cabin—all of them disposable rubbish just like the files in the main computer—and Hattori had been patrolling the decks, you had decided to use the moment they switched (the short timespan when Hattori left the deck and Kudo walked down to the galley where you were crouching) to rush to the ship's rail unnoticed so that you could get rid of the real Pandora's Box without being seen. If you hadn't clung to the necklace, Kudo might never have found out; and you had to stifle the hysterical laughter stuck in your throat when the thought hit you that, if only he had arrived a few seconds later, he would be repeating his impromptu proposal on the phone to you now instead of staring at you in detached abstraction.

"What have you done?" he only asks, staring at you as if he had just discovered that you're a perfect stranger to him.

"Decluttering." You smirk, helpless at the sight of his incredulous gaze and his white knuckles against the black rail. "Now that the Organization is down and we have all the files on the codename members as you wanted, there is no need to open Pandora's Box anymore. You can let go of it now and return to your Ran-nee-chan as planned. Aren't you thankful that I've just rescued you from a lifelong mission?"

He freezes for an instant and then turns away from you to gaze into the waves, lost in thought until he faces you with the silent and unwavering resolution you could observe during all of his cases before he delivers his final blow.

"This," he points his accusing index finger at the waves, "was the chance of a lifetime!" He scrutinizes your face, eerily calm and smouldering with fury until he proceeds in a voice as cold as his glacier-blue eyes. "You've just destroyed it. Why?"

"Security." You give him a flippant smile. "Security and peace! It doesn't matter much to you, with your over-developed sense of justice—but it matters to me. It would never have stopped if we had continued this."

"We were a team, dammit!" he snaps. "You should have told me all about this beforehand. We could have backed up all the files without anyone knowing."

"We couldn't. All of our particulars have been sent to the cloud the moment we opened the door to Pandora's Box." You pause, shivering at the memory of Gin's smile, which is still haunting you. "Or do you really believe that we could have got past the Night Baron and hacked into the account of admin?"

He would have found a way to deal with it if only you had told him about it in advance, he insists. "We had so much help from everyone, Hakuba, Kaitou Kid, M Jean Black, the FBI and the CIA, even from people inside the Organization."
"The CIA and the FBI!" You give a dry laugh. "You mean we three had to sneak to Pandora's Box in the middle of the night, hide our location from the FBI, distract our enemies and allies alike with the help of the British detective and Kaitou Kid, steal the most important files, and let this ship explode before informing our trusted allies because we know we can depend on them?"

"Have you read the files before deleting them?" Kudo asks, alarmed. Perhaps he has realized the gravity of the situation at last.

"No, I'm not that tired of living. I've only erased the data during the countdown. You can rest assured that it's over now."

For a while, he is quiet again, watching you wordlessly while the wind picks up and lashes the falling rain against your faces. Lightning flashes in the sky, followed by a crash of thunder announcing an approaching storm.

"I knew there must be another Pandora's Box apart from the cabin. But I didn't expect that you were the one who hid it from me."

As a matter of course, he has noticed that the files in the main computer seemed oddly incomplete: as if someone had filtered out the most important information and hidden it somewhere. The files on you, for example, contained your education at Infinity, your grades, your status as a leading researcher, and even your long-time relationship with Gin but neglected to mention APTX and your parents' research. Moreover, all of the Organization's victims and affiliates (small firm bosses, lawyers, hit men, local drug traffickers and weapon dealers) seemed rather insignificant compared to what he would have expected from a syndicate with such ambitious goals as eternity. And even though he could find the files on all codename members in the captain's cabin, the files on the most important members like Vermouth and Gin appeared to him rather sketchy at best. He was sure that there must be another Pandora's Box on the ship but didn't tell you about it because he didn't want you to worry.

"The real Pandora's Box… So many lives have been sacrificed for it," he coolly reflects. "Three generations of ceaseless fighting! And you simply threw it away like that. I can't make out what's been going on in your head."

"It's ironic, isn't it?" you raise your voice, as the sound of the storm looming on the horizon has begun to drown your conversation. "So many people have died for something a little traitor like me could delete in a few seconds. And I only got the key because Gin was drunk and in love. Three generations' worth of work destroyed by a bottle of sherry and a few nasty hormones! Thinking about it, I almost feel like laughing."

Contrary to your words, laughing is the last thing you want to do despite the smirk pasted on your lips. Gin once loved you and you might have loved him. But things must have gone awry at some point although you can't pinpoint the moment it happened. Before Akemi-nee-san's death, before the handcuffs and the cigarette butts, even before the complaints, accusations, and jealousy, something must have happened which drove a wedge between Gin and Sherry.

"Why did you do it?" Kudo asks again.

"To keep you safe," you could have said, but it seemed horribly wrong to say it at this moment.

"I wanted this to stop since I don't believe that three people can fight against the world and win. You're mad at me because now you're never going to find out the truth. But is the truth really worth it if it's unpalatable? A lot of people are going to celebrate their freedom tonight after receiving the message that Pandora's Box has ceased to exist. Just think of the ones who were born
into circumstances which forced them to live as sharks and not dolphins—people who can finally live in peace and start anew. Justice isn't such a grand thing for the people whose lives will be ruined by it. I suppose I did it for all the people who aren't heroes. People who are more like me and less like you."

Strangely enough, your thoughts are drifting to the red-headed girl you haven't seen for years, to her and the seventh crow, who is just as much of a loyal member as you. What is he thinking now that he has finally gained his freedom five years after he attempted to steal a back-up? He might be jumping on his monster of a motorbike at this moment, racing through the dimly lit streets to break the wonderful news to her.

What about the victims? Kudo's sharp voice cuts through the sounds of the sea and the rain. People like your sister?

He hasn't brought up her name in years, and you're surprised to discover that he is still thinking of her.

"Let the dead rest in peace! Life is for the living, isn't it?"

Realizing that you've said something inexcusably banal and seeing the anger rising in his eyes, you admit in an attempt to defuse the crisis, "I know I wasn't fair to the victims."

What is "fair", after all? Akemi-nee-san, who had never deliberately inflicted pain on others, bled to death while Gin, who had killed more people than he could remember, died while you—out of nostalgia, pity, remorse?—were holding his hand. But has life ever been fair? What did six-year-old Gin do to deserve the childhood he had? A past so unbearably cruel that it turned a normal child into Anokata's most loyal crow?

"Life is never fair," you continue since Kudo doesn't bother to say anything in reply. "In life, security is what matters in the end." Managing an ironic smile, you add in a parody of an old gender stereotype, "Just try to look at it from the standpoint of a woman."

"Security?" he only echoes, missing the joke completely or choosing to ignore it—you will never know. "I'm a detective, dammit! If I'd wanted security, I'd have chosen another occupation to begin with!"

"Well, then try to look at it from the standpoint of a criminal like me," you suggest, "although that's probably even more of a challenge for someone as pure and principled as you."

Criminals like you? His lips tremble into a smile before he suddenly bursts into laughter, bitter and dry, a sound unfamiliar to your ears. "How on earth did you get the idea that other criminals are like you? I know so many corrupt judges who can kill legally during the day and sleep well at night, sick psychopaths who will torture their victims over and over again until they die, serial killers who wouldn't even stop at toddlers and elderly people—and I really don't care that the culprits might be mentally disturbed and can't control themselves. Why should I?"

You've seen him angry more than once. But never has he been so beside himself as he is now. Just as he didn't know what Pandora's Box meant to you, you didn't expect that he would crack under the disappointment like this. You knew that he wanted Pandora's Box so much that he would never have been able to resist, but you couldn't imagine that it was so important to him that he would go to pieces after losing it.

"I want all of them locked up in jail or in a mental institution so that people like you, the Professor, and the Detective Boys can live in peace!" He slams his fist on the rail. "What's so hard to
You shrink inwardly from the undisguised loathing in his voice, all the while remembering how it sounded on the phone only a few minutes ago.

"How come you didn't think of all the innocent people we could have saved? All the scapegoats who have been wrongly convicted of crimes they didn't commit because the Organization faked the evidence, bribed the judges, and silenced the witnesses. What about the family members and friends of the victims whose murderers have never been found, whose lives will never be the same again? And all the victims whose lives have been ruined? What about them?"

The anger in his eyes slowly die down, displaced by an expression you've never seen before. For years, his eyes have fascinated you with their extraordinary brilliance and intensity—and you can't remember seeing them so desolated and empty, the expression of someone who has been betrayed by the person they loved.

"I trusted you!" He grabs you by your arms, pinning you against the rail. This time, his voice sounds slightly different, and you suspect that he is crying even though you can't see much in your present mental state. The moistness might as well be the rain.

"After deleting the files on you, I thought that it was over, that we could finally be partners, you and me. I had been looking forward to all the cases we could solve together. I trusted you blindly. But you know what? I've realized that it was a case of blind love, and an unrequited one on top of that. You've never taken it seriously right from the start!"

I can't remember what happened directly afterwards. All the things he flung at me in his rage can be condensed into a few sentences—none of which were more hurtful than what he had already said before. The next thing I can remember is the laughable freak accident. In retrospect, it was a miracle that he hadn't gone overboard as well even though we were idiotic enough to fight on the deck during the storm.

You and I, we two don't match. We have so different values that we might as well belong to different galaxies. I wish we had never met!

Drama always seems redundant and ridiculous on reflection—but while it unfolds, it feels like an unstoppable natural force. He tightened his grab at me—or rather at her since this memory has become impersonal as it retreated into the past—hurting her so much that she winced in pain. Finally registering that he was digging his nails into her injury, he quickly let go of her arms. A sudden movement of the ship threw her off balance. Out of reflex, he caught her, holding her for a moment. But directly afterwards, he shuddered and pushed her away as if he had been burned.

Simultaneously, an enormous wave threatened to overturn the ship, and she felt the floor slipping away from her feet while a second wave washed her against the ship's rail. Another wave transported her almost gently overboard until she felt the air beneath her and became aware that she was going to die in less than a minute. Instinctively, she grabbed at the rope in front of her, but her wound ached from the jerky movement and she unthinkingly let go.

"Hold on, Haibara," called Kudo's voice in the distance. And then again—this time more an anguished cry than a command: "Hold on, Ai!"

Why did he choose this moment to call her "Ai", she wondered in detached amusement before she hit the wall of water and sank into the numbing darkness, which enveloped her like a block of ice.
g.
As if he could see...

As if he could see the air thickening around our table, Furuhata Motoki obligingly hurries to the scene of trouble to salvage the situation with his tried and true weapons: assiduous, undivided attention, broad winsome smiles, and friendly words.

Is everything all right with your lunch? You haven't touched anything!—he casts a mournful glance at the almost untouched plate of fish on the table.

The food is great. I force the corners of my lips upwards into a bright smile. We're just not hungry at all.

"I've got an idea," he cheerfully suggests. "Since you haven't visited us for so long, your order is on the house. But I won't let you go before you've ordered something else because I can't allow you to leave this restaurant hungry!"

It makes sense that Furuhata-san's pride wouldn't allow him to let his customers pay for a meal they haven't enjoyed. And yet my pride doesn't allow me to accept his offer when the food is excellent and the service impeccable.

"Everything is absolutely perfect," I assure him. "I'm only less hungry than I thought since I had a late breakfast only two hours ago."

What a pity! Despite being a big eater, he can't enjoy lunch after a late breakfast either, Furuhata-san commiserates, turning his attention to Kudo. "You haven't touched your food either—but I see you've had a late breakfast, too," he pleasantly adds with a glance at Kudo's full bowl, his already wide smile broadening as he registers Kudo's crumpled shirt and my dishevelled appearance.

Evidently, Kudo is still struggling to digest the news that I've spent a night with the culprit of a previous case (the one he had to give up out of all cases!), as he distractedly—and thoughtlessly—clarifies that, no, he didn't have breakfast at all, much to my dismay.

"I'm sorry. I must've misunderstood… Since you both haven't touched your food, I—" Bewildered, Furuhata-san darts searching glances back and forth between Kudo and me.

"She didn't have breakfast with me, if that's what you've been thinking," Kudo ruthlessly spells it out, whereupon my patience snaps.

"That is, I spent last night at another man's place and had breakfast there," I stoically declare, watching Furuhata-san's and Kudo's countenances slip as if I had revealed a scandalous secret. To Furuhata-san, who has mistaken Kudo for Kaito and thinks we two have been together for two years, it must look like we're having a falling-out because I was unfaithful.

Nevertheless, I can't comprehend why Kudo is looking daggers at me at the moment. Wasn't he the one who started this? I only played along.

"Well, you see…" Furuhata-san hesitantly begins, racking his brains to come up with a few words of wisdom he can offer his two problem customers.

It's always a tough challenge to be with the same person for long, he courageously launches into an improvised sermon. One is forced to adjust to the partner's different lifestyle, which necessarily
leads to irritation and fights. On the other hand, couples that are too similar often lose their initial
spark and bore each other silly very soon. In any case, long-term couples tend to drift apart at some
stage in their lives and need time to rediscover each other—a natural process, which is sometimes
tragically disrupted when one partner gets carried away by feelings for someone else.

A new infatuation might feel more intense. But can it really hold a candle to a serious relationship,
which has much more memories attached to it and which has evolved over a long period of time?
With hindsight, people often regret a breakup. To make matters worse, a new relationship is often
burdened by the wreckage the old one has left. In view of all the drawbacks such a situation brings,
it's always advisable to settle one's issues in the troubled relationship instead of embarking on a
rebound love affair with a new lover.

Memories are slowly built over time—he gently concludes. And real emotional intimacy, which
has deepened in years, can't be developed within a few weeks, especially not when one is still
committed to a long-time partner.

On other days, I wouldn't have minded Furuhata-san's well-meant counseling service in the least.
Today, however, I'm so peevish that his platitudes raise my hackles.

"You've completely misunderstood..." I can hear Kudo's irritated voice trail away into a sigh of
exhaustion. While Kudo possesses both the stamina and the determination to tackle any intellectual
problem for days without needing either food or sleep, emotional issues tire him out within seconds
as if they were demons sucking up all his energy.

"There is no intimacy between us," I tell Furuhata-san (or "Motoki-san", as he is usually called by
his customers) in a confidential tone. "He has another girlfriend and almost never visits me."
Simulating heartbreak, I let my eyes well up with tears.

But that's unacceptable, Furuhata-san grimly reproves my lunch companion, changing sides
without further ado. "If you don't cherish your beautiful girlfriend, it's no wonder that she'll find
someone else to replace you!"

"Why did you do that?" Kudo asks me in disbelief after Furuhata-san has left. "You make me look
like a two-timing jerk!"

To protect myself! I shrug. "It's the first time that I've spent the night at a stranger's place and you
behave as if we were a couple and I were promiscuous."

My mood doesn't seem to have improved much, Kudo dryly observes. "So the call wasn't from
him?"

No, I admit, as it would have been difficult to lie about this with Kudo's watchful eyes on me. The
call was from an old acquaintance who wanted to do some catching up after a long absence.

"An old acquaintance, presumably an important person from a long time ago, judging from your
expression when you talked to them and completely ignored me when I tried to tell you I was going
to solve a case for your landlady," Kudo deduces. "It can't be anyone I know. Moreover, you've
been living in your apartment for only three years. Knowing you, I know it's highly unlikely that
you'd call anyone you've met at university during the last three years 'an old acquaintance'. I gather
it was someone you've known in the past before we two met." He presses his fingertips together.
"Who can it be? And how come he or she knew your phone number?"
Preoccupied with Seiya, I've forgotten about Tenoh-san, whom I must hide from Kudo's troublesome curiosity—a deadly disease which can't be cured. The last thing I need in my present situation is meitantei-san investigating Tenoh-san and stumbling over the truth about Pandora's Box by accident. I've already sacrificed so much for my secret—Kudo, Seiya, my inner peace—that I can't allow Kudo to dig it up now.

She's just a random acquaintance from my first semester at university, who moved away two years ago, I lie through my teeth. Some women are clingy for no reason, and she seems to like me so much that she asked me for my landline number, a request I was too kind to refuse.

In reality, Tenoh-san has found out my number on her own, for I was still living in the Professor's house the last time we met. I'm sure she has continued to have me watched out of personal interest or even out of a sense of obligation, as if she were obliged to safeguard her erstwhile partner in crime for the rest of her life. With the help of the Night Baron copy, it must have been a five-finger exercise for her to obtain my new address and phone number within a few seconds. I sometimes wonder what would have happened had I given her a backup of Pandora's Box as planned—whether she would really have used it within limits as I once thought or whether she would have lost control completely and burn herself out during her relentless quest for revenge. Inspired by her heavenly name, the insidious influence of her deep-rooted mistrust, and her androgynous beauty, which had no equal at Infinity, I've often likened her to Lucifer, the fallen angel.

"You're a case I'm never going to solve," Kudo asserts calmly, giving me a skeptical look while shoving the fish, which he has given up eating, aside. "You're keeping secrets I won't try to uncover since I don't want to pry into your private affairs. But I can't help but wonder why you have to hide your friends from me."

Because my friends don't necessarily have to be his friends, I testily rejoin. Because I'm not his girlfriend who feels the need to introduce every new person she has met to him!

"Does it mean that you feel the need to introduce your friends to him?" The treacherous glint in his eyes warn me that this can't have been a harmless question without a specific purpose. Alarmed, I consider my words carefully before giving him my answer.

"No, I don't. I'm fiercely possessive of him and won't ever share him with anyone—especially not with nosy detectives who still owe him an apology."

Kudo's eyes narrow. Satisfied, I realize I've chosen the right topic to distract him from his cunning plan for using our friendship to worm a belated confession out of Seiya and to investigate my peculiar attitude towards my supposed new boyfriend in one fell swoop. Even though we seldom meet, I can still read Kudo like a book.

"Come on, Ai," he blurs out in his frustration. "You're usually not so gullible!"

Since disputing Seiya's possible innocence with Kudo is futile without disclosing the contents of Misa's love letter (I don't want Kudo to revive the old case now that life has returned to normalcy for all the people involved), I resign myself to the ancient tactic of "calling a tacit truce by creating a diversion".

"Shiho," I pedantically correct him before I realize that I've offered him my first name instead of my last. "I'm not Haibara Ai anymore."

Kudo has obviously noticed my concession, as he instantly perks up and smiles, charming the three girls that have just entered Furuhata's bar and are now following Furuhata-san to the table they've booked in advance while eying my companion. Feeling their stares on him, Kudo shoots each of
them his usual cool, analytical, dissecting gaze—the same he gave me when I entered the classroom six years ago. It has effectively nipped any potential hero-worship in the bud, as I can tell from the looks on their faces. Impressed, I wonder whether Seiya could put Kudo's killingly critical gaze to good use to fight off his groupies after his comeback in December.

On the billboard at the intersection opposite our window, Two Lights are hovering over the traffic like Greek gods levitating over the bustle of the unworthy humans they liked to toy with. After making their acquaintances, it's not difficult for me to discern the resentment in their eyes—the rebellious air their fans love so much about them must be a legacy from the disgust they felt at selling the impossible dreams and illusions neither of them believed in to make a living. Seiya's easy-going, buoyant demeanour has appeared so effortless to me that I've believed it to be the result of an innate ability he didn't need to cultivate. But now that I've met his two foster brothers, I wonder whether his happy-go-lucky attitude was initially a counteraction against their infectious despondency and fatalistic pessimism.

From the bar, Furuhata-san's gaze rests on me in an expression of whole-hearted, grim support. He seems intrigued (or titillated?) and, at the same time, scandalized—as if I had just transformed from the nice lady next door into the tragic man-eating femme fatale. Normally, I'd have been perturbed by the spectacle Kudo and I have made of ourselves. After reliving Pandora's Box, however, I have the feeling that no petty worries will ever bother me again. Does it matter that Furuhata-san believes you're either Kudo's bit on the side or you've just cheated on your negligent boyfriend, asks a voice in my head. Thoughts are inherently ephemeral just as life is evanescent. And one day, when you're at death's door or in a coma like Kakyuu, whose life was intertwined with yours without your knowledge, what Furuhata Motoki thought or didn't think of you today won't make any difference.

g.

"I don't think I owe him an apology, but I do think I owe you one," Kudo suddenly remarks, startling me out of my reverie. "I'm really sorry…"

The familiar words sound so out of context that I can't place them at all. It takes me a beat to comprehend that he is alluding to our quarrel at Pandora's Box and another beat to recall that he tried to apologize to me after the Professor's funeral as well.

"For what?" If it makes him feel better to listen to me telling him yet again that I'm over it, I'm not going to deny him the satisfaction, I graciously decide, realizing that if I were Ran, I'd be jealous of me for being able to satisfy so many of his needs. I cannot only alleviate his migraines by giving him the strongest painkillers ever invented but also assuage his guilt by giving his perfect fairy tale a perfect happy ending…

"For pushing you overboard." He smiles ruefully, visibly conscience-stricken at the remembrance. To all appearances, he is right about the claim that I will always remain a mystery to him (or, as I'd put it, his usually formidable intellect will always be on standby when it comes to the workings of my mind.)

"You didn't push me overboard, I must beg to differ. I was washed overboard! If you had pushed me, I'd have exerted a terrible, bloody revenge."

For three years, Kudo seems to have entertained the thought that I resented him for sending me overboard in a fit of anger whereas in my mind, the accident was at worst an interruption to our quarrel—prolonging the impasse—and at best an embarrassing episode I'd rather not dwell on.

"Maybe I should apologize for my behaviour and my words then?" To my dismay, Kudo doesn't
feel inclined to stop. On the contrary, he is more chatty than usual, as if he has exhausted his reticence during the past years and is now compelled to share all the thoughts he has been holding back with me. He is still sure that what he said was right, he continues, as he hasn't changed his opinion in the meantime. "But the way in which I told you those things was wrong. I wish I hadn't attacked you like that… Afterwards, I was shocked by what I did, pinioning your arms and—"

"You exploded and lost control over yourself once you got started. It can happen to anyone," I mildly told him, whereupon he eyes me warily, apparently suspicious of my generosity. "And if you hadn't let go of me, I'd have freed myself," I add with a smirk. "Did you know we had a self-defense class at Infinity? I suppose you do since it was mentioned in the files you read in the cabin."

"No, I don't," he laconically asserts. Then, with a tinge of irritation, he adds, "I was distracted by the files on you and Gin."

Gin... Another topic which will forever remain obscure, as I've failed to discover his true motives I was once so sure about before it was too late for further investigations. Seiya has added a whole new dimension to the story whose gist I thought I've known for years. A mentor, friend, lover, protector, enemy... All the facets of Gin's character and the many different roles he played in my life were less transparent than the bland files in the fake Pandora's Box have made them out to be.

The silence between Kudo and me, only punctuated by the sound of either of us reaching for the drinks, feels oddly comfortable, as if we were once again Edogawa Conan and Haibara Ai before taking the antidote. From the speakers at the bar, Tenoh-san's latest piano piece is holding all of Furuhata-san's customers spellbound. With its endless cascades of downward arpeggios, it evokes the image of the composer's girlfriend's soft, long curls, which must be reaching her hips by now. Everyone deals with a dark secret in their own way and inflicts self-punishment on themselves in their own style, I muse. Tenoh-san told me after the Professor's funeral (the last time we met) that Kaioh-san would never cut her hair again after Pandora's Box—an almost unbearable fashion faux pas for a woman like her.

It seems I harbour no grudge against him for what he did and said, Kudo breaks the silence with his husky voice, in which surprise is mingled with relief and uncertain apprehension.

"There is nothing to forgive," I tell him truthfully, feeling once again indescribably tired like the moment I almost fell asleep at Seiya's place before he offered me coffee. Kudo still doesn't realize that the action which genuinely pained me was the reflex he couldn't control—an automatic reaction, for which he cannot apologize. He didn't push me overboard but he pushed me away from him, instinctively recoiling from me when I needed his support. The morning after, when I was lying in the log cabin, under which the Organization had kept "Pandora's Box" (as Seiya observed, the ship, the laptop, and the decoy computer all shared the same name), cocking an ear at Hattori and Kudo's discussion in hushed tones about Kudo's dilemma of choosing between hurting me or Ran (If ya don't make up yar mind now, ya're turning me inte yar accomplice, 'nd I can't lie te nee-san 'bout tis!—I wished I could murder the Detective of the West for his sing-song dialect I couldn't stand!), I had plenty of time to consider the full implications of what had happened. If getting rid of Pandora's Box had been enough to make Kudo recoil in horror from my touch, what would he do if he knew the truth about all the other things I had done? Sure Kudo wouldn't (and couldn't) ever hand me over to the FBI or the police—but it was also beyond dispute that he would file away everything he knew about Sherry / Haibara Ai / Miyano Shiho in a folder labelled "Unrepentant Criminals Past Saving".

"You know, I was extremely jealous of Gin," he admits to my bewilderment. "Not because of his past relationship with you but because of his influence on you even after his death." After
everything my villainous ex had done to me, I still cared so much about him that his death left me completely devastated, Kudo claims. "I suspected that you threw it all away because of him, sacrificing a possible future with me for the memory of a person who wasn't worth it…"

Perhaps he was only unable to deal with my rejection, which came as a great shock to him when he was almost certain that his feelings were reciprocated. He truly didn't know how to deal with it, Kudo elaborates, his bright eyes glued to our unsteadily flickering candle, whose tiny vermilion light is dwarfed by the midday sun.

Casting my mind back over the few moments between us before I returned to the ship's galley to deactivate Pandora's Box, I remember that he clearly couldn't make sense of my anguish after Gin's demise. My deathly silence after the latest mental breakdown (Kudo was always conveniently present whenever I cracked up, as if fate had chosen him to be a helpless witness of my sorrows on a whim), my flight when he tried to kiss me and I left the cabin in the conviction that I had heard Hattori's steps, my cool, almost indifferent reaction on the phone to his rash proposal…

What difference would it make if he knew the truth? I can still see him knocking the weapon out of my hands, shaking me out of my murderous stupor, telling me that my attacker was lying on the floor and that I should stop shooting lest I ran out of bullets or killed our most important witness.

I know you're feeling guilty about it now but it was self-defense, I remember Kudo imploring me afterwards, after Gin's death, when we were huddled together in the cabin. And your prompt reaction saved Hattori and me, if it's any consolation to you, he attempted to joke, which came out noticeably cooler than he had intended to. Kudo had misread the situation, which was uncommon for him—but his opinion of me was so tremendously high that he failed to see the alternative explanation for my wretched mood.

All my plans ruined because of two bullets which missed their intended target! I could almost hear Tenoh-san's voice in my head, groaning in exasperation, "I thought I didn't have to tell you to aim for the head!"

One of us should return to the bridge of the ship—as the weather had worsened and we were about to pass a few dangerous rocks—while the other two should stay to clean and bandage Gin's wounds, Kudo suggested after finding Gin's pulse and propping my unconscious ex against the door to the galley. As he was indubitably the most skilled of us when it came to steering the ship, Hattori volunteered to go back to the bridge alone.

Hopefully he makes it through the night and won't bleed to death, Kudo grimly said, inspecting Gin's wounds, which consisted of several bruises, burns, and two bullet holes by courtesy of me. It was not only a question of kindness (even though kindness certainly played a large role as far as Kudo was concerned). Since the files in the captain's cabin had turned out to be unsatisfactory to both Hattori and Kudo, a witness like the second crow was their only chance of learning the truth about the Organization.

_I'll stay with him while you get us something to stop the bleeding and disinfect the wounds_, I told Kudo, tossing him the Browning (Vodka's weapon, with which Vodka had given me the small flesh wound back in the log cabin) I had picked from the floor. _You'd better take this with you before I succumb to the temptation._

No, I'll leave it here in case you need it to defend yourself. But if he stirs and you can't stand his face, just whack him with this! Kudo returned the Browning to me, handed me a large pan from the galley (I didn't know whether he did it in jest or not), gave me a reassuring pat on my shoulder, and disappeared, his steps growing fainter as the seconds ticked away. I waited uneasily, eyes trained on my ex-husband's face until Gin finally opened his eyes and smirked at me, as expected.
How could Hattori and Kudo fear for his life just because he had received a few nasty wounds? The devil—or his incarnation, in this case—wouldn't let himself be taken out by Tenoh-san's and my efforts combined. Gin wasn't going to do me the favour and drop dead in an instant. Neither could he do it voluntarily if he wanted to, as robust as he was. I could remember all the other wounds he had received in his life, all the burns and cuts I had to treat when he came home from yet another mission in a rotten mood because his victims—surprise, surprise—had had the impertinence to defend themselves instead of obediently letting him execute them. If he had likened me to a greenhouse flower, I had likened him to weed. Fortunately, I had the perfect weedkiller in my locket—if only I dared to use it.

No, it wouldn't do either Kudo or me any good if I confessed my guilt, I decide. Why should I burst Kudo's bubble and extinguish his lingering feelings for me by telling him how we had won? The Organization is destroyed even though he hasn't stained his hands with any evil deeds. All I need to do now is to remind myself never to mention what I used to throw at him in my nightmares—what I could only express in my dreams when I couldn't contain the wish to confess: the truth that no glorious victory has ever been snatched from the jaws of defeat without sacrifices...

After all, even he could only resume his normal life at a cost of a hundred times twenty-six white mice.

Tenoh-san's piano piece has stopped in the meantime—the last note, which should have been allowed to linger in the air, brutally interrupted by the moderator's enthusiastic voice announcing some "important news". As the musical world doesn't interest me in the least, I turn my attention back to Kudo.

"There was no reason to be jealous," I inform him. "I… sort of forgave Gin for the things he did after his death because it's easy for me to forgive the dead. But if he hadn't passed away so peacefully, I'd have made sure he died before we left the ship!"

Alas, half-lies and white lies are still lies. Just like the poor excuse I gave Seiya this morning when I told him that I was unable to stay in a long-time relationship and would like to stop pretending. An illusion created to keep his idea of me intact: a nice woman, a victim of circumstances, who happened to be so frail and so traumatized by a past love that she can no longer commit to anyone…

"Why did you throw it away?" Kudo asks again, obstinately trying my patience.

"I don't think we need to go into this any further unless you're searching for a reason to send me out of this window in front of so many witnesses," I snap. "I've told you more than once why I did it. Since we won't ever agree on the topic, just let it rest, please!"

"I didn't mean the files." Kudo gazes at me directly for the first time since his contrite apology, and I'm lost for words before the sound of Seiya's name steals into my ears, thwarting my attempt at giving Kudo an answer.

Three Lights are returning in July (on Seiya-sama's next birthday!) instead of in December as planned, touring around in Japan before going to L.A—the moderator squeals in delight. They're going to stay in Los Angeles for at least five years, as all the three of them have been offered main roles and are also writing and singing the music for some (still mysterious) high-budget Hollywood series.
I can't hear anything...

I can't hear anything the moderator says afterwards, for his comments are drowned out by a flood of protests, squeals, laughter, sobs, cries, shouts, and even screams—most of which come from the Crown game centre below although I can discern strangled sobs from the people around us as well. Seiya's loyal cult following is larger than I thought, I absently register, wondering whether they're more thrilled by his imminent comeback or devastated by his plans to abandon them so soon afterwards. Tears, sobs, swollen eyes, and red faces can be testimonies of either joy or grief—and it occurs to me for the first time that it can be extraordinarily difficult to distinguish the expressions of extreme feelings on the opposite sides of the emotional spectrum from each other.

Numbed by the unexpected news, I'm struggling to make sense of the situation and its implications. Pestered by his brothers, Seiya has reluctantly informed me about the (extremely lucrative and tempting) job offers he has received (a result of Hollywood's current derivative tendencies, fascination with superheroes, and penchant for serialization). Some Hollywood studios have bought the rights to remake the two dramas Three Lights did. Customarily, they would cast famous Caucasian actors in potential blockbuster series, but this time they're so taken in with Taiki, Yaten, and him that they're going out of their way to keep the original cast—a decision further strengthened by the knowledge that Three Lights have grown up bilingual.

As a matter of course, I don't expect him to waste such a unique opportunity for my sake now that we've separated. Neither did I expect him to pass it up for me when we were still together. He could shuttle back and forth between Los Angeles and Tokyo in his breaks while I can visit him whenever possible on the set, I suggested while he only looked at me aghast, asking, "Do you really want that?"

In all honesty, I didn't. Even in our delirious state, we both knew that in life, you can't do everything, have everything. If you get something, you will always lose something else—a simple rule of the otherwise impenetrable game of life, in which the cards are never distributed equally and never lie openly on the table.

In my head, my voice of reason took pains to apprise me that it was impossible to maintain a long-distance relationship over a long period of time without losing focus on either the partner or the work. It might be possible to do it for one, two, or even three years. But, as the number of the long-distance relationships that started with the best of intentions and ended for the best of reasons prove, love is a delicate hybrid whose emotional side can seldom thrive without its physical one.

Only a few hours ago, Seiya was adamant that—unless I was sure I could move in with him after finishing my studies—he wouldn't accept the offer. Now the public announcement has made it clear that he is trying to cut ties. Since I've told him not to write or call me, he has given me up. He might as well have chosen the media to deliver his message: I'm not going to pursue a woman who has ditched me after a few hours! Since you've left me with no plausible reason as to why we had to break it up, I'm going to abandon you.

The fantasy I've been nurturing since Tenoh-san's call (I only need to turn up on his doorstep with an apology for my fickleness and he will welcome me back with open arms) thus quashed, the only thing I can do is to stare into my glass and try not to do anything outrageous—sobbing into Kudo's shirt, stabbing the fish, smashing the vase—which could land me in hospital. The overwhelming sense of loss and betrayal is, admittedly, irrational but impossible to suppress. Drunk with love (no
other phrase could have captured the mood), we've planned to search for a new apartment, to elope
to wherever his agent couldn't follow, to stay with each other for all eternity or at least until death
parted us… To be fair, I've left him in such an abrupt way that it's only natural for him to drown his
sorrows in work (Yaten-san aka Shortie has told me about Seiya's workaholic tendencies whenever
Seiya was immersed in a project or suffering from a new Odango-induced heartache). Still, it's
staggering how he has organized his comeback within only four hours, even changing the date on
impulse to put as much distance between him and me as fast as possible.

"How are you two going to stay in touch if he'll be juggling so many tasks and living half the world
away from you?" Kudo's voice interrupts my train of thought. "Or do you seriously consider going
with him?"

Coming from Kudo, the news acquires the air of finality it needed to enter the realm of reality and
to put out my last flicker of hope. Crushed, I murmur that we still don't know how to proceed with
our relationship—a half-hearted lie Kudo immediately sees through—while dropping my forehead
into my palm. In a strange twist of fate, time has rewound, presenting me with the same dilemma I
faced three years ago. At that time, Kudo and his honourable talk of "turning back time" triggered
the same sense of loss, illuminating what I had craved beyond all reason. Secretly, I had hoped to
receive a pledge of acceptance—an unequivocal "I'm going to stick by you despite whatever things
you've done"—while what I got was the equivalent of the biblical "an eye for an eye", a decision I
was forced to accept.

Kudo's decision, as it turned out, was partly triggered by a misunderstanding I didn't notice.
Stranger-san's misunderstanding, however, was deliberately created by me.

All the things you've told me until now simply don't add up...

Azabu Juuban's streetlights were sparkling like a glittering carpet in the distance, their lustre
dissolving into the purple dawn. He was contemplating me with his curious eyes, calling Pandora's
Box a "tiny laptop-like thing". I felt like I'd just been freed from it for the first time in years. How
wrong I've been…

As fond as I am of it, the memory reinforces my conviction that it would have been torture to live
with Seiya while trying to hide the truth. Accustomed to observing other people and empathizing
with them so that he can imitate them afterwards, he is too fast at sensing the incongruities and
discrepancies between my words and my behaviour.

Kudo, who must be weary of my catatonic trance, has left for the bar to pick up the tab in a
surprisingly thoughtful attempt to spare me another of Furuhata-san's sermons. As luck would have
it, the latter is presently distracted by his girlfriend: an attractive, tall brunette with long curls, who
has just entered the restaurant and sidled up to him. Nishimura Reika, shy and polite, is pleasantly
different from her mother in both looks and manners. She only flashes me a smile, bows before
Kudo, and turns her attention to her boyfriend after thanking Kudo again for helping her mother.

Furuhata-san, on the other hand, has instantly morphed from "dedicated waiter" to "clumsy fool in
love". His customers forgotten and the new flow of customers at the door ignored, he has scooped
the woman as tall as himself into his arms and whirled her round, barely missing the vase at the
counter. Love—or at least romantic love—is a curious sentiment. The price it costs is sometimes
so high that the fleeting elation it causes doesn't seem worth the suffering in the long run. It's scary
how an unreasonable infatuation can take over one's life, and I can't help but resent my stranger for
the shackles of dependency he has put on me. After experiencing the dizzying highs of a requited
love, it's difficult to live without it—for the daily life, without the generally derided but secretly
coveted romance, can feel unbearably insipid.
Around me, everyone else seems to be discussing Seiya's comeback, waxing lyrical about his acting skills and his voice, speculating about his rumoured scandals, criticizing his decision to leave Japan for LA, or even ascribing improbable patriotic motives to his planned expatriation (Seiya-sama has set out with the aim of showing the world that Japanese talents can easily outdo the overpaid but mediocre wannabe-artists in Hollywood—why else should he want to leave a country where he is so adored by his fans that he can't go anywhere without them tailing him?)…

No matter where you look, no matter what you do—Sherry, whose voice I can still hear in my head, defiantly remarks—people will always moralize, judging you for every action you take. Sometimes I'm guilty of moralizing myself, and usually I don't mind others preaching to me. Today, however, I'm tired of the world with its arbitrary morals and its invisible manacles. And I begin to appreciate Seiya with his contagious laugh and his tendency to throw himself into everything with wild abandon (a trait which might have exasperated me under different circumstances), recalling that despite his many attempts to change my mind, he hasn't preached at all.
Part 13: A few hours ago...

A few hours ago…

A few hours ago, life was perfect…

The dream, a jumbled mess of scents, sounds, and images, has faded away. Sunlight is filtering through the patterns of the translucent curtains, warming your closed eyelids. The moment you return to consciousness, the anxiety dissipates, an air of sublime contentment spreads over the whole apartment; and you begin to stir, languorously enjoying the heat of stranger-san's lean, long-limbed body, which—in any position—is perfectly fitted to every of your nooks and curves like a long-searched-for puzzle piece.

In response to your slight change in position, he instantly shifts, automatically closing the small gap between you two as if he were unwilling to let go of you even if it's only for a moment. While the fragrance of kinmokusei and orange blossoms is still lingering in his hair and on his skin, his natural scent is now more distinct. Your sophisticated nose, which has been smitten with it at first sniff, once again verifies that its effect on you is anything but short-lived. Inviting and tantalizingly intangible, it arouses your suspicion that the desire to kiss is the nicer sibling of the primitive animal urge to devour the beloved—to nibble at them like one lazily nibbles at a delicious dessert or to swallow them whole like a ravenous snake swallows its prey.

This is the reason why people claim that love is blind, you think in amusement, drinking in his scent, which has slightly changed as it mingled with yours, as though it were a mysterious substance you've grown addicted to. You are confident you could recognize him in a crowd even if you were blindfolded. Unlike the vague sense of defeat after your first time with Gin, the escapades of the last hours felt so right that you would charm the man next to you into repeating them again if your body didn't tell you to stop. Your lips have begun to hurt, not to mention all the other sensitive places which aren't accustomed to all the attention they got from him.

"Well slept?"

He has just opened his eyes to gaze at you, blinking with unfocused eyes into the slanting sunlight before giving you a perfectly blissful smile, which leaves no doubt that he has enjoyed the last hours as well.

"Not really," you admit, reaching behind him for your watch. "We've only nodded off for a few minutes, I think. I've had a dream…"

"A bad one?" He pushes himself into a sitting position, startling you with his sudden nudity as the blanket slips from his shoulders. Now would be the right time to get dressed and leave if this were a one-night stand. Since it isn't, you only behold him with the same unabashed interest with which he is now looking at you. As much as you love seeing him in his clothes, you infinitely prefer seeing him without. Dressed, he appears playful and flamboyant, displaying a mischievous predilection for rebellion against the tyrannies of common sense and the current fashion. Stripped, he has a rare serene, statuesque look, a timeless appeal of the type that inspire great artists to create masterworks.
"I can't really remember. But don't worry," you tease him. "You weren't in it. I've been searching for you while something was beeping in the distance. Is it your tumble dryer?"

All you can remember of the dream is the futile search—the deep sense of failure and loss during your hopeless fight against time. You've been combing Ueno-koen for him in vain while the Queen of Spades was smiling, amused by your plight. Since the memory of the peculiar scene still makes your flesh creep, you suppress the impulse to recount it to him.

"Now I know why you thought it was unpleasant," he chuckles with his eyes closed, tenderly brushing his fingertips from your right breast down to your waist, over your belly, and along the contours of your left hip bone. "I'll make it up to you for my absence in an instant. Just give me a second to stop this racket and get us coffee."

You see you will have to deflate his ego before it lifts off with him like a hot air balloon, you observe as he nimbly leaps to his feet and—exhibiting a total lack of decency—strides to the door without putting anything on. The persistent beep of the tumble dryer, barely audible through the closed door, assaults your ears when he opens the door of the bedroom and sidesteps the vases—and you remember with a stab of guilt that it's time to leave, as Kudo must have woken up and will investigate your disappearance if you let him wait for too long.

Damaging his ego is an impossible task, "stranger-san"—the endearment has received an ironic quality now that you know him so intimately—claims when he returns with a coffee cup, grinning at you when he notices that you find the sight of his bare body extremely distracting. So many people have tried—none has ever succeeded. He only warns you in advance to spare you the humiliation of defeat.

"Then it's time that someone finally beats it." You take a sip of the fragrant espresso, which he has scented with lemon peel, and sigh. "Apropos time…" You cast him a regretful glance. "I must go home now since I've locked Kudo up in my apartment. I'll come back to you this evening."

He pauses momentarily, a startled expression on his face, as if he has completely forgotten about Kudo's existence. Then he smiles and resignedly nods, taking the cup from you to bring it to his lips without saying anything.

"Seiya?" You raise yourself up on one elbow and pull his blanket over your breasts, as you've begun to feel the cold the moment he withdrew.

He settles beside you, tugs at a corner of the blanket, and smiles at you over the rim of the cup. "Yes, Shiho?"

You like how your name sounds when it comes from his mouth. The sibilant "sh" followed by the two vocals sound like a murmured musical motif preceded by a hushed whisper.

"Are you jealous?"

If the situation were reversed and he would return to "Odango" to spend a day with her before she leaves for another city, you certainly would have been jealous. The fact that Kudo—despite being in a steady relationship—is not married yet and has actually invited you to watch cherry blossoms at Ueno-koen with him doesn't make the situation sound better. If Seiya is only half as possessive as Gin was, he must be suspecting you of keeping all your options open until Kudo leaves. Troubled by the possible misunderstanding, you move closer to share the blanket with him, tucking your cold feet under his warm legs. Even though you've been cocooned in the blanket and he has been walking around in the nude, he is still warmer than you.
He looks genuinely surprised as if he hasn't anticipated your question at all.

"No, I'm not." He places the empty cup on the bedside table, next to the roses, and leans in to kiss you with the pleasant bittersweet taste of espresso on his lips. "But I don't think you should tell Kudo about this. At least not today."

"It will be hard to hide it from him since he is so observant," you remark, "but of course I'll try". Relieved that he hasn't suggested that you three sit at the breakfast table together in awkward silence (a situation you want to avoid at any cost!), you're nevertheless curious about why he wants to hide your relationship all of a sudden.

"I don't want to hide our relationship. I only meant that you shouldn't hurt Kudo by telling him that you've spent the night at my place while he was there. He proposed to you a few years ago—maybe he still has some feelings for you now. I don't want this to turn into a drama since the things between you and him really don't have anything to do with us."

After being caught in a love triangle for years, he seems petrified of slipping into another love triangle—a feeling you know well since the last thing you want is watching how "Odango" turns into another rival, whom you have to share your lover's affection with. Neither do you want her to suffer because you've stolen him away. As odd as it sounds, Seiya is right that the past between Kudo and you shouldn't have anything to do with your relationship. Kudo was clearly not available when Seiya asked you out for a date. And you both know that you would never have gone out with him if Kudo and you had been a couple—just as he wouldn't have been interested in a rendezvous with you at all if he had had the merest chance with his Odango.

If you both had been unavailable, Seiya and you might have been intrigued by each other after that chance encounter in the park but would have kept a safe distance to each other, realizing the danger the other person poses. But now that you are ("irrevocably!" you would claim if it wouldn't sound so clichéd) in love with the stranger who has fascinated you right from the start, you can't imagine anyone or anything to come between you and your soon-to-be life partner. Kudo's departure will still be unbearable—a separation whose finality you're struggling to accept. But he has ceased to be a viable option for so long that you've grown accustomed to his perpetual absence.

As much as you once tried to make yourself believe it… Once upon a time when you were desperate enough to stalk Kudo and Ran, staring at Kudo through the window of your café and the window of their restaurant, past your reflection on the window glass and the busy street in the evening rush hour… A love that is doomed to stay within the realm of fantasy can never compare with a love that can be lived. On the other hand, a passion that has been consummated probably won't be able to smoulder as long as a passion that has never been awoken. Not receiving a kiss one craved can freeze an unattainable love in time and space, making it forever desirable in the absence of tangible faults. But receiving the caresses one desired—and having one's expectations not only satisfied but far surpassed—is an experience that turns the whole world upside down.

All troubles gone, with the antidote to all sorrows within reach, you're so generous in your happiness that you could embrace the whole universe. It's like looking at the distant spheres in the sky and suddenly seeing their luminescent glow for the first time, or admiring the fascinating pattern of the spider's web under the bed, wondering why you've never taken notice of it. Knowing the danger that this consuming infatuation between your stranger-san and you may burn out within a few years, you're not in the least afraid, trusting his and your ability to save it in time.

The "last kiss" before you two get up (meanwhile, you've already moved to the bed and put on your bathrobe) leads to a second "last kiss" and a third—each lasting longer than the previous one.
Similarly, the caresses, which have started out innocent, are now threatening to keep you for another hour at his place. It's impossible for you to resist—you admit between two lingering kisses that torture your swollen lips—for kissing him has become a compulsion. And when he insists that he is not trying to seduce you into staying but is in fact just as helpless as you when it comes to fighting these bothersome urges, the bathrobe once again slips from your shoulder and ultimately lands on the heap of damp clothes in the corner of the room.

Oscillating between pleasure and pain, you two have just got lost in a world of your own when the commotion from the corridor—clattering noises of broken porcelain and shattered glass followed by a string of colourful profanities in a high, crystal-clear male voice—shocks you two out of your half-conscious state. While you're still blinking at the door of the bedroom, horrified, Seiya has the presence of mind to bolt to the door and block it with his back while motioning you to put on the bathrobe again.

"Taiki has the spare key to my apartment," he says apologetically, laughing at the comical situation as you hurriedly grope for the bathrobe, cursing your bad luck, which sent you his foster brothers at a time when their presence is absolutely not welcome.

"What blithering idiot would leave the damned vases directly in front of the door so that anyone who tries to come in will bleed to death? Yaten has just cut his foot because of you, moron!" cries a dramatic male voice, which is slightly deeper than the other one.

"That's Taiki," Seiya dryly remarks, introducing his "perfect flower-loving brother" to you.

Yaten Kou, to whom the other voice obviously belongs, is still screaming obscenities of the most creative sort and has apparently also kicked at another vase in his rage, as you can once again hear the sound of glass shattering.

"Stop it, Yaten!" the deeper voice orders. "Just hold this for me while I'm getting you a bandage."

"We've brought you breakfast, jackass," yells Yaten-san, his clear, sophisticated pronunciation jarring with his uncouth manner. "Come here and bring a rag if you don't want me to stuff the gyozas down your throat until you gag!" The rhyme must be a coincidence, you decide, unless the poor guy is suffering from a mental illness which causes him to rhyme obsessively.

"I've left the light in the bathroom on," your stranger-san chuckles in amusement, enjoying himself at the expense of everyone else in his apartment. "They must think I'm still in there."

"And what's the point of that?" you hiss, crouching down next to him. "Why don't you simply tell them to leave us alone?" In situations like these, his relaxed attitude is impossible to tolerate.

"Stop talking to yourself! I can hear you, creep!" Yaten-san exclaims, enraged by what he believes to be a prank. To your relief, he hasn't rhymed again.

"It's hard to believe that he's actually the oldest of us three," Seiya calmly remarks, takes you on his lap, yawns, and closes his eyes as if he were preparing to stay in this impossible position for the whole morning.

"Tell him you're with a woman right now and want to be left alone!" you command, jerking at his earring to stress the importance of his cooperation.

"I'm with a woman right now who will rip off my earlobes if you two don't get out of my apartment and leave us alone," your stranger-san shouts, his voice resonating through the small bedroom. Nevertheless, his voice lacks conviction that this approach will succeed. To your dismay, it seems
Seiya was truthful with you when he claimed to have been single and running from lovestruck women all his life. No one will believe him that he has brought a woman home.

"Haha, that was a good one!" Taiki-san, who must have returned to the corridor in the meantime, testily comments. "If you don't come out of your bedroom in an instant and help us clean up this mess, I'm going to break the door down!"
Oddly enough…

Oddly enough, Taiki Kou's threat—instead of throwing you into a panic—only calms your tattered nerves. Believing in the proverb that barking dogs don't bite, you note in amusement that Seiya's perfect flower-loving brother is not only impatient and rude but also makes empty threats of the sort which only a twelve-year-old would ever carry out.

"Seems like we're going to stay here for a while," you observe in resignation, using your toes to fish for the blanket on the floor without having to leave Seiya's lap. His devil-may-care attitude is rubbing off on you, as you can already see Taiki and Yaten Kou leave the apartment in a huff when they finally comprehend that their brother won't come out of his refuge. Making yourself comfortable on Seiya's lap and draping the blanket over your precious singer so that he won't catch a cold, you console yourself that the situation could be worse. It was dumb luck that you've placed the vases directly in front of the door, forcing the intruders to make a hubbub loud enough to startle you two out of the drunken haze. Also, the compulsive kissing had begun to hurt, and it was time to take a break from it to recover and let time flow naturally again.

Outside, the sun is still rising as if time had really stopped or at least slowed down so much that you can no longer feel how it passes—or the reverse is the case and you can sense the passing of time so acutely that every second seems to last for an eternity. Some people claim that time flies when you're having fun but you've discovered that it's actually the opposite. Time always seems to pass slowly when you're enjoying yourself—and happy moments only appear so short in retrospect, after they're gone forever.

Overcome by exhaustion and the warmth Seiya radiates under the blanket—he has already dozed off, to all appearances—you close your eyes as well and listen to the hustle and bustle from the corridor with smug satisfaction. It seems Taiki Kou is now mopping up the water on the floor and collecting the shards while Yaten Kou (having exhausted his thesaurus of expletives in the meantime) is rummaging through something you believe to be a medical kit. Thinking of Kudo, who is hopefully still asleep, you've just fallen into a pleasant reverie when Taiki-san's deadly serious voice announces, "One!"

Within a fraction of a second, Seiya has pushed you off his lap and is now shoving you towards the wardrobe with his right hand, his left hand fixing the door handle in a tight clutch to make sure that no one can come in.

"My clothes!" he orders, eyes wide open and alert.

"Two!" Taiki Kou dramatically continues. "If you don't come out in a second, I'll come in!"

"Wait a minute!" Seiya gives the door a curt knock. "I'm still in my pyjamas," he lies, smirking at you as the blanket slips from his shoulder. "Just one or two minutes so that I can get dressed and do my hair." With an impatient flick of the wrist, he holds out his palm to you. "Quick! Any pullover and any pair of jeans will do."

In answer to your raised brow, he hurriedly explains to you that Taiki is in an extremely foul mood. And whenever Taiki is in his (admittedly rare) psycho mode, he is the most impetuous and irresponsible of the three of them. "If you don't want him to walk in on us like this, please give me something to wear."
"What play are you staging, Seiya? Don Juan?" Taiki Kou pounds on the door with his fist. "I give you exactly one minute from now on! One minute! Sixty seconds! Do you understand?"

"Got it," Seiya sighs. "We'll come out in one minute."

"Like hell we will!" You glower at the door, suppressing the urge to tell his brothers to get lost. On the one hand, you haven't wanted to make a negative impression on Seiya's foster brothers, who are obviously very close to him even after their band breakup. On the other hand, they're too dense for nuances so that you will have to depend on your skill at using unambiguous wording.

"Listen!" you raise your voice, keenly aware of Seiya watching you with undisguised enjoyment. "You two have barged in on us in a most embarrassing moment. And I really don't want to make your acquaintances when I'm only dressed in a bathrobe which doesn't even belong to me. I'm also sure we can handle the mess in the corridor on our own. So please go away before—"

"Fifty, forty-nine, forty-eight," is Taiki Kou's only response to your speech. Leaning against the door, Seiya is now huddled under the blanket, laughing openly about both Taiki-san and you. While he is indubitably the most charming man you've ever met, he is also the most exasperating in his unflappable happiness. Irritated, you give him a slight kick in the ribs, which he parries with his wrist before he plants a placatory kiss on your ankle.

"Don't brag! We all know how great your voice imitation skills are." Yaten Kou's high voice sounds now dangerously near. "You have forty seconds to come out. It's two against one. You know you don't stand a chance, Seiya!"

"It's actually two against two," you tell Seiya as you're ransacking his wardrobe for something which doesn't look like a theatre costume or a rag—obviously, stranger-san has been wearing the same clothes for the past ten years. Throwing him a pair of black-and-blue striped socks, a decent pair of black trousers, black underwear, and an old midnight-blue shirt, whose colourful diamond-shaped patches and whose frills at the cuffs match his whimsical personality more than the mundane jeans and pullover he has asked for, you grimly inform your new boyfriend about your strategy: "If they really dare to break in, you'll have to tackle Taiki-san so that I can take Yaten-san because Taiki-san is too tall for me."

Getting dressed at a speed which makes you feel dizzy just from watching, Seiya only laughs at the idea.

"You really want to fight Yaten in that bathrobe?" he asks, leaps over the bed, and throws open the window to let the crisp morning air in. Watching him make the bed in three efficient movements, you can't help but swell with proprietorial pride. There he is, your perfect house-husband. Your perfect life partner!

"Your perfect assassin," Gin's voice, which has been preserved intact in your memory, mocks. And another morning in another apartment in Azabu Juuban springs to mind, when he routinely made the bed before loading his trusted Beretta for "work"…

"What are you thinking of?" Seiya has just removed the satin band around his hair so that the long black waves are now spilling over his shoulders and cascading down below his waist. Startled, you recall the fedora and the shawl he wore when you two first met and hazily wonder how he would look if he were languidly leaning against a black Porsche, bending his head and cupping his hand to light himself a cigarette.

"On second thought, I'll pass. I'll wait for you here until you've escorted them out. Just pretend that I'm not here and fake a migraine so that they leave you alone." Still bewildered by your own
thoughts, you distractedly brush your palm over the heads of the roses on his bedside table, enjoying the sumptuous pleasure of their petals against your skin. There have been similar roses in your hotel room in Kyoto as well, scarlet roses which Gin bought you after noticing your admiring gaze when you two passed the flower shop. You've almost forgotten that Gin had been an attentive and caring lover whenever he was in a good mood—when whatever demons he had been fighting with gave him a short break to focus on you.

The fragrance of kinmokusei and orange blossoms in Seiya's hair only contributes to the curious feeling of déjà vu, reminding you of the first months of your relationship when Gin still wore a similar perfume. But rather than feel unsettled by it, you prefer to see it as a good omen. It looks like your otherwise infallible nose really did pick the wrong lover back then—at Infinity when you saw stranger-san for the first time and met Gin again after years of studying abroad. Be that as it may, now that you've eliminated the wrong choice, the remaining man must be the right one…

It's peculiar how your mind is always trying to find a pattern behind coincidences—sifting through the random occurrences to search for the "fateful ones" in a futile attempt to bring the events of your life into a narration.

"Why do you want to hide here?" Seiya, who has redone his ponytail in a flash, quickly collects the damp clothes on the floor and drops them into the basket behind his electric guitar. "I thought you wanted to go home because you've locked up Kudo in your apartment. And Yaten and Taiki won't leave very soon because they usually stay here until three p.m. when we all go to the studio for a jam session. They wouldn't leave me alone even if I pretended to be sick… I also thought we didn't want to hide this."

There is the saying that if you marry a man, you also have to marry his parents. In this case, you seem to have slipped into a relationship not only with Seiya but with his foster brothers as well.

"Say, aren't you ever alone?" You shudder at the thought that not only his brothers but also Odango's friends—"Mina", for instance—seem unduly fond of him.

"Almost never," he grudgingly admits. "Not when they're within the radius of one hundred miles."

"You can't seriously expect me to meet them while I'm only wearing your bathrobe!" You demonstratively fold your arms in front of your chest, frowning.

He gives you an uncomprehending look, reaching out to smooth the crease from your forehead.

"Why not? It's not like you're naked."

"I might as well be!"

"Should I give you a pullover or a long shirt of mine?"

If looks could kill, he would be dead. But at least he seems to know as well as you that yours truly in his trousers would be a ridiculous sight.

"Five, four, three," Taiki Kou interjects.

"Stop it!" Seiya pushes the bed against the door to block the entrance. "Just give me another minute." Perching on the bed with the sun in his face and his tousled black locks crowning his head like an eccentric hat, he reminds you of someone—an image, an icon, or an allegory?—whose name has slipped your mind.

"Why don't you want to come out and meet Yaten and Taiki?" he asks, bracing his back against the
heavy wooden door as a series of violent kicks shake the walls. "Although they're somewhat nasty this morning, they're both pretty nice on normal days." Alternating between hilarity and disbelief, he endures your lecture on how society judges impulsive women who "share their favours too easily" whereas promiscuous men are viewed with a mixture of admiration, envy, and amusement, as all women—well, the eligible girls who count—are still expected to be perfect angels who can only be conquered by their great and irresistible husbands in their wedding night...

Even before you've finished your sentence, it dawns on you that he is part of a social circle which is very different from yours. Surrounded by boho artists, musicians, and actors who easily slide in and out of short-lived affairs or embark on sexual adventures without caring much about the moral judgements of the stodgy rest of the world, he might be yearning for the romantic ideal of finding a soul mate and growing old with that person without ever contemplating the physical or social aspects of the union. When he wordlessly pulls you into his arms for a kiss, your mistrustful side begins to suspect that he is bored to death by your sermon even though his method of shutting you up is a delight you would rather not forgo.

"Now I know why people indulge in extramarital affairs," he chuckles, slipping a wayward hand under your bathrobe, which you slap away in mock aggravation. "No one in their right mind can enjoy making love to a cold angel, can they?" He pulls his face into an innocent, bovine expression of contentment and coyly bats his long eyelashes—and you relent, letting go of his teasingly roaming hand to kiss him again.

"Caught in the act on the morning after… I should have expected this, knowing we're jinxed," you remark, alluding to the rain, which has changed your plans and turned what should have been a perfectly platonic date with a nice stranger into this predicament your reputation won't ever recover from.

"Doubled jinxed," he gravely reminds you. "Considering that we're doubled jinxed when we're together, this is completely harmless compared to all the disasters which could happen."

"Dammit, Seiya! We're breaking the door down!" Taiki-san announces, whereupon Yaten-san confirms with audible excitement, "I'm ready!"

"I'm coming out now!" Seiya groans. "You two are insufferable! Just give me a few seconds."

Come on, he coaxes. They'll find out about us sooner or later, anyway. Why not bring it behind us now? They will either like you or they won't, and perhaps it will take them time to adjust—but what else can actually happen?

All right, you give in, ceremoniously straighten your bathrobe, and run your hands through your hair for lack of a comb. After all, his brothers are the ones who should be ashamed of themselves for their childish antics. Waiting for Seiya to draw the bed away from the door, you resolve to face Taiki-san and Yaten-san with aplomb. The last kiss Seiya gives you before taking your hand and pulling you with him only eases your decision.

Still blissfully unaware of the impending catastrophe and delirious with unadulterated happiness after the assurance that this must be true love because he is already introducing you to the two most important people in his life after knowing you for only one night, you blindly follow your new boyfriend as he pulls the door open with a flourish and, giving you a smile which could have melted even Anokata's heart, presents you with a nightmarish scene similar to one you have already seen before…

…The large pool of blood at the door, which looks even more sickening as it has been diluted with water and smeared by the bloody mop, which has been carelessly tossed onto the floor and is now
lying in the middle of the corridor like a human's remains; the masses of tiny green, white, and pink flowers strewn across the floor; the long-stemmed roses of three different colours (Yaten-san and Taiki-san have brought a few bouquets of yellow and white roses they must have received from their fans at Two Lights' to dump them on Seiya)…

Taiki Kou—who cuts a fine figure in his midnight-blue suit despite his bony limbs and his unusual height—is towering directly over you, staring down at you with intelligent, hypnotic eyes shimmering in an almost violet hue as they are illuminated by the morning light. Despite his imposing presence, however, your senses are irresistibly drawn towards the smaller, more delicate figure on the bench: a glamorous-looking young man in a similar midnight-blue suit, whose fine-boned arms are resting limply on Seiya's two helmets, between which he is sitting. His bewitching, almost feminine beauty seems heightened and, at the same time, tarnished by his long silver-white hair and his vivid, horror-filled green eyes. And even amidst the scent of roses and blood and Seiya's mysterious, alluring scent, your nose can still easily detect Yaten Kou's heavy fragrance…

The refined, tea-like fragrance of pure, undiluted sweet osmanthus—the scent of the red-haired girl.

g.
For what feels like a whole century, you only stare at Yaten Kou while Yaten Kou, in return, is staring back at you. Indistinctly, you can hear Seiya introducing his brothers to you even though you can't tell what he is saying with the continuous buzz in your ears. That late summer afternoon in Tsukino-san's café, which has been haunting you all night, has been revived with a vengeance in the figure of this stranger, who doesn't only possess the scent of the red-haired girl but also Gin's hair and eyes. As irrational as it is, you have the feeling you're facing the personification of your guilt—and from the look on his face, you surmise that, for some obscure reason, Yaten-san is going through the same turmoil as you.

After the initial fright, however, your mind begins to acknowledge the differences, breaking the spell. Yaten-san's hair, as smooth as the finest piece of silk, is of a pure silver-white—with no tinge of either red or gold even in the vermillion light. His round, childlike eyes, opalescent and bright like those of his foster brothers, are of a warm green several shades paler than Gin's. In spite of his lovely feminine face, whose flawless features challenge even Kaioh Michiru's ethereal beauty, Yaten-san is also unmistakably male. At second glance, you notice that he is not as tiny and frail as you thought. Slender limbs, toned muscles, relaxed shoulders of perfect proportions, and a comparatively long neck compensate for the delicate stature. And when he slowly rises from the bench, you notice that even though he is resting his weight on his uninjured foot and leaning against Taiki Kou's arm for effect—the wimp is mimicking an invalid!—he is still taller than you by a few inches.

With a deep sigh, he takes Seiya's blue helmet into his hands. And as the image of the red-haired girl and her blue-clad biker flashes through your mind, you're struck by an idea which you immediately dismiss as ridiculous although you know that it will be nagging at you from now on.

"I've told you over and over again that you shouldn't leave them on the seat," Yaten-san complains, deliberately ignoring your presence by keeping his gaze fixed on Seiya. "One day, someone is going to steal them."

"Why, no one has tried to steal them yet," Seiya lets go of your hand to catch the helmet, which his brother has just tossed at him. "This is Miyano Shiho," he casually proceeds with his introductions after the small digression. "Since we got drenched on the way to Two Lights', she had to stay here for the night."

"I've called you!" Ignoring the introduction, Yaten-san knits his perfectly groomed brows with the righteous indignation of a betrayed wife. "But you didn't answer your phone."

"Forgot it in my jacket, which is still hanging in the bathroom. I've tried to call you back. You should have waited for a few hours before smashing—"

"I didn't smash it—only turned it off and dumped it into the trash! That's where mobile phones belong if they don't serve their purpose!"

"You're such a spoiled brat." Seiya gives his shorter brother an affectionate pat on the head before retreating into the bedroom to place the blue helmet on his bedside table. The white helmet, which you've been wearing when Seiya and you were roaming Roppongi (and which is still lying next to the medical kit), must belong to Yaten Kou then, according to your deductions. Apparently, Seiya and his oldest brother are sharing Seiya's bike or even riding it together.
"You impudent little scamp!" Yaten-san's eyes are still glued to Seiya as if you didn't exist. "You forget that I'm five months and twenty-two days older than you."

"I'd remember it if you acted your age—"

"—says the one whose behaviour hasn't changed since he was eleven! Why are you wearing the shirt you wore at the circus, by the way?" Yaten Kou wrinkles his nose with the distaste of a bona fide fashionista and, for the first time during the talk, darts you a curious look. "Since when do you like frills?"

"Shiho has chosen it for me." Seiya winks, but you can't say whether he has winked at his brother or at you, as you only caught it in your peripheral vision while you're still busy studying Yaten Kou.

Will you ever feel threatened by the ubiquitous beauties—groupies, actresses, musicians, dancers, even Odango's friends—flocking to your boyfriend? With a pang of jealousy, you realize that the real threat to Seiya's affections is Yaten-san, whose insults are uttered in a tone so extremely caring that you begin to suspect that the centre of their erstwhile love square wasn't Kakyuu as you automatically assumed. Even Taiki Kou is regarding you coldly, looking you up and down with an expression of dislike, worry, and reluctant interest. Nevertheless, the hint of hostility leaves his lustrous eyes immediately when you meet his gaze. It looks like the actor has just stepped onstage. And the smile he gives you afterwards is so amiable that you almost wonder whether you're projecting your feelings onto others and have only imagined his antipathy.

"Miyano-san? I think we must apologize," Taiki-san begins, his dramatic, edgy voice turning softer as he is speaking. "I thought it was only one of Seiya's voice-imitation pranks. He can be such a kid at times… So you two got caught in the rain on the way to Two Lights'? Your clothes must still be in the dryer at the moment. And I suppose you two refused to come out because you didn't want us to misinterpret the situation."

To your surprise, Taiki-san, who is indisputably Seiya's more pleasant brother when he is not provoked—has just given you the chance to save face although he must have seen you two holding hands when Seiya opened the door. Or perhaps he is so convinced of his brother's innocence (or is so clueless himself—you aren't sure) that he didn't suspect anything, thinking that you and his brother can only be at the hands-holding stage. For a moment, you are tempted to take the bait, put on a demure smile, and lead him to believe that you've been worked up over a potential misunderstanding. But since Seiya and you have decided not to hide this relationship from his brothers and it would be a pain pretending to be the angel you aren't, your moment of weakness doesn't last long.

"There isn't much to misunderstand, actually." Seiya is right and you might as well bring it behind you now. "I'd have preferred to meet the two of you when I'm wearing my own clothes. But now that the damage is done, I'll just pretend that oversized bathrobes have come into vogue this season."

Both Yaten and Taiki Kou only stare at you, scandalized. Expecting Seiya to be proud of you for holding your own against his overbearing brothers, you turn to flash your boyfriend a victorious smirk. However, he has just picked up Kaito's card, which must have fallen out of your bathrobe unnoticed, and is now crouching on the carpet, beholding the Queen of Spades with an unreadable expression. When he raises his eyes to meet your gaze, you can tell that he has spaced out so completely that he has missed your riposte.
"Kuroba has given you one of his double-faced cards?" It was less a question than a statement, and you believe to hear a trace of anxiety in his voice, which you, after a glance at his smiling face, reinterpret as harmless curiosity. He joins you at the door while flipping and turning the card in his hand, studying it from every angle. "It's extremely well-done! From the side, it's as thin as a normal playing card."

"I met him in Ueno-koen before he went to Two Lights' for his performance," you inform Seiya in an irrational urge not to conceal the smallest detail from him. "This is supposed to be a token of his affections. A lucky charm, so to speak."

"But why did he give you a death card as a lucky charm?" Seiya looks intrigued.

It surprises you to hear that the Queen of Spades is a death card. The moment you laid eyes on it, you felt that the black lady was a most fitting card for you. Recalling Kudo's remark that both the Ace of Spades and the Queen of Spades have negative connotations, you regret that you haven't been interested enough to ask Kudo what the cards mean. While you believe in tarot readings as much as you believe in astrology or in the existence of aliens on earth, you thought it was delicious irony that Kaito has accidentally drawn you a death card although he wanted to give you a lucky charm.

"Kaito originally wanted to give me a wild card symbolizing the unexpected," you tell Seiya, wondering why both Yaten and Taiki Kou are now watching you with growing interest. "But then the unexpected happened and he drew the wrong card for the first time in fifteen years."

Chuckling into his fist, Seiya looks inordinately amused by Kaito's blunder.

"But it seems like you did pick a wild card for yourself, after all." He flashes you an enigmatic smile. "Or your wild card has found you on its own…"

Shaking his head, Taiki Kou gives a sigh, which almost sounds like a suppressed groan of pain.

"It seems the days of the good lyrics are over now," he observes in resignation. "I'm going to write the lyrics for our songs from now on."

"You sappy idiot!" Yaten-san mutters under his breath; and when Seiya mouths back something you can't guess, you wonder in irritation whether the two of them are exchanging these endearments on a regular basis and whether you're up to their eccentric flirting, as you honestly can't tell what the repartee was about.

"Is the Queen of Spades really a death card?" you ask to change the subject, reaching out for the card Seiya is still holding.

Before you can take the card, however, Yaten-san has already snatched it out of Seiya's hand.

"The Ace of Spades is generally seen as the death card or at least the card of misfortune." He gazes at you directly for the first time, rolling his pretty feline eyes with exaggerated boredom. "The Queen of Spades, on the other hand, is supposed to be a malicious, cunning woman, and indicates the betrayal of a lover or a friend." His eyes bore accusingly into yours as if he weren't talking about the Queen of Spades but you. "When it serves as the Queen of Swords, a tarot card, it represents intellect and sound judgement independent of emotions. "Reversed," he turns the Queen of Spades upside down, whereupon you notice for the first time that this Queen of Spades is not reversible like court cards usually are, "it means the opposite, indicating that your emotions are interfering with your judgement and distorting your perception."
"The Ace of Spades can mean either death or the opposite, luck defying death, whereas the Queen of Spades sometimes carries connotations of death as well—for example when it's delivered to your door by the Mafia." Taiki-san takes the Queen of Spades from Yaten-san, throws an almost tender glance at the Queen's face, and returns her to Seiya, who doesn't show the slightest inclination to give her back to you. "And sometimes, the Queen of Spades doesn't bring death in the literal but rather in the figurative sense, like in the song by Styx."

"Styx?" You give him a blank look, as the name only reminds you of the river on which Charon's boat carries the souls of the dead to their final destination. While you're well versed in Greek mythology after your education at Infinity, you don't know anything about the musical world.

"Beware of the Queen of Spades," Seiya begins to sing quietly, taking you by surprise, as you aren't prepared for his tantalizing singing voice despite having heard it on the radio once—a voice so dangerously seductive and yet so unattainably distant in its unique beauty that it's impossible for the enthralled victims to escape the rush of longing. "Her black widow's curse might find you yet… Beware of a love that you will regret… Her love means only your death…" He trails off, leaving you with the same sense of emptiness as years ago when his song on the radio ended and you wished that he would start singing again.

"Don't worry, it's not about love," Yaten Kou looks down at you with a condescending smirk. "It only means that you should never gamble because luck is a bitch and you'd better not depend on it."

"Yaten!" Taiki-san gives his brother a reproving nudge.

It's hard to believe, but this grumpy guy is extremely talented, Seiya apologetically says. The perpetually bad mood is partly caused by his frail health, which is so tyrannical that he would fall ill if he doesn't get the right amount of sleep, food, and exercise for just one day. "Yaten doesn't only sing, dance, model, act, and master any instrument after learning it for two weeks, he also has an uncanny knack for reading people." Apparently, The Talented Mr. Shortie (as you've secretly dubbed Yaten Kou in your mind) has also designed this gorgeous set of playing cards, Seiya tells you, which is why you can see their small 'family' immortalized in it.

"I can't see any of you on this card," you indicate the Queen of Spades and, drawing on your good mood from the "olden days" when Seiya and you were still alone (it seems to you as if those moments are now gone forever), pretend to compare each of the three brothers to her.

Unamused, Taiki-san only raises a serious brow and wrinkles his high forehead while Shortie, who is now leaning against the door frame, blows at his side-swept bangs with an exasperated sigh. Seiya is the only one who smiles.

"Since he is such a cocky narcissist, Yaten is the King while Taiki is the Jack. The Jack doesn't match Taiki's character, but there wasn't any court card that would have fitted Taiki."

"I'd have expected you to be the Jack," you tease him, whereupon Seiya winces.

"How kind of you! Well, Yaten, who is less nice, has also designed a card for me even though I haven't agreed to come back with them yet—"

"Shizuka-san has already begun to sell the cards to the fans," Taiki-san dryly informs him. "So, if you do come back with us, your card will be a free addition to the set. If you don't, our fans will still be able to play almost any card game without you."

"So which card are you?" you thoughtlessly ask, giving Seiya's unruly locks, which seem to have
grown overnight, a few strokes with your fingers, before the obvious answer dawns on you and you finally comprehend why he claimed you've found your wild card without Kaito's help.

"There is only one card in the whole set which fits you, fool!" Shortie hisses.

Seiya and Taiki-san laugh at his customary insult. You, on the other hand, have begun to feel sick as your gaze has fallen on the auburn tresses of the Queen of Spades, who might as well be a stylized version of the red-haired girl…

"And this," Seiya inevitably continues, absently caressing the Queen's pale cheek with his thumb, "this is Kakyuu."

A/N: Finally I've arrived at the chapters which are more fun to edit, which is why I'm on an editing spree. Sorry for spamming the readers who receive FFNet alert emails for this fic.
Vaguely...

Vaguely, you recall Gin's smirk when he told you that the young woman has survived. Either he thought that being in a coma didn't count as dying, or he was the opinion that it was the ideal statement to calm your frayed nerves without telling you an outright lie. Without success, you try to fight the unwelcome memories that assault your senses—all the gruesome details after Gin had regained control over the vehicle and you turned to throw a last glance at the two people on the street... The blood, the flowers, the midnight-blue car, which had helped Gin corner the biker but kept its distance during the crash and which then carelessly hit the unconscious girl from the side, sending her body to the pavement as it sped up to follow Gin's Porsche...

The codename member in that car had been executed, so Gin told you, as the Boss had strictly forbidden any attempt at purposeless killing and was justifiably incensed at this sadistic treatment of an innocent bystander, who didn't endanger the Organization and should never have been hurt in the first place. Although it reinforced your suspicion that Gin didn't want to kill the girl and that it was you who caused the accident, you had been grimly satisfied when you heard the news, thinking that, for once, Anokata's punishment made sense and was directed at the right person.

The red-haired girl—Seiya's foster sister—is dead; but you can't feel anything but pity for Seiya and yourself at the moment, when your supply of empathy is limited and you're numbed by the realization that everything between Seiya and you has suddenly changed, and that it can never be the same again. Gone is the idealistic view that you won't need to keep any secrets—that one day, you can tell your lovely boyfriend all about your past, about the Organization, Gin, the red-haired girl, and Pandora's Box, as he seems like someone who wouldn't judge but only listen.

Yet hope, as flimsy as it is, is always the last thing which dies. It goes without saying that now is certainly not the right moment to confess to Seiya that you've caused the accident, but you're almost certain that he will be able to forgive you for a tragic miscalculation in view of your good intentions. In fact, this could strengthen your bond instead of wrecking it if you're careful enough and take your time...

Or he will never be able to forget and hate you forever for destroying the girl he regarded as the personification of kindness, you uneasily concede, realizing that Seiya and you are, in a way, still strangers, and that you might never be able to read him as easily as you can read Kudo.

In your boredom, you might have wished for the unexpected—but this is the worst coincidence that could have happened, you realize, trying to collect your thoughts despite the conflicting emotions raging inside you. Ironically, you did sense that there was a connection between Seiya and the red-haired girl the moment you recognized the bike and saw Seiya wearing the blue helmet although you were already too fond of him to linger over the theory. Unaware of all the implications, which you should have been able to deduce if you hadn't let yourself be swept away by his warmth and his zest of life, you've willingly climbed on his bike without knowing what you've got yourself into...

"She is very pretty," you can hear yourself saying, trying to gain time to think, evading Seiya's troubled gaze resting on you.

"She was very beautiful." Yaten Kou begins to fidget with the red parasol in the umbrella stand beside him, apparently hurt by the realization that Seiya has already told you about her. "The drawing doesn't do her justice."
Kakyuu—the "fireball"... Perhaps it was her fiery name which made you imagine Seiya's Kakyuu to be the wild, temperamental type. The red-haired girl, on the other hand, appeared so extremely quiet and ladylike that you didn't even for a moment suspect that they could be the same person.

Now that the truth seems so transparent, you wonder why you haven't drawn the parallel between "Kakyuu" and the girl's conspicuous red hair and reddish-brown eyes, which must have been the reason why Seiya's foster parents had given her the seemingly unsuitable name.

You feel guilty for all the wrong reasons, not so much because you might have caused the accident (as you had honestly tried to save her back then), but because, in the end, you have unwittingly taken away from her everything, even the man she loved. Kakyuu was, as you can see with the benefit of hindsight, a typical 'good girl' who was thrilled about rebelling against the rules by telling a stranger a lie—bragging about the lover she didn't have to give herself the air of a woman of the world.

With a twinge of conscience, you begin to see her as the complex person she was, acknowledging her quaint sense of style, her flashy dress, her heavy make-up, her overlong hair, her shyness, her sad smile, and her good manners. Being an old-fashioned lady only by upbringing and not by choice, she must have felt overwhelmed by Three Lights' fame and wondered whether she was interesting enough to keep Seiya by her side considering all his other more attractive options. In spite of her great natural beauty, Kakyuu was insecure and helpless, eager to become more glamorous and independent when the "seventh crow" stole a backup of Pandora's Box (to secure his freedom?) and the accident happened. Instead of living with her seventh crow as you thought, she has been dead for almost two years, dying on your birthday because one of her foster brothers (Seiya, according to Kudo's deduction) pulled the plug to her life support system...

The blue-clad biker, who has only been a side character in your life until now, has suddenly taken centre stage. From the things you've learned, you draw the inevitable conclusion that one of the three brothers must be the seventh crow. Since Taiki-san is much too tall to be the man in blue, who wasn't much taller than Kakyuu even in his helmet and his biker's suit, you deduce that it must have been Yaten-san, who is unable to remember you (as he didn't see you through the window of the car?) although he is visibly plagued by a sense of unease in your presence.

And yet a few things still don't make sense. How could Yaten Kou become a codename member of such an incredibly high status at such a young age? Did he enter the Organization to support his younger brothers after they left home? You're almost fond of Shortie now that you know he has assisted Tenoh-san and you and was the only one who dared to vote against Akemi-nee-san's death when all the other crows have already voted for her execution.

Why did Seiya lie to you, pretending to know next to nothing about the Organization while it's improbable that he didn't know that his oldest brother was one of the highest codename members? Apprehensive about your own deductions, you take a step back to examine them. You can still remember the figure on the bike—a slender person with narrow hips and waist—as he was racing along the sunlit, tree-lined road, slowing down when the girl behind him, who was riding side-saddle and clinging to his waist, began to lose her balance. Yet you can't tell whether it was Yaten-san, or Taiki-san (who might have grown by leaps and bounds in the past years), or even Seiya himself (who was a few inches shorter eight years ago). Just because Yaten Kou wears the same fragrance as Kakyuu (as he always mixed her perfume for her?), he doesn't necessarily have to be the man on the bike. Now that you think about it, it appears to you that Seiya, too, looks like the blue-clad biker from behind, a similarity you've already noticed before.

"Are you feeling sick again?" He gives you a worried look, touching your damp forehead. "Cold sweat is never a good sign."
"No, I'm all right… Just a little tired."

Even though one of the three brothers was the "boyfriend" on the bike, you're certain that he hasn't seen you through the window of Gin's Porsche. Now that both Kakyuu and Gin are dead, this will stay your secret forever, as you cannot ruin what Seiya and you have for a fleeting moment of relief. Ill-judged honesty and redundant confessions more often wreck love than salvage it.

Grudgingly, you admit that Seiya is less harmless than he looks if he was the seventh crow. The accomplished liar would have lied about practically anything he has told you without batting an eyelid. And he is probably keeping more secrets from you than you from him without having a crisis of conscience…

"We don't want to stand around forever, do we?" Yaten-san complains. "I'm exhausted, too, and so hungry I'm about to faint!"

"Let's go in and have a look at the gyoza," Seiya suggests, throwing his arm around your waist to pull you towards him. "You can have breakfast or a coffee while I iron your dress for you."

The world seems oddly intact again when your anxiety dissolves in his embrace. Kakyuu and the seventh crow have ceased to matter, for you're sure that nothing will be able to destroy your mutual trust, which has been as immediate and instinctive as your implicit trust in Kudo.

"You have to clean the corridor first, lazybones!" Shortie reminds Seiya with audible bitterness as he coolly turns away. "There are still a few shards. You don't want to cut your feet on them."

In response, Seiya scoops you up in his arms and, while you're trying in vain to keep your bathrobe in place, carries you into the living room, where he throws you onto the sofa before he returns to the corridor to mop off the blood and the water. Laughing off the comments of his foster brothers, who assert that infatuation invariably destroys braincells and that he is the living proof of that fact, he once again makes you believe in the illusion that love is the only thing which counts, and that the past doesn't matter in the least compared to the future.

g.
Part 14: Like a red herring...

Like a red herring...

Like a red herring in a mystery novel, Kakyuu has diverted my attention away from the main problem. Unlike a red herring, however, she has eventually led me to it. I had been so busy agonizing about Seiya’s reaction if he should discover the truth about the role I played in Kakyuu’s accident (a very unlikely scenario) and the disastrous impact my secret was going to have on our relationship (a more likely development!) that I completely overlooked the obvious clue to the impossible obstacle between us—a clue which has literally been hanging in front of my nose all along...

Perhaps it was "stranger-san" as well—Seiya, whose sheer limitless reservoirs of smiles have been so distracting that my mind refused to acknowledge the possibility that he might not have been a former ally but an old adversary instead. In my eyes, he was—and may forever be—a living compilation of all the men I’ve loved, possessing everything I liked about each of them and, endearingly, even a few of their annoying quirks and faults. For all his worrisome impetuousness, recklessness, stubbornness, excessiveness, flirtatiousness, and arrogance, I could find in him Kudo's integrity, charisma, and brilliance, Kaito's wit, humour, and charm, Gin's secrecy, sensuality, and elegance, Rye's determination, protectiveness, stoicism… There was also an elusive quality that belonged only to himself, an unknown ingredient I had never found in anyone else before him. Idealizing our love in my fantasy, I've deluded myself into believing that all my previous failed attempts at love were a preparation for our perfect fairytale romance—that in reality, my subconscious had always been searching for him alone.

"I take everything back," Kudo, who has just returned from the bar, wryly remarks with an inclination of his head in the direction of Furuhata Motoki-san and his adventurous Nishimura Reika. "If they can maintain a long-distance relationship for ten years, you two are able to do it as well."

Despite his words, we both know that he has deduced the truth, having witnessed my reaction at the announcement of Seiya's comeback and imminent departure for L.A. Nonetheless he seems only staggered and almost saddened by the knowledge. If Kudo is relieved that Seiya and I have already broken up something he considers to be a classic case of blind love, he is considerate (or rather compassionate?) enough not to let me know.

The moderator on the radio, who has been interviewing hordes of hysterical fans in the meantime, is announcing the song with which Three Lights made their debut eight years ago. Its name shakes me out of my apathy, as it brings back my recollection of a remark Seiya made last night, and my irritation at his harmless lie—another of his silly pranks—demands its verbal expression.

"'Search for your love,'," I murmur in disbelief. "I should have known it…"

The look Kudo gives me implies that I should elaborate on it, as even his deductions skills are limited.

"'Search for your love!' He told me it was the name of his fragrance," I try to explain to Kudo before I give up, realizing how insignificant the detail must sound in his ears. "Whatever. I can't believe I've fallen for it although it's only the name of his debut song." Like Kakyuu, who lied to me about her non-existent boyfriend, Seiya must have lied to me about the name of their perfume just for fun.
"You've been deceived in more than a way, so it seems," Kudo coolly says, taking my cardigan from the hook. This time, I let him help me into it without putting up a fight, feeling too exhausted and indifferent to bicker with him about unimportant things when there are more important issues to disagree on.

He has got it all wrong, I tell him as the background music and Yaten and Taiki Kou's muted voices in the intro are slowly leading into the familiar melody I heard that summer afternoon when I met Kakyuu. "I've… only put it on hold because I didn't feel ready for it." But Seiya didn't deceive me, I insist, trying to convince not only Kudo but also myself, for insecurity and mistrust—my old enemies—have crept up on me after our separation. "I think he was really serious about me." Otherwise he would never have brought me to his private apartment.

Pulling at Kudo's arm, I flee from the song after returning Furuhata-san's disappointed "goodbye". Apparently, today is the day of farewells—something I've never been good at, preferring to take leave without formalities and decorum. Downstairs, the melody is following me into the Crown game centre and out of it into the street, continuing in my head even when it's no longer audible.

Perhaps Seiya didn't lie, for all the things he said didn't necessarily exclude the truth although he often omitted certain details. In this case, Three Lights could have taken the name of their family's fragrance for their debut song as an in-joke or even a hidden message—a firm promise to Kakyuu, who was forced to stay behind, to languish at her parents' place and wait for her rescue like a helpless princess in a tower after her three foster brothers had left home.

"Search for your love"—that's how they always called it when they were small, Seiya claimed. His parents—as tolerant as they were (or at least that was the impression I received when he talked about them)—simply accepted it and never referred to the fragrance by another name. At that time, I didn't know that he had just revealed to me why a relationship between him and me would never work. In retrospect, I wonder whether I would have listened to the voice of common sense even if I had grasped the significance of his disclosure.

Before my inner eye, I can still see him at the fountain with the harp-playing Gemini, his lips curved in the roguish smile which had begun to capture my imagination and draw my attention away from the hard facts. The reflection of the moon in the water and the rustling weeping willows have also made a splendid backdrop to his mesmerizing voice and the wind in the top layers of his hair, whose soft, short curls—so I imagined—were wonderfully evocative of spirits dancing in the night. He was the ideal blend of thrill and security, familiarity and outlandishness. I loved everything about him, his air of mystery, his hidden ponytail, his voice, his scent, even his long, worn leather jacket…

I think we should have given it three different names or more because I have the feeling we all made mistakes while memorizing the formula and ended up with three different scents, he said, impulsively telling me a long guarded family secret, for he must have instinctively trusted me and been as oblivious to my past as I was to his. It's a shame since they were so proud of it. My poor parents…

Kudo and I have returned…

Kudo and I have returned to my place in complete silence, as I'm too devastated by the news of Seiya's departure and Kudo too confused and despondent about the development, which he can't
make sense of, to say anything. In contrast to our bleak mood, the midday sun is still blazing down on the blooming world, playing on the iridescent fabrics of the curtains behind the windows and catching the subtle auburn shade in Kudo's dark hair. Unsurprisingly, my landlady waylays us on the stairs when we enter the house. With a triumphant grin, which stretches from one ear to the next, she informs us that she has just found out that Kudo is a good friend of "Heiji-kun".

Hattori's mother and she studied with the same kendo teacher when they were both beginners, she told us. Since she liked the peculiar poise of the kendo champion so much, she made sure to stay in touch with her afterwards and to meet up with her whenever she went to Osaka. Hattori's mother (whom my landlady must have called to rave about the handsome detective who has solved her "case") has just told her on the phone that Kudo Shinichi wasn't only Heiji-kun's friend but also the one who has found them such a "nice, quiet tenant". Thanking Kudo effusively for bringing her a manageable tenant like me, she dotingly pats me on my shoulder and rubs my back, petting me as if I were a pedigree cat.

"She also told me that your girlfriend's karate is deadly!" She beams at Kudo. "But I'd never have thought that she could be a karate champion." Turning to me, she looks me up and down, nodding to herself as if she is extremely impressed. "You're not short but still rather petite, I must say! I'd have expected someone who is, how should I put it, less dainty and more athletic."

Easily satisfied with idle gossip, she has mixed up everything and leapt to the wrong conclusion due to her lack of information and her poor research. But perhaps I shouldn't mock her when, at Seiya's place, I almost did the same. Telling her the truth that I was suffering from a migraine —"Thank you, but I already have very strong painkillers at home"—I drag Kudo with me into my apartment, fighting the urge to go to bed with a hot bottle (my usual remedy for depression) when the door has finally fallen shut behind us and we are alone again.

It wasn't only the lack of information which thwarted my attempt at playing detective. My memory of the accident, incomplete and perhaps even inaccurate, presented me with difficulties I couldn't overcome. After eight years, I'm no longer sure about what Kakyuu really said. Did she claim that she was waiting for her "boyfriend"—or was it me, who put the word into her mouth just because I was waiting for my boyfriend-to-be as well? In front of the flower-shop, the seventh crow had pulled Kakyuu by her hand to the bike—a gesture which left an impression on me because Gin never held my hand at that early stage of our relationship—and Gin's remark that she was the typical good girl falling for the stereotypical bad boy further strengthened my mistaken assumption.

In addition, my emotions have interfered with my honest desire to find out the truth. I was unreasonably jealous of her—the girl I believed to be Seiya's reason to run away from home. Apart from the irregular surges of pity and horror which swept through me whenever I thought of her cruel fate, I secretly resented Kakyuu for ruining our relationship by putting on me the intolerable burden of guilt. The lingering uncertainty and the fear that I would never find out the truth about whether or not I was the culprit of that case was also torturing me.

Was I really responsible for Kakyuu's accident? Or did the accident happen due to Gin's miscalculation when he threatened the seventh crow? Unless Tenoh-san opens up tomorrow and tells me the whole story from her point of view when we meet up at Tsukino-san's, I will never know.

To the best of my recollection, it appears to me now as if Kakyuu had only asked me whether I had seen a blonde man in a blue suit—a man who was agile and organized although he was always in a hurry. A man who was rude enough to honk instead of entering the café to fetch his date. Perhaps Kakyuu did want to give me the impression that they were going out with each other—perhaps she
didn't. It was only one of the many unimportant little details which were distracting but didn't matter.

Tomorrow… Just the thought of it fills me with frustration, as if I didn't have the motivation and energy to last for another night. After the ups and downs I went through since yesterday's twilight, I feel so indescribably exhausted that I would rather die!

"I think you should take a nap," Kudo suggests. "You look like you need it. If you want, I can wake you up in an hour."

No thanks since I don't want to oversleep my life, I decline, startling both Kudo and myself with the vehemence of my answer. The thought of waking up all alone because he has abandoned me for a new case once again is enough to make my stomach clench in knots. As pathetic as it is, today I can't bear to sit in my apartment by myself even though I used to enjoy solitude.

"The rumours about Three Lights' comeback have always been unreliable," Kudo tries to console me as we return to my sofa, which has become our favourite place to relax. The last time he heard about it, Two Lights was supposed to make their comeback in July instead of December while Seiya was supposed to have retired—and now they say that Three Lights is returning in July instead of December as planned. "There is no point in brooding about it. If you two have put it off because of his career and you can't bear to see him leave, I think you should at least give him a call."

Another light finally goes on in my head, illuminating a few cryptic remarks I overheard but didn't understand—remarks which seemed so unimportant that I wouldn't have paid attention to them if Seiya and his brothers hadn't been strangely agitated when the topic was brought up.

Shizuka-san told the reporters last night that our comeback will be in December, not in July as planned. The suppressed fury in Taiki-san's voice struck me as odd even though I wasn't interested enough in the date to pay attention.

Why in December, Seiya asked, frowning.

Christmas season, perfect for fluffy romantic ballades. Yaten-san violently kicked against a large china vase on the floor (one of the last that were still intact), which promptly earned him a well-aimed hit from Seiya's mop. That is, if you don't join us and add some of your darker stuff to the album.

I'd prefer it to be in July. Seiya continued to mop the floor, his frown deepening. It was new to me to see him angry, as I had only seen his gentle, good-humoured side. Nevertheless, I was so taken with him that I liked his angry face as much as his humorous one. Unlike Gin, even his darker emotions weren't threatening in their intensity, as his aggression seemed devoid of brutal violence. I was almost certain that Seiya couldn't have been the seventh crow for many reasons: He was too amiable, too spontaneous and kind; he seemed truthful when he insisted that he had never belonged to any group apart from Three Lights; I couldn't imagine him to honk at Kakyuu, as he didn't use the horn at all when we were on his bike; and I was sure that, if he had been the seventh crow, he would have spotted me—a girl he had already met—through the open window of Gin's Porsche...

So you've finally decided? beamed Shortie, who, kneeling on the bank with his feet gracefully tucked away on one side, unintentionally gave a hilarious parody of a mermaid on the shore.

Not yet. I have to talk it over with Shiho first. But I've made it clear to Shizuka-san that I don't want...
our comeback to be in December of all months. Seiya's voice sounded colder than usual, hard and distant like his unapproachable, cool public image. *It's not fair of her to force it.*

After pouring us water into our glasses and dropping another handful of APAH capsules into my palm, Kudo strides into my bathroom and returns with two boxes of tissues, which he nonchalantly places in front of me. Irked by his assumption that I was about to misuse his shirt again, I shoot him an irritated look. Even if I had enough tears left to weep, his gesture would have effectively killed the urge.

"Don't you want to tell me now why you've 'put it on hold'?' He lets himself drop into my armchair with the air of someone who has just bought it and is now enjoying his excellent purchase. "If he was so serious about you as you claimed, the breakup doesn't make sense. It's hard to believe that you've done it only because you didn't feel ready for it or because of his career." His piercing greyish blue eyes are boring into me, luring me into confessing with the unusual tenderness of their calm, steady gaze. Fortunately, I'm not easily swayed by other people's compassion for me, having been taught by Gin to resist the alluring magic of pity.

"It's Hollywood—we're talking about the main role in a huge franchise, maybe even in two—versus unemployment and the freedom of a starving classical musician and actor who will have to pay more for his travels than he earns. He will be broke by the end of this year at the latest if he continues to hide from the public and live on his savings, so Shortie and Stick told me." I swallow my capsules of APAH with the stoicism of a woman who is learning to cope with a terminal illness. "I think it's better for him to forget about me and focus on his acting for the next years. I must also admit I'm not the right woman to be waiting for him in the wings or on the set either."

Shaking his head at my obstinate refusal to tell him the truth, Kudo hands me my water glass without a comment.

"I'm not dying," I remind him, emptying my glass in one gulp. "No need to pamper me."

But this isn't living either, Kudo forcefully asserts. I'm only a shadow of myself, suffering as if my world were ending because of someone I don't even know! His eyes roam the living room for a moment before resting menacingly on my lavender rose on the bar counter.

"I swear I'll feed you two pills of APTX and turn you into a toddler or an infant if you harm my flower!" I warn him in my darkest voice—imitating the tone in which Gin always used to threaten me when I was small—before he can act on his impulse. Reminded of the tests whose results I haven't yet checked, I push myself up from the sofa, hurry over to the cupboard where I keep my blood culture bottles and medicine chest, and gaze hard at the blood samples, which—standing neatly in a row—look perfectly identical to the images in my medicine books in their absolute perfection.

"You'll be perfectly all right, you drug-abusing hypochondriac!" I smirk as relief is flooding through me, giving me the same sensation of lightheadedness I got whenever I had drunk too much sherry with Gin or stayed too long in the sun on Tenoh-san's beach. It's ridiculous, this tremendous relief at something so banal as the test results I've already guessed—but I feel so incredibly light, as if one of my mosts important tasks in life had been completed and a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. "You only need to maintain your health—ergo: rest, sleep, and eat regularly. Cases or no cases, you need your daily dosage of eight hours of sleep and three substantial meals!" Noticing in dismay that I sound less like the doctor I'm trying to mimic and more like a caring wife, I darkly add, "I'm going to tell your Ran-nee-chan to use her karate on you if you don't comply with my regulations. And now I'll teach you to mix APAH all by yourself so
that you won't forever depend on me!"
At the end of my life...

At the end of my life, one of my biggest regrets will be having forced Kudo to mix APAH in my apartment out of all places. While it might sound melodramatic to claim that the last hour was purgatory for both of us, it's not a gross exaggeration. Apart from his singing (which can put anyone except himself into a coma if only he does it long enough), his skill in mixing APAH—or the lack of it—is a weapon so deadly that even Gin's Beretta seems harmless in comparison.

"I've told you that I can't cook," he whines, evading a flame, which has just shot high into the ceiling. "It's absolutely not in my nature to prepare food."

Obeying my instincts, which have been sharpened by the constant danger of the last hour, I let go of the sponge to grab the fire extinguishing towel next to the sink and throw it over the burning pan while Kudo climbs on the bar counter to deactivate the smoke alarm so that my landlady won't suffer a heart attack. Resigning myself to the one truth that learning requires motivation, dedication, fighting spirit, and time—none of which either of us possesses in abundance at the moment—I decide to accept his lame excuse and admit that the catastrophe was partly my fault as well. Why should he learn something he fears and dislikes under pressure just because I, on a whim, suddenly feel compelled to withdraw my help? It's like forcing a five-year-old to clean its children's room on its own after doing it for him every day.

"And I told you that you only need thirty minutes in the morning to learn it. Ran and your parents have spoilt you rotten! Two years at Infinity would have done you good." In spite of my harsh words, I continue to scrub the counter with Seiya's air of insouciance, copying his masterly survival mechanism.

"Did they teach you self-discipline there?" Kudo, who has just opened the window to get rid of the smoke, darts me a curious look. It's the first time that I've mentioned Infinity to him without being pestered.

"They didn't. But if you didn't manage to meet their requirements, you were out. I'm doing the same to you now. Another hour of this and I'll end up murdering you and myself—slowly and painfully… with a syringe or with a spoon!"

"You've seen how I'm doing when I'm trying to mix it with your assistance!" Kudo retorts. "Now just try to imagine what happens when I'm trying to do it on my own…"

He has a point, I must concede. After all, I can't risk him to blow up the whole neighbourhood and kill Ran or Fusae-san in the process.

"Then tell your Ran-nee-chan to mix it for you!" I surrender, filling the last APAH capsules for him while he is mopping the floor with his usual proficiency. "I only need to make sure that you know the formula by heart. We're going to use mnemonics if you can't learn it by rote."

Kudo pauses in the middle of his movement and sighs, preparing himself for protesting against my suggestion.

"Any objections?" I grimly raise the spoon in my hand, knocking it threateningly against the counter. In my mood today, I'm not particularly averse to a fight. He won't win with any dirty tricks since yours truly—far-sighted as she is—has already saved her lavender rose by moving it to her
"I think you've misunderstood what I said," he slowly begins. "Actually, what I meant…"

A mass of fast-moving clouds obscure the sun for a fleeting moment, dimming the golden light of the early afternoon. Seeing Kudo in the soft light with the mop in his hands, I'm overcome with a renewed sense of loss. The boundaries between Seiya and him begin to blur, as if they were the same lover in two alternative universes… The one that has managed to get through my defenses. The one that ultimately got away.

Perhaps the problem with me and my bygone loves is that they never really "get away". All of them are staying with me forever, hiding in the shady nooks of my mundane everyday life. It's impossible not to think of Gin whenever I see a black fedora in a display window or catch a whiff of tobacco, when I watch the snow falling silently in the dark or spot the gleam of a cigarette butt. While my memories of Kaito are pleasant and harmless, calling on me on sunny days and rainy nights in welcome reveries, my memories of Kudo and stranger-san are beautiful only in disguise, tormenting me with the mirror of my own inadequacies and my everlasting darkness…

So you were the seventh crow, weren't you? You said you supported Tenoh-san's group even though you weren't part of it. My voice was hopeful, almost urgent, as we were strolling past Tsukino-san's café with our fingers intertwined. Don't worry. I was a codename member myself. I don't mind if you once belonged to the Organization…

While I couldn't imagine Seiya to be the seventh crow, I almost wished that he was after the palaver his brothers caused. If Seiya had been the seventh crow—so I told myself—he and I would be linked by the same tragedy, would have fought on the same side with the same allies, and defeated the same enemy. We would have lied to each other about Kakyuu but our deceptions would have cancelled themselves out. Generous as he was, he would have been able to forgive me for an accident I didn't want to (and maybe didn't even) cause. Eventually, a stronger bond would have developed between us. Things would have been perfect if he had been the seventh crow!

No, of course I wasn't. Seiya blinked at me in genuine surprise. What are you talking about? Bewildered, he stopped at the bridge to look me in the eye. I thought Taiki has told you everything. Don't tell me he has only played a prank on you when he showed you our terrace! He smiled, shaking his head at my strange question. Apparently, he would have been greatly amused by the misunderstanding if he hadn't noticed that I wasn't feeling well.

Meanwhile, I recoiled in horror from the realization that he wasn't lying to me—and the truth, which I had feared but not dared to express, was creeping on me like a poisonous snake. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I recalled Taiki-san's story about Kakyuu and their parents and became aware of the fact that there was something I didn't comprehend—that my seemingly reasonable deduction was faulty because it was based on a mistaken assumption…

"Sorry, what did you just say?" I try in vain to focus when I notice Kudo's gaze linger on my face.

"Ah, forget it!" he sighs, lips pressed tightly together in pent-up frustration. "Since you obviously can't pay attention to anything I say at the moment, I'll tell you another time."

…This morning, when I was leaning against the closed front door, waiting for Seiya to leave, there was a moment of indecision, an intoxicating rush of unblinking determination to succeed against all odds. Torn between my desire to be happy and my wish to be good, I stood in front of the stairs and stared at the flower in my hand, wondering when my reckless mood would pass so that I could leave this unfortunate episode behind me. As the feeling didn't go away, I opened the door and stepped outside in a daze. I was telling myself that I might as well go through with this relationship
until the sticky end—Pandora's Box, Tenoh Haruka, and Seiya's parents be damned!

Alas, luck was on Tenoh-san's side, as stranger-san had disappeared without a trace. The street was bustling with strangers but conspicuously lacked the one I wanted to see. After I left, he must have run from me as though he had been chased by the devil. Looking about myself in bewilderment, registering for the first time that the morning sun had climbed high and was now illuminating my surroundings with its cold, harsh light, I had the vague feeling that I had been on trial and failed the acid test this time.

"Some loves are so destructive and cost you so much that they aren't worth it," Kudo asserts after we've cleaned up, and throws my cardigan at me. "I don't think staying indoors is good for you now. I still have a few hours before Ran's train arrives. Let's go for a walk in Ichinohashi Park together."

Relieved that he too, would like to delay work, I insist that he take the formula and the APAH bottle with him so that we don't need to return to my apartment again. After locking the door and tiptoeing out of the house for fear of meeting my landlady, we both dash into the street, turn left at the corner to take the bus at the intersection, and stared in shock at the vast sea of people in front of us.

"This is unbelievable!" I murmur before it hits me that I've lost my handbag and don't have any cash on me. We must go back, as I can't take the bus before I've fetched my card and withdrawn money from the bank, I admit, whereupon Kudo only rolls his eyes and tells me that, for once in my life, I can let him pay the fare.

"All right, that is if we manage to get to the station and on the bus without being trampled to death," I agree.

Now we're fighting our way through the crowded street thronged with shoppers, couples, mothers with prams, and young adults wearing Three Lights headbands and Three Lights shirts, throwing roses and singing drunken songs even though it's still early in the afternoon. Everywhere I look, I can see street vendors selling Three Lights playing cards and the odd merchandise. Children are imitating the ninjas in Three Lights' second live action series while teenagers are cosplaying Young Sherlock Holmes, Young Moriarty, and Young Watson in *Detective Boy Holmes*…

Once one's attention has been called to a detail, one won't be able to escape its ubiquitous presence. How can I flee from Seiya and my guilt when everywhere I go, I'm haunted by his image? At the traffic lights, I pick up a playing card someone has lost on the street. It's Taiki Kou dressed as the most unfitting Jack of Hearts, not the card I've hoped to see.

Kudo, who is holding my arm for fear of losing me in the crowd, is steering me through the masses, shielding me from the worst trampling and elbowing specimens of our human species. Once again I'm reminded of stranger-san, who has often displayed the same streak of protectiveness as well. Perhaps even the most independent person can plunge into an abyss where they can't climb out without someone else's support. Kudo's old-fashioned gallantry, which once drove me to distraction, are today a welcome help, as I've begun to feel myself weaken with every passing hour.

"Where have you lost the handbag I gave you?" Kudo asks all of a sudden. Darting him a sidelong glance, I notice that he has lost his healthy glow and only looks slightly better than me, pale and fatigued in his open jacket and white shirt. "Did you lose it in the bus yesterday? It would have matched your dress perfectly, which is why I bet you've taken it with you to Ueno-koen."

Last night, immediately after we met, he noticed that I didn't carry a handbag, he smugly proceeds. My refusal to take the bus while walking cautiously—as if my feet were hurting in my new sandals—further strengthened his suspicion. A few cursory glances last night, followed by a careful inspection of my cupboards and wardrobe this morning, showed him that the handbag was nowhere to be found. He would have thought that I had thrown it away in a fit of blind rage if my wallet hadn't been missing as well.

"This is a private matter of mine," I reprove him. Since I didn't ask him to investigate, he should let it rest. "I don't want you to ruin our afternoon with your detective work."

"If you so wish," he grumbles, murmuring something under his breath about recalcitrant evil-eyed chemists.

"I can't hear you," I sharply remark.

"It wasn't important. But this—" Kudo shouts into my ear, as the noise around us, which has been growing with every passing second, is threatening to drown out his words, "—is all Seiya's fault! They're all storming in the direction of Two Lights' in the hope of meeting him or snatching a piece of his worthless merchandise. I bet Sonoko will be there, too."

"The upside of this is that no one will go to Ichinohashi Park."

"How did you become such an incurable optimist?" Kudo asks, appalled.

"Someone told me to look on the bright side."

"Ah."

Luckily, our bus is not very crowded, as all the fans of Three Lights are driving in the opposite direction. After Kudo has paid the fare for both of us, I walk towards the back row and stop dead in my track when time rewinds and I see her again, unmistakable with her odd "odango" hair. She must have got on the bus one station before ours and is now leaning against the window in the same blue jeans, white blouse, and pale pink jacket she wore yesterday, carrying the same blue handbag with silver moon prints on her lap like yesterday, reading in a small paperback. Just like yesterday, her long hair is spilling from her two high buns over her shoulders, gleaming like streams of gold in the afternoon sun. Immersed in her book, she doesn't look up when Kudo and I arrive. All the seats are occupied save for the one in front of me.

"I can stand," Kudo chivalrously says, offering me the seat next to Odango.

"Age before beauty," I accept, and make myself comfortable next to her.

Yesterday afternoon when we were sitting next to each other in the bus, she was to me only a cute young woman with very long hair. Now that my personal interest in her has been aroused, I'm trying to see her with Seiya's eyes. She has a delicate, heart-shaped face with full cheeks, a flat snub nose with barely visible freckles, round blue eyes with very straight long eyelashes, and honey-blonde hair done up in buns that would look silly on any other woman. At second glance, she is despite her irregular features much prettier than I thought, not beautiful but exuding an unobtrusive, endearing aura of beauty that grows on one the longer one looks at her. Noticing that she is being watched, she looks up from her book and gives me a distracted smile.

Curious about what she is reading, I sneak a glance at the paperback in her hand, an illustrated collection of short poems and aphorisms. A quote from Fernando Pessoa, which has long faded
from my consciousness, jumps off the page as if it had been highlighted: "The feelings that hurt most, the emotions that sting most, are those that are absurd—the longing for impossible things, precisely because they are impossible…"

With a deep sigh, Odango closes the book and crams it into her handbag before she props her head against the windowpane and shuts her eyes. Nevertheless, I know it well enough to let it continue in my head.

…nostalgia for what never was; the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else; dissatisfaction with the world's existence. All these half-tones of the soul's consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an eternal sunset of what we are.

When I discovered them in Paris in Jean Black's library, these lines—testifying that decades ago, someone else had suffered from the same emotions, had dwelled upon the same thoughts—were a great solace to me. Now, after Pandora's Box and the price I had to pay for enduring peace, it's impossible for me to keep my emotional distance. When one has suffered too much, one can no longer linger on poetic language—for all one wants is that the sorrow will end. The moment one realizes that hopeless longing is one of the greatest torture in life, one either breaks or finds the effort of will to leave it behind.

Naturally, Seiya has never belonged to the seven crows, which is no consolation to me as I thought before I knew that the truth was worse than anything I could imagine… Why should a free spirit like him join the Organization—or any other organization—if he would break their rigid rules, scorn their uniforms, mock their pretentiousness, and abhor their bureaucracy? I would have been able to guess the truth after what Taiki-san told me if I hadn't shut my eyes and ears to it. But instead I had been wondering why Stick seemed to be wrestling with his words, making a fuss over unimportant details like whether Seiya had really left of his own accord or whether he had been kicked out by their parents instead.

Yaten and I stuck by Seiya after our parents gave him an ultimatum and he chose to leave. It wasn't easy since we weren't allowed to take anything with us apart from the clothes we were wearing. Sheltered as she was, Kakyuu would never have survived on the streets. But our mother told us she'd let Kakyuu go if Seiya made it…

"Look," Kudo says, touching my cheek briefly to make me turn my head.

Through the window of the bus, which is laboriously chugging along, I can see the first orange and reddish glow of a sunset in the azure sky. It has come unusually early, as if it were trying to make up for yesterday's long twilight.
Sunsets in Paris...

Sunsets in Paris start earlier and end later than sunsets in Tokyo—a fact you've known before but had yet to see with your own eyes. As insignificant as the difference might be to other people, it impresses you so much that you could almost forget how disappointing Paris was in the beginning.

You were underwhelmed by the city of love, to say the least. At its best, Paris was a conglomerate of tree-lined avenues, skyscrapers of tinted glass, decaying historic buildings, and exclusive shopping districts with a distinctive cosmopolitan atmosphere. At its worst, Paris was a cold, dirty, stinking, drab grey mess. No tint of blue could be spotted on the monochrome grey sky, which was almost completely covered by a veil of dull brown smog. In December, the broadleaved trees were already naked, sporting only a few dead leaves, which flapped erratically in the biting wind like Kalima butterflies before they flew away.

The omnipresent dirt was most distracting, especially to a person who could be described as being "spotlessly clean" even by Japanese standards; and you wondered whether the Parisians were so accustomed to the grimy look of their city that they could no longer see it or whether they had simply resigned themselves to the inescapable dog poo, which was pasted in heaps against lampposts and tree trunks like provocative installations of modern art. To your sensitive nose, the air smelled vile even in winter. All sorts of smells assaulted your nose at every street corner: the complex fragrance of expensive perfume mingled with the odour of unwashed clothes and sweat, the scent of fresh crêpes tempered by the stench of smoke and trash—evidences of human laziness, greed, and inefficiency blended with manifestations of nature's cruelty and unstoppable decay.

Hattori, Kudo, and you spent your first night in Paris near Quai Montebello, where Kudo and you—committed to your disguises—shared the queen-sized bed while Hattori made himself comfortable on the single bed at your feet. In contrast to Hattori, who tossed and turned and sawed logs in his sleep (and who wouldn't stop even after you got up twice to shake him!), Kudo was perfectly still. Just like his younger alter ego, Kudo liked to lie on his back with his legs crossed and his fingers interlaced—as though he were trying to shut himself off from the world and keep up the appearance of being accessible and open at the same time.

"Scientists contend that back sleepers who cross their legs have relationship problems," you teased him the following morning. You were making the bed while he was still lolling in the armchair to which you had ordered him, waiting for Hattori to leave the bathroom so he could shower and shave. His hair, though still uncombed, didn't point in all directions but was astonishingly smooth save from the one cowlick which—defying the laws of gravity as well as the power of combs—was perpetually standing up on his head like an antenna. Perhaps—so you speculated in one of your rare juvenile moments—this was the secret why he was always alert whenever the situation required him to: Even when he was asleep, his magical cowlick was awake!

Still lethargic in the morning (meitantei-san was a night owl like you and seldom looked like a living being before eight o'clock), he shot you a dark look, in which you could detect a flicker of insecurity.

"The same scientists would claim that it's impossible to shrink a human being." He rolled his eyes. "Arrogant as they are, they just can't admit to themselves that they still don't know anything about the human brain."

It was odd to hear him out of all people rant about arrogance and the limits of science. But even in
your slightly distracted mood, you could tell that he looked strangely vulnerable. You had hit a
nerve, you realized, and immediately made an effort to forget what you had just learned so that you
wouldn't act on silly ideas, which you were going to regret later.

Now was definitely not the right time to pursue a man who was still in a relationship. His
annoyingly nice girlfriend and her terrific karate skills aside, you could never reconcile your plans
for your post-Pandora's-Box life with a future by Kudo's side even if he were romantically
interested in you. If anything went wrong at Pandora's Box (and you knew from experience that
things seldom went according to plan), you would have to stay away from Kudo for his and your
own sake, living abroad for a few years until the situation had calmed down. Initially, you had
planned to await your inevitable assassination with aplomb. Tenoh-san, however, had kept her
intransigent attitude when it came to your safety.

"If our scapegoat doesn't take the bait and you end up opening Pandora's Box yourself, I'll need to
make sure that you get out of this alive," Tenoh-san mused, knitting her brows. "Since you told me
yesterday that your detective is rather attached to his pretty girlfriend and isn't in love with you—"

Although the calendar claimed that it was still autumn, a harsh winter had already crept up on this
part of Japan. To fight the gloom and dreariness of the first days of winter, which was worse than
the cold, Tenoh-san had lit a small fire, in front of which both of you were now crouching, sipping
water and cocktail while discussing your emergency plans and modus operandi.

"He isn't in love with me! He cares about me just as he cares about the Professor and the kids—"

"—Then I'm sure it won't hurt him too much if you change your identity and start a new life in
another country."

At first, you had been appalled by her suggestion. Running away was, in the eyes of all your
friends, an act of cowardice. It also cost so much energy to start anew, so much emotional strength
you no longer possessed. It would also hurt the people you cared about most, disappointing them
and putting them into a state of constant anxiety.

"I can't do that to the Professor!"

Tenoh-san had only thrown you a long look—the type of look people usually threw total imbeciles
—before she got up from her pillow, let herself fall into the armchair in front of the fireplace,
stretched out her slender legs, and took another sip of her cocktail.

"I never said that you should run away and leave all of them hanging! Kudo would frantically
search for you, which would only create new problems for us. I think you should leave your
detective and your Professor a message, which I'm going to deliver myself. After opening
Pandora's Box, you can go with me to Venice for a few years. Michiru and I each have our own
apartment there." Noticing your lack of enthusiasm, she sighed. "Why are you so attached to Beika
out of all places? Your Professor could live without you before you two met. He will survive
without you just fine. I'm sure everyone will benefit from the arrangement: I can protect you better
if you stay in my vicinity, you won't put your Professor in danger, and your detective will be able
to focus on his girlfriend without distraction. In Venice, you could start again from scratch: new
language, new career, new loves, new messes to clean up." She gave you a suggestive wink.

"You're very easy on the eye as a grown-up, and Kudo and you are on the same intellectual level…
You also told me you liked his girlfriend. You don't want to separate the couple by accident, do
you?"
Although you had given up the delusion that Kudo could possibly feel more for you than friendship, it still hurt to imagine his inevitable engagement and marriage once his struggle against the Organization was over. The very thought of having to congratulate him on his wedding cut you to the quick, and suddenly the idea of going to Venice with Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san looked like a very desirable alternative.

"Don't worry. To Kudo, I'll always be 'one of the kids'… But Venice sounds fine to me," you accepted, much to Tenoh-san's delight. The former "Serenissima" was a singularly beautiful lady, Tenoh-san enthused, especially at night when she was quiet—when her teeming streets were devoid of tourists and only roamed by cats and lovers and the odd gamblers and burglars. Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san had two very beautiful apartments there. Kaioh-san considered selling her small apartment, where she was presently staying, to a friend. But Tenoh-san's apartment was spacious enough to accommodate a dozen people.

"Hotaru-chan would be thrilled to have you around, and you can have lengthy, tedious science talks with Setsuna-san whenever she visits us!"

"Listen, I don't mind accepting your hospitality for a few weeks or even a few months, but you can't expect me to live in your private apartment with your 'family' for years."

"Why not?" She looked genuinely surprised. "Michiru and I have enough money to spend for the next two hundred years, and you can't expect to make a living in Venice, where prices are only topped by human stupidity!" As you knew, money was always distributed unfairly—she declared—and rich people would always grow richer as poor people grew even poorer in the course of their lives. It was only fair and natural that the rich helped out the poor whenever they could. And since you didn't own anything but children's clothes and a few elementary school books while Tenoh-san was rolling in money, it was Tenoh-san's duty to provide for you when you needed her help. Apart from that, she adored you—and you couldn't deny that you liked her, too. She and you were going to get along extremely well.

Even though you understood the logic behind her explanations and knew that Tenoh-san's generosity was not in the least calculated, you were still uncomfortable with the arrangement, preferring not to be burdened with another debt you could never repay.

"Can you help me find a job or give me something to work on so that I won't feel like a freeloader?"

"Michiru has a small academy in Venice. She will surely find a fitting job for you," she distractedly agreed, her eyes already brightened by a new idea. "But your talk of you being 'one of the kids' to Kudo actually gave me an epiphany! Say, do you plan to take the antidote before opening Pandora's Box?"

"I do," you gingerly placed your empty glass on the bar next to the fireplace, "since it will be much easier to shoot in an adult's body if one really has to defend oneself. In a child's body, it's strenuous for me to hold a weapon for long unless I use both hands. As an adult, I can use a Beretta with either hand, which makes it easier for me to react in time."

"Well, since no one knows about APTX but a bunch of people—most of whom will be as dead as a doornail by the time you open Pandora's Box—"

You knew what Tenoh-san was suggesting even before she had finished her sentence.

"You think I should open Pandora's Box in my child form and take the antidote afterwards? Or—"
"Or open it in your adult's body and take APTX again afterwards, which sounds smarter but is actually more risky. Will you shrink again if you take APTX for the second time? Or will you only die from the second dose?"

"Most probably, I won't die. I've already tested it on the few mice and rats that survived the first dose of APTX after I finished the antidote. They all shrank again although a few of them would shrink slightly less than the first time."

"Then this is our best bet in case you have to open Pandora's Box yourself." Tenoh-san beamed. "I'm going to adopt you after you take APTX for the second time. Hotaru-chan will be happy to have a sister, Michiru and I will be happy to have a second daughter, and you can start anew under the best circumstances. It's a win-win situation!"

You took a moment to contemplate the option. Accepting Tenoh-san's offer would mean to begin a new life in Venice as Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san's child. You would have gorgeous lesbian celebrity foster parents (never mind that they were part of a group of prodigy vigilantes in their spare time!) and a foster sister, who was frail and taciturn but just as adorable as Akemi-nee-san once was. Knowing your future foster parents, you would be tutored at home—in other words: be left to do whatever you pleased. You would probably take up dancing again—a pastime you greatly enjoyed at Infinity—and trade your chemicals for oil paints and brushes. And Kudo would continue solving cases in Japan, would get married to Ran, would visit you with his wife and kids once in a blue when you, too, had grown up and started a new career as… As what? A musician? A painter? Very unlikely! You didn't have the ambition for either.

Contrary to Tenoh-san's speculations, you wouldn't have any lovers. You were through with that aspect of life, too weary of love to be willing to go through the hassle of adapting yourself to another person again. You would pursue a career, partly for the sake of having it, partly because you needed to provide for yourself and for the Professor when he got older and, as you would expect, poorer—for he sucked at planning and tended to overspend his budget…

You couldn't picture your life in ten years, couldn't see the Miyano Shiho or the Haibara Ai of your future, even though you could see thirty-year-old Kudo very clearly. When he visited you in Venice (or in another city?), he would be wearing the new pair of jeans Ran had bought, as he would always find himself too busy to go shopping for clothes when there were so many more important and more interesting things to occupy himself with during the day. He would also be wearing the new pullovers and cardigans and scarves and hats she had knitted, much to your exasperation. He would eat very little in Venice because he was so accustomed to his wife's wonderful cooking, and he would have to squint or wear glasses because he had been reading voraciously in his free time, preferably in bed at night when his wife was fast asleep. When you met, he would cite Sherlock Holmes from memory as he always did, and you would laugh at him and tell him your impressions of him, which he would find annoying and unpleasant, even a bit insulting (although he would have to admit that everything you said was true). You would tease him and mess with his mind without him ever realizing that you never teased other men in the same way. Hotaru-chan, brilliant and intuitive, would immediately notice how differently you always behaved whenever he appeared. But, considerate as she was when it came to other people's private lives, she wouldn't ever mention it…

"I'll consider it," you murmured while your future without Kudo was spreading in front of you like a scroll of parchment filled with ancient scribbles you couldn't read, on which the illustrations—the only things whose meanings you could grasp—all featured Kudo and his unavoidable marriage.

"You're not going to regret it." Tenoh-san smirked. "I'll be the greatest daddy you can imagine."
"Very funny!" You tried a chuckle and then gave up. "I do hope we won't have to resort to this, though. After three years of pretending, I'm sick of mimicking the Professor's cute little girl during social occasions."

"Not when our scapegoat walks into our trap," Tenoh-san agreed. She languorously took another sip of her cocktail, a curious drink whose intense shade of blue looked peculiarly soothing in your present state of mind.

"What's the name of this?" You indicated her glass.

"Blue Lagoon." Tenoh-san smiled. "Do you want to try?"

You didn't, you told her, as you had stopped drinking long ago.

"But I know a non-alcoholic version of this. Wait a minute." She retreated to the bar next to the fireplace while you rearranged the pillows you were sitting on and continued staring into the fire, watching the elaborate dance of the flames and their flickering shadows. In only a few weeks, the whole situation would change. You were going to meet up with M Jean Black while Tenoh-san was going to lure the Organization's informants into a trap, "that person" and his seven—well, six—loyal crows would pay for Akemi-nee-san's death, you were going to secure Pandora's Box for Tenoh-san, and your stay in Beika would be over if Vodka didn't open the door to "Pandora's Box" before Kudo, Hattori, and you arrived…

"Your Blue Lagoon!" Tenoh-san presented you with the blue drink, whose lustrous glow shifted between turquoise and azure depending on whether you held it in your left or in your right hand, near the daylight lamp beside the desk, on which the maps of Paris, Osaka, and Kyoto were lying, or near the fire.

"Thanks."

After mixing herself another Blue Lagoon, Tenoh-san sank into her armchair again, sipped at her drink, and effortlessly glided into her business mode.

"When are you going to give me your undetectable drug?" she asked. If you couldn't come to her before you went to Paris without arousing your detective's suspicions, she could contact you in Paris although you would have to smuggle the pills through customs in that case. "I'll need at least twenty-five of them, preferably in a small jewellery box, which fits comfortably into my pocket."

"Regarding APTX, I've changed my mind."

A deafening silence fell upon the room, punctuated only by the crackling sound of fire, before time resumed its course.

"Great!" Tenoh-san put down her glass. "If you're trying to lecture me on how your drug was supposed to lengthen life instead of ending it, our deal is off."

Her words shocked you—albeit for reasons she couldn't guess. She had just made you realize that you had completely forgotten about the true purpose of APTX. The "Silver Bullet" had been used as a poison for so long that you failed to remember that it was once supposed to bring humankind the childhood it needed—the basis for a happy and meaningful life, which would make people more capable of love, empathy, and altruism.

"I didn't want to say that."

"What did you want to say then?"
"I can't take the risk of shrinking them," you admitted. "What would you do in such a case? Adopt the Boss or one of the crows? What should we do if not only one of them shrank but three or four of them? You can't possibly adopt them all!"

"I wouldn't even consider the option," she coldly stated. "They would only look like children, and their small size would make it much easier for me to take them out without leaving any clues behind."

Even a real, innocent child—if it functioned as a walking bomb—would have to be eliminated in order to save all the people who would end up as victims if you spared the little one, Tenoh-san proceeded. In such a case, she, too, would suffer from her guilty conscience for months, cursing the choice she had had to make. In this case, however, she would have no qualms about finishing off criminals who had wreaked havoc on the world. If this was the only reason why you denied her your drug, you were an absolute fool.

"We can make do without APTX!" you insisted.

"No, we can't!" She defiantly crossed her arms. "Unless you can give me another undetectable drug as replacement, this will be our last conversation about Pandora's Box. I wish Kudo and you luck on your little trip. Please do give the crows you meet my love... if you survive long enough to do it!"
Sunsets in Paris...

Sunsets in Paris start earlier and end later than sunsets in Tokyo, you observe, letting your gaze follow the last rays of sunlight as they fade from the horizon. Standing on the terrace of M Jean Black's house, listening to the muffled music inside, you take time to behold the Seine and Notre Dame at night. Countless lamps are shimmering in the mauve darkness and in the moving water, engulfing the ancient buildings and trees in a mantle of light. Just as you're preparing for Pandora's Box and the downfall of the Organization, Paris is preparing for Christmas. Strings of lights cover the old city at twilight like gold-threaded silk and velvet envelop an aged courtesan. Like an erstwhile femme fatale who is now long past her prime, Paris reveals its former beauty only during twilight and at night, when the signs of deterioration are well camouflaged by darkness and artificial lights.

For the first time since your arrival in Paris, you're struck by the realization that you are "holiding with Kudo" in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. The occasion is precious and, once gone, will never return. Pleasantly sated after M Jean Black's fantastic welcome dinner (you love French cuisine!) and tired of the ceaseless pondering and reasoning of the past weeks, you allow yourself to fall into a reverie about how things could have been if Kudo and you had met by accident—preferably in a city like Paris or Venice—as holidaying strangers who were still unattached...

The attraction would have been mutual and instantaneous, more intellectual and platonic than what you felt for Gin but just as strong. It wouldn't have taken the holiday romance long to mature into enduring love. Even though you two challenge each other too much to become one of those perfect couples that never quarrel and always finish each other's sentences, a relationship between Kudo and you would have lasted!

Foolish delusions are dangerous once they've taken over one's mind, so you effectively nip it in the bud before the infatuation can take hold of you again. Something similar has happened before and ended badly, leading to betrayal and death. No love is worth the ultimate sacrifice, as you know from experience.

On the river bank, a lone figure is standing, smoking a cigarette. The dark man with long hair, whose face you cannot see, is probably waiting for a friend or lover. He reminds you of Rye, who was once waiting under the window of your hotel room in another winter night—before Gin's jealousy fueled his suspicions and Rye's cover was blown.

What are you taking me for, Sherry? I wasn't born yesterday... I've seen how you looked at him!

A third-rate FBI agent (Andre Camel, as you later learned) had mistaken one of Gin's informants for a bystander while preparing for Gin's arrest, Gin told you when he returned from his first real "rendezvous" with Rye (which, bungled by human stupidity and Gin's intuition, never took place). As you feared, Rye disappeared from your lives afterwards. He came back years later under another cover to protect you, partly out of affection, partly out of guilt. Initially, you feared that the old infatuation would be reignited. But in the end, the only thought of him is enough to remind you of Akemi-neesan's death—and whatever you once felt for him is now buried so deep under the remains of your past that you can barely remember it.

"Your Blue Lagoon!" Kudo announces, pressing the cold glass against your cheek with a smile.
The drink in his hand is a deeper shade of blue than the cocktail you drank at Tenoh-san's place, and one sip makes you realize that you've forgotten to tell him to fetch the non-alcoholic version.

"I usually drink the mocktail version of this." You take the glass from him and button up your coat with your free hand. "But since tonight is a special night, I might as well make this an exception."

When you let your gaze roam over the river bank again, the dark stranger has disappeared—as though he had been only a figment of your imagination.

You've given up drinking because you were sometimes hideously drunk when you were working for the Organization, you tell Kudo on a whim. Tonight, you're in the mood to shock him.

"How do you behave when you're drunk?" Kudo asks, leaning against the balustrade. He seems in a great mood tonight, delirious with joy and anticipation. He has shaken off the Organization's spies, passed M Jean Black's test with flying colours, and been accepted into the group of individuals who knew about Pandora's Box: the surviving victims of the Organization, whose lovers, spouses, children, or friends had been ruined or killed. All of them dreamers, who don't work for the government but only for their personal revenge or for their ideals. Pitiful optimists, who have dedicated their whole lives to the goal of making the truth available to the public and bringing the Organization down.

"I tell the absolute truth," you shrug, stirring your drink, "and I kiss everything and everyone in my vicinity."

He colours and stares, fixing his wide eyes on your lips with a look of pure horror.

"Just kidding," you yawn. "It's a tired trope in romance live actions, you see. Just make the heroine smooch the hero or vice versa while they're drunk, and you get the premature, awkward kiddie's kiss that makes the audience swoon."

"A drunken kiss wouldn't appeal to me," he contemplates. "Actually, I'm sure I'd be repulsed by it."

You grimace in distaste, as his words have conjured up Gin's drunken kisses, which Sherry—for a reason you can no longer understand!—didn't mind and even enjoyed in the first months of their relationship.

"So when will the wedding be?" you ask to change the topic.

"Whose wedding?"

"Your wedding, who else's? Haven't you already made plans for it now that you're in your original body again?"

"Heaven forbid!" He opens the first button of his coat and then quickly, impulsively, steals a sip from your straw. "Not at this age! I can't even think of marrying anyone."

But he fears Ran would be happy about a proposal, he admits with an expression of intense pain. He learned about it when he overheard a phone call between Ran and her mother and heard about it again from Sonoko, who can't ever watch her tongue and who thought she had done her best friend a favour by urging Kudo to surprise his girlfriend with a romantic proposal (restaurant, candles, flowers, diamond ring, and all that jazz) on Christmas or New Year at the latest.

"Good luck then!" You knock back your drink. "Christmas is too early but New Year seems a good date. I abhor weddings in general, though. Don't expect me to come!"
As though you had finally removed the lid from a magical jar, Kudo suddenly unleashes a torrent of complaints about Sonoko's pushiness, his mother's unwanted and inappropriate interest in his love life, and all the dramatic differences between Ran and him, which they can't overcome. You calmly listen to his passionate rant and the muted chanson in the background while the first snow flakes are falling silently on the twilit world, reminding you of the night Gin and you met for the first time since you left the Organization.

You know that Kudo is talking nonstop to avoid the one problem you two had better address—the Gordian knot neither of you can bear to cut through. In retaliation for mocking it, Paris sneakily weaved its famous charm on you on the second day, when you were combing Quai Montebello for Monsieur Jean Black. While Kudo and you were walking along the quai hand in hand, the water glistened, the sun painted translucent rainbows on the sky, the few birds that hadn't flown south sang, his faint aftershave miraculously managed to hide the smell of the trash nearby, and even the smog abetted the city's plan to take revenge on you by taking on the appearance of a mysterious mist or a swirling fog, clouding your judgement when you were still intoxicated by the radical hormonal changes after taking the antidote…

Hattori, impetuous and frank, was the first to comment on the fact. The disguise of you two—he indicated your intertwined fingers—had become much too real, much too convincing. An old fairy tale should have taught you that you should "be bold but not too bold, lest that your heart's blood should run cold", he cryptically remarked in jest, patting Kudo on the shoulder and giving you a reproachful glance, for curiosity killed the cat and it was usually better to be content, to stick with what you already had.

But French couples are really much more touchy-feely than Japanese couples, Kudo vehemently protested in a wretched attempt to defend himself, although he grudgingly let go of your hand and kept his distance for the rest of the search. Nevertheless, infatuation always has an obsessive, compulsive side to it, and you two ended up holding hands again only minutes afterwards, when he spotted M Jean Black in the distance and Hattori's words were forgotten.

Monsieur Jean Black, a tall, aquiline man with Tenoh-san's teal eyes and fine mouth (who resembles an older, more stylish, shorter-haired version of Rye in a blue fedora), was just as frank as Hattori but less obscure.

I was sorry I could only send you the passports of a married couple since no one else fitted your descriptions. He gave you a firm, cordial handshake while his serious face creased into a genuine smile. But as everyone can see, you two are already so much in love that you don't have to pretend at all.

"I really don't want to backstab her or belittle what we have," Kudo asserts. "She is the greatest girl I've ever met—the only one I can imagine being with! I only feel like marrying her would be a horrible mistake. Maybe it's just too early for me to think of marriage…"

Then he desperately tries to be a good boyfriend to Ran by listing all her positive traits, by conjuring up her presence and bringing her to Paris to plant her between him and you on this terrace, whose atmosphere has become too intimate for his liking.

"Marry her or don't marry her—I really don't care," you put a stop to his effusive praises. "Personally, I think you will do it some day if you live long enough. But you should pause for an instant to ask yourself whether you really want to open Pandora's Box."

Although you know you might as well repeatedly bang your head against a brick wall in the hope
that it will listen to your words, you continue just for the sake of expressing your opinion: He is playing with fire, planning to steal files which not only the Organization and several intelligence services and terrorist groups want but also a staggeringly large amount of extremely powerful and influential political leaders need. Once his name has been connected to Pandora's Box, there is no turning back. They're going to find him and shut him up if he is not extremely careful.

"Do you know why there are so many *agents motards* among the guests?" he gravely asks with a sidelong glance at the hall.

You look up at him, resigned. Inside, they are now playing "Charade", Tenoh-san's mother's favourite song.

"I know."

You've overheard snippets of his talks with M Jean Black while trying to give your whole attention to the elderly man next to you, whose daughter has been murdered by the seven crows just because she had a short-lived affair with a secretary of them and accidentally read important mails (which she mistook for romantic messages from a rival) when he was sleeping.

"The seven crows and several high-ranking codename members once received special motorcycle training from former members of the national police," Kudo tells you nonetheless. "When that information was leaked, all of the people who knew about the identities of the crows were killed. Good friends and colleagues of those agents—among them people who didn't even know anything!—either died in an 'accident' or have been convicted of crimes they didn't commit. Many of them are still in jail, serving a life sentence. Jean Black knows about the affair because his wife was the youngest of the first-generation crows. She tried to leave the Organization and was murdered after their wedding."

Kudo didn't ask for details since he could see that the wound has never healed. But he will find the truth in Pandora's Box, along with all the evidence needed to free the people who are still in jail. There are many other cases like the *agents motards*—thousands of victims Pandora's Box can save. There are so many mysteries Pandora's Box will solve, so many murderers it will convict! Apart from that, the families of the dead cannot move on at the moment. But once a satisfying closure has been reached, many damaged people will heal.

"The odds are also many thousands to one that you will be assassinated after the first successful trial," you point out. He couldn't seriously expect that all the people whom he exposes with the evidence in Pandora's Box will sit back and enjoy watching him ruin their and their families' future. "I hope you're aware that the thousands of lives you save will be exchanged for yours. What would Ran say if she knew about it? Aren't you hurting her as well?"

"No, Ran would understand," he gently smiles (at a remembrance?)—and you can feel acutely that, although you are the one he wants at the moment, you are losing him to her. "She knows me. She would simply accept that it's impossible for me not to help them."

You let go of your glass, which he catches in midair while he distractedly adds, "I really wish you could accept it as well."

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g.
Sunset and moonrise can occur at the same time, a fact I know in theory but haven't yet observed in life. The bus is chugging along while the clouds are moving fast, away from the bus as if they were fleeing from us.

Both Odango and Kudo smile like little children when the last layer of cloud breaks and the full moon appears, sharing the same glowing sky with the dying sun...

The face of the woman next to me suddenly intrigues me more than the early sunset. Has she really betrayed Seiya in a worse manner than I betrayed Kudo? If my fears are true and the blue-clad biker has used Kakyuu like Rye used Akemi-nee-san to get information on my research, Odango, who was part of Tenoh-san's vigilante group, might have known about it.

Seiya's attraction towards Odango went according to plan. Odango's feelings for him, however, were unexpected.

Was theirs a love that should never have happened, an attraction between enemies who, in essence, are the same? According to Seiya, Odango is a dazzling, free and easy character: laid-back, generous, charming, heedless of danger—very much like him.

During another, more radiant but moonless sunset, the trees cast long shadows on the road—intricate patterns in colourful shades of green, brown, and grey. The first autumn leaves in late summer flew past the window as Gin sped up, following the midnight-blue car, which was trying to hit the bike in front of us.

Are you two trying to kill them? What does a "red card" actually mean?

Hush, I need to focus! The little rat is even much faster than I've thought!

g.

The midnight-blue car has slowed down when Gin overtook it and is now staying behind, keeping a distance between the bike and Gin's Porsche. Oscillating between horror and fascination, you stare out of the window at the girl you can't help but like. The biker gracefully evades Gin whenever Gin draws nearer, and you realize in relief that, as fast as Gin is, the biker is faster.

"Damn le zajong motaar!" Gin curses under his breath.

"What did you say?" you ask, wondering whether he has just spoken French and said "les agents motards".

He only clenches his jaw, speeds up, and doesn't answer.

You can't see much of the man on the bike, even though you can tell that he has a rather attractive figure. Distractedly—paying more attention to his girlfriend and her bouquet of flowers—you register his comfortable blue leather suit with yellow stripes, his narrow waist, his slender fingers in blue leather gloves, and his unusually relaxed back and shoulders, which don't even tense when
the red-haired girl loses her balance, causing the bike to sway dangerously to the side before he regains control.

"That bike is one of the fastest motorcycles in the world. It can reach five hundred and sixty kilometres per hour at top speed." Gin smirks. "The rat is a natural, that's certain. But I wonder how long his little girlfriend can keep up with it!"

g.

…She is a Pre-Raphaelite painting of a lady in red, who looks ridiculously anachronistic on a motorcycle. Pressing the bouquet of roses to her chest and tightening her grip on her boyfriend's waist, the red-haired girl is staring at the black Porsche with horror-filled, misty eyes, unable to comprehend why the cars are cornering them, before her gaze falls on you…

g.

"How did it go?"

The meeting was scheduled at nine a.m., as the crows and Anokata—like most normal people—need a decent breakfast before work. The trial has lasted for about seven hours, unusually long for "the usual paperwork".

"Well enough."

Overwhelmed by guilt, you run a finger along Gin's high cheekbone and gingerly push his bangs aside. Judging from Gin's ashen face and bloodshot eyes, he must be shattered.

"Get out of here and have a snack!" He fumbles for his lighter and a new packet of cigarettes. "I need to be alone for a few hours. I'm going to join you later."

You spend the whole evening alone on the hotel's roof terrace, sipping sherry and scribbling into your notebook (you get the best ideas for APTX4869 at the most inappropriate time) until you feel pleasantly drunk. The scent of kinmokusei outside, a faint warm fragrance only a few days ago, is now overwhelming, almost nauseating. Gin didn't tell you anything but you can guess that he has received a red card from the six other crows. You know a second will mean his death by their hands—a special execution for a special member.

Since he doesn't join you, you fetch him at nine o'clock, deciding that even though he is death nearer than before, he shouldn't miss dinner. You find him in bed with the full ashtray, staring at the haze of smoke. His long silver-blonde hair, usually smooth and glossy, is greasy, dishevelled, damp with sweat. On the bedside table, next to the roses, is an empty bottle you first mistake for poison before you recognize the familiar evergreen shrub on the elaborate, hand-drawn label.

Seeing his suspiciously swollen eyes and the bin under the desk, which is filled to the brim with crumpled tissues, you deduce in astonishment that Gin—cold and tough Gin!—must have cried. Maybe out of anger or humiliation—you try to convince yourself—but certainly not out of grief and guilt.

g.

"Gosh, you can really see the shadow of a rabbit on the moon!" Odango cries.
Blushing deeply, she looks about herself in embarrassment when her eyes meet mine and she brightens up, giving me a smile so warm and sweet that it's impossible for me to believe that she might have deliberately distracted Seiya.

In contrast to Odango, Kakyuu was withdrawn and self-conscious, burdened by her parents' great expectations and overwhelmed by her foster brothers' fame. Having to face a rival like "Odango atama" when she was frustrated with Three Lights' grueling schedule and Seiya's exasperating reticence, she was an easy prey for a devious opponent…

All of a sudden, I'm overcome by utter disgust—revolted by people with grand visions, people with hero syndromes like Anokata, Gin, M Jean Black, Rye, and even Tenoh-san. Kudo, despite his impossible dreams, is the one exception I can stand. All he wanted was helping the victims of the Organization without realizing that he was about to become a victim himself—minor "collateral damage" like Kakyuu and Akemi-nee-san.

"Let's get out of here!" I leap from my seat.

"But there are still two stations left!"

"It doesn't matter. The weather is great!"

A light rain is going to fall on the way to the park, Kudo remarks. One can tell from the direction the clouds are moving. We should get out at the right station and then take shelter in a café until the rain stops. "The drizzle won't last long since the weather is very much like it was yesterday—sunny with sudden spells of rain."

"You can treat me to tea in the tea pavilion on the way to Ichinohashi Park if you're too frail to suffer a few raindrops." I storm out of the bus. "Are you coming with me now or not?"

"Really, Ai… Today you're a piece of work!"

When the doors of the bus close, I'm once again overcome by a strange sense of déjà vu. Odango has just leaned her honey-blonde head against the window again and closed her eyes, falling asleep instantly, to all appearances, for her head repeatedly (and comically) knocks against the window when the bus chugs away. An elderly couple has come to the station and is now waiting for the next bus. It's the same couple that had been feeding the ducks at Shinobazu-no-ike.

The brown eyes of the old lady, framed by deep laughter lines, meet mine but show no sign of recognition, much to my relief. A furtive glance at her husband tells me that he was one of the people who stared at me when I walked with Seiya. Apparently it was Seiya, who drew his attention in Ueno-koen, as the man only smiles at me politely, without recognition in his eyes. Perhaps he only stared at us because he had recognized Seiya's face, which he knew from the media, in spite of Seiya's disguise.

"They're probably on the way to Shinobazu-no-ike to feed the ducks," Kudo tells me on the way to the tea pavilion while a mist of rain begins to fall, droplets of colourful diamonds in the glorious sunset. "You can see tiny dried bread crumbs on the woman's tote bag, and this bus stops at Ueno-koen."
The mist of rain…

The mist of rain is glistening in the last light of twilight, and when Kudo approaches you, you wonder why he and you always seem to miss the sunset in some way. Your face is still frozen in a polite half-smile—has been frozen for days. You two are the last people left at the grave, as you've known in advance that you will be a terrible hostess during the funeral.

You've sent everyone home, telling them to come on the next day. There would be a small dinner with entertainment—just as the Professor wanted. In his testament, he insisted on an unconventional, cheerful party, brightened by magic tricks and bawdy jokes. Sad funerals are a waste of time—he claimed—and time is a truly limited resource.

Ran and Sokono are going to bring food and candles. Hakuba Saguru is going to coordinate the event while Kuroba Kaito will be there to cheer up the Detective Boys as he did during the goodbye party following the downfall of the Organization. Kudo is going to present all of the Professor's gimmicks and inventions to the guests. And since the Professor knew that you would be traumatized and unable to speak, he insisted that Ai-kun should be allowed to stay away if she wanted as long as she didn't harm herself, for she had always been the type to grieve alone…

You listen to Kudo's voice without knowing what he is saying, as you can't focus on his words when the sound of his voice is already too much. With considerable effort, you can make out that he is offering you to resume the old friendship. He feels sorry for all the things he has said and done, for taking you to Pandora's Box, for the incident on the ship, which gave you both pneumonia, even for asking Agasa-hakase to come to the party in Osaka…

"We were all exhausted so we all made mistakes. The Professor got into the accident because he was so happy about the outcome that he chatted all night and played online games for too long. You know it's not your fault!" You try your best to listen to Kudo and to console him, but you also keep a safe, comfortable distance. He looks miserable and out of place in his smart dark suit, which either Ran or his mother must have bought, but he is sensible enough to agree with you for once.

"I know."

And yet, he has to admit, he can't help but try to piece together the fragments, believing that the picture he gets in the end is the right one. That's the problem with the human mind: one always tries to find a logical pattern behind everything…

"You should tell Ran about this," you suggest. "She has been your best friend since forever. She will know what to do about it."

The truth is, you no longer have the strength to deal with another person's grief—not when you are empty, drained, and feel like dying. You can feel him stiffen and wonder why he is coming to you with this. You two haven't exchanged a redundant word for weeks.

After exchanging pleasantries and even a few half-hearted jokes about how the Professor would love the party you were going to throw for him, Kudo and you are standing at the grave, beholding the flowers on it without saying anything. The real tragedy of love, you realize, is not the absence of the lover but the absence of love—its slow death when all hope is gone.

He has come to you to talk about Ran, Kudo says at last. And you know what he is going to tell you since you've already braced yourself for it after the goodbye party in Osaka.

Watching him leave in the lavender-grey light in his immaculate suit, you cast your mind back to Quai Montebello and Paris. After eating ice-cream in December and trying to dance without
knowing the steps—all the silly things lovers-to-be make when they believe themselves to be unobserved—you tossed a coin and then took the small jewellery box with the twenty-five pills out of your suitcase. The last pill, the twenty-sixth, you kept in the locket of the necklace Kudo had given you—even though you had to throw out the figurine in it…

This is the decision you’ve chosen and the outcome you’ve accepted, but the Professor should have lived for another thirty years, you think, finally allowing the thoughts you’ve tried to push away in. Agasa should have grown old and weak until he had to be nursed. More than once you had envisioned yourself returning from Venice after ten to fifteen years with a suitcase of presents. And you thought you two would be travelling the world afterwards and affectionally mock Kudo’s cozy bourgeois family life in Beika together.

Contrary to your expectations, the Professor, much more far-sighted than you thought, had even provided for you before his death. But you were the only person who didn't even think of bringing a flower.

g.

You can feel the last funeral guest behind you when she finally arrives—having recognized her sweet unisex perfume and her light footsteps, which sound perfectly regular. In her usual husky voice, she offers you her condolences. Her conduct amazes you, as you've expected her to shoot you or at least scream at you for scrapping your plans.

"It's almost like divine punishment, isn't it? Although that would mean that the Boss in heaven is just as cruel as Anokata." You grimly trace Agasa’s name and the dates on the tombstone with your gaze, trying to make sense of what you see to find closure.

Tenoh-san doesn't reply but only contemplates you in silence. You can feel her gaze linger on your face even though you keep looking away.

"Out of all the people who had anything to do with this, I'd never expected him to die."

Wasn't this the justice in which you believed? A life in exchange for a life—an eye for an eye… This was only one life in exchange for twenty-six. Perhaps the Boss above thought that he was being kind.

"It's not divine punishment," she sharply says. "You know this is madness—"

"I didn't say it is." This is just life, unfair and random as you know it. Receiving a just punishment, you ponder, would have been a consolation.

She raises her hand as if she was about to stroke your head, but then she reconsiders it and lets her hand fall.

"You must stop blaming yourself for this, koneko-chan!"

You turn to her and take in her strange handsomeness with tired eyes. Today she is wearing a soft indigo suit and a yellow tie with black stripes, which bring out the colour of her fair hair and really suit her. Great natural beauty is a tremendous asset when it's comforting and inspiring—and you decide to surrender to her influence for now, to try to let go.

"Stop calling me 'koneko-chan'!" You give her a nudge.

You've grown accustomed to the nickname Tenoh-san uses for all the girls she admires—perhaps because both of you believe that cats are independent masters of survival. Nevertheless, you no
longer feel good enough to be addressed by the title.

"I've seen Kudo and you," Tenoh-san unexpectedly says. As harsh as she is, she has learned to recognize a real love ever since she met Michiru. "Your detective is suffering as much as you, I'm sure. You can't let him go back to his girlfriend like this! Don't misunderstand me—I don't propose that you tell him the truth since the law-abiding idiot would throw all of us in jail."

But perhaps you should tell him parts of the story since Kudo should know about what you would have done for him at Pandora's Box—she implores you—all the risks you've taken on yourself, all the sacrifices you would have made for him… It makes a huge difference to know whether one's love is being returned or not. This story will have a happy ending if you can forgive yourself and move on.

"To know or not to know—it wouldn't make a difference at all—" you shrug, "—at least not to Kudo, who would have given his life for anyone. On the contrary, I would only blurt out clues and endanger your group and you will have to eliminate him in the end. Keeping my mouth shut and buying pretty purses will be my main modus operandi for the future."

"I could help you if you want," she begins.

"Please don't!" you cut her off, suppressing the sudden, irrational urge to hit her. You can't bear to see her face or her hands, which are just as tainted as yours. Admittedly, a large portion of your bitterness stems from the knowledge that she will find solace in her music, her motorcycles, her cars, her friends, her happy little family, and the love of her life—whereas you will have to endure this alone.

Turning back into Haibara Ai is impossible now. You don't even feel like a member of the Detective Boys anymore.

"You've already done so much! I'd be thankful if you'd just return to Venice and let me deal with the aftermath."

To your relief, Tenoh-san doesn't put up a fight. She must have pondered this and guessed your answers before she came here. Nevertheless, you suddenly feel grateful, almost touched, about the fact that she has at least tried—and it hits you that Tenoh-san… Haruka-san… is the only person in the world who knows about your crimes but still accepts you as you are.

"I don't know if you can remember—but I told you beforehand that you don't have the nervous disposition for this."

Michiru is suffering, too, Tenoh-san tells you, even though Kaioh-san doesn't know all about the affair, as Tenoh-san has protected her by not telling her too much. Tenoh-san's lovely mermaid doesn't only have nightmares but is also trying to castigate herself—saying that she will let her hair grow forever.

"You know, Michiru always said that a woman should never have hair that goes past her waist… But as strong as her own hair is, I fear that they're going to reach her feet some day." Her fine lips curve into a lopsided smile. "At least that opens up completely new possibilities in bed… Ah, I'm only trying to cheer you up, koneko-chan! Don't look at me like that!"

You wonder whether not getting a haircut is really punishment enough. But it's all relative in life, and to people like Kaioh-san, who would die for their perfect looks, not cutting their hair must be a sacrifice of gargantuan proportions.
How cynical and spiteful you've become, you acknowledge, and it doesn't look like this will ever stop. How could you have predicted a bright future? If the Professor were still alive, the development would have broken his heart—but this thought, too, isn't enough of a consolation.

"Do you believe that this will ever pass… Haruka?"

You seldom call her or even think of her as "Haruka", only in your weakest moments, when the distance between you and her vanishes in an abyss of grief. Haruka gently touches you, and you can feel her warmth around your neck and smell her scent of wild roses in the cool breeze.

It's odd that she out of all people is the only person who can offer you a moment of peace. All at once the burden falls from your shoulders and you let go, lean your forehead against her chest, and weep without making a sound. She patiently rubs your back and hands you her silk handkerchief. Then she impulsively pulls your face towards her and gives you tender, chaste, soothing kisses.

"I don't know. It seems I'm the only one of us who is really cut out for this," she muses, looking almost saddened by the discovery. The wind and the last rays of sunlight are playing in her tousled blonde hair as she puts your hand on hers and places the white chrysanthemum she is holding on his grave. "Sometimes I almost envy Michiru and you for your sufferings and regrets—because I can still sleep well at night and don't feel anything."

...
Part 16: This is your version...

This is your version…

This is your version of the "Ghost at Twilight"

—and like the others, it's neither complete nor true.

All versions of this tale lie when they tell the truth.

The missing fragments are still hidden from you.

Kudo and I are now sitting together in the small, dilapidated but clean tea pavilion near Hikawa Shrine (the same picturesque Hikawa Shrine where, according to Seiya, "Rei-chan" lived and where Odango and her friends met up to study together), waiting for the drizzle to stop. Apart from us (and from the waiter and the waitress, who can't be older than thirty), the few people in the pavilion are at least fifty-five. All the children, teenagers, and young adults (except for Odango) must be on the way to Two Lights' or waiting in the queue in front of the entrances of the club, hoping to catch a glimpse of their worshipped gods or to snatch a new set of playing cards.

"Why do you want me to study this stuff during such a sunset?" Kudo asks with audible resentment in his voice, darts me reproachful glances, and runs his fingers through his dishevelled hair.

"You're like a grown-up squirrel that refuses to become independent. Hence I'm kicking you out of my nest and showing you how to find the nuts on your own," I cheerily declare and heartlessly sip my fragrant jasmine-scented green tea while he mumbles under his breath that squirrels are callous mothers of the worst type.

The cold was washing over her,

and the sky assumed the colour of blood.

Her handbag had fallen out of her limp hand

—but she couldn't let go.

Someone depended on her painkillers,

which only she could make

—and being the responsible scientist she was,

she couldn't leave before knowing he wouldn't suffer.

g.

The sunset slowed down as Time began to stretch,

to cut off twenty-four hours of Eternity

—and the Ghost rose and hurried into the park,
towards the bench where he would be waiting for her.

g.

The last twenty-two hours have been a game
—the price for the one day you received.
You've defended yourself and fought against the Gods,
supported by the very men you've wronged.

g.

You've been travelling through the present and the past,
roaming Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Paris,
rummaging through the twenty-three years and eleven months of your life
for an answer to the questions,
for the one truth…
or for justice…

"Aren't you glad now that you didn't marry me? It would have been a hell of a marriage—at least for you!" Smiling, I peer at the two glowing orbs in the sky, into the soft afternoon light pouring over the bustle of the world, colouring my dress purple and giving Kudo's hair a deep chestnut tint. While I can't claim that I'm in high spirits after everything I've gone through (beyond doubt, today has been one of the unhappiest days of my life!), I'm feeling peculiarly light, as though I'd finally reached the state believers in Buddhism would call "nirvana".

"It wouldn't have been in the least boring," he graciously agrees, shooting me a dark look. "You'd have kept me occupied, even during sunsets in early spring, among cherry blossoms, which other couples would be gazing at while we two are studying."

Pluto and Jupiter are your formidable opponents.

Chronos has asked Time to run in circles for a day.

Fortuna has shuffled, reshuffled, and distributed the cards,
The Fates have thrown the dice,
And Justitia is presiding as the judge.

Venus and Mars are still following the game
While Cupid has been secretly messing up the cards.
Felicitas has always been trying to help,
But Nemesis has always interfered.
"Are you sleeping?" Kudo's husky laugh breaks through my reverie. Exhausted by all the drama since yesterday's twilight, I've been dozing on the wooden chair with half-opened eyelids, abandoning myself to the languor of the late afternoon. The air is warm and smells of spring flowers and grass. In the distance, I can hear birds singing. The light rain still looks like a thin veil of opals and diamonds. Even though I firmly believe that nature is cruel and only kills us, I must admit that there are moments when its beauty is unrivaled.

"No, I'm not." I yawn. "I'm just… watching the sunset, trying to distract myself so that I won't die of boredom. I'm going to test you in ten minutes, though, so you'd better focus."

*Kaito, Hakuba, Hattori, and Jean Black are Jacks.*

*Kakyuu, Akemi-nee-san, Odango, and Kaioh-san are Queens.*

*Kudo, Gin, Rye, and Tenoh-san are Kings.*

*Anokata, their crows, and the Professor are Aces.*

The people around us, who don't seem to care much about Three Lights' merchandise but more about their acting and their music—are all excited about Three Lights' comeback, which doesn't seem an unsubstantiated rumour. There was a short interview on the radio half an hour ago, a shapely brunette in a tweed dress claims. Taiki Kou and Yaten Kou, who are usually mysterious and reclusive, have commented on the movie projects and revealed that they're thrilled to return to the stage with their youngest brother. One shouldn't build one's hopes up when it comes to Seiya Kou's comeback, however—as Seiya-san, who is a bit of a rebel, can't be found anywhere and hasn't given an interview yet. Also, the rumours about his comeback have always been unreliable, as the notorious womanizer has often changed his mind, carelessly breaking the hearts of his fans.

While Kudo obediently studies the formula, I study the people around us and listen with rapt attention to their talks, trying to take in as much information as I can. If the pace of evolution were faster, I would be developing mutant eyes and ears.

"He has shut himself off to play drums, says his agent. Seiya-san is very focused and doesn't let anyone near him during his practice sessions…"

"But Two Lights said in the interview that they'd been searching for him everywhere and that they couldn't find him in his studio…"

"Taiki said he thought Seiya has run off by himself again. I bet there is another love story behind this, as always, and he is already on a flight to Venice or New York. Our pretty Casanova is famous for pursuing his affairs at the most inappropriate moments…"

"But that's part of his appeal, isn't it?"

"Maybe he is fleeing from a jealous husband of a new lover?"

The news disturbs me for unknown reason, causing a curious pulsating, churning feeling in my stomach. Gazing at the moonlit sunset illuminated by the fine mist of rain, which is less brilliant than the radiant sunset yesterday but even more enchanting in its motley colour scheme and its many-hued softness, I have an eerie feeling that there is something I haven't comprehended, or rather something I've neglected to do.

*Seiya and his brothers are the San Hikari,*

*The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars in the dark*
—The most beneficial or the most harmful wild cards,

The highest trumps or the worst excuses,

The jesters that can turn the game around,

Depending on the rules

And on luck…

"If it was really serious between you two, his agent must be right and Seiya is probably playing drums at the moment," Kudo remarks. "It's his way of coping with grief, as everyone knows. That was another reason why I suspected him: a fellow musician told me Seiya had been practicing like a maniac for the whole week before his sister's death."

As the final moments of our disastrous date flash through my mind, I wonder whether I would have shown more grace during our farewell if only I hadn't been out of my mind with anger and grief. If it had been possible for me to stay, I would never have left—and even now I feel cheated by what others would call fate, which separated us just when I believed it could last.

"You should at least say goodbye to him before he goes away." Kudo remarks, sighs in irritation when I don't answer, and folds the formula to put it away.

"You'd better study that than give me advice on how to take care of my love life. If you can't make APAH yourself, you're going to die a horrible death—and I'm going to watch you shuffle out of this mortal coil without moving a finger!"

A crooked smile tugs at his lips but doesn't reach his eyes.

"I already know it by heart."

"You know, Kudo, if one could earn money by selling smugness, you'd be the Scrooge of Beika."

"It's only the truth, you can test me if you want to."

I do want to test him—and he can really recite the formula by heart and explain the whole procedure to me, much to my relief. Apparently, we still have a little time left before he has to go home, shower and shave, and fetch Ran from the train, as he doesn't get ready to leave but only lingers in his chair, stirring his tea.

"You know, I absolutely can't make you out." He scrutinizes me with bewildered eyes. "I don't know why you've run from him like you've run from me at Pandora's Box although you're so besotted with him." But he hopes that I'm going to tell him some day, in a few years, when I'm finally over it…

"At your age, you should have learned to abandon vain hopes." I shoot him a withering look.

He gazes down into his cup for a few seconds before he sips at his tea as though he had just realized that it's drinkable and he is supposed to drink it.

"Apropos vain hope… My proposal," Kudo begins, and I freeze, taken aback by the ease with which he talks about it. "What was actually the answer you'd have given me if we hadn't fought about the files?" He looks at me expectantly. "Was it a 'No', or was it a 'Yes'?"

There is no limit to his cluelessness, I realize in amazement, wondering how—after all these years
and all our talks in Paris, on the ship, and at the Professor's grave—he still doesn't know. As
brilliant as he is, Kudo is the type that needs an unambiguous answer, for he tends to see the world
in contrasting black and white or at least in bold expressionist colours. But even though his
slowness irritates me to no end, the thought that he seems to have been haunted by Pandora's Box
just like me consoles me. It might not have been torturing him in his dreams, but it must have been
haunting him at night whenever he couldn't sleep. He can't let go of the past before knowing the
alternative to his present life. In a way, it's almost touching…

I cast my mind back to the past, trying to conjure up the possible future that never happened—and
it dawns on me that I, too, don't know. I've always thought it was a clear "Yes", believing myself to
be the one who has been rejected—but when I reminisce about it now, I'm no longer sure.
Cautiously guarding my secrets, I had to push Kudo away because he is always too fast at sensing
the incongruities, too fast at deducing or guessing the truth even when he doesn't have sufficient
clues. Wasn't it the same I'm doing to Seiya now?

"Yes" or "Thanks, but no thanks"—does it really matter, I ask him. It's been over for so long, and
we both have finally moved on.

His eyes flash with anger at my reply.

Of course it does matter, he insists. After all, the difference between "requited" and "unrequited" is
like the gap between "guilty" and "not guilty". Although years have passed, the gap still matters to
him. He has been pondering about it all the time, wondering what he meant to me in Paris,
wondering "why the deuce" (he tends to quote Sherlock Holmes at the most inappropriate times) I
simply threw the necklace he gave me away with Pandora's Box—a gesture which infuriated him
so much that he snapped.

"I didn't throw it away. The pendant was stuck in Pandora's Box and I was trying to get it out. I
accidentally let go of it when you sneaked up on me."

Kudo is staring at me as though he had never even considered the option that it could simply have
happened—that the gesture he saw at Pandora's Box, which was filled with so much symbolism
from his point of view, wasn't supposed to mean anything.

"You were standing at the ship's rail," he weakly protests.

"Just because I had to get rid of the laptop… and I could already hear your footsteps in the
vicinity." I sigh and laugh in dismay, realizing that three years ago, fate, or whatever it was, played
a prank on both of us. "It was an accident, Kudo. That's the absolute truth! I suppose your detective
mind just had to connect the dots and turned everything into a story."

"Ah," he only says, looking so relieved and yet so taken aback by the discovery that I almost pity
him. Afterwards, we silently watch the sunset, which is slowly changing as the rain stops falling.
The world seems to brighten up for a moment, when the late afternoon sun peeps through the thin
layer of orange and golden clouds.

"So, was it a 'Yes' or a 'No'?" he asks again, in a trembling voice, eyes bright with anticipation.

"Yes," I sigh, since telling him about all the different nuances of that simple "Yes" would be a
pain. "Although I despised—and still despise!—the very thought of marriage. You... took me by
surprise, I suppose, and I thought I should simply give you what you wanted so that we could stop
arguing."

"Ah," he says again, flushing, looking so deliriously happy about a simple past "Yes"—a relict
from a bygone time—that I don't know how to react. Hence I say the only thing I can think of at the
moment, for time is running short. It's already half past four on my watch. And he still has to shave
and at least change into less rumpled clothes before fetching Ran.

"Well, since you have to leave soon… Good luck in Osaka, and send me a card from time to time,
preferably on my birthdays."

He chuckles, darting me an amused look before he turns serious again.

"You've got it all wrong! I'm not going anywhere."

"You said you've 'come to terms with Osaka.'" I give him a blank look, folding my arms. If this is a
joke, APAH must have worse side effects on him than I thought.

"But you've really misunderstood what I said! What I meant to say this morning was: I've come to
terms with the reality that Ran will go to Osaka while I'm going to stay here." He buries his
forehead into his palms, closing his eyes in resignation. When he looks at me again, his gaze has
softened. "Our relationship has been stagnating for a whole year, and we both have tried to distract
ourselves with work in the hope that it's only a phase. After sleeping for a night on your sofa, I
realized that it felt great to sleep alone for once. I'm going to fetch Ran from the train and admit to
her that I can't keep doing this forever, stealing her time and trying to love her when all I can think
of is how much I want to be single and free again."

The ghost lingers on in the ending sunset,
knowing it can never really win against Time.
All the cards stay on the table for the very last round,
until the ghost turns away as the silence falls.
The truth, in this world, can't be expressed by words.
But a silent love can't survive in an imperfect place.
On the horizon, the last ray of sunlight fades,
and the ghost at twilight returns to its time and space.

This version of the tale doesn't have a happy end,
for all the lovers will be waiting in vain.
Your sorrow, however, is both pain and bliss,
the exquisite suffering which only love can cause
when having met the beloved is already enough.
This is only one version of the "Ghost at Twilight"
—and like the others, it's neither complete nor true.
All versions lie even when they tell the truth.
The missing fragments are still hidden from you.

g.

A/N: I don't know if this happens to other writers, but writing about Shinichi's migraines usually gives me a migraine although I seldom (almost never) have headaches; and now I've had to learn that editing the chapters in which Shinichi has a migraine gives me a migraine as well.
This is another...

This is another version of the "Ghost at Twilight"

—and like the other versions, it's neither complete nor true.

All versions lie even when they tell the truth

—and there are missing fragments, which shall be hidden from you.

The cold was washing over you

—the sky assumed the colour of blood.

Your handbag had fallen out of your limp hand

but you couldn't let go.

Someone special depended on your painkillers,

which only you could make

—and being the responsible scientist you were,

you couldn't leave before knowing he wouldn't suffer…

The sunset slowed down as Time began to stretch,

to give her twenty-four hours of Eternity

—and the Ghost rose and hurried into the park,

towards the bench where he would be waiting for her.

The last twenty-two hours have been a trial

—the prize for the one day you received.

You've defended yourself in front of the Gods,

supported by the very men you've wronged.

You've been travelling through the present and the past, roaming Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Paris, rummaging through the twenty-three years and eleven months of your life for an answer to the questions, for the one truth… or for justice…
Pluto and Jupiter are your formidable opponents.

Chronos has asked Time to run in circles for a day.

Fortuna has shuffled, reshuffled, and distributed the cards,
The Fates have thrown the dice,
And Justitia is presiding as the judge.

g.

Demanding an ally for your impossible quest,
pointing out that two against one is unfair,
you wished for good company to share your loneliness
—another Ghost at Twilight, from another universe.

g.

Pluto and Jupiter both wanted to play,
While both conceded that your wish made sense.
Venus and Cupid agreed whereas Mars shook his head.
Fortuna rolled her eyes—but Justitia nodded.
Mercury vetoed that you’d be breaking the rules
—For two ghosts at twilight can’t share the same scene.
Nemesis suggested to turn him into a wild card.
And you accepted—without knowing who he was…

g.

Kaito, Hakuba, Hattori, and Jean Black are Jacks.
Kakyuu, Akemi-nee-san, Odango, and Kaioh-san are Queens.
Kudo, Gin, Rye, and Tenoh-san are Kings.
Anokata, their crows, and the Professor are Aces.

g.

Akemi-nee-san, Kudo, Kaito, and the Professor are Hearts.
Odango, Rye, Hattori, and the agents motards are Diamonds.
Kaioh-san, Tenoh-san, Jean Black, and the crows are Clubs.
Kakyuu, Gin, Hakuba, and Anokata are Spades.
The *Game of Life* doesn't come with a manual.
And figuring out the God's rules is a difficult task.
The dice are all loaded, all the cards have two sides,
a few cards are doubled—and some change as time passes.

The Ace of Hearts is also a Jack of Hearts.
The King of Hearts is also an Ace of Diamonds.
The Queen of Hearts is also an Ace of Spades.
The Jack of Hearts is also a King of Diamonds.

The most courageous Ace is your King of Hearts.
The most amiable Ace was your dearest companion.
The most charming Jack was your nicest crush.
And your sister brought you darkness when she proved to you her love.

Your stranger and his brothers are the San Hikari,
the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars in the dark
—the most beneficial or the most harmful wild cards,
the highest trumps or the worst excuses,
the jesters that can turn the game around,
derpending on the rules
and on luck…

Venus and Mars are still following the game
—While Cupid has been secretly messing up the cards.
Felicitas has always been trying to help,
But Nemesis has always interfered.
Pluto has played most of his Aces,
The King of Spades, and the most loved Queen.
Jupiter has drawn all the Jacks.
You are losing… but there are still wild cards left.

Encountering each other during a magical sunset,
chasing together after the same double rainbow.
Apollo has forged you a two-faced card
—The highest Joker, and another Ace of Hearts.
A temptation beyond your wildest dreams,
An impossible love that will cause you pain
—Your ideal partner, whom you shouldn't have met
… For you made the Choice during another sunset…

Protecting you both from Dolor or Algos
While fatally wounded by Cupid's stray arrow.
Your nameless stranger was your highest possible trump
—Until Fortuna reshuffled the cards,
and the Fates threw the dice anew.

Pluto cheated while Jupiter looked away
—And helping a ghost isn't exactly Venus' job.
Minerva was not present while Justitia is blind,
And Cupid, the heartless prankster, only applauded.

Late in the game, during the second round,
Athena or Minerva comes breezing in.
Joining Felicitas, she gives you sound advice:
"Beware of the Queen of Spades—and don't be too nice!"
Mercury thinks you've been sufficiently warned.
There are two ghosts here—but only one can stay.
Even if one lives, the other one will fade,
For he belongs to an alternative universe.

Waiting for him in the ending twilight,
Knowing you can never really win against Time.
And Nemesis smiles as the twenty-third hour passes,
While Mars is furious at you for losing to the past.

The truth, in this world, can't be expressed by words.
But a silent love can't live in an imperfect place.
On the horizon, the last rays of sunlight fade,
And the other ghost returns to his time and space.

This version of the tale doesn't have a happy end,
And you will forever be searching for him in vain.
Your sorrow, however, is both pain and bliss,
The exquisite suffering that only love can cause
When having known the beloved is already enough.

This is one version of the "Ghost at Twilight"
—and like the others, it's neither complete nor true.
The full truth is always hiding in the gaps
—in the silence… and shall be hidden from you.
Since the rain has stopped, we can take a walk together until he fetches Ran from the train. Kudo suggests after I've offered or rather stammered my condolences over the demise of his first relationship, which must be a severe blow to him. Leaving the tea pavilion, I notice in irritation that on the daily calendar at the wall near the entrance, the calendar page of yesterday hasn't been turned—a sign of neglect, which wouldn't have disturbed me on another day. But after the last twenty-two hours, the gulf between Friday and Saturday appears to me so vast that it's impossible for me to grasp why, to the people whose lives haven't undergone a sea change like mine, tonight might as well be Friday night.

Ichinohashi Park is the place of couples and pigeons, as Kaioh-san once said. While the pigeons are still here, no couple can be seen. We two are the only people strolling under the blooming cherry trees, which are already shedding their tiny pink petals. In the distance, I can see silhouettes in the moving cabins of the giant wheel, which looks like the colossal Wheel of Fortune in front of the golden sunset. Avoiding the noisy amusement park, Kudo and I wend our way along the main road, occasionally lingering under a tree to watch the forgetful squirrels as they dig in vain for their long-forgotten nuts.

Last night, I was keenly aware of Kudo's reluctance to leave Tokyo although I was so completely preoccupied with my own sorrow this morning that I distractedly dismissed his change in mood. Hearing all the arguments against a committed, long-time relationship from his mouth—arguments which might as well have come from mine—is nevertheless so disconcerting that I can barely contain my bewilderment. It seems everything about being in a steady relationship has been getting on Kudo's nerves, even light duties like calling Ran whenever he stays away for a whole night to work on his cases, justifying himself to her whenever he forgets to buy the salt, or having dinner with her when he'd rather go to bed with his notebook or a novel and a cup of tea. Seeing her every single day has also killed the last ounce of couple chemistry they had. And while he still loves her dearly, which he repeatedly stresses to assuage his guilt, all the futile attempts at staying in love with her have drained him so much that he'd rather go through the drama of a separation.

What saddens him most about their relationship is the realization that returning to Ran after the downfall of the Organization has become one of his greatest regrets, Kudo tells me in front of the stone stairs to the restored Hikawa Shrine, where a slender miko with scarlet lips, long sleek black hair, and a perfect porcelain face is sweeping the courtyard. Behind her, a handsome, long-legged brunette with lush curls in a high ponytail is pruning the large cherry wish tree. Where do they grow all these stunning girls, I wonder, amazed at the tremendous amount of beauty around me.

After the first year, in which he made several clumsy attempts to put his feelings into words and tell Ran the truth, he has really "tried hard to make it work," Kudo proceeds, evoking images of candle-lit dinners, hot bubble baths, and carefully planned, tender Lovemaking. As he absentmindedly kicks at a pebble on the ground, a sharp pang of regret shoots through me. He even spent more time with Ran and less time with his cases with the spectacular result that Ran ended up begging him to follow his passion, unable to stand being with a modern Sherlock Holmes who had too much free time on his hands. Relieved, Kudo returned to his cases while Ran focused more on her karate. And while they both have profited from the arrangement, they have also continued to grow apart.

When the offer to lead the dojo in Osaka came, it was clear to both of them that Ran should grab the chance. Forcing himself to act like the ideal boyfriend despite thinking that the two of them make lousy lovers and should never have crossed the boundaries of friendship, Kudo voluntarily offered to come with her. But in view of her barely concealed horror at his suggestion, he finally had to admit that their present relationship—a friendly but passionless coexistence with the
occasional bickering—was giving cause for concern.

"Long-term relationships thrive on compatibility, not passion, Kudo," I console him, diplomatically—hypocritically—acting out the exemplary friend I should be to him and her although I'm the opinion that he has made the right choice. "As sad as it is, even the greatest passion will turn into a moderately pleasant partnership in the long run."

Despite my words, it's hard for me to imagine Seiya and me sharing the same apartment like a pair of distracted siblings who never really touch apart from the obligatory goodbye peck on the cheek. Although Kudo's addiction to mysteries has always been worrisome, I'd never have expected him to become so indifferent to a… well… womanly woman like Ran. At least she seems to have become immune to his charms as well if one can trust his words. Naturally, I try to take Kudo's version of their love story with a pinch of salt since the same tale often sounds different from another point of view.

"Ran and I can return to each other when we're both over a hundred years old, then," Kudo dryly remarks, unexpectedly revealing his old sense of humour, which I've almost forgotten that he possesses. "Right now, this relationship isn't satisfying to either of us since we have totally different expectations. She wants to lead the dojo, marry, and have at least two kids. I want to travel and discuss mystery novels with her. So Ran suggested that I visit you to find out whether I'd prefer to stay in Tokyo or whether I'd like to start anew with her in Osaka. She is trying to come to terms with her own feelings as well."

It takes a moment for his words to sink in. But when I finally grasp the implications, I have to fight the urge to hit him.

"So it was her, who told you to visit me?" I wheel around to him with narrowed eyes, clinging to the hope that we've misunderstood each other. "Why me out of all people?"

With a start, I realize that I'm the only person Kudo can confide in when it comes to his relationship problems. The Professor is dead. Hattori is in Osaka and the last guy from whom he can expect sound relationship advice, considering Hattori's tumultuous relationship with his fiancée, who regularly uses her Aikido on him. Kudo's father is perpetually engrossed in his own writing. Kudo's mother loves to meddle in Kudo's private life too much to be of any help when he faces real problems. Kudo can't possibly dump his romantic woes on the Detective Boys. And it's out of the question that he confides in Sonoko, who can't keep any secret to herself and who has always been Ran's friend, not his. In his eyes, I'm the last sensible and trustworthy person left. I must have interpreted too much into his words…

Much to my heartache, I haven't misinterpreted his remark at all, for Kudo only smiles and informs me with his characteristic brazenness: "Yes. In case you're wondering whether Ran knows about us: I've already told her everything."

"She knows…" I echo, feeling faint all of a sudden. "You've told her about Pandora's Box?"

"About our quarrel and my proposal, about Paris, well, about everything…" He looks straight into my eyes with his unblinking gaze, blithely unaware of his wrongdoings. "It took me a whole year to admit it to her, but I couldn't have pretended that nothing had changed between us. She deserves to know."

"You said you were going to 'turn back time'! You should have stuck to your word for once and do what you said instead of spilling the beans!" I can't believe I've gone out on cinema dates with Sonoko and Ran without suspecting that Ran… or rather Ran and Sonoko and probably all of Sonoko's friends, as the annoyingly innocent angel can't keep any secret from her indiscreet best
friend, know about the past "proposal gone wrong" between Kudo and me.

"But of course she understands—"

"Of course she understands..." I explode, incensed at his naiveté. "She always understands everything. It's me, who won't ever understand it, Kudo! You should have asked me before you expose me to your girlfriend and her friend! All I wanted was a clean start—without the Organization, without the damned files, and most of all, without you, haunting me."

"You can't erase anything from the past, Ai," he claims with an exasperated, tired smile, whereupon I retort that at least I can try.

We would have argued much longer about the matter if I hadn't spotted a shock of golden-blonde hair floating towards the stairs at the entrance of Hikawa Shrine, which Kudo and I have just left behind us. Despite her red sunglasses, it's easy for me to recognize her Marilyn Monroe's face and Mona Lisa's smile, which has adorned various perfume and lipstick advertisements. Aino Minako, as lovely in real life as in the photoshopped ads, is climbing the stairs to the courtyard, where her appearance is greeted by the miko's gruff, husky, deep voice with the cryptic words: "Finally, here comes our brightest star in the firmament—fashionably late, as always!"

"How does the saying go? 'Time flies when you're dressing up'," Aino Minako laughs. She has a high voice and a deep, contagious, ringing laugh, whose childlike carelessness jars with her seductive, knowing smile.

"Venus is the brightest planet beside Jupiter," Kudo, who has followed my gaze, explains. "Since it's also the name of the Roman Goddess of Love, it's an allusion to her name: Aino Minako, the 'beautiful child of love'. It seems the idol has come back to Tokyo to film the new romantic comedy with Two Lights."

Gazing after the modern-day goddess of love, I wonder why Odango has been driving in the opposite direction when one of her best friends is coming to Hikawa Shrine. Chances are that they have planned to meet up at "Rei-chan's" place, where they used to study together, and Odango has managed to get lost again.

"It's funny how her looks match her name," I muse, indicating her red shoes, the long chain of gold hearts around her hips, and the red bow in her long blonde hair. "Kaito and I once talked about how much life resembles a card game. If people were cards, Aino-san would surely be the Queen of Hearts." Despite Seiya's claim that there has never been anything between them, I still feel a little pang of jealousy, as I haven't really forgiven "Mina" for the "awesome night" she mentioned in the card I read this morning.

Who am I kidding? Living with Seiya would have been torture in more than a way. Even Shortie has warned me about it. And yet the most magnetic chemistry often exists between opposites who would drive each other nuts in daily life. Even without destructive external circumstances, making an infatuation last is a balancing act, a challenge which no sensible person would voluntarily take on if the nasty hormones hadn't deactivated their rational thinking.

"And which Queen are you?" Kudo asks with an insolent smirk. "The Queen of Diamonds or the Queen of Clubs, as harsh and difficult as you are today?"

"If I were a card, I'd be the Ace of Hearts because I've sacrificed my precious time and sleep to save a thankless brat from his migraine. But I'm not a card," I smirk back. "In my own life, I'm the player."
And sometimes—I add as I can remember my boredom before I drew my wild card—I find the
game so tedious that I'd like to break it off.

"Today, for instance," Kudo wryly remarks.

"No, not today. Today it's just… complicated. Confusing, in a not-so-good way."

Meanwhile, we've arrived at the Sphere Towers, the skyscrapers, which have been built on the
ruins of Infinity. The only thing which has remained from my school days is the huge marble
fountain, where Kudo and I are sitting now, watching the sunset mirrored in the water beside us.

He has been thinking of setting up his own detective agency, Kudo says, giving me a smile whose
brilliance stangers me. The thought of starting anew in Beika obviously does him good. His pale
skin has regained its usual glow, and his bright eyes, of a mesmerizing violet-grey similar to Taiki-
san's in the pink light, are shining again like they used to do.

"Great!" I behold his radiant face with motherly pride. "You can't do all the work for the Sleeping
Drunk forever. Working independently, you can really become the Sherlock Holmes of the twenty-
first century some day."

"I've been wondering whether you're interested in helping me out a bit," he says after throwing a
fleeting sidelong glance at me. "Since I'll be busy at the crime scene, I'd be happy to have someone
who can record the data of my cases, type my notebooks, and answer the phone for me. You also
have so much forensic knowledge that you'd speed up the whole process. We can be partners…"
He gives a slight, anxious cough, fidgeting with the leather jacket in his hands like a nervous
elementary schoolboy. "Since I'm a bit messy whenever I'm stressed, it won't hurt to have someone
nagging me to clean up my office regularly."

"You're asking me to become your Watson?" I blink at him, wavering between being insulted and
elated by his proposal.

"Not Watson!" He chuckles at the thought as if he has been comparing me to Watson and has
arrived at the obvious conclusion that I don't resemble the loyal, simple Dr Watson in the least.
"Your mind is much too sharp and you're much too hard to read. If you were a character in the
Sherlock Holmes universe, you'd be Irene."

From his mouth, this is the most candid love declaration a woman can ever receive. Knowing
Kudo's overly romantic reading of "A Scandal in Bohemia", about which I've often teased him, the
fact that he has likened me to Sherlock Holmes' ideal woman takes my breath away. My date with
Seiya might have jolted him out of his apathy and galvanized him into action so that he suddenly
(and awkwardly) begins to romance me.

However, the map he drew for me just to ask me for a cherry blossoms viewing session during
sunset indicates that Kudo has been thinking about this for quite a while. Who knows what Ran
and he have agreed on before she went to her training camp. Perhaps she has even guessed that he
will be drawn towards me (or the woman he believes me to be) after distancing himself from her.
Ran's ever-increasing karate prowess hasn't been the proof of their happiness as I thought but has
rather been a testimony to her frustration with their relationship, which must have been a bitter
disappointment to her after the long wait.

"No sweet talk will ever turn me into your sidekick and amanuensis, Kudo!" I eye my detective
with mistrust, as I can't be sure of my deductions when he has been sending out mixed signals for a
whole day. Wisely holding back the remark that Irene Adler didn't marry Sherlock Holmes but
another man—an ending which Kudo has always hated—I steer the conversation towards a less
dangerous direction. "If I ever decide to write a novel, it won't be about you."

"About whom would you write then?" he asks, visibly crushed by my change of topic, which is equivalent to a gentle refusal.

"About the Ghost at Twilight," I improvise, going off at a tangent by describing my imaginary novel to him. While all the versions I know focus on the love interest of the ghost, my version would deal with the ghost itself, as it takes a special temperament to defy death for one day just to say goodbye to a shy, repressed idiot, from whom it would only get a belated, indirect, lousy love declaration.

To my annoyance, I've blurted out my version of the ghost story to Kudo. To my relief, he doesn't seem to have noticed it.

"No one would be interested in your novel," he only taunts. "Readers usually like suspense and romance, not a lengthy character analysis which gives them suicidal thoughts."

"Then I'm going to give them not only one but two romances by fusing all the versions I've heard into the same storyline," I declare, bewildered by my own words, for the night Gin told me the ghost story has suddenly emerged from the back of my consciousness, flitting through my mind with disturbing clarity. If the different versions of the ghost story have actually been parts of the same narrative, the peculiarity of the last twenty-two hours would suddenly make sense.

Abnormally long sunsets and twilights interspersed with flashes of fragmented memories of surprising vividness while time seems oddly irregular and stretchable… My endless patience when I stayed on the bench to wait for Kudo, who came late for hours, although I was exhausted and freezing… My unhealthy, almost obsessive interest in Kakyuu's death; my odd wish to justify all my past and present actions to myself; my uncharacteristic eagerness and readiness to consummate my fatal attraction to a stranger, whom I've known for less than a day…

"So the ghost wouldn't only visit its true love but also appear to a stranger three times during the same day in the hope of hearing 'the right words at the right time' from them, whatever that means?" Kudo, whose analytical mind likes puzzles and riddles and easily grasps what my sentence implied, asks.

"Yes, but the ghost wouldn't intentionally be looking for its alternative lover to steal their heart. That would sound so… manipulative and opportunistic. No, my ghost would stumble over the stranger while searching for its past love interest because the Gods placed that person directly in front of its nose. I'd choose Greek Gods to lighten up the dark story because they make colourful antagonists. Also, people always love to read about fateful encounters. Without the concept of fate, life sounds unbearably random."

"Would your ghost be a man or a woman?" Kudo looks genuinely intrigued, his curious eyes glued to my face as if he had just seen me for the very first time.

"A woman, of course, because it would be easier for me to write from a woman's point of view."

The ghost wouldn't expect to find love when it was much too late, a voice in my mind adds. But deep down, she would know that a part of her has been searching for her stranger. When we go, we always want to leave a trace of ourselves behind: an echo, a story, an imprint—even when it's a grieving lover. While she wouldn't expect either of her two loves to pine for her forever, a bit of sadness and nostalgia from time to time sounds fine.

She would steal them from their prospective future loves in the most final way, turning into the
elusive ideal woman they can never have. She would forever be haunting them during twilights and sunsets—while she would prevent both of them from saying the right words, preferring to protect all her dark secrets.

A/N: There was an additional poem-chapter before this one in the original version of the fic, which I've deleted since it felt redundant. I could accomplish the same by merging two poems into one in this chapter and changing a few details in the last oracle-poem (in Chapter 76).
Part 16: Have you ever...

Have you ever...

"Have you ever regretted a choice you've made?" Kudo asks as the clock strikes a quarter to five and the bells of the Azabu Church in the distance chime. We both know he has to leave, but, as obstinate as he is, he refuses to go before tying me down with a satisfactory answer to his (job, friendship, relationship?) proposal.

I cast my mind back to the overnights I pulled at Infinity just to excel at anything I touched—to prove myself in front of Professor Tomoe and his prodigies and to impress Gin. The day I finally received my long-awaited cocktail code name; my almost-encounter with Seiya when I dragged my sister away from him instead of staying for a talk; my haphazard reaction when Gin cornered the seventh crow; the night I let Gin seduce me although I felt emotionally blackmailed by his proof of implicit trust; my short infatuation with Rye; my tragic miscalculation when I refused Tenoh-san's plan to steal Pandora's Box while Akemi-nee-san was still alive; the two thousand six hundred innocent mice I sacrificed for my revenge; the two bullets that missed their target at Pandora's Box; the white chrysanthemum at the Professor's grave, which I didn't bring...

Well, that was nice. Thanks a lot for last night and the lovely morning. But since I'm not cut out to deal with all the concessions one has to make in a steady relationship, I fear that's it. Please don't call, don't write, and don't stalk me since I don't want this to turn into a case of fatal attraction.

It's hard to say what I regret most—to choose the one thing which could have been different and which I would change if I could turn back time. In retrospect, if I look at the outcomes of my endeavours, I have too many regrets to count, I tell Kudo. But if time rewound and I had to face the old situations again without the knowledge and the experience I have now, I wouldn't be able to change anything. Hence I'm certain that I don't have any regrets, not when it comes to the choices I've made.

That's admirable, Kudo smiles. Few people can say with conviction that they don't regret anything.

Yet regrets aren't the only things which sting on a day like today, when the past catches up with the present and I'm faced with questions I can't answer. I've honestly tried to believe in Kudo's notion of justice, as hard as it is for me to cling to something which clashes so much with my own experiences that I might as well believe in a fairy tale.

Ironically, the moment my humane side won over my vengeful side at Pandora's Box was also the moment I lost. When I sensed Gin's aura and heard the rustle behind Kudo and me, I instinctively turned and shot. But at the same time—here is proof positive that love never really dies—the autumn nights in Kyoto stole into my mind. Once again, the scent of sweet osmanthus and orange blossoms in my memory mingled with the real, authentic aroma of the present—the musty, dank smell of the ship and the distinctive odour of gunpowder and smoke. The slight tremor which shook my hand was enough to ruin my plans. And after Kudo had left, when I faced my arrogantly smirking enemy on the floor, who had become too weak to defend himself but was still too strong to die, I knew that in order to protect Tenoh-san, Kudo, Hattori, and me, I'd have to silence the last witness—the scapegoat I was going to pin my crimes on—and improvise.

In my daydreams, I had often fantasized about our final reunion, which would end with his or my death. Since leaving the world together with Gin didn't belong to my secret desires and the thought of dying in front of his sneering eyes charmed me even less, I often saw myself—uninjured, as eerily beautiful and threatening as a vengeful angel—hovering over his bloody, crushed figure with
a smirk on my lips. Shoving his overlong bangs aside with the tip of my shoe, wrinkling my nose in distaste, I'd gaze hard into his eyes and ask him how it felt to be bested by his former protégé, whose astonishing accuracy and fast reactions were once a source of his pride. "Traitor!" he would helplessly hiss as he was trying hard to breathe, fighting for his last seconds on earth like a desperate rat trying to escape from a sinking ship. And I would raise my perfectly arched brow in genuine amazement, asking him why he was calling me traitor when it was him, who had betrayed me.

In my dreams, I'd informed Gin about how much being in a relationship with him sucked—how my love for him had turned into resentment and anger and then indifference and disgust because we were both always stressed but I had to do all our household chores alone. He was always too busy, too depressed, or simply too arrogant and drunk to care how the apartment looked. Or he did notice but was the opinion that his little girlfriend should do all the work so that he could sulk in his armchair with an ashtray and a bottle of sherry.

I'd even told the imaginary Gin in my fantasy that his never-ending complaints, his well-meant but ill-timed caresses, and his brutish, awkward, plain-boring lovemaking repelled me, especially when I was exhausted and frustrated from the long day and just wanted to be left alone. Before Akemi-nee-san's death and before the abuse he hurled at me, he failed me by dumping on me all his past and present problems along with the mundane tasks of our daily life. His grand speeches of equality and justice for all were useless when he, like many men, couldn't even grasp the simple notion of sharing the housework with the woman he called his "wife".

Since dreams seldom bear a semblance to reality, I only sighed, gave Gin (the bloody, crushed, but still sneering figure under me) a listless look, put down the pan Kudo had given me, and opened my locket to take out a small, inconspicuous pill.

You have two options, I began in my most neutral low voice, letting the pill fall into his right hand, which was lying limply on the floor in front of his face, without touching him. You can swallow this and enjoy a painless, pleasant eternal sleep—I can assure you that it won't hurt in the least since I've designed it for myself and the hundred mice I fed it to all died peacefully. Or you can refuse and I swear that the aftermath will hurt! Even if you made it into a witness protection programme, which you won't, no one could help you escape the aftermath. All your trusted allies—Anokata, the crows, and their secretaries and spouses—are dead, courtesy of the first-class education they gave me. Pandora's Box will be gone by tomorrow. And since you're the last person left who knows the secrets, all the blackmailed big names and terrorists will hunt you down, torture you, and use you for their little games. I grimly raised the Browning in my hand. You must feel like the last unicorn now, Gin, but I'm not going to let you suffer such a fate. I'm going to give you a messy death by my hand if you don't choose the pill. I will cry rivers of tears for you, claim that I had to shoot you in self-defense, and get away with this. I have great faith in my acting skills—everyone will believe me!

Much to my surprise, Gin only laughed, laughing tears as if my speech had genuinely amused him. When he moved his left hand, which had been hidden under his wide coat until then, I could see he was holding a small black device resembling a mobile phone, which he must have dug out of a small hole under the oven. Devious as he was, he must have managed to type something into it while I was fumbling for the pill. Snatching the device out of his hand, I realized that it was not a phone or a voice recording device but only a small phone-like remote control—the remote control for Pandora's Box. His name and particulars, which would be sent to all the blackmailed people on the list once I started to backup the files for Tenoh-san, was something Gin couldn't change, as he had swallowed my bait and opened the door to the cabin. But he had attached an explanatory note to the message—a single name, which forced me to change my plans again.
Sometimes I had more luck than I deserved—I tell Kudo—when I survived APTX, found allies in the most unexpected places, and escaped unscathed from situations that should have ended in death. At other times, a run of undeserved bad luck would tail me wherever I go, ruining the people close to me as though I were a harbinger of doom.

"Some people live a perfectly boring life in which nothing happens. You happen to receive all the ups and downs," Kudo thinks aloud. "But as selfish as it sounds… I'm glad because if your life had been different, we two wouldn't be sitting here with each other now."

I calmly behold his figure against the ending sunset, whose gemlike radiance is reflected in the tinted glass of the skyscrapers and the splashing water of the fountain.

"You know, Kudo… You're like a painting that should never have learned to speak. If someone could just cut out the sound, I'd really enjoy being here with you."

"Thanks a lot for the backhanded compliment." He smirks. "Coming from your critical mouth, it weighs a ton."

Smiling, we both watch the white and grey pigeons around us in silence, enjoying the peaceful, mellow light of the setting sun. In my mind, I can still see Infinity around us; the marble stairs, which have been removed after Professor Tomoe sold the land; the high stone walls, which were overhung by an interwoven net of red, pink, lavender, purple, violet, blue, and yellow Morning Glories, which are now gone forever. The few surviving trees, even the large weeping willows, have been moved. All the flower beds in the school garden have been burned. Even the large veranda, where Hotaru-chan, Professor Tomoe's reclusive daughter, often sat when all the students were on the track to watch Tenoh-san's races, is no longer there.

Tomoe's laboratories, parts of which have survived the fire, are now gone as well although the adoring nurses have moved whatever remained in the labs to the private mental hospital, where the mad professor is now staying. Although everything but the fountain is gone, I can still see Tenoh-san's picturesque silhouette on the bench in the courtyard, her shadow touching Kaioh-san, who used to play the violin under the moonlight in warm summer nights. Gin used to drop me at the iron gate after our dates before he raced away in his black Porsche, and Tenoh-san would always wink at me when I passed the garden and strode towards the dorms although her eyes would immediately—reassuringly—return to her then secret lover, who, immersed in her music, would only look through me with faraway eyes.

Many loves alternate between care and abuse—which usually happens between couples like Gin and me, who don't match, but also between couples like Tenoh-san and Kaioh-san, whose personalities and quirks seem to have been custom-made for each other. Sometimes lovers are thrown together by circumstances, fused together by surmountable obstacles, and chained together by what some people would call the red thread of destiny. But there are also temptations which are too great to resist, leading to situations which will only end in tears.

The fairytale happily-ever-after ending of true love may be a lie—one of the greatest, most elaborate deceptions people practice on each other and themselves. But the evanescent quality of love doesn't necessary mean that the fleeting moments of perfection weren't real. Recalling those moments with the men I've cared about in my life, I wonder whether I've loved all of them at one point or another. Even though it was eventually destroyed by their shortcomings or my own shortcomings or just plain bad luck, it would be a lie to pretend that it never existed.

I could tell Kudo about Misa but I don't want him to reopen the case, as I believe that Misa has
already been punished enough with the burden of her guilt. As weird as it sounds, I take pity on her. Even though I would never murder a rival, I've tasted both unrequited love and jealousy.

I can remember the fury I felt when I saw Kudo and Ran holding hands on the way to Tropical Land, the feeling of nausea which kept me in bed for a whole day when I caught her sneaking through the gate of his mansion at night only weeks after his laughable decision to "turn back time". I well recall the conviction that it was me and me alone, who had ignited and fueled the fire in Paris and at Pandora's Box while she—the innocent, clueless, bland fool!—was the one who received all the fruits of his pent-up passion!

Sitting in the vast house, which had become as silent as a tomb after the Professor's death, loneliness was easier to endure than his close proximity, their compassion, and her encouraging smiles. As Kudo's good friend and the Professor's much-pitied orphan, I had to continue eating all the soups, cakes, and cookies she brought me (often in the presence of the Detective Boys) whenever she was bored because he was away. For Kudo's sake, I put on a passably agreeable face although I was simmering with anger.

Ran's resemblance to my late sister only added to the frustration, reminding me of the time I was tired of Gin and smitten with Rye, who spent way too much time talking to me although he was Akemi-nee-san's boyfriend. If only Ran died, Kudo would eventually belong to me—the thought invariably stole into my mind at night when I was about to fall asleep, when my defense was crumbling away and I allowed myself to weave the fantasy that, some day, the whole story of Pandora's Box would be forgotten so that Kudo and I could start anew…

Fusae-san, like a guardian angel Agasa-hakase sent, saved me when she called me and bought the house. It was only possible for me to let go and recover from my loss after moving to Azabu Juuban. But Misa, the sophisticated, sickly girl who read Shakespeare sonnets, didn't have anyone.

Now that Kakyuu-san's beauty had long faded and she was only a pale shadow of herself, doomed to lead a life of confinement and dependency within her damaged body, her three foster brothers were still orbiting around her just as they did when she was still alive. And it dawned on Misa that, as long as his princess was alive, Taiki-sama would never be free. He and Yaten-sama would continue to worship her from a distance, wasting their youth while she would always stay with her favourite foster brother. If Kakyuu-san survived, she would destroy at least three lives while suffering a fate Misa wouldn't even wish on a rival.

I wish I could find out the truth behind that case since I don't want to shield a psychopath out of misplaced sympathy. Even though I don't want to believe it, there is a possibility that Kakyuu was totally insignificant in Misa's eyes, and Misa ruthlessly ended her patient's life just to take revenge on Taiki-sama for rejecting her.

How clichéd and cynical! But clichés are clichés because they are so typical. And beneath the outer shell of love, there are more spiteful feelings than most people want to admit to themselves. Love is never just "love", this overwhelming desire to make the other person yours, this willingness to make the greatest sacrifices for the beloved person. Under the filigree of selfish desire and selfless sacrifice, there are always other, darker feelings burning in secret—the whole assortment of resentment, humiliation, fear, and even hate—especially against the love interest, who has barged into your life uninvited and enslaved you in such a tyrannical way.

If Misa is one of the few angels on earth, she might even have pulled the plug out of compassion.

Having watched Taiki-sama for so long, Misa knew how much he suffered to see his beloved foster sister and love interest in a half-dead state. How much more would it hurt him to see the woman he loved spending the rest of her life as a mentally and physically challenged, who wouldn't be able to
do the most elementary things on her own? There would be no discussions of poetry, no movie analysis sessions, no flower gazing or singing or dancing, or anything of the sort. Instead, Taiki-sama would have to face the empty shell of Kakyuu-san staring up at him in silence, pulling grotesque grimaces at him, which were cruelly reminiscent of her old smiles, which were once so endearing and kind.

Even if he would never admit it to himself, Misa could see that Taiki-sama would be relieved if Kakyuu-san died. To claim he would be happy about Kakyuu-san’s death would be a lie. But he would be relieved if Kakyuu-san would never wake up to rob him of the memories of the beautiful girl she once was…

Am I in denial of Seiya's role in Kakyuu's death just because I'm biased? For me, it's impossible to picture Seiya as Kakyuu's murderer. Visiting Kakyuu for the third time, he must have used his handkerchief to remove the fingerprints on the life support machine out of the mistaken assumption that one of his gloomy brothers had pulled the plug. It would explain why he appeared so distressed and refused to give a statement despite implicating himself with his silence.

For the first time, I can understand the mystery freak beside me. Knowing the truth makes it easier to let go of the past. I was less curious about Seiya's motivations and thoughts when I was sure that we had all the time in the world to explore each other.

"We should go to the bus station now since you still have to fetch Ran from the train," I remind Kudo. Watching the sunset with him has been enough. For obscure reasons, I don't want him to linger here any longer now that the sun has begun to fade from the horizon.

Kudo pushes himself from the rim of the fountain and wipes the tiny pink sakura petals, which are sticking on the fountain and on our clothes after the light rain, from his jeans. For a moment, he seems to debate with himself whether he should put on his jacket. But since the weather is still warm, he only hooks a finger through the label inside and throws the jacket over his shoulder instead.

"I know tonight is too early, especially since you must want to be alone to cry about Seiya's departure and I really owe Ran a proper explanation when we break it up… But if you don't have plans for tomorrow night, can we meet up for the dinner I missed last night?"

He simply can't drop what he has started, and I should really mix something into his drink the next time he visits me to teach him the tiniest bit of humility.

"All right," I tell him in a non-committal but cheery voice although I'm thrown by his behaviour, which still seems suspect to me. "Just give me a call before you come. And don't be late again."

Lingering at the fountain by my side, he gives me a long, thoughtful gaze, whose deep sadness and determination almost hurt me physically. Strangely enough, it has always been easier for me to deal with my own sorrow than with his. If he doesn't say something soon, I will have to rack my brains to come up with a joke to lighten the mood.

"Seiya's brothers are hiding at Hikawa Shrine at the moment," he tells me with an air of resignation. "Aino Minako always wears a special pair of red pumps when she appears in the news with Two Lights. She's wearing the same pair today. She also wore the smile of a woman who is looking forward to meeting someone she is intensely infatuated with. There are footprints from two different pairs of shoes in the courtyard, which probably belong to the leather sneakers Two Lights always wear. We can ask them about Seiya's whereabouts if you want. I still have fifteen minutes. I'm going to help you find him if you want to say goodbye to him before he goes away."
"You're getting obnoxious, Kudo." I glide from the rim of the fountain and slip into my cardigan. "Just stay out of this since it doesn't concern you."

But it does, he claims, surprising me with his intensity as he rushes after me. It does concern him since it's impossible to get over a relationship which has ended in such an abrupt way. "The mind tends to remember all the good things. If you two had stayed with each other and got thoroughly sick of each other's quirks after a few months, it would have been easier for me."

Although he still hasn't spelled it out, it's impossible to misread what he wants to say. And while we're walking back in tense, brooding silence, trying to deal with the change in situation, which overwhelms me, my mind returns to the moment in Seiya's apartment when he sang the song by Styx and joked that my wild card had found me.

"Last night, Kaito told me that I only found life boring because I thought it always followed a set pattern—like a card game in which one could see the faces of all the cards. But he thought that we didn't really know the cards because we could never guess all the traits of the people around us… He also said that—as low as the probability was—some day I might draw a 'wild card', which changed the whole game."

Kudo, who has patiently listened to my confession, accepts the obscure explanation with more grace than I expected from him.

"I suppose he is your wild card, which changed everything?"

"A wild card, yes," I give him a wan smile. "But I'm not sure whether he has ever been my wild card to begin with."

Like a wild card in an opponent's hand, Seiya has barged into my life at the worst possible moment, leaving behind a gaping wound, which will never heal, and placing on me the burden of an impossible love just when the one I'd always wanted was finally within my grasp. For all that, I can't bring myself to regret those seven hours—when loving another person was as natural and easy as breathing. Infatuations usually come and go, and short-time affairs breeze in and out of one's life without having a significant impact on one's mental make-up. But I know with certainty that Ueno-koen will never be the same, that Azabu Juuban will always be haunted. I will never be able to sit on a bench or on a boulder again without seeing his ghost, just as I will never be able to take a walk, listen to music, drink coffee, shower, or dry my hair again without being reminded of that string of flawlessly perfect moments, when the universe suddenly made sense. Regretting it would be a form of betrayal or even a homicide of the cruelest sort, as if I would try to murder love itself, which I can't resent despite the sorrow it has brought me.

Although our time with each other is over, there is a puzzle I still haven't solved: I still don't know how to label him. An ally or an adversary, my guardian angel or the devil in disguise, my highest trump card, or an excuse that cannot win—my stranger has been both a helpful and a harmful card, bringing Kudo back to me while keeping us apart.
Although Paris is not... 

Although Paris is not the city of love but rather the city of dog poo—after a few days, it grows on you. You could stay here forever, studying your guinea pig Kudo, who is studying Hattori and Jean Black while the former FBI agent and the hot-headed Detective of the West teach each other kendo and fencing.

Hattori, Kudo, and you have been sharing a spacious bedroom with an adjoining study, which must have been the old bedroom of M Jean Black and his wife. Within a few days, your group has morphed into a small family, for which you cook while Hattori and Kudo do the laundry and the grocery shopping, as you three have to care for yourselves when M Jean Black's housekeeper is away and your host is busy holding master classes. In the evenings, Hattori usually practices fencing while Kudo and you read mysteries or watch old thrillers together over a cup of tea. Every other day, there will be a small dinner party, during which you meet M Jean Black's allies, the people who have a personal interest in the files in Pandora's Box. There have been the usual bickering and annoyances since Kudo has ruined your favourite cashmere pullover and Hattori has always bought either too much or too little for lunch, turning cooking into a tricky task. But all in all, the situation only weakens your resolve and pours burning oil into your wounds, for living with Kudo is much more pleasant than you thought.

Weekend in Paris means having another large party, mainly held for all the former agents motards who were busy or indisposed the last time. There are a few who are still young, the children of the victims or the children of the late victim's spouses and lovers, who have remarried but never forgotten the grudge. Among them are a few twenty-odd-year-old men who have set out to irk your fake husband as much as possible by trying to flirt with you or behaving so gallantly towards you that they convey the impression of flirting although they are only being polite. And when the music begins to play and a particularly nice-looking, well-dressed specimen walks up to you to ask you for a dance, Kudo grabs your hand and pulls you to the dance floor, claiming that the slow waltz is a special dance, which his wife has promised to save for him alone.

"Jealous?" you smirk at Kudo as he nervously looks about himself, trying to copy the poses of the men around him. It's blatantly, painfully obvious to you (and probably to everyone else in the room who is watching him) that he can't dance. And since you can no longer dance either, you wonder how you two are going to get out of this situation without feigning headaches or staging a marital quarrel.

"Not really, but since you're supposed to be my wife as long as we're in Paris, I have the feeling that you belong to me."

"So you're feeling possessive?" you smirk. "That feeling, Kudo, is called 'jealousy'!"

Only a mentally challenged person would claim that Kudo is musical, but you have to admit that your detective can lead. You two are now moving in perfect synchronization, in silkily smooth but hopelessly wrong moments syncopated to the music.

"You're a terrible dancer, 'darling'. Even much, much worse than I've imagined," you gravely point out.

"I thought it would be easier to copy the movements." His face reddens, and he keeps shooting attentive glances at the other couples' feet, observing their steps and turns. "But you must admit
that, until now, we've done really well."

"Well, yeah… we're dancing a completely different dance, in case you haven't noticed. You're going to get a prize for inventing a new version of the slow waltz for tone-deaf people."

"I dare you to become even nastier towards me than you already are, my dear," Kudo laughs, parodying the husband he is playing while pulling you closer to him. He smells like spring in winter and feels like a warm summer breeze, and your mind fails to think of a new insult for the time being.

"Charade", the old, lonely Parisian waltz, tells of love lost when fate pulled the strings while the music in the wings were still playing on, and you wonder whether Tenoh-san's mother—M Jean Black's wife and the youngest of the first-generation crows—had known about her impending execution when she watched the movie and sang the song to her husband and her child. Giving in to the twisted urge to say goodbye, you've asked Kudo to watch *Charade* with you before you two left for Paris. In one or two weeks, you will either be under the sod or on a plane to Venice. Hence you feel like being selfish for once, telling yourself that Kudo's girlfriend wouldn't mind if you stole him from her for another week.

Letting your eyes roam about the blue hall just to take in your surroundings and to engrave this moment into your memory, you meet M Jean Black's watchful gaze. It seems he has finally recognized you as the sixteen-year-old girl he saw with Kaioh-san and his daughter in front of the aquarium years ago. When he gives you a meaningful nod and disappears into the library adjoining the hall, you keep dancing with Kudo until "Charade" fades out. You're thirsty and would like to have a drink, you tell your present "husband", whose eyes are shining like stars and whose cheeks have taken on the colour of a glowing sunset. Preoccupied by his own muddled feelings and the intensely romantic mood, he luckily fails to notice that, to you, the spell is broken.

M Jean Black has disappeared from the library by the time you arrive, having left it through the second door, which leads into his private study. Looking about yourself in admiration, you take in the cozy Victorian style room with crown moldings, red velvet, and dark wood. It reminds you of Tenoh-san, who has an old-fashioned, romantic aura about her despite being the most modern and emancipated woman you know.

Taking Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, which is lying on the table next to you, into your hand, you open it to the bookmarked page. *The feelings that hurt most, the emotions that sting most, are those that are absurd: the longing for impossible things, precisely because they are impossible; nostalgia for what never was; the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else; dissatisfaction with the world's existence. All these half-tones of the soul's consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an eternal sunset of what we are.*

"You're too young for these thoughts," says Jean Black, who has just joined you in the library and looked over your shoulder. In response, you only knit your brows, put down the book, and scrutinize his face. If you hadn't known that Tenoh-san and he are related, he might not have reminded you of her at all. But knowing that he is her father, it's easy for you to spot the similarities. The same fine mouth and the same pointed chin, eyes of a different shape (longer and narrower than hers) but of the same colour, which you also have: a very bright shade of hazel running into teal blue instead of green.

"You don't like me," he smiles, stating the obvious while lighting himself a cigarette. "But I thought that you liked Haruka when I saw you with her, and I'd like to talk about Haruka with you. Let's go to my study to talk in private, shall we?"
"I'd rather talk about Kudo instead. Why did you have to drag him into this?" you ask M Jean Black after you two have settled yourselves beside each other on the small sofa next to the desk. He has shut the door to the library so that you two can't be overheard. But since Kudo will come to the library to search for you as soon as your drink has been mixed and will deduce that you're in the study within a second, M Jean Black and you only have a few minutes.

"Do you think he is too young for it?" He offers you a cigarette, which you decline. While he is of Franco-American origin, M Jean Black speaks British English. It's difficult for you to trust a person who is so inconsistent and so hard to read.

"Too young to die? Yes, he will be twenty in May. But he won't be able to celebrate it if he dies next week."

Why are you so certain that Kudo is going to die, M Jean Black asks you. The chances are high that all of you will come out of this alive. Without Pandora's Box, the Boss and the seven crows will no longer be immune from arrest. They're going to be in even deeper trouble than Kudo and will most probably be assassinated in prison because they know too much. Most of the codename members are also going to receive capital punishment in Japan, considering all the crimes they've committed.

"Not the Boss and the crows. They're going to get witness protection."

There is no doubt about it—he agrees—if they don't commit suicide before they can be arrested. And even that wouldn't be the worst ending to this fight, which has lasted for too long. "They need our protection. And we need them alive. With the knowledge they have, the crows can change the fate of so many people."

In short, incomplete but coherent sentences, he tells you how he has been preparing for the downfall of the Organization in the past years, about his excitement when he learned from James, his cousin, that Kogoro Mori has been added to the Organization's list of potential enemies. Having made the acquaintance of the detective during one of his Japan trips, Jean Black knew that Kogoro Mori couldn't have been the genius he claimed to be. Even without Haruka's help, it was easy for Jean to guess that the mastermind behind the Sleeping Kogoro was Edogawa Conan, who, even if he were a prodigy, was too brilliant and mature to be a six-year-old child. And the fact that Edogawa Conan appeared out of nowhere just when Kudo Shinichi disappeared from the news was too curious a coincidence to be dismissed.

His wife, who was usually secretive, had told him a few things about the Silver Bullet and Pandora's Box in her rare talkative moments, and Jean Black would certainly have been assassinated as well if the crows had expected him to know anything about them. But since she took her secret to the grave and he stayed inconspicuous, retired from the agency, and only worked as a fencing teacher ever since his mental breakdown after his wife's death, the Boss seemed to have been sentimental enough to let him live to raise his daughter, who was only a seven-year-old child at that time.

"You're too young to have regrets," he puffs at his cigarette with a nostalgic smile. "But at my age, regrets begin to consume you. I've neglected Haruka—a failure my late wife would never have forgiven me. I've taken her with me to all the meetings of the agents motards but was never available whenever she reached out to me. All I could think of was how to plan my revenge. And when Haruka was fourteen and I had finally recovered from my grief, it was much too late." His teal eyes are looking through you into a past which can never be revived. "Haruka was once a wonderful girl—the kindest person I knew, nicer than I or even her mother ever was. Immersed in her idea of revenge, she has become radical."
"She is still a wonderful person," you tell him in a sharp voice. "She has a family she truly cares about although you wouldn't accept her girlfriend, which was the only reason why she distanced herself from you. It's hard to believe that she has become such a good parent to Hotaru although she didn't receive love from her own parents."

"She didn't get much attention from me, not even before her mother's death, because I was always busy—but her mother was very affectionate towards her," Jean Black admits, studiously ignoring your comment about Tenoh-san's relationship with Kaioh-san. "Although she belonged to the crows, my wife was a lovely woman." He hesitates for a moment. "Has your boyfriend told you how we lost her?"

You shake your head in silence. It was Tenoh-san, who described her mother's death to you in detail when you suggested that you two take out Anokata and the six loyal crows with the undetectable poison you created for yourself instead of APTX. *I'm not their Good Samaritan,* she had screamed, staring at you through unshed tears. *If you dare to propose such a thing to me again, I'm going to shoot you!*

"I'm going to spare you the details," M Jean Black gives a mirthless chuckle. "She received the second red card when she left the crows to stay with me. We were well prepared for an attack, but after years of waiting, we thought they'd forgiven her or forgotten about us. When Haruka was seven, my wife got sentimental, asked me to marry her although she had never cared about official documents. She disappeared in the night of the wedding, leaving the last red card on our bed… I found her clothes and all the pieces of her body after days and weeks. The only thing I couldn't find was her wedding ring."

"And now you want that the same happens to us?" you ask, unimpressed by his tragedy when all you can think of is Kudo's safety. "Are you telling me all these things to prepare me for the aftermath?"

He sighs, regarding you with a sharp, cold gaze.

"I've warned your boyfriend beforehand that this will be dangerous. But it's a matter of social conscience! There have always been people who selflessly put themselves in danger to protect others. Without those people, how would our world be? Kudo Shinichi is one of those people, and he is extremely competent. He is old enough to know what he is doing and young enough not to be burdened with children and a wife—people who depend on him and who could tie him down. If I weren't absolutely sure that he is the right man for the job, I'd never have told him where the crows keep Pandora's Box."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" you coolly ask, unable to hide your contempt. "You could have done this on your own instead of asking a teenager to do it for you."

"I can trust your boyfriend but not myself." Jean Black gives you a sad smile, which resembles Tenoh-san's so much that it throws you off-balance, and chuckles. "You believe I'm afraid of death? On the contrary! To me, death is a luxury. The only thing which keeps me alive is Pandora's Box. To die in peace, I need to witness the downfall of the Organization."

"Well then, after the Organization goes down, you can go ahead and kill yourself!"

Instead of being offended, he flashes you a humorous smile, which changes his features drastically and makes him look ten years younger than he is.

"Maybe I will..."
Revenge—he changes the topic—is always personal. To serve justice, however, you need to be open-minded and impartial, which is almost impossible if you have a compelling reason to seek revenge.

"You see, I don't have anything against revenge," he says, puts out his cigarette, and throws the cigarette butt into the ashtray. "Personal revenge can be sweet and healthy, especially when it's fair and straightforward. But this…" He shakes his head with a mournful expression. "…This is too big! Killing one person out of personal revenge, in a fair fight, is not the same as killing eight people or more. If I kill the crows, I'll also have to kill their sniper spouses and their devoted secretaries. The quantity always makes a difference, and guilt grows exponentially. I'm afraid of losing myself in this."

You calmly hold his piercing gaze until he averts his eyes, turning his attention to the cigarette butts in the ashtray. Instead of asking you whether his daughter and you are plotting a revenge or not, he only sighs, leans back, and closes his eyes.

"Kudo Shinichi is the perfect man for this," he says at last. "He can comprehend the pain of the victims because he has had a taste of it. But his personal loss—three or four years of his life—is absolutely nothing compared to mine." For an instant, his deep eyes flash with icy rage. "If Pandora's Box were in my hands and I knew the identity of the seven crows, I'd simply kill them all—more than that, I'd torture them, rip out their guts, and cut out their eyes! Your boyfriend, on the other hand, is going to keep a clear head and make the right decisions."

When you rise from the sofa without saying a word, he only follows you to the door and opens it.

"Although I'm sure that Kudo Shinichi is the right one for the task," he tells you in a low voice as you leave, "I'm not so sure about you."

Kudo, who has been waiting for you in the library, has naturally overheard the last sentence. Pulling you to the veranda after fetching your coat for you, he hands you your non-alcoholic Blue Lagoon and leans against the iron railing. Since Kudo has turned off the light of the veranda, only the crescent moon is illuminating the old honey locust next to the entrance, whose thorns are throwing dark shadows on Kudo's face, creating the illusion of scars and burns and claw marks.

There is no excuse for not doing the right thing, he claims. There are always sacrifices you need to make and risks you need to take to achieve your goals. But from a moral point of view, it's of primary importance that the people who risk their lives are doing it of their own accord. "I can risk my life but not yours. If you're not sure that coming with Hattori and me is really what you want, please give me the key and stay with the Professor in Tokyo after we return to Japan."

You laugh, much to your own surprise, as you're trying to imagine how Kudo is going to use the key if he has never learned to hold a tune. The first-generation crows are, without exception, musical people with an acute sense of rhythm and pitch, who have taught the younger generations to cope with that person's quirky sense of humour whenever they try to enter the cabin.

"Nice try. But I've told you I'm only going to assist you on condition that I come with you and open the cabin, haven't I?"

You can remember a talk Gin and you had in Kyoto before he went to the meeting at Pandora's Box. Let's face it: the Organization isn't what it once was or what it claimed to be, you told him after an uncommonly pleasant evening, during which you two listened to his favourite jazz singer and shared a bath. Like any other organization, it has traitors, corruption, and bureaucracy. I think
we two have already done enough. We should simply retire and let the other codename members do all the work.

We both would be executed, Gin only said, sitting up in bed without shoving you away. Spewing blue smoke and lazily running his fingers through your damp hair, he asked you where you would go, for whom you would work if it were possible to leave the Organization. For the industry or for the government? Everyone in this world was corrupt, which couldn't only be blamed on the corrupt system.

You see, Sherry, we have a recurring problem: You can't comply with the regulations. A girl like you would never be happy—he asserted—as freedom and justice didn't necessarily need to be part of happiness to most people but to you. Like other people, however, you didn't only need freedom but also security. In life, you can never have both. Believe me, it would be easier for you if you were just a decorative doll like the redhead you liked so much.

Even if I had it, why should I give you the key, you remember asking Tenoh-san, who had been waiting for you in front of the lab to pester you about Gin and Pandora's Box. What do I get in return?

Freedom, the blonde racer, whom you had never talked with before, smirked. Most people don't need it but you need it, like me. I can see it in your eyes!

At Infinity, Meioh Setsuna-san once told you that your incessantly working mind, combined with your pessimism, would be your greatest enemy when you grew up, and predicted that you would be having a hard time fighting against your destructive intellect because you're unable to trust your own intuition. Back then you thought she was indirectly flattering you, trying to be nice. But now you begin to consider the possibility that Meioh-san was only brutally honest and that her words weren't meant to flatter you at all.

Just as Kudo doesn't know all about the crow's security measures and the key, Kudo doesn't know what the real Pandora's Box is, for you've never revealed to him the dreams of the Organization. More than once, Gin has ranted about the corruption of power and what it meant to live in a world where everything was a social construct, how unbearable life would be if it weren't for that person, who was going to change the world for the better. Most people—Gin told you—didn't question their beliefs, preferring to trust all the arbitrary moral values and life views society imposed on them. The codename members, on the other hand, fought for their ideals and dedicated their lives to changing the future for the next generations.

It's hilarious how philosophies resemble each other, how Gin, Rye, Kudo, and Jean Black all say the same thing…

Kaioh Michiru, the most interesting of all, says that people often let themselves dictate by what they think is right and natural. There is the tendency to do the things which seem right in one context in another as if it was universal, causing unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecies. Despite (or because of?) his unquestionable brilliance and integrity, Kudo, too, has a pattern he can't escape. He will always solve mysteries. If he gets the tool to bring criminals to justice and save all the victims, he will definitely use it.

Your memory for formulas has always been excellent. If you hadn't feared that Kudo would get himself killed as soon as he returned to his original state, you would have made the permanent antidote long ago. You've only created the temporary antidote because you pitied Ran and him, whose carefree lives would never have been messed up if it hadn't been for the Organization's utopian dreams.
"When I was small, I always wondered why the gods put Hope into Pandora's Box." Kudo smiles at you, watching you sip your Blue Lagoon with thinly disguised enjoyment while you're staring in fascination at the changing patterns on his face, which the moonlight and the shadow of the honey locust, whose thorns sway gently in the biting wind, create. "When I got older, I began to realize that the gods, no matter how harsh they were, still liked humans too much to punish them with all the evils of humanity without giving them something else in return." He doesn't mind spending his whole life on the run, he adds. As long as you don't mind it either, he will take it in stride and accept Monsieur Jean Black's protection even if it means to spend the next twenty years of his life in Europe.

You, too, wondered why Hope has been kept in Pandora's jar when you heard the Pandora's Box legend for the first time, you think to yourself. But in the end, you've come to an entirely different conclusion. In one version of the tale, Pandora closed the lid of the jar before Hope, the greatest evil of all, could escape. In another version, the naive woman released it, and it flew out into the world to prolong the torment and perpetuate humankind's suffering with its irresistible face and its angelic voice, which coaxes the mortals into believing that they can defeat all evils someday.

Inside, the music is playing "Starry, Starry Night". Kudo reaches out to rub your shoulder, giving you a reassuring squeeze before pulling away. It's easy to get lost in the moment, thinking this is how things are supposed to be. You two are sitting on the vast veranda at the breakfast table like a middle-aged couple, beholding the crescent moon and the "starry, starry night"—the emblem of the eternal coexistence of light and darkness in the universe and the symbol of unattainable, endless beauty. The smog has cleared, but the air is bitterly cold. Kudo is being really docile these days, you think as you sip your Blue Lagoon and listen to Don McLean's song on Vincent Van Gogh from the hall. It must be his guilty conscience, as (without really touching you), Kudo has been betraying Ran with you for days.

"And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you, Vincent
This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you…"

In life, there are sometimes moments of infinite sadness like now, when you're sitting alone on the double bed, drying your hair with the hair dryer of a long-deceased woman, who once belonged to the seven crows. Sometimes, you wonder whether Kudo ever feels like people like Tenoh-san and you and whether Kudo only doesn't have a truly dark side, against which he has to fight, because he has been spared from all the things which could have triggered its development like deep, unbearable sorrow. You wonder how he would be if he had to go through genuine hardship. Not the sort of challenge that turns one into a hero and an acclaimed detective but the sort of hardship which Tenoh-san, Gin, Jean Black, and you went through—the sort which makes you despise the whole world. What a person would Kudo become if he suddenly lost everyone he cared about… Ran, her parents, his parents, the Professor, Hattori, you?

You wonder why you feel this uncontrollable urge to protect Kudo although it can't be your duty to stop him. It should be Ran's task, you think with bitterness. But she can't do anything because you've advised him not to tell her about Pandora's Box before the whole operation was over.
In fact, there have been many cases in which you let Kudo endanger himself and almost sacrifice himself for others when you two were still Edogawa and Haibara. But during all those cases, it was him, who had to make the decision for himself. Now the situation is entirely different. You've given him the permanent antidote and are going to open Pandora's Box for him so that he won't run off and try to wring the key out of Gin, the only crow he knows. It goes without saying that you will have to take responsibility for the aftermath as well.

The coin flies high before it comes down, rolls to the door of the bedroom, and falls on one side. Let Kudo proceed with his plans to secure Pandora's Box, it says. Assist him as well as you can—and let him die.

Impossible, you realize, since that's the one thing you can never do. No matter how much and how often you will have to dirty your hands, no matter how high the price will be: the most important things to you—in the past, in the present, and even in the remote future—is to avenge Akemi-nee-san's death and ensure that Kudo stays alive.

Removing the small Cupid from your locket, you replace it with the twenty-sixth pill. The remaining twenty-five pills, all fastidiously numbered so that Tenoh-san won't mix them up, are lying snugly next to each other in the red jewellery box, which once contained the love necklace you're wearing.

You can't even tell whether it is love or obsession, or just the simple urge to protect. For everyone needs someone like the red-haired girl in their life: a symbol of frail perfection, without which the world can't function. Gazing at the white-gold Cupid, which is now lying forlornly at the bottom of your jacket pocket and which you're going to throw out tomorrow when you meet up with Tenoh-san so that Kudo won't find it by accident, you have the premonition that love itself will be the price. But love, or at least romantic love, is so fleeting and so insignificant compared to life.
Part 18: Banalities and habits are...

Banalities and habits are reassuring in times of confusion, as I discover once again when Kudo and I stroll back to Hikawa Shrine, balancing on the border of a past and a possible future love. Thus we're bantering again like Edogawa and Haibara did, ignoring the delicate issue between us, which we don't know how to solve without hurting each other.

"If you continue to take so much APAH during the day, it doesn't make sense to fill all the tiny capsules. You might as well keep the powder in paper bags or packets instead."

"That could cause dangerous misunderstandings. I don't want to be arrested for taking drugs in public every time I have a migraine."

"Why not? It would do you good. That way, your incentive to take APAH will remove itself with time."

The ginkgo trees at the other end of Ichinohashi Park are looming in the distance, swaying in the wind as though they were trying to lure us towards Two Lights', where throngs of excited fans are lined up in front of the entrance for Yaten-san's self-designed card game. Like yesterday, the world has lit up again before twilight, as if the sun were trying to defy death in a magnificent attempt to stay above the horizon forever.

"You've left your phone at home again." Kudo gives me an accusing look. "Just like yesterday!"

Like yesterday, a voice in my mind echoes. Just like yesterday, the light rain has already been dried by the evening sun. The rain clouds I saw on the bus must have dispersed before they reached Ueno-koen. And maybe Seiya is sitting on the same bench in disguise, waiting for Odango as he always does whenever he has time…

Except that she has ended their regular meetings without a warning just like I've ended our relationship. I can still see his self-mocking, distant smile as he stepped back and sighed, observing that he had been dumped twice within the same night.

Kudo has consoled me and kept me company during the first phase of grief, but Seiya was alone because neither of the two women he loves was available when he needed them. I doubt he has tried to talk about us with Shortie and Stick. In spite of their indisputable closeness, it seems to me that the relationship between Seiya and his two brothers is unbalanced and that he tends to support them without letting them comfort him in return.

Yesterday, I planned to arrive at the place of rendezvous at six o'clock but was delayed by the traffic jam. It must have been around half past six when I arrived at the bench, as it was forty past six when I, prompted by Seiya's question, gazed at my watch for the first time. And now I bitterly regret that I haven't recorded the exact time my stranger and I met—as if my life or even his life depended on the last stroke of the seconds hand when the twenty-fourth hour passes.

"If you don't have time for me, you'll have to call me because I'll come over if I can't get a hold of you on the phone," Kudo threatens. "If he happens to be at your place tomorrow night and insists on going out with us, it could become a very awkward dinner."

"It could be interesting! Just imagine Furuhata-san's face when he serves the three of us at the
same table." Since Furuhata Motoki-san was the friend who informed Chiba Mamoru about his fiancée's infidelity, he must know Seiya by sight and—after the drama Kudo and I caused in his bar during lunch—would also deduce that Seiya was the man I had breakfast with this morning. I'm almost curious about Furuhata-san's reaction to the imaginary nightmare scenario now that my reputation is ruined.

Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to call him because the battery of his phone is dead, I remind Kudo, whereupon he obligingly assures me that he is going to get a new one as soon as possible. If truth be known, I'm selfishly glad that the battery of Kudo's phone is dead—that he can't receive a call from Ran or from Megure-keibu or from a detective of the Tokyo Metropolitan Department, who could inform him about yet another death whose cause he has to investigate, while he is with me.

In the distance, the white stone stairs of Hikawa Shrine are gleaming golden in the warm sunlight while the shadows are tinted a deep purple. Kudo is right that I should at least say goodbye to the stranger who has kept me company and rescued me from my melancholia for one night, helped me solve the mysteries of my life, and changed the way I see.

"Life isn't exactly a barrel of laughs at the moment, is it?" Kudo remarks. "For neither of us…" With a hint of irritation and undisguised jealousy in his voice, he adds, "You should have waited a bit longer before you let a complete stranger seduce you."

"Are you sure that he seduced me?" I flash him an amused smirk. Being a 'bad girl' in Kudo's eyes is actually relieving, as I no longer feel the pressure of keeping up with angels like Ran. "Maybe you did have a point when you compared me to Irene Adler."

Kudo stares at me in genuine surprise, oblivious to the implication of my last sentence.

"What do you mean?"

"Irene Adler was a 'well-known adventuress', Kudo," I remind him, realizing at the same time that he either doesn't know what the expression insinuated in Victorian times or has blotted it out in an attempt to turn Sherlock Holmes' much admired woman into the virtuous angel who would have been his own ideal. "She was an opera singer who had scandalous affairs with famous men far above her social status. For that reason—and not because she had such a lovely singing voice—Holmes had heard of her and even kept a brief account on her profile before he took on the king's case." I laugh as I see the realization dawn on Kudo's stupefied face. "The king was so paranoid about Irene Adler ruining his upcoming marriage because she was considered unpredictable and dangerous—the ultimate femme fatale."

"You have a habit of dashing my illusions with only a few words!" Kudo runs his fingers through his hair in despair as he often does whenever he is shocked or nervous. "I'm never going to see Irene Adler with the same eyes again."

"We all have to face the truth some day, Kudo," I chuckle. "If it's any consolation to you: Sherlock Holmes admired and liked 'the woman' nonetheless. If you can't digest the unpalatable truth, you've chosen the wrong profession."

"Since I respect Holmes' decisions, I'm going to accept her as well." Kudo gives me a familiar bashful smile, which almost reminds me of the starry smiles that perpetually graced his lips in Paris three years ago; and suddenly his obsession with Sherlock Holmes doesn't seem childish and irritating to me anymore.

In a time and in a country where "good women" were expected to be the modest, unblemished
"Angel in the House" who devoted their lives to their husband and children, took all the domestic duties on themselves, and blushed whenever a ribald remark entered their squeaky-clean ear, Irene Adler—defying all the boundaries society forced on her—roamed the streets in male clothes, allowed herself the freedom to have secret and even not-so-secret love affairs, and socialized with people far above and far below her social status, who were all enthralled by her. A rare, modern woman too wild and self-willed to survive in a conventional world, Mrs Irene Norton had to flee the country in order to protect her happiness, which she found with her unconventional, handsome ("remarkably" so, in Holmes' words), and loving barrister. Poor Mr Godfrey Norton is always ignored, erased from the story, eliminated by death, or defamed off-screen in most Sherlock Holmes adaptations for the simple reason that he would have stolen the limelight with his charm and his strikingly good looks and rendered a romance between Sherlock and Irene most improbable...

Fighting a new tug of regret and the familiar ache, which threatens to overcome me when the key to Seiya's apartment pokes at my leg through the hole of my pocket, I wish my stranger and I had met when he was Godfrey Norton and not Moriarty on the set.

We've arrived at Hikawa Shrine again, and I hesitate in front of the stairs to the now empty courtyard, where only the cherry wish tree is waving its heavy sakura-laden branches to greet me. Perhaps Taiki-san and Yaten-san are really hiding at "Rei-chan's place" at the moment, and I can return the key to Seiya tonight if they tell me where to find him. It's peculiar and disquieting how the urge to find closure is growing in me as the seconds pass—as if I only had one and a half hour left to give our story an appropriate ending.

"Since you'd rather do this alone, I'll go to the main train station now." Kudo casts me a quick sidelong glance. "I have only five to ten minutes—but if you want, I can wait here until you've knocked at the door and talked to them."

"No, thank you. If I feel like meeting the Despondent Duo again, I'd rather enjoy Shortie and Stick's insults without knowing that you're lurking in the distance, taking notes for your memoirs."

He gives me an exasperated smile.

"One day, we should make a list of all the problems between us and find out whether you or I are guilty of causing the majority of them. I dare say that you are the one who always pushes me away whenever I threaten to uncover your secrets."

I shrug as I trace the engravings, marks, and dents on the stone plate in front of the gate with my fingers—scars of the past which are not going to fade with time. "I'm not a mystery for you to solve, in case you haven't noticed. And it's impossible to deal with all the issues of our relationship in five minutes, Kudo. Time is running out, so just give up now."

He doesn't give up but lingers in the ending sunset, whose myriads of colours are all reflected on his crumpled white shirt. To me, he has always been the fairytale white knight in a grey and black world—but it's new to me that I don't feel the slightest desire to resemble the pure princess he would have liked me to be. Kudo Shinichi might have dreamed of saving her from the dragon and joining her in holy matrimony, but Miyano Shiho is the mermaid from the dark depth of the ocean who believed that she wanted the prince while she—far more ambitious than she wanted to admit to herself—was longing for an eternal soul.

"All the past issues between us... whatever we said or didn't say to each other—does it really matter?" Kudo asks in retaliation for my comment that my answer at Pandora's Box won't make any difference at this point in time. "I think there hasn't been a day when I didn't think of you in some way, wondering what you're doing in Juuban and whether you're still thinking of Paris as
Taken aback by his confession, which came just when I no longer expected it, I remember that Kudo has always had a way with words, capturing my heart just when I thought I had finally evaded him.

"I've missed our cases," he continues in his exasperating candour, "especially your cutting remarks that often put me on the right track."

"I told you I'm never going to be your sidekick and amanuensis, Kudo!"

"Neither do I want you to," he dryly remarks. "In that case, my reputation would suffer for sure."

I smile at the thought, wondering how our story would sound if I were the narrator. No doubt, I would mock Kudo and make fun of his silly cowlick, his barbarous singing, his non-existent cooking skills, and his bottomless pockets while glossing over all the grand and noble gestures which distinguish him from other men. I would fuss over all his irritating habits like gobbling APAH, blurring out insulting observations, and dissecting every person he meets as though they were corpses in the morgue. Of course I would also lay particular stress on his weaknesses and failures: how he naively insists on jailing every criminal and saving every victim on earth at the expense of his own happiness; the contempt and disgust he showed me when he shrank away from my touch at Pandora's Box; his terrible timing and how he tried to find solace in my love and dump his grief on me just when I was too broken to offer him love and show him sympathy; his callous betrayal when he took our love and, in a generous attempt to make everyone happy, gave it to another girl...

I would claim that our story has ended on a dismal, muted note—omitting all the other times when I had fallen out of love with him and he managed to weave his spell upon my mind again. Not even once would I linger over the many ways in which he cared for me, rescued me from my loneliness, and saved my life, dismissing it as simple acts of kindness he would have offered anyone else. I would ignore his pain and his loneliness, his hopeless longing for a lost past, which not even my painkillers could quench. In the eyes of an inattentive, trusting reader, his reputation would suffer for sure!

"I wish we were partners again," Kudo admits. "I'm not expecting anything from you—especially not when you're still mourning a past relationship. I only hope that you don't mind continuing the partnership we had in Paris—without the charade this time."

Since I find him too endearing to resist him at the moment (and because I've become weak after fighting with myself for too long), I give in and smile, leaning against the stone plate in front of Hikawa Shrine as I raise my hand to say goodbye.

"Why not? If you stumble over an interesting case... and if I'm free and bored... just give me a call and I'll give you a hand."

His face lights up and he impulsively takes my hand in his, much to my surprise, and we slowly shake hands like the partners we should have been in these three years, which have been lost to resentment and anger. His hand still feels like it did in Paris—warm and comforting and safe, touching me deeply although it no longer makes my heart race. And when he jokingly asks me not to get myself a new boyfriend until tomorrow night, I only smirk and tell him that it's not his business to play my guardian.

The sunlight is fading as the day is coming to an end. The sun has set on this love—and yet it feels like the start of something new. I have the premonition that twilight will be darker today although..."
there will be a thin lambent purple line flaring in the distance. Perhaps my love for Kudo is Love in its purest essence—I ponder as I climb the steps to Hikawa Shrine, turning back to smile at him when I hear his voice wishing me luck. Gazing after his snow-white figure among the dark crowd, remembering his brilliant eyes, which have seen through so many facades and lies but have always failed to pierce through the depth of his Irene Adler's soul, I watch my detective disappear behind the giant wheel of the amusement park with an irrational sense of relief. In a twist matching the ghost story I've reinvented, I don't want him to stay with me now that the dusk of twilight time is falling.

My love for Kudo, once desperate and volatile, has transformed into a deep, everlasting, spiritual infatuation devoid of the razor-sharp edges of passion, freed from the remnants of jealousy and greed. It must be the love ninety-year-old couples who have shared decades of their lives feel for each other when they are no longer susceptible to the capricious ups and downs of romantic love—a tyrannical, dangerous yearning for the stars, which is as arbitrary and impetuous and unrestrained and hurtful as Amor's golden arrow.

Kudo and I have bypassed and missed out all the decades' worth of in-between phases, however, have not been able to fill the gulf between the first stirrings of infatuation and the last enduring attachment with all the other worldly and heavenly aspects of a reciprocated mature love. Overrated when it's depicted as the sole purpose of being alive but also underrated when it's derided as superfluous and corrupting, desire itself is a divine gift one can only appreciate after knowing and losing it. The freedom and peace of a mind devoid of romantic yearning usually comes in exchange for true happiness. Longing, despite being the main force that wrecks the world and creates whole universes anew, is a fragile and difficult creature, which can't be revived once it has died, and which seldom if ever returns after it has been nurtured in another garden.

Stalling for time in the long shadow of the cherry wish tree, I ransack my mind for words I could say to Shortie and Stick to convince them to let me meet their brother again after ripping out his heart and trampling on it. For a moment, I consider going straight to Seiya's apartment and wait for him there—but a peculiar, overwhelming sense of purpose urges me not to lose time in case he is not at home, as I still owe him an explanation or at least an apology for my erratic, fickle behaviour and the wound I inflicted on him when all he did was showering me with affection and offering me his warmth whenever our paths crossed.

According to Haruka-san, you tricked both Kudo and her and erased the files on the real Pandora's Box—I don't mean the main computer in Pandora's-Box-the-cabin, which only served as a decoy, but Pandora's-Box-the-tiny-laptop-like thing, where the seven crows kept their most important files... In that case, wouldn't it have been easier to leave it exactly where it was—on Pandora's-Box-the-ship, which was going to explode, anyway—instead of messing with it? Why did you activate it so that the only option for you to survive was to erase it completely?

Unaware of what he was doing, my stranger has given me the one trump which would weigh heavily on the scales of Justice when he reminded me of my one moment of grandeur, in which a dark creature like me sacrificed what she wanted most for another person without expecting anything in return. Crouching in the galley with the fake cookie box containing the real Pandora's Box in my lap, listening to the pit-a-pat of the rain and Kudo's voice from the phone, I remember staring at the screen in grim determination as the countdown was flashing before my eyes. It would have been ridiculously easy to click on Send, or just wait until the programme, which Gin had activated before he died, sends the mails on its own...

If it had been Kudo's name, I would immediately have deleted the files—but with his voice talking so tenderly of love and lifelong commitment on the phone, the tables were suddenly turned, and I could hear the sweet, persuasive voice of opportunism whispering at my ear. All the arguments I
had conjured up for myself against a life on the run, all my fears when I heard M Jean Black's unimaginable personal tragedy, suddenly stopped to make sense in view of the future Kudo offered me.

Wasn't this the risk Tenoh-san and I accepted when we pursued our revenge? As courageous and radical as she had always been, a dark heroine for whom the ends justified the means, there was no doubt she would immediately have chosen the thousands of lives over her own life, made a backup of the files, and sent off the emails even with her own name attached to them. After all, the two reasons why she wanted Pandora's Box for herself were removing the files on her family and helping the victims in her own stealthy way. If I did nothing to stop the emails from being sent to the blackmailed people on the list, Kudo and I would still be safe, the victims of the seven crows would still receive their long-awaited and well-deserved justice... and Tenoh-san would spend the rest of her life under witness protection.

It was the moral dilemma most political leaders faced at least once in their lives—the question whose answer depended on one's own personal interest in the outcome. As Gin said, fear and selfishness usually won in extreme circumstances. Logically, the decision should have been easy no matter what I chose. Kudo Shinichi's love and the agents motards' everlasting gratitude or Tenoh Haruka's happiness—the thing I wanted most and the conventionally right choice weighed against the life of my trusted ally. I wish I could have told Kudo the reason why I cried, the real cause of my tears he mistook for tears of grief: When Kudo took me into his arms after Gin's death, covered both of us with a blanket, confessed his love for me, and offered me a lifelong partnership while I was thinking of Kaioh-san and Hotaru-chan, whose beloved life partner's and "father's" name would be irrevocably attached to Pandora's Box if I saved the files, I was faced with the hardest, cruelest choice of my life.
The miko's smile—warm and engaging only seconds ago—freezes on her lips and vanishes from her eyes the moment she hears your name. You're Miyano Shiho, "Seiya's new friend," who would like to talk to Taiki-san because Seiya and you have forgotten to exchange phone numbers—you tell her, making a valiant effort to explain the situation although the dangerous glint in Hino Rei’s dark amethyst eyes show you only too clearly that she has already heard about you from the Despondent Duo and is ready to tear you limb from limb for hurting her friend.

"Unfortunately, Taiki-san and Yaten-kun don't have time for anyone apart from their closest friends at the moment." She doesn't even pretend to smile. "I regret to inform you that Seiya-kun's affairs and one-night stands don't fall into that category."

If you weren't positive that stranger-san was inexperienced when he met you—Taiki-san's refusal to believe that his brother was with a woman when he tried to knock down the door was final proof of Seiya's innocence—you would have been rendered speechless by the realization that your stranger has intentionally lured you into his bed. As things are, you're only surprised and mildly irritated by Hino-san's unconcealed contempt.

"I'm not a one-night stand." You make an effort to keep your voice low, exhausting your supply of patience to stay polite despite the frosty, almost hostile reception. To prove that last night wasn't only a casual encounter, you show Hino-san the key to Seiya's apartment. Instead of placating her, however, it only fuels her anger.

"You can give it to me or throw it into his mailbox." She gracefully holds out her long, slender hand, and reluctantly adds, "He must have liked you a lot to give you his key since he usually doesn't give it to other lovers. It seems you've been special."

"Other lovers?" Your voice falters when you realize for the first time that Taiki-san could have been surprised at the fact that Seiya has brought a woman home with him and not the fact that he was in the company of a woman. Taiki-san has also called his brother a "naive idiot" for letting a complete stranger, who could be a lovesick groupie, seduce him, which doesn't necessarily mean that Seiya has never had any secret lovers…

Hino Rei raises her fine raven brows, blinks in astonishment, and gives an annoyed, defeated sigh.

"How, do you think, did Seiya-kun get his reputation? You can't blame him since the women keep hurling themselves at him even when he is in disguise. I'm sure he has only accepted their feelings out of pity and never initiated anything. But afterwards they all get clingy and beg us for his phone number because they've obsessively fallen in love with the unattainable guy… Of course he always swears on everything he holds dear that he hasn't even touched a hair on their heads. But since he is the greatest actor alive—when he is in the mood, he even believes his own lies!—and three-quarters of the paper wishes on this cherry tree must belong to his past one-night stands," she points an accusing finger at the heavy hope-laden branches, which are swaying in the gusty wind, "I doubt all the girls have been lying."

You stare at the young woman in front of you in stunned silence, taking in her classical, contrast-filled beauty. With her slight stature, long glossy ebony hair, alabaster skin, regular features, blood-red lips, and slightly slanted eyes framed by long, thick eyelashes, Hino Rei is the very image of a Japanese fairy. But beneath that calm exterior, her fiery temper and impatience shine
through like an intense, uncontrollable, inextinguishable blaze. It dawns on you that she is madly jealous because she is not a normal friend as you assumed but most probably one of Seiya's special friends, ex-girlfriends, or spurned lovers. Having had to watch the object of her desire pining for a friend of hers for years (while distracting himself with other women and ignoring her?), meeting the stranger whom he has given his key after one night must have been the last straw.

Notwithstanding her bitterness, Hino-san looks guileless and proud—the type that calls a spade a spade and never stoops to underhanded stratagem. As the hundreds of delightful caresses and kisses Seiya lavished on you flash through your mind and once again fan your desperate, heartrending longing for his voice, his scent, and his skin, you tremble with murderous, impotent rage at the realization that Kudo was right and that the notorious heartbreaker must have lied to you, seduced you, and manipulated you for a whole night. Abandoned by his unrequited love, he must have chosen the first pretty woman he met to keep him company in his depression. It's a win-win situation—you can imagine him winking at you with his unapologetic, irresistible smile, pecking you on your cheek before he sets out to tempt his next victim. The irony that he ended up falling in love with you and had his heart broken for a change isn't enough of a consolation. Ablaze with fury, you wish he were here so that you could scratch out his eyes, hang, draw, and quarter him.

Hino-san's friends and Taiki-san appear in the corridor just when you've made up your mind to leave, eyeing you with three different expressions on their faces. The long-legged, curvaceous, handsome brunette, whose heavy-lidded hazel eyes are smartly brought out by her verdigris blouse and her pink rose-shaped earrings, darts Hino Rei and you worried glances. Taiki-san, who looks even more haggard than usual beside the tall, voluptuous woman, seems oddly relieved to see you. Aino Minako (who must be Seiya's on-and-off lover if the rumours about them are true), is studying you curiously, with a hint of a mischievous smile in her cornflower eyes. It makes sense to you that Seiya would visit her whenever he goes to Venice, as she resembles Odango so much that she might as well be Odango's more beautiful, much more seductive, and infinitely more confident twin.

"What's up, Rei-chan?" the brunette girl asks while Taiki-san steps forward and grasps your arm in a gesture of urgency. After "Rei-chan" has summed up the situation to her friends in unambiguous, derogatory terms ("Seiya-kun's latest fling is begging for his number!"), Taiki-san leads you from the door to the cherry tree and informs you in concise but jumbled sentences that his younger brother has disappeared and that you've just dashed his hope that Seiya is with you.

"Seiya is furious at Yaten and me—told me on the phone that we're wrecking his life. He doesn't even answer Yaten's calls anymore. Shizuka-san is searching for him as well since we need to pack for New York and drive to the airport in one or two hours at the latest." Stick lets go of your arm to gesticulate. "I've even left a message and apologized to him but he didn't respond. I'm glad that Yaten is napping at the moment. He'd gladly kill you for what you did to Seiya."

"New York?" You try to make sense of his words. "Why New York?" Although you'd have loved to comment that you'd have expected Shortie to be ecstatically happy that you've released his youngest brother from your clutches, you're not in the mood for the resulting discussion.

All the three of them have been shuttling back and forth between New York and Tokyo ever since the downfall of the Organization, Taiki-san explains. Now that they've found a studio in New York, they're going to stay there until their comeback in July because the producer and the director of the new movie franchises are living in New York as well.

"I know it sounds rushed." Taiki-san looks almost apologetic. "But Seiya has been delaying his decision for so long that Shizuka-san was afraid they could rethink their decision to keep the
original cast in the original roles. We're also considering swapping the roles between Seiya and me in *Detective Boy Holmes* because our director would rather have me as Moriarty and Seiya in the main role. Since Akane-san, who is in New York at the moment, will be on another set in Africa next week, we have to meet up with her and the producer tomorrow night. But you know Seiya…"

Stick has taken your arm again and led you back to Hino Rei and her friends. "It's impossible to talk sense into him when he has clammed up. And now that he has run off, all we can do is wait for him here in the hope that he shows up within the next hour."

"Usagi is searching for him as well," Aino-san tells you as she openly studies you from head to toe. With a compassionate smile and the self-assured air of a woman who knows her worth, she adds, "She is the only one he will listen to."

"If he listens to anyone," the brunette girl, who has a remarkably strong, resonant voice, muses. Hesitantly, with a sidelong glance at Hino Rei, who only rolls her eyes in response, she bows. "I'm Kino Makoto, one of Seiya-kun's friends. We were classmates in high school." Although you can tell that she resents you for hurting her friend almost as much as Hino-san does, she is trying hard to be civil.

"Aino Minako, Seiya-kun's future sister-in-law, hopefully," Aino-san, imitating her friend, bows as well. "But I have to add that I wouldn't ever reject the offer to become his girlfriend on the side if he turns up on my doorstep!" She grins. "I hope that you don't mind sharing him with me." Feeling Taiki-san's disapproving, embarrassed gaze on her face, she turns to give him a brazen wink. Apparently, Aino-san, who has Seiya's sense of humour, isn't only Seiya's friend with benefit but also shamelessly flirts with his brothers as well.

Keeping your temper in check despite the hot waves of extreme jealousy that sweep over you at the remembrance of the night she alluded to in her card and all the celebrity gossip Sonoko has told you about Seiya and her, you introduce yourself again and prepare to leave, as you can sense that you're not welcome in their tightly knit circle.

"You can wait here if you want to," Hino Rei reluctantly offers. "That is, if you can deal with Yaten-kun's reaction when he wakes up and finds you here."

For a moment, you try to picture yourself at Hino Rei's coffee table, making small talk and stealing Two Lights' last two hours with their friends in the hope that Seiya will return with Odango and you can talk to him for a few minutes in the presence of his brothers and his former, potential, or part-time lovers—not to mention the married woman he has been in love with for the last eight years, who presumably has feelings for him as well…

"No, thank you." You return the key to your pocket. "I'll be looking for him at home instead."

"That's a good idea," Taiki-san agrees. "Maybe he has shut himself up in his apartment and only played dead when we rang. After you left him, he was so beside himself that anything is possible."

From the look of things, Stick is just as delighted by the thought of seeing you at Hino-san's coffee table (and the prospect of preventing his older brother from murdering you after waking up?) as you are.

"I doubt that Seiya-kun is at home," Aino-san remarks. Flashing Hino-san an apologetic glance, she sighs. "Usagi thinks he is waiting at the place where they usually meet up. She didn't want to tell me where it was, though."

You've come to the same conclusion although the thought of stalking him and her in Ueno-koen appeals to you even less than making small talk with Hino Rei and defending yourself against
Yaten Kou's jealous fits. The suspicion that Odango could be so shocked at the news that Seiya has seriously fallen in love with a stranger overnight that she breaks off her happy marriage like Kudo his long-time relationship with Ran is nagging at you, torturing you with the vivid images of your own imagination. *I can't live without you. I'm going to get a divorce. If you let me, I'm going with you to New York...*

"I think I know where he is. I'm going to search for him there if I can't find him in his apartment."

"Ueno-koen," Hino-san obligingly says, much to your surprise, as she is the last person from whom you'd have expected help. "But Ueno-koen is huge, and it's already a quarter past five." With her long dark hair and her serious eyes, she looks like another Queen of Spades, you absently observe, comparing her to Kino Makoto, whose athletic looks resemble the Queen of Clubs more.

"I'm going to leave the key in his mailbox then," you tell her, resigned. In detached amazement, you wonder why you're going out of your way to say farewell to an unscrupulous womanizer who has deceived you for the whole night. It will only take the little cheat another kiss to turn your head again and convince you that he is the very epitome of innocence. You've wrestled with yourself for so long to let go and find your hard-earned peace while Seiya embodies the unexpected mess that will throw your life into disarray again.

"If he is at home, please tell him to be ready at half past six," Taiki-san sighs. "At least he should grab his favourite guitar and his notebook if he doesn't have time to pack because we'll be staying in New York until July." Noticing the quiver on your lips, which you haven't managed to hide, he gives you a puzzled look, in which intellectual curiosity is mingled with pity. "I knew that you'd break up with him when I told you about Kakyuu and our parents—but I thought you'd do it in a less brutal fashion since you appeared so sensible... Anyhow, Seiya will listen to you although he despises all of us at the moment." He takes his hands out of his trouser pockets and steps aside to prevent his long ponytail from flying into your face, reminding you almost of stranger-san in profile. Unlike Seiya's smile, however, Taiki-san's smile is like the reflection of moonlight in a lake—tranquil, enchanting, cool, and distant.

"I hope you can convince him not to throw away this chance because of a small quarrel." He hands you a tiny piece of paper he has just pulled out of his jacket pocket. "Two main roles in two large franchises. These are the sums they offer him for the first two movies—not in yen but in US dollars, mind you! Seiya can't possibly refuse this now that he is nearly broke. He will be the best-paid actor of his generation if he doesn't mess this up." For once, Taiki-san's violet-grey eyes are filled with remorse. "Please tell him I'm sorry for selling out and betraying him like that. But he has been wasting his talents for years... I really believed it was for the best."

Staring at the two eight-digit figures on the innocuous scrap of paper, which is going to separate Seiya from you for good, you need a moment to readjust your face before you can fold it up and look Taiki-san in the eye. He calmly holds your gaze even though you can tell that he is racked with guilt. Without a word, you turn on your heel and look back only once when you've already arrived at the stone stairs. In the scarlet light of the gathering twilight, the wind is tearing at Taiki-san's long auburn ponytail and his midnight-blue suit, evoking the image of the shooting star he is supposed to represent on the posters for the first time. Like a hand of cards, the three queens are gazing after you with mixed emotions. Distractedly playing with the gold chain of hearts around her hips, the lovely Aino Minako raises her free hand to wave you goodbye while Kino Makoto is only leaning against the cherry wish tree with a doubtful expression, shaking her head. Taiki Kou—more Joker than Jack with his unpredictable mood changes—turns away with unreadable eyes while beside him, the beautiful Queen of Spades smiles.
Part 19: Contrary to your expectations...

Contrary to your expectations, tonight’s twilight is breathtakingly radiant, exhibiting not only spectacular scarlet and pink cloudscapes but also a mysteriously shimmering, deep lilac afterglow high above the reddish-golden band on the horizon. The full moon is hanging on this silky curtain of light like a flawless white diamond. As the light behind you fades, the afterglow before your eyes only seems to intensify—and all the trees and buildings in the distance gradually disappear, their outlines blended together into the dramatic skyline.

Driven by a bewildering brew of jealousy, despair, fury, compassion, and love—it is peculiar how the label you were once so hesitant to attach to the feeling has become synonymous with his name after less than one day—you fly to his apartment at a speed which doesn't only ruin your sandals but also your knees and feet. When you arrive at the lift, breathless with anticipation and fatigue, you become aware of the problem that you haven't hatched a plan of action yet although various hypothetical scenarios ranging from rosy to apocalyptic have played out in your mind like a film.

If Seiya invites you in—you suddenly know with certainty when you're finally standing in front of his apartment—you will pin him against the wall and kiss him after kicking the door shut. In revenge for his outrageous lies, the joke he played on you, and the humiliation you had to endure from his brothers and his friends, you will seduce him and use him, struggle free from this ill-fated love, and drop the accomplished Casanova in time for his flight to New York so that he will never forget the woman who has bested him in his own game.

No one opens the door when you ring. If he is at home, he must be sulking in bed or—your blood boils at the thought—distracting himself from his heartache with the help of another woman.

You turn the key and open the door without making a sound, entering his apartment as stealthily as a weightless spectre. Stepping across the threshold, you inhale the familiar scent of roses in the deathly silence. The apartment still looks the same as when Seiya and you left, you observe. Vases of roses are still scattered over the floor between the living room and the kitchen. Piles of love letters are still lying on the coffee table in a heap. From the balcony, the high clouds, the moon, and even the first evening stars, which have come out much too early, seem so near that you can almost fall under the illusion that they are within reach. For all that… Through the blue-tinted glass of the large window, the twilit world has lost its rose colour.

"Seiya?"

If he is in the company of Odango or another woman he has chatted up in a café or on the streets, you're not going to barge in on them without a warning. Taking off your cardigan to hang it on the lowest hook, you begin to feel like Kakyuu, who must have done the same whenever she came home. In a ghost story, her soul would have chosen you as its host for one day, using you to steal the heart of the man who never fully succumbed to her charms when she was still alive. Or the love you once felt for Kudo in Paris has returned to haunt you in disguise, pretending to be a stranger so that it won't be recognized and killed off again…

The beeping sound, muted as if it came from behind a thick, soundproof door, steals into your ear the moment you allow yourself to ponder the untenable, ridiculous idea that the last twenty-three hours have indeed been unreal—a game whose rules provide that you can never see Kudo and Seiya, who have the same initials, at the same time even when they appear at the same place. Like two sides of the same coin, or the same lover in two parallel universes, they have supported you,
taunted you, and got under your skin as they ceaselessly prodded you to leave your comfort zone to retrieve the memories you had chosen to forget. Pushing open the door to the bathroom, whose muted green colour is as soothing as its owner's voice before he drifts into sleep, you register that the washer-dryer combo is not even plugged in although the faint beeping sound is continuing in your head, counting the seconds which pass in the ceaseless, steady flow of time.

In the bathtub, countless bouquets of roses in white, yellow, and red are lying snuggly pressed against each other, filling the air with their heady sweet scent. The warm, nostalgic fragrance of kinmokusei is still lingering in the room as well, wafting from a blue carafe, which lacks the hand-drawn label.

Unnerved by a premonition you cannot name, you knock a few times at the closed bedroom door and push it open. The room is empty, much to your relief. You would have died if you had found him with another woman in it.

Letting your gaze roam the bedroom and linger on the window, whose translucent patterned curtains cast soft, sinister shadows on the bed, you realize with a sinking feeling in your stomach that Seiya and you won't see each other again before he leaves for New York or will see each other much too late, when no time is left for explanations and apologies. Whatever he might have lied about for fear of scaring you away, his love for you felt real. From whichever angle you look at it, it was you who has degraded your fairytale romance to a casual one-night stand, who once again ditched her ideal lover and surrendered to the circumstances. The pattern must have emerged when Gin ended your "marriage" by shooting the only person you truly loved at that time. Since then you've let go of love whenever you could feel it in your grasp—and it doesn't help to know why.

Removing your sandals before treading on the soft carpet, you climb into his bed and rest your head on his pillow, on which you can still smell the scent of his skin. Since it's highly unlikely that you will find him in Ueno-koen within the one hour you have left, you decide to wait for him here instead of rummaging through his drawers for his number or run aimlessly around Shinobizu-no-ike. Maybe—so you tell yourself as you're falling into a pleasant reverie, teetering on the brink of a deep, dead sleep—maybe he will appear in the door in a few minutes and welcome you into his arms. And you two will elope before Tenoh-san can stop the wedding, or she and you will negotiate, and all will be well again.

In truth, you feel too fatigued to move, as though you had wandered across countries and continents and walked thousands of miles within one day. It was the same during the "party" on the day after the Professor's funeral, when you watched Kaito perform his magic tricks. The children and even most of the adults present were delighted by the flowers, the doves, the playing cards, the flickering light, the mirrors and the smoke and the petals flying through the air. To you, however, everything was only a variant of the same game, the repetition of a trick you had already seen.

Watching Kudo and Ran, who were cozily settled close to each other in a corner of the very sofa where Kudo and you had sat and watched Charade before you two went to Paris, you replayed the quarrel at Pandora's Box over and over again in your head. You could see with painful clarity that things would have taken another turn if only you had lied at the crucial moment. Overwhelmed by a sense of loss and indignation at the injustice of it all, you wondered briefly whether you should win your detective back by lying to him now.

"Why did you do it?" he asked her. And the camera focused on her flushed cheeks—which might have been coloured by the harsh, cold wind—and her hard eyes or even her firm mouth as she gazed into the distance and gently murmured, "I did it for you!"
His eyes widened as realization dawned. The music played—a romantic, sickeningly sweet tune. And when they dramatically sank into each other's arms in the rain, which washed away her lies, romance would have bloomed, and he would have forgiven her for deleting the files...

"To keep you safe," you could have said. But it would have felt so wrong to say it at that moment. Although you had intended to protect him at first—when Tenoh-san's name was to be sent to all the blackmailed people on the list, the game had changed, and you learned for the first time that you could never build your happiness on another person's pain. Perhaps you had been too weak or too stubborn, or simply too proud. Or maybe you erased the disk because it was the only way to make sure that Kudo will stay safe—or because you were fed up with the machinations and had to end it all. Since one lie more or less didn't make a difference, you could have lied to Kudo or give him a simplified version the truth—if only you hadn't felt utter disgust at the very thought of it.

In a utilitarian world view, saving the files would have been the right decision no matter whose name Gin had attached to the mail—but your notion of loyalty dictated that you couldn't sacrifice Tenoh-san's happy family for all the Organization's victims. In saving Tenoh-san for Kaioh-san (whose blue umbrella once protected you from being drenched on the way to the dorm while she missed a date with her girlfriend, as you later learned), you had sacrificed thousands of strangers and your own happiness. Tenoh-san, whom you had left in the belief that you had planned to erase the files right from the start, would have called it an act of formidable self-defeat.

Too bright to be black but too dark to be white, poisoning twenty-six people without remorse just to lose what you wanted most due to a moment of weakness and the refusal to live a lie—you were left with a story you couldn't tell, rendered mute before the man you loved like Andersen's little mermaid. But what was wrong, and what was right, you wondered as you were watching Kuroba Kaito's magic tricks with almost clinical detachment. The truth had so many facets and faces of which none looked really right... not when the sunlight faded away at the end of the day and the boundaries blurred into each other in this never-ending twilight.

Some people believed that tragedy was transcendental, a poignant reminder of the gulf between our wishful thinking and the truth—the gap which sometimes equaled the distance between the stars and the earth. And yet you couldn't feel anything of the supposed greatness of suffering as you were walking down the stairs to the cellar. The detective was tailing you from some distance—an elegant, urbane figure in a tailored suit, who offered you his hand when you arrived at your empty desk. Since he wasn't the detective you wanted, however, you didn't take it.

The Professor had been a genius, who had only invented gadgets and toys, Hakuba Saguru said, pulling out a chair with a flourish to sit down next to you. But while the Professor had squandered his talents on inconsequential games, he had known how to make use of time, a resource most people wasted.

Time and life usually slipped away as people focused on their negative experiences, on the repetitiveness of tradition and the familiarity of the known. On a stopwatch, time seemed forever to elapse at the same unchanging pace; but our personal perception of time—the time which really counted and which depended on our awareness—was stretchable to the extreme.

Days could feel like years while years could feel like weeks. How did time pass for someone who was dreaming, who had gone into a coma, or whose life flashed through their mind in their last moments on earth? At the end of our lives, time often revealed itself to be the treasure we had foolishly thrown away in our relentless quest for happiness. Unhappy people were those who left the world with regrets while happy people knew that they had made the most of their time.
When he wished for a party instead of a traditional funeral, your Professor had tried to give you all one day of mirth, which would otherwise have been lost to grief and gloom. Since happiness couldn't be forced on anyone, you were free to stay away from the party if you wanted—but Hakuba, whose task was to coordinate the event, felt responsible to keep you company and make the day bearable for you.

It has never occurred to either of you to steer your growing friendship in the direction of romance, for the chemistry between Hakuba and you are of a purely platonic nature. But you two sometimes meet up when he returns to Tokyo to do some catching up. And as the words which once saved you again enter your consciousness, you force yourself to get up and let your eyes sweep the bedroom.

You haven't been searching for a clue or anything in particular. In fact, you aren't even aware of having searched for anything at all. But when your gaze falls on the small razor and a tube of glue Seiya has left on the bedside table between the helmet and the vase, you instantly recall the curious expression on his face when he asked you why Kaito had given you a death card, and put two and two together...

Seiya has slipped the card back into your pocket along with the key to his apartment. And since you were elated by the fact that he had given you his key, you didn't pay attention. Taking the two playing cards out of your pocket, you behold them in the luminous glimmer of twilight. The Jack of Hearts you found on the street is a regular court card—but the other card is not the Queen and the Ace of Spades, which Seiya must have kept for himself after stealing it from you.

It's an Ace of Hearts with a note in his illegible sloping hand, which you decipher as "Tonight, in Ueno-koen". Turning it to the other side, you discover that in reference to Seiya's character and name, Yaten-san has drawn a colourful jester in front of a starry night, who is wandering on the edge of a precipice and reaching for the stars with a disarming smile, heedless of the danger in front of him and unaware of the ruins he is leaving behind.
Although you know that…

Although you know that haste often causes accidents and that you had better hail a cab, you storm out into the twilight and follow the bus route to Ueno-koen for lack of a better plan. Cursing yourself for losing your handbag with the result that you don’t have any cash for a cab ride, you stumble on your impractical, soon-to-be-disposed-of new sandals along an endless procession of sky-bridges and skyscrapers, tree-lined avenues, and sumptuous villas, past a string of gourmet restaurants, exclusive boutiques, and five-star hotels. As the clothes in the boutiques grow more trendy and affordable and the number of the stars on the hotels in the vicinity diminishes, the lush, pale pink cherry trees at Shinobazu-no-ike materialize into view.

Shivering with anticipation, you fly past the bustling streets towards the water, which is glistening in the same ever-shifting shades of violet and purple as alexandrites glow at night under incandescent lights. The last squirrels of the evening are scrambling along the branches, leaping from tree to tree. At the intersection you just left behind, children are playing ball while cars and bikes are chasing each other for fear of getting into another never-ending rush-hour traffic jam, honking aggressively at the passersby who dare to step on the busy streets despite the faulty traffic lights, which have yet to be repaired. In the distance, a few ducks are paddling eagerly towards the food an elderly couple—ignorant of the danger their ill-advised kindness may cause—throws at them.

The sense of déjà-vu, which assails you again all of a sudden, is no longer vague but tremendous, sheer overwhelming. Time has rewound again, hurling you back into yesterday's pre-stranger-san world. The similarities between last night and tonight are so disturbing that you seriously question your sanity for a moment. You didn't pay attention to the faces of the children playing ball at the intersection where the accident occurred—but now that you whirl around to gaze hard at them, you could swear that they’re wearing the same school uniforms as the group of children you saw last night on the way to Ueno-koen. You can’t distinguish one reddish-brown squirrel from another squirrel of the same colour, just as all ducks of the same sex and the same size look almost identical to your ornithologically uninterested eyes—but the couple that are feeding the ducks now are, without doubt, the same elderly couple that had been feeding the ducks yesterday, the same couple Kudo and you met at the bus station.

On your phone, which must have acquired a previously undiscovered glitch, the calendar brazenly lies when it claims that tonight is really Friday night.

There are slight differences between tonight and last night, however… White seagulls have joined the teal-brown-tan patterned ducks at the pond. All the cherry trees are shedding their blossoms in the rising wind while the deep lilac sky is still overhung with thin layers of scudding crimson and scarlet clouds, which partly obscure the full moon and the stars like a protective red veil. The air is fresh and damp but distinctly warmer than it was last night. For all the merits, your heart, which has been thudding in your chest to the peculiar beeping sound you can still hear in the distance, fails for a second and then hammers on with a throbbing, nagging ache when you arrive at the old place. As far as your eyes can see, all the benches at Shinobazu-no-ike are occupied. The bench in front of you, on which Seiya sat last night, however, is empty.

With a sickening feeling in the pit of your stomach, you let yourself fall on the familiar bench to give your aching feet a rest. Seiya hasn't come to the place of rendezvous or has already left, as he didn't expect you to come after the dismissive words with which you ended the affair. You
remember admiring him for his ability to take whatever life throws at him in his stride. But now you realize for the first time that his talent for avoiding undue complications and resisting other people's influences despite being smothered with love also enables him to let go of strong attachments and free himself from you as if you had never crossed his path.

A cool breeze sweeps through the trees, rustles the leaves, and brushes against your naked arms, reminding you that you've forgotten your cardigan at Seiya's place in your hurry. Since it's much too late to go back now, you decide to leave it to Seiya as a souvenir.

Sitting alone on the bench for two, waiting again for a man who doesn't come, you summon all your courage to revisit the past once more, as you still feel the urge to hunt for the last puzzle pieces to the picture and sift out the truth from the lies. But this time, neither your stranger nor your detective will be around to inspire you or direct your attention to the details you might miss. You've always been a pessimist and a coward when it comes to facing your guilt. And despite Seiya's lucky charm in your pocket, you don't nurture high hopes for success, for you know that you will have to wrestle with your demons alone.

Fumbling in your pockets...

Fumbling in your pockets for your phone to check the date again before embarking on another journey into the past, you notice in dismay that it's gone. You can even remember leaving it at home—in fact, Kudo has commented on it in annoyance on the way to Hikawa Shrine—which is most disturbing, as you could have sworn that you used it to check the date on the way to the pond. Did you only imagine it in your distress because you didn't find Seiya on the bench? You have the absurd feeling that it will take shape before your eyes now if only you make an effort to conjure it up. When you were five or six, you could control your dreams—making the monsters in your nightmares disappear and calling your fairies and guardians with a mental snap of your fingers—a skill which gave you a tremendous sense of power and freedom. Waking up from those dreams invariably hurt more than words could express. But it was impossible to hold on to them once you had realized that they weren't real, and every morning you would wake up in tears no matter how hard you struggled to keep on dreaming.

You bring your hand to your mouth as if to cover a yawn, discreetly bite into your thumb, and note in satisfaction that it hurts. Studying the very real looking bite marks on your skin, you recite the formula of APTX4869, the antidote, and APAH in your head, assuring yourself that you can still recall them as well. The curious beeping sound in your inner ear has stopped, much to your relief. Beneath your stoic exterior, you've always been the emotional, volatile type. Thrown off balance by stranger-san, who has thoroughly wrecked your inner peace within a few hours, and devastated by the speed at which he let go of you, you must be imagining things after your latest mental breakdown.

Why should you deny it? Lovesickness is a serious mental condition, which can turn the most sensible person into a pathetic emotional wreck. Usually, the delusional, obsessive-compulsive state lasts for three months and the woes of unrequited love can last up to three years until the victims finally move on or—in a few hopeless cases—succumb to the sickness anew. You've gone through this more than once although this time feels like the most severe case of all, and you don't need to feel ashamed of it since greater mind than yours have suffered from it as well. Dante and Petrarca, Shakespeare and Goethe, Schubert and Liszt, even the prudent and practical Agatha
Christie and the principled, respectable Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had once fallen victim to it. Perhaps Kudo's overly romantic reading of "A Scandal in Bohemia" was a valid interpretation, after all, and Sherlock Holmes, the flawless "automaton" and "calculating mind", had kept the photo of the woman just because he had, inexplicably, fallen hard for an unattainable stranger he didn't—couldn't—know and not because he felt obliged to keep a reminder of the lesson that one should never underestimate a foe. Watson must have been fooled by Holmes' usual nonchalance, claiming that his friend was incapable of sentimental feelings while the poor detective was actually trapped for life in an especially persistent case of unrequited passion. Why else should Holmes have thought of a married woman of dubious reputation, whom he hadn't ever had a real conversation with (their hurried encounters in disguise don't really count) as the ideal of a female who "eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex" just because she managed to outwit him once?

Having thus assuaged your anxiety and mended your pride, you set off to rummage in your past for the missing pieces of your story. There are so many memories to dwell on and so little time to weigh them against each other, to separate the essential from the trivial and isolating the fiction from the facts. So you only brush against most of the recollections with a distracted glance, acknowledge their existence without trying to relive them, much less analyze them. Analyzing in itself seems now a futile, redundant act, which more often obscures the truth rather than unveil it.

Gingerly, you feel your way along the poorly lit corridors of your mind, pass Tenoh-san's picturesque seaside house, where you practiced shooting and studied the plans of the isle, the Werewolf Cliff, the subterranean passages, the log cabin, and the outwardly decrepit ship while lying on the beach in the autumn sun. You barely gaze at the train where you jotted down random ideas for the perfect poison in personalized, encrypted shorthand, evade the Professor's frequent worried glances, ignore the Detective Boys' reproaches, flee from Ran's attempts to take care of you, and pause for a moment in front of Kudo, who, after returning to his original body for good, looked like a stranger you didn't know.

How many pills did you make? Kudo asked you the night he took the antidote. You had just left the sofa and he had followed you to the stairs to the cellar, where he was now leaning against the door frame near the window while the full moon was peering through the blueish clouds, through which no star could be seen. He didn't only sound curious but also anxious, and you could tell that he was wondering whether you were going to take the antidote.

You turned away from his prying eyes, and for a weak moment, you almost consider showing him the twenty-five pills you had created for the crows and Anokata. However, you were sure it wasn't the criminal's urge to confess their crime but rather the artist's need to share their latest creation with a proud, excited smile: Look, I've toyed with the idea for so long and now I've finally made this! Isn't it nice?

Since Kudo was much too staid and upright to appreciate your masterpieces and you would endanger Tenoh-san and put the whole enterprise at risk, you only gave him your trademark smirk and told him in feigned boredom that you had made two pills—one for you and one for me.

Maybe you had been silly and sentimental, but it was out of the question that you used the Silver Bullet—the ray of hope, which was supposed to "kill the Werewolf in Man", according to the Organization's scriptures—for the ugly task. The mental image of twenty-five dead children strewn across the hall (you didn't care about the one scapegoat you'd have to shoot at Pandora's Box) would have haunted you for life. The other choice, betraying Tenoh-san by giving her the painless drug you had designed for yourself, wouldn't be wise—not when she had spent her whole life
cooking up her unlikely revenge and when forgiving her enemies didn't belong to the many skills she had honed at Infinity.

*I'm glad that you're taking the antidote as well*, said Kudo, who seemed too relieved and thrilled by Miyano Shiho's upcoming 'comeback' to notice the small pause you made before you replied. He had already feared that you'd stay a child to experience a second childhood—a decision he could have understood but wouldn't have liked.

Why not? Because one should never run away from one's fate? You were almost amused by his naïveté, the black and white view of the world he had managed to keep intact despite all the cases he had solved by now.

He didn't know, Kudo admitted. Perhaps he was interested in the grown-up Miyano Shiho, whom he had never had much time to get accustomed to. He was curious about whether Miyano was similar to Haibara or distinctly different. Even though the two were technically the same person, the connection between body and mind was so strong that the differences couldn't be ignored. One moved differently in an adult's body, and movements were crucial to thoughts.

Likewise, Kudo Shinichi and Edogawa Conan weren't exactly the same person, you thought, scrutinizing the young man in front of you with the impersonal but intense interest of a scientist studying a beautiful specimen of a previously undescribed, unexplored species. Your senses weren't attracted to him at this point in time—not yet. But in either form, Kudo caught your intellectual interest.

In the beginning, you only wanted to toy with the detective a bit when you told him that you were eighteen: perfect for him. You had flirted with him out of habit, forgetting the fact that you were in the body of an elementary school child and therefore of no romantic interest to his teenage mind. You had forgotten what you expected from him, a blush or a grin or any other display of embarrassment at having his ego stroked by a pretty girl. Instead, he only looked startled because he knew that you weren't interested in him in the way Ran or Ayumi-chan were. He couldn't make sense of your flirtatious jokes, which seemed to jar with your distant, reserved demeanour.

That was the moment when you decided that the chibi sleuth was rather intriguing despite his boyish, rather nondescript face.

*If you expect my grown-up form to be different from me, you should have told me to stay Haibara Ai, Kudo*, you taunted him. *It's not flattering to me that you're so keen on getting rid of me although I've just restored you to your real body.*

With a sigh, you shut the door to your lab and locked it from the inside before he could protest. You were going to take the antidote now and didn't want him to peep, you told him through the closed door.

In the brilliantly lit cellar, all the tables, desks, and surfaces had already been cleared and cleaned, all the carcasses had been removed. Still, Kudo must have known that you had been experimenting with rats and mice but wisely refrained from preaching about the moral implications of animal testing, as he needed the permanent antidote and couldn't risk getting himself killed by a faulty calculation. Taking the antidote as the first human being was already risky enough. You had told him that you needed to make sure that there wouldn't be any unmanageable after-effects because you didn't want to gamble with his life and weren't keen on spending the rest of your life as his personal doctor.

After creating APTX4869, its counteragent, and APAH, you had become a specialist when it came to cell division, aging, and pain. You knew how to target the exact organs you wanted to age,
ruining them within hours or even minutes without arousing the slightest suspicion. The sweet
tooths got all sorts of cancer, the drinkers ruined livers, the smokers damaged lungs—an exclusive,
custom-made punishment for the Organization's highest-ranking members and its leader. All the
conditions being equal, we all paid for our mistakes and ultimately lost to our vices at the end of
our lives. Looking at it from that angle, it was justice par excellence!

To give Tenoh-san, who had been exceptionally supportive and charitable, an early Christmas gift,
you had made sure that the little pills would cause excruciating, absolute, unalleviated death
agonies for at least a day. You naturally invented the antidotes to them as well in case Tenoh-san
or her allies were forced to drink from the same bottle as Anokata and their crows. You had done
the best you could do to protect the good guys and punish the bad guys and couldn't feel even a
soupçon of guilt—why should you? Tenoh-san's mother had died a horrible death before her seven-
year-old daughter's eyes, the price she paid when she asked them to spare her husband and her
child.

You silently endured and almost welcomed the pain when the antidote burned into your flesh and
stretched your bones. It was really a walk in the park compared to what the mice had gone through.
A few minutes later, Miyano Shihō's fine, almost sharp features greeted you in the bathroom
mirror… and Haibara Ai, the cute girl whose perfect oval face was tempered by childlike round
cheeks, who used to hide behind Edogawa-kun's back, was no more.
Part 20: Overwhelmed by the...

Overwhelmed by the heady melange of different scents and sounds in the giant perfume and cosmetics store, your nose failed to detect Tenoh Haruka when she sneaked up behind you, and you only started (and then stared!) when she cleared her throat and chuckled. To say the ex-racer had successfully surprised you with her present outfit would be an understatement. Accustomed to her crossdressing habits, you wouldn't have recognized Tenoh-san in her present attire at all if she had tried to disguise herself and dyed her conspicuous platinum blonde hair.

For an endless minute, you only studied the tall, slim woman in silence, letting your gaze trail from her glossy rosé lips to her lavender silk scarf to the soft curves of her unbound chest to her narrow waist, which was accentuated by her close-fitting black-and-white biker's suit with red highlights. Despite her sheer endless legs, androgynous features, and deep husky voice, it was impossible to mistake her for a man now.

Giving your hair a few affectionate strokes with a black-gloved hand and taking your arm to usher you out into the ever-busy Avenue des Champs Élysées, Tenoh-san laughed out loud about your reaction.

"For your information: I'm a real woman! Today I don't mind dressing like one." She cheerfully swung the red helmet in her hand back and fourth. "Well, how do Kudo and you like the city of love? It's not Tokyo or Venice, but it's one of the cities which starts to enthral you on the second or third day."

Even though she had cut ties to les agents motards when she stopped calling Jean her father, she still visited Paris regularly, she told you on the way to the parking space where she had left her motorcycle. Spoiled as she was, Tenoh-san had even brought her favourite red Suzuki Hayabusa to Paris—and you idly wondered what she would do to the poor fool who dared to steal it.

"Do you have a second helmet for me?" You frowned at the gleaming red-silver motorbike, on which you could see no helmet at all. "I'm not going to drive with you without a helmet!"

"Here!" She tossed you the helmet in her hand, which smelled distinctly of a warm, spicy male rose fragrance.

"But you aren't wearing one!" You pointed out the obvious while clambering onto the passenger seat of her bike and gasped in horror when she instantly raced off at phenomenal speed while all the cars in the vicinity were honking at her.

"Didn't you know that I'm invincible, koneko-chan?" She beamed at you through the rear-view mirror. "Although I do hope that none of the agents motards will follow us to fine me. The French have great motorcycle officers! We could have a fun race if you were Michiru."

"You're insane!" You tightened your grab on her leather jacket and made an inhuman effort to ignore the blur of cars and houses that flew past you at a speed which made it impossible for you to discern them.

"It's taken you long to find out!"

No one but Kaioh Michiru could put so much trust in the skills of the driver that she didn't break
out in a cold sweat on Tenoh Haruka's passenger seat, and you should have foreseen that Tenoh-san would be unable to stick to a speed limit since racing was her life and arrogance her besetting sin. Keeping your hands firmly on her waist and fervently hoping that she wasn't so ticklish that she would let you distract her from driving, you decided to enjoy the drive with Tenoh-san as an experience you were unlikely to repeat after leaving Paris. It was also the very first time that you had got the chance to witness how the famous racer handled a motorbike. On photos, you had seen Tenoh-san on her bikes more than once: blue-silver bikes, red-silver bikes, yellow-gold bikes—she had an impressive collection. But you were sure you had never seen her wearing a helmet. Since you weren't a fan of hers, you never attended her races.

"Where are we driving?"

"It's a surprise, love. You're too beautiful and good for the mundane shopping districts in Paris. I'm going to show you something more romantic."

To your surprise, it didn't take you long to grow accustomed to Tenoh-san's driving style, and you were soon lulled into a false sense of security by the constant hum of the tyres and the fragrant helmet on your head. You would smell of Tenoh-san's shampoo by the time you returned to M Jean Black's house, you predicted, making a mental note to douse yourself in rose perfume at the perfume store to justify the scent. Since you were paranoid about Kudo's deduction skills, you were also going to wash your hair, which would have been flattened by the helmet by then, before dinner.

"First, we need to establish some ground rules," said Tenoh-san in a more serious tone, skipping the question whether you had brought her the pills since they were the condition for your meeting in the first place. "No word to Kudo! If I ever learn that he or any of his nosy friends and relatives are investigating me, my family, or anyone else in my group because you've given him a hint, he is as good as dead. And I'm going to spare your life so that you can mourn him and enjoy your guilt forever."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Not at all. I'm just stating the brute facts so that there won't be any misunderstandings between us. If I fail—which I hope not—I won't drag Michiru or you down with me, and I do hope that you'll be smart enough not to play the heroine and stay out of whatever happens afterwards. In return, you keep your cute kissable mouth shut so that your detective won't ever cause us trouble."

"Fair enough. Any other rules?"

"Just one. We can't plan everything, so improvisation is crucial to our success. If anything goes wrong, I won't break down and weep in the hope that my late mother will send me my fairy godmother! I'll improvise and do whatever it takes to get out alive—and I trust you to do the same."

"Why are you boring me with banalities all of a sudden?" you snapped, irritated by her derogatory manner, under whose cover you could sense her hidden anxiety. "What are you getting at?"

She sighed and sped up even more, taking a curve at lightning speed. "Since our imbecile of a scapegoat will be weakened by a few injuries—burns, for instance—I'll bet on you in any case. But if you can't take him out for whatever reason, you have to inform me and finish it as soon as possible."

"Shooting Vodka will be a piece of cake! He is as slow as your great-grandmother if she were still alive. Apart from that, he can't even aim."
"My great-grandmother, my dear kitten, was fast." Although you couldn't see Tenoh-san's face at the moment, you could hear the smirk in her voice. "My mother said I got my speed from her. So don't ever dare to insult her again!"

Now that you had dispelled her worries, the drive became rather pleasant. The warm light of the early winter afternoon was pouring down on the lamp-lit world while the snow was steadily falling. Strings of lights and Christmas wreaths and garlands, which all blurred into a magical concoction of colours when you raced past them, adorned the naked broadleaved trees and the conifers along the road. From time to time, you would close your eyes and let yourself drift into a reverie, contemplating your future after the downfall of the Organization.

Your plan for Pandora's Box was deceptively simple. If you didn't have to enter the cabin first because your scapegoat dutifully, obligingly, walked into your trap, you could stay in this adult's body for good. Perhaps Kudo and Ran would even split up after a few months or years of cohabitation or marriage. And being the supportive friend who always listened to his relationship-related rants with half-hearted complaints, you would graciously help your detective get over his first love in no time...

Sadly, all the versions you've conjured up for the post-Pandora's-Box relationship between Kudo and you sounded unsatisfactory, even pitiful, a meagre diet of "friendship turned love out of convenience" or "unlikely attraction caused by circumstances" when what you really wanted was a whirlwind romance or an epic, fateful love affair. In the last few days, Kudo had become smitten with Miyano Shiho because they were strangers in a foreign city, who were collaborating to save thousands of wrongly convicted prisoners and uncover the truth about what he believed to be an evil syndicate. You knew very well that he was less in love with you as a person but more in love with the romantic setting and the idea of the woman you could become. After returning to Beika, he would see his girlfriend again and Paris would either be forgotten or remain a fond memory he secretly indulged in during cold winter nights. If you're lucky, you would be busy fighting off reporters and answering questions in court—so completely preoccupied with the problems of how to lie about your role in the Organization and fight for a lenient sentence that you wouldn't even spare a thought of him.

In spite of (or due to?) her incredible speed, Tenoh-san gave you the euphoric illusion of sailing across the sky, and it wasn't until you realized that she had been driving in the direction of Bonnières and had already passed Vernon that you guessed where you two were heading.

"Are we going to Giverny?" you asked, wondering what she wanted to do in Giverny out of all places.

"Smart kitten! We're going to Monet's House. It's usually not open to the public in December, but I have an old acquaintance in the Claude Monet Foundation who owes me a small favour for saving her dog from a gang of wannabe bikers." Her voice turned unmistakably seductive. "We might as well make this a date since there is a remote possibility that we two won't ever get a chance to go out with each other anymore."

After passing Claude Monet's reading room (which was also called "the little blue sitting room") and the pantry where spices, olive oil, eggs, and tea were stored in wall cabinets, you had the chance to admire the artist's first studio-turned-sitting-room, whose walls were lined with photographs, prints, and the Master's paintings. Climbing the staircase to the private rooms, where objects from Monet's days were displayed, you marvelled at the great trust other people put in Tenoh-san while she seldom if ever trusted anyone. You beheld the dressing rooms, bedrooms, and
sowing room of the long deceased upstairs with mixed feelings and were relieved when Tenoh-san and you returned to the ground floor, where the yellow walls and red-white checkered tiles of the restored dining room and the blue Rouen tiles of the quaint kitchen breathed life into the monochromatic winter world. Outside, the "Jardin d'eau"—Monet's water garden, in real life a true work of art just like the painting—was already covered by a thin layer of ice and snow.

On the famous green Japanese bridge, Tenoh-san and you proceeded to discuss the last details of your scheme.

"Listen, unexpected things can happen," she began. "If the drinks get mixed up or Gin survives because he notices that something is fishy—"

"—I'll shoot Gin as well."

"That's the right attitude!" She looked extremely relieved. "Although I hope it won't happen."

"No, it's actually a good idea. Idiots like Vodka can be dangerous in their unpredictability. Gin, on the other hand, is extremely punctual and precise. It will be easier for me if we choose Gin as the scapegoat since he will fail to surprise me when it comes to timing."

She shot you a half-quizzical, half-amused look mingled with genuine surprise, and it finally dawned on you that she had been so tense because she was afraid that you might be hampered by moral sentiments or sentimentality.

"All right, I'm going to let Gin escape, then, after weakening him a bit. Too bad Vodka will be the one with the damaged lungs… It's a tiny blemish on our otherwise flawless plan."

Since you had anticipated her approval of your idea, you had already adapted to the change and created a lethal poison for Vodka, which was going to destroy his liver, you smirked, handing her the red jewellery box with the twenty-five pills. You had numbered them according to her list of soon-to-be corpses, which only consisted of Arabic numerals for lack of names and curt descriptions of the habits of Anokata, their family, their crows, and the crows' secretaries and sniper spouses. Now it was Tenoh-san's task to feed the pills to the respective people without mixing them up. You wished her and the seventh crow luck.

She took the box from you with a feverish gleam in her green-speckled blue eyes, beamed after checking its contents, and slipped it into a deep pocket of her leather jacket.

"You resent Gin even more than I thought…" she mused, letting her gaze follow the Cupid you just dropped into the water. "What was that?"

"If anything happens, I'm going to take the full blame," you said, evading her question.

"No one can jail us for an undetectable drug." She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "You shouldn't worry about the aftermath but focus on your tasks."

"You don't have much trust in my shooting skills," you remarked.

"It's not your shooting skills I have to worry about! It's your mental ability I can't rely on." She compassionately patted your back. "You're nicer than you think, koneko-chan—and being nice hasn't ever done you any good whenever Gin was involved."

Since you couldn't come up with anything to reply, as you were still contemplating how funny her choice of adjective sounded considering what you were going to do to Anokata and the crows, she pulled a blue USB stick out of her pocket, placed it into your palm, and closed your fist around it.
"All the particulars of the people who enter the log cabin will be sent to the cloud, which is still protected by the Night Baron. Just insert this into Pandora's Box and only the email with the name of the first person who opened the door will be sent to the blackmailed big names while the others will immediately be deleted from the disk. It's not as good as the Night Baron, but it's the best we have at the moment. And now do tell me what you just dropped into the pond so that I won't have to feel guilty when all the water plants die next summer."

"Do you know the coins people toss into fountains and wells as a payment for the answer to a prayer?" You beheld the liquid mirror, which had swallowed the sacrifice for Kudo's safety, with a vague sense of foreboding. "It's something similar to that: a payment for our success—the price for lasting peace and freedom."

"It was a bit more than a coin, wasn't it?" She gave you a grave, knowing look. "What was it made of? Silver?"

"White gold. It's not like I have anywhere to put it, so I might as well sacrifice it to some war deity, Mars or Andarta or Hachiman, depending on who you believe in.

"I only believe in myself," she sneered. "But if I had to choose a deity, I'd choose a Greek god since I've always liked the gods of Greco-Roman mythology. They were a fun motley bunch that embraced life and seemed fairly tolerant despite all their quirks. Mars is too male, too dumb, and too bloodthirsty for my taste, though. The payment shall go to Athena then, the goddess of strategy and wisdom."

Leaving the Japanese bridge to return to the bike, you cast a last glance at the marvelous composition of snow-covered maples and weeping willows framing the pond—a paradise lost—and slipped the USB stick with Meioh-san's Night Baron copy Tenoh-san just handed you into the same pocket where the Cupid had been. The sun was setting, tinting the snow gold and pink. Just below Tenoh-san's collarbone, a simple gold cross gleamed golden-orange in the sun before she turned away from the light and the reddish tint was gone.

"Why are you carrying it if you aren't even a Christian?"

"It belonged to my great-grandmother, who gave it to my grandmother, who passed it on to my mother, who left it to me... When Hotaru-chan is old enough to stand on her own feet, I'm going to give it to her."

She paused to show you a little package under the seat, which contained a knitted purple pullover with a large black heart and the red number ten on it—a small souvenir she found in a boutique before she met up with you. Watching her fold away the birthday present with parental tenderness and pride, you recalled with a pang of conscience that Tenoh-san once reluctantly revealed to you that a few crows had children, too…

Twenty-five pills? Ignoring the seventh crow, who is on our side, and Vodka, the one scapegoat I'll have to shoot, we're dealing with the Boss, five crows plus their personal secretaries and their sniper spouses, and Gin. That makes one plus fifteen plus one people: seventeen. Who are the remaining eight? Although maths had never been your favourite subject, you could do whole number addition and subtraction well enough.

The Boss has a secretary and a spouse, who has a secretary as well, which makes it twenty people. The remaining five are Anokata's most loyal bodyguard and four children I'll have to take out lest they take revenge on us.

Appalled, you had carefully put down your exquisite blue and violet Murano water glass before
you shook your head.

*I'm not going to murder children, under no circumstances!*

*I'm not talking about little kids, koneko-chan! I'm talking about young adults like Kudo, who are extremely talented, perfectly trained, incredibly loyal, good at teamwork, and very smart—the best fighters and shooters I've ever seen. Even your shooting skills can't be compared to theirs. If you agree to do this, you'll have to do it right: It's either them or us—you have to think of Kudo's life!*

Staring into the crackling fire, which was dying in the hearth, she looked almost tragic as she sipped her red wine and smiled. *You shouldn't forget that I was a child as well—and only seven when my mother died! We really can't afford to spare their children's lives…*

You two raced back to Paris through the ending sunset, which painted the snow purple and the trees along the road black. Obsession was a curious thing, you reflected. When you were alone, you could easily succumb to it and even embrace it as a part of your destiny. Yet once you had seen yourself mirrored in someone else whose obsession was even more dangerous than yours, you suddenly shrank away from your own actions as if the extreme gravity of the situation only dawned on you when you could observe it from a distance. Tenoh-san radiated a warm rosy glow of pure happiness while you were shivering in your thick winter coat. All warmth had left you after you stepped out of Monet's Garden.
On the way back to Paris, you suddenly became aware of the fact that Tenoh-san and you were racing on a slippery road through the heavy snowfall, which painted your surroundings white and obscured your view. If Tenoh-san got into an accident now (if she carried on like this, she would get into an accident before long!) the whole operation would be over in an instant. One didn't survive a crash at this speed, especially not on a motorcycle, without a helmet. But since you knew she wouldn't listen to you, anyway, you refrained from pointing it out to her.

You thought you'd be happier about this, you admitted, breaking the silence. But you doubted that you could celebrate your victory after your forthcoming revenge even if you two succeeded.

"We're not hurting innocent civilians, koneko-chan!" Tenoh-san sighed, exasperated. "We're not even targeting the bad guys at the bottom of the ladder! We're putting ourselves in danger to eliminate the bosses in one clean swipe so that there won't be any collateral damage! And we're actually avoiding the messy aftermath which Kudo's pacifism will cause. This is counterterrorism at its best!"

If Kudo took the crows to court and used the information in Pandora's Box, he would spend his whole life on the run, she reminded you. His girlfriend, his parents, the Professor, and the detectives who supported Kudo would most probably be watched, be kidnapped to be used as a lever, or even be murdered unless they gave up their identities and went into hiding. Some people would do anything to silence your detective! Not only the Yakuza, the Italian Mafia, the Russian mafia, or one terrorist group but all of them would want Kudo's head. To make matters worse, most governments were going to search for Kudo as well—not to protect him but to 'neutralize' him, mind you, which was the usual answer of the secret services when they failed to see another solution to their problem. The few FBI agents who were known to have worked with Kudo would suddenly get into an 'accident'; the agents motards would be forced to back down. In that case, you couldn't count on Tenoh-san's help since she, too, would lean back and pretend to busy herself with another problem so as not to get her own family into trouble.

Of course a few scapegoats would get out of jail, a few politicians would have to resign, a few codename members would commit suicide. But even a drunken idiot like Mori Kogoro could see that eliminating the crows and their 'families' would produce a more desirable outcome at a smaller sacrifice...

"In case you count on Jean's help: He once swore to protect my mother and love her until 'death do them part'. He only kept his second promise, as we all know. How well is he going to protect your detective if he couldn't protect his own wife? If he hadn't waited until she received the last red card but listened to her and killed Anokata and the crows before they could strike, she'd have had a chance to survive."

In fact, you knew that all the things Tenoh-san said was true—but knowing that a sacrifice was necessary didn't make you feel better about the act. You shifted uneasily on Tenoh-san's passenger seat when your thoughts once again drifted to the four 'children', whose only known crime was to have been raised by a syndicate, people who were just like you. While you didn't care about Anokata and the crows, you felt sorry for yourself, especially now when you had the premonition that your life would forever be divided into the phase before and the phase after you had given Tenoh-san the twenty-five pills, no matter how justified your actions had been.
"Do you know what I find extremely sad about this world?" you remarked as the sun disappeared and the afterglow of twilight remained the only light on the horizon. There was nothing one could do to regain one's equilibrium. There was no way to make atonement since there was no redemption, no boundless, eternal, universal love, no appropriate punishment, no divine forgiveness. At the end of your life, the white mice and the strangers you had murdered would remain a scar on your conscience, whose ugliness would have grown exponentially with time. In Andersen's fairy tales, there was a sense of closure, a purpose even in death. You had always liked the ending of "The Little Mermaid"—as tragic as it was…

"Has Jean recognized you?" Tenoh-san asked after she had refilled her tank at a petrol station and you two had returned to the centre of Paris. To soothe your tattered nerves, she had slowed down a bit although she was still weaving through the traffic at the maximum speed allowed. The ex-racer didn't seem surprised by her father's speeches and patiently listened to your account of the talk between Jean Black and you until you were finished. To all appearances, it didn't faze her a bit.

"Jean has always loved to keep up appearances," Tenoh-san said, indifferently. "He also loves to cling to the past." She gazed into the distance with a mocking smirk as she continued to drive, steering her bike with somnambulistic ease as if it were a part of her body. "Do you know why he can't accept Michiru? Not because he hates lesbians—hell no! Jean has a few gay friends and likes them as much as his straight friends, and I'm sure he wouldn't even have minded having a gay son. But he couldn't bear that his darling daughter, who once resembled her lovely, feminine mother so much, would suddenly cut her long blonde locks and turn butch once she hit puberty. It was useless to explain to him that I had never, ever, liked boys and that I had only cut my hair and bound my breasts to prevent them from chasing me!" Jean also felt obliged to stay true to his old principles and the agents motards, who wanted to see the Organization's leaders in court—Tenoh-san claimed—but it was glaringly obvious that Jean was pining for the same sort of revenge which she wanted.

She dropped you off at a street corner near the same perfume and cosmetics store on the Avenue des Champs Élysées where she had picked you up. Before you could turn and leave, however, she held you back by your hand and contemplated you in silence.

"Jean knows me," she said at last, swinging her red helmet, which you had returned to her, back and fourth instead of putting it on. "He already knows we're going to take them out and steal a backup of Pandora's Box—but I bet you he won't even move a finger to prevent us from executing our plan. If Jean were in my shoes, he'd be much more vicious!" Her eyes darkened. "We aren't torturing them, koneko-chan! We're only putting the clock forward and shortening their time on earth a bit, giving them a much quicker and more pleasant death than what they'd have received if God existed! Twenty-four hours of pain are too short a time to atone for their sins. It's absolutely nothing compared to what a normal person who dies of cancer has to suffer."

What Jean really meant to say was that he could usually tell who was who on his chessboard, Tenoh-san claimed. Kudo Shinichi was his rook or tower (the promising, naive, young detective who would always keep strictly to the straight and narrow) while Haruka was his queen (his ruthless and efficient girl, who would avenge his wife's murder and win the game for him). Kudo would convince Interpol and the FBI and the rest of the world that Jean Black had honestly tried to secure Pandora's Box and catch the seven crows alive but failed while Haruka would bring justice to all the victims of the Organization in a roundabout way. Who Jean didn't need in his game was you: an unpredictable knight of no clear colour, who could ruin all his schemes.

"It's not like we're stealing the files to sell them, koneko-chan! We're going to help the victims by
forcing the judges to release the wrongly convicted and make amends to the victims' families. Looking at it from this angle, you're not betraying Kudo at all. Tonight, you can go to bed with a clear conscience. Twenty-five plus one... Is it too high a price for all the people we're going to save? Would you really feel better about this if you, like Andersen's mermaid, could wander the world trying to make random children happy until you had earned your eternal soul?"

It wouldn't change anything for you or the people you were going to kill—although she believed that finding a sense of closure would be helpful since you were the only person whose judgement mattered when it came to your own peace of mind. "But we aren't living in Andersen's romantic Christian universe but in a cynical post-modern world—so a Royal Flush would probably solve all your problems," she jokingly added. "Also, I'm sure that our Greek Gods like to gamble. If people were cards, you'd already have made Hotaru-chan, Jean, Michiru, and me happy with your latest creations." She gently patted her pocket, in which she was hiding the jewellery box with the twenty-five pills. "You only need an Ace of Hearts—your Professor?—for the best possible Straight Flush, which is, at least in Poker, unbeatable!"

It took you a beat to grasp that she had just assigned everyone in her family and also her father, whom she no longer viewed as a family member, a card. Hotaru-chan must be the Ten of Hearts since the girl was turning ten in January while Kaioh-san was, obviously, the Queen. Knowing how narcissistic she was, you also suspected that Tenoh-san had assigned herself the King and her father the Jack instead of vice versa.

"Is your father the Jack?" you asked her nevertheless and gave her a doubtful look when she nodded. "But you two and Kaioh-san resemble Clubs or Spades much more than Hearts, in my opinion." Since all the suits had to match in a Royal Flush—you pointed out—you doubted that having three Clubs or Spades would be very helpful.

Tenoh-san only sighed in response, and you changed the topic by asking her to thank the seventh crow in your name.

"Why are you so interested in the guy?" She eyed you in palpable mistrust. Tenoh-san clearly didn't want you to know too much about her allies lest you mess up and she had to sever all the links to you.

"You said he was the only one who voted against my sister's execution," you explained. It was, no doubt, an impressive act—especially since the crows didn't use secret ballots, as Gin once told you. Even though it didn't save Akemi-nee-san in the end, his gesture impressed you nevertheless.

To your surprise, hot colour suddenly suffused Tenoh-san's face while her eyes were glowing with something akin to embarrassment and pride, convincing you that the seventh crow and she must be closer to each other than you had thought. It was indeed a courageous albeit foolish act—she agreed. Imagine all of them crouching around the fireplace in silence, eagerly ticking off the "yes" box to please that person. All the six crows naturally expected the seventh to go along with the flow since he had already received a red card. Much to their dismay, the third-generation rookie dared to vote against it—citing the Organization's policy not to carry out unnecessary assassinations and to let the insignificant members buy themselves out of the Organization...

"Anyhow, my family and I are Hearts!" Tenoh-san winked at you, interrupting your train of thought just when you began to wonder how the crows had become so bloodthirsty if they had once sworn to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. "Because everyone has two faces if you look at them closely! Michiru and I don't take pity on our enemies but you know you can trust us!" She leaned in to cup your face. "I also suspect that I'm your King of Hearts although you'll never admit it to yourself."
She impertinently stole a kiss before you could react, shocking you with the unanticipated sensation of her warm lips against your cold ones, and laughed when you vehemently pushed her away.

"Do you want to know a secret? Jean called me last night and told me to take care of you because he thinks you're too emotional for this." She casually started the engine. "We have his blessing, koneko-chan—if we don't mess this up. Just remember what they did to my mother and your sister, don't be too nice, and don't disappoint us!"

Tenoh-san raced off before you could reply, and raised her hand, which was still holding the red helmet, to wave you goodbye as she sped along the Champs Élysées. Her fair hair glimmered in all shades and colours in the city's multitude of lights and flapped in the wind until it was finally covered by her red helmet. Gazing after her slender figure until it disappeared, you distractedly noted that the sight of her retreating back looked oddly familiar—as if you had already seen her narrow waist and her relaxed shoulders on a bike before although you couldn't recall when and where anymore.

—g.
All the people in the vicinity…

All the people in the vicinity have begun to throw furtive glances at you—probably wondering why a young woman like you have come to Shinobazu-no-ike to view cherry blossoms alone, for all you know. The elderly couple at the pond have started to direct their attention from the ducks and the gulls to you as well, eyeing you with poorly concealed curiosity while talking to each other in hushed voices. To communicate that you're waiting for someone (and therefore not particularly keen on making the acquaintances of the men who are leering at you), you demonstratively check the time. Even though it seems to you as if you had spent hours ruminating on the past, it is only six o'clock on your watch.

Meanwhile, a comforting thought has just struck you and taken root in your mind, kindling a spark of hope, which shakes you out of your apathy. Seiya, who might expect you to come to the bench at the same time as yesterday, may be roaming Ueno-koen to return to this bench at half past six. If that's really the case, you only need to stay planted to the spot and wait until you two meet.

At the same time, you remember that Taiki-san has told you that Shizuka-san, their agent, is searching for Seiya as well because they all still have to pack their luggage for New York. There will be no time for Seiya and you to talk in private if you wait for him here.

"Excuse me!"

You explain to the elderly couple, who are giving you the relaxed, attentive smiles happy couples often wear, that you're searching for a man of your age, who has blue eyes and slightly curly black hair. If he happens to turn up in the next couple of minutes, could they please tell him that Shiho would be back at half past six at the latest and that he should wait for her?

They amiably agree, claiming that they're waiting for friends as well and staying here for another hour, anyway—and you set out to search for Seiya in Ueno-koen since you can't bear to wait for him any longer. On other days, waiting for an hour on a bench at this pond (among cherry trees and gulls and ducks in a fairly pleasant weather) wouldn't have seemed like a superhuman feat—and last night you could wait for Kudo for hours. But tonight, you have a nagging feeling that not seeing Seiya again before the sun disappears from the horizon would be the most terrible tragedy of all.

You can't even tell what you expect from the meeting—especially since there is no way you're ever going to tell Seiya the truth. No matter how deluded you are when it comes to him, you don't nurture the slightest hope that he will ever forgive you for what you've done. You aren't sure you're hoping for a sense of closure either… As irrational as it sounds, you almost expect a continuation of your story as if you two could just pick up from where you left off, disregarding the past and the unavoidable future issues which would drown this relationship under a giant pile of Pandora's Box debris…

Ueno-koen is now swarming with people, many of whom are sitting or kneeling on thick blankets, celebrating hanami parties. On an island in the middle of the pond, Benten-do—the temple of the biwa-playing goddess of rivers and water and music and art—is surrounded by festival food stalls while lanterns already light up all the trees for yozakura. As much as you'd love to admire this rain of cherry blossoms in their mysterious, ethereal glow, you doubt that either Seiya or you will be around to see it tonight.
Despondent, you realize that you're never going to find Seiya among this sea of people, in this dim, ever-shifting light. Like you used to do in your most desperate moments when you were small, you close your eyes for a second to conjure up his presence—to summon up the memories of all the outlines, shapes, scents, and sounds for the right blend of the spirit you want to call. Unlike in your dreams, your approach naturally doesn't succeed—and the park is packed with strangers but still lacks the one you're looking for.

The very instant you abandon hope is also the moment you see him again. He is strolling past the food stalls in a desultory manner, with his long ponytail tucked into his jacket and half of his face hidden by his giant sunglasses—unmistakable with his proud singer's head and his light steps, which haven't changed despite his supposed heartache over you. While you behold your ex-boyfriend's arresting profile in the colourful grey of the moonlit twilight, you marvel at Yaten-san's accurate depiction of his youngest brother on the 'wild card' when he clothed him in all the colours of the rainbow. Like a star among drab grey rain clouds, Seiya has the tendency to make his surroundings fade into a blur once he appears on the scene—and you begin to wonder whether the much quoted claim that if you love someone, you'll let go of them for their own good might be just another mantra, another cliché one always stumbles on.

You've left your stranger like a grown-up abandons a childhood dream that can never be realized—but you've failed to foresee that the euphoria of a requited infatuation in its initial stage is only a small cozy flame compared to one which has been tainted by loss and been allowed to escalate with time. Staying with him was impossible after experiencing how easily love can be replaced by hate. But staying away from him seems just as unimaginable now even if you could muster up the will to leave.

Luckily or unluckily, the decision is not yours to make. Unlike last night, when he immediately sensed and acknowledged your presence, your stranger is so distracted that he doesn't seem to take notice of you at all. The reason for his inattentiveness is obviously the woman leaning on his arm, with whom he is having something which closely resembles a lover's quarrel from the distance. Staring at the attractive dark lady, who looks as if she is just as attached to him as you were this morning, you curse yourself for expecting to meet Seiya Kou out of all people alone in a park while the inveterate womanizer is forever surrounded by female admirers and former or present lovers.

You can see at first glance that he has a rather rumpled look to him this time, which alters but doesn't diminish his attractiveness. Crouching on a blanket, an artist is eagerly sketching the bickering couple with hard pastels while the women walking past them are ignoring their partners to gaze at him. Overcome with disappointment and unspeakable anger, you briefly consider confronting the chameleon-like Casanova to see whether he will bravely defend his vices or come up with new fanciful lies. But since renouncing all claim to the lover is intrinsic to ending a romantic relationship, you decide after the first flash of fury that it would be ridiculous to bother an ex-boyfriend about his general lack of honesty.

Torn between the urge to stalk them and the wish to preserve your last ounce of pride by turning away and leaving, you end up following them at a discreet distance while sizing up the woman on his arm. Judging from the looks of the women you've seen until now, Seiya definitely has a weakness for the fine-boned, petite type. The twenty-odd-year-old brunette, who looks like a prettier and more heavily made-up mix between Odango and you, is of a delicate stature, has a medium-length bob with bangs a few shades lighter than Hino Rei's hair, and sports an almost imperceptible limp—an illusion which must be caused by the broken heel of her right shoe.

"But I only wanted the best for you!" she coos in a husky voice as she squeezes his arm, which she is leaning on, and gently drags him to a food stand, where she buys them a box of sakura mochi.
They must know each other for much longer than you and him, that's for sure, and you wonder briefly whether you ought to be shocked at the discovery that he must have cheated on her with you.

Seiya coolly declines the piece of sakura mochi she offers him as if he were refusing an offer of tacit truce, which surprises you, as you didn't expect him to be so resentful towards a pretty woman. Now that you've come precariously close to them—any closer and you would be able to jerk at his hidden ponytail if you reached out your hand—you can also see that he looks uncommonly pale and tired and that his eyes, which are no longer hidden behind his sunglasses, are flashing with anger like this morning when his brothers told him about the date of their comeback.

"I think it will be much easier for me to get over this if you do me a favour and stay out of my life for a few months!" His voice sounds startlingly sharp and cold, and you allow yourself to drown in nostalgia for a moment as you recall how lovely it sounded when he said your name.

"Aw shucks, don't be such a kid, darling!" She pouts when he carelessly wipes her hand on his arm away. "You know how much I adore you! Otherwise I wouldn't have worked my ass off to—"

"But I'm not interested in your plans for me, period! You know how much I hate your tactical ploys and how you try to turn everything into a debating gambit!"

To your relief, he is less interested in her advances than you thought, and their story, whatever it was, must have ended long ago. Now that the misunderstanding is out of the way, you almost feel sorry for her—especially since you can imagine Seiya treating you with the same icy attitude after you've broken up your relationship.

Agitated, they both quicken their pace, leaving you behind, and you can't hear the next sentences, which get lost in the continual bustle around you.

"I don't know why you're doing this to yourself!" you can hear her again as you draw closer. "No woman who ditches you after one night will ever fall in love with you for real. You're either a lousy lover—inexperienced groping always sucks!—or you two lack chemistry, or she is simply the type that never jumps into the same bed twice. Whatever, you can't say no to both offers without losing your face! I wish you were more sensible like Taiki!"

"If I were like Taiki, who never forgets a grudge, I'd sue you two for character assassination since that's what Haruka-san and you have done to me! But it wouldn't have bothered me at all if you hadn't turned my own brothers against me and… your lies!"

"You can't keep doing this forever… hiding from the girls and… travels… and… money…"

"I'm… all the time… because they bore me silly and try to own me or tell me how to live my life! The first time I've found an interesting single woman who… Taiki, Yaten, and you absolutely had to ruin it for me!"

"Aw… so dramatic… doesn't suit you, darling… only way to heal… work… whenever you're suffering from… or heartbreak… at your best."

As the distance between you and the pair has grown again, it has become harder for you to overhear their conversation, and you hastily weave through the strings of couples and families who have come between Seiya and you to close the distance. You arrive at the cork gun shooting gallery just when she gets on her toes and pecks him on his chin, on a spot near a corner of his mouth—a familiar gesture which doesn't seem to surprise him or annoy him at all. Although their
feelings aren't synchronized and they have never been in a romantic relationship, as you can tell from the various snippets you've overheard, a kiss is still a kiss! His dark-haired beauty must be much dearer to him than you wanted to believe.

They part without Seiya returning the kiss, to your relief, and you continue to watch him in silence as he takes a cork rifle from the gallery owner while a very young woman (this time it's a tall blonde, who can't be much older than eighteen!) stops at the gallery to devour him with her large blue eyes. Without hesitation, he nonchalantly shoots down a small white bear, the prettiest available prize, without visibly aiming at it—and you vaguely wonder what would have happened if Seiya and you had encountered each other for the first time in front of Pandora's Box when you tried to open the door to the log cabin.
Part 21: After receiving...

After receiving his prize, Seiya turns to meet your gaze when you approach him—steering his faint smile from the blonde girl directly towards you as if he had been secretly observing you without you noticing. As a general rule, chance encounters between ex-lovers don't happen without a healthy dose of awkwardness. But in your case, the separation has been so abrupt and the absence has been so brief that this feels more like a second date than an accidental reunion.

Since he has taken a large step towards you just when you stopped in front of him, you end up standing so close to him that your cheek brushes against a button of his jacket when you raise your head. You can hear him chuckle and automatically smile in response, but your smile instantly fades from your lips at the sight of his cautious, watchful expression. Even though you can't discern any trace of resentment or anger on his face, Seiya feels now more like a stranger than when you two first met.

"Have you found the card?" he asks, flashing you one of his ready smiles, which he generously distributes to the blonde girl as well.

You nod without managing a word, knowing that he will no longer trust you although his question implies that he has indeed come to Ueno-koen in the hope of seeing you again. He may be more friendly and hospitable towards strangers than his brothers—which can be attributed to his general good humour—but when he withdraws into himself, Seiya is hardly approachable in his liberal pleasantness. At the moment, he is politely dividing his attention equally between you and the blonde woman, which is almost insulting considering the intimate history between him and you.

"I've come because I didn't want to let you wait for hours on that bench like I had to wait for Kudo," you remark at last—before you realize that mentioning Kudo's name after your breakup is not the smartest way to begin a conversation.

"I see," he says calmly, civilly, stepping back to scrutinize you with his observant eyes. The temperature between you two gradually drops to the freezing point. And you've begun to expect him to tell you that you can go home now that you've come since he no longer has to wait for you when his eyes suddenly light up with a mischievous smile and he spontaneously presses the soft bear against your cheek.

"Do you like it?" he asks in a low, seductive voice, tenderly stroking your cheek and your chin with the nose of the bear. You've always had a weakness for plush animals in general and soft fluffy bears in particular whether they're koalas, pandas, teddy bears, or even polar bears; and keeping a huggable reminder of this relationship is a temptation you can't resist despite your resolution not to accept sentimental presents from an ex-lover.

"I love it." You gingerly take the small polar bear into your hand to stroke its ears and nose. "You surely have an eye for beautiful things," you tell Seiya. "I've never seen a polar bear this cute!"

He smiles and gently traces your cheekbone with the back of his thumb—a familiar, affectionate gesture, which feels oddly foreign and thrilling after the separation. Your heart leaps with anticipation when he slowly bends down, and you rest your free hand on his shoulder to return his kiss. But you've barely felt his hot breath brushing against your lips when he abruptly draws away.

"Great!" he beams. "If you find it cute, she's going to like it as well!"
With a sudden flick of the wrist, he callously snatches the bear out of your hand and gives it the blonde girl, who is just as flabbergasted at his gesture as you are.

"Thanks a lot for watching me shoot!" His voice—courteous and refined a few seconds ago—has taken on the sweetness of ambrosia. "Since you've brought me luck, it's yours!"

"But I thought…" The young woman—who is the same cute, nice girl-next-door type as Odango—shoots you an apprehensive glance before she turns to him with glowing cheeks. "It belongs your girlfriend, doesn't it?"

"Oh, my friend—" he gives a dismissive wave in your direction, "—is a minimalist who doesn't like keeping material presents. And now that she has touched it once, she doesn't need it anymore. If I gave it to her, she'd only throw it out after one night." He flashes her an irresistible smile. "Hence I'd rather give it to someone who will appreciate it more."

"Don't worry. I prefer dogs and cats to wild animals, anyway," you coolly declare. "Also, that shade of white is much too bright and too high-maintenance for my taste. I bet it will turn grey and ugly after one day!"

Since the girl is obviously dying to talk to him alone, you leave them at the shooting gallery and storm back to the bench to inform the elderly couple that you've found the arrogant jerk so that they no longer need to pass on your message. There is no way you'll let Seiya know that you've been waiting for him like all his other clingy girlfriends and ex-girlfriends—even asked two complete strangers for help in your despair.

Just when you think you've finally freed yourself from him for good, your ex-boyfriend catches up with you at a pink camellia shrub and walks silently beside you although he is keeping his distance so as not to touch your arm.

"Where have you left your latest fangirl? You're even dumber than I thought if you've left her that bear for nothing!"

"It wasn't for nothing," he smirks. "She did give me something in return."

You don't really want to know what he has received—and you'd have loved to kick him like you did this morning if only your present relationship weren't too ambiguous for such an intimate expression of affection. Since you'd rather bite off your tongue than ask him and he only wears a mysterious smile suggestive of overnight dates or at least romantic dinners at fancy restaurants, you two continue to roam the park with each other in silence, both maintaining an arm's distance to the ex-lover. From time to time, impatient passersby will overtake you two by weaving their way through the space between him and you, and you have to suppress the urge to grab his arm for fear of losing him in the crowd.

Unfortunately, he still smells alluringly of hope and impossible dreams and fairy tales; and his smile still evokes painful remembrances of the late-summer sun, whose warmth becomes even more precious in cool autumn nights—the grim, harsh heralds of winter. To your delight, he moves nearer when a horde of tourists threaten to push past you and gently takes your elbow to pull you aside. You automatically raise your head out of habit and lean against his arm—and you two stop under a cherry tree to kiss as if you two had never broken up, passionately and desperately (outrageously, considering that you're in public!) trying to make up for the hours of hopeless longing with ineffectual, hurried caresses until someone whistles and someone else shouts that you two should "get a room."

"But there is no room in the vicinity, isn't it? Unless you count the temples," Seiya quips, holding
"We can't walk to your apartment," you point out, trying to ignore his warm hands resting enticingly on your waist and your hips. "Your nosy brothers will barge in on us again." Although Taiki-san no longer keeps the spare key to Seiya's apartment, you can remember very well his threat to break the door down.

Faintly, as though you were peering through a dense blanket of fog, you remember with difficulty that you wanted to let go of selfish desires which wouldn't only get you but also your loved ones into trouble. This is—as you've feared since you arrived in Ueno-koen—a most troublesome regression. And while you know that it's only natural to relapse into one's old ways after an improvement, you're devastated that you've only been able to look temptation in the eye for a few minutes before it was game over.

"We could take the bus to your place," he suggests. "It's only a few minutes to the bus station… Or we could search for a nice secluded place or a hotel although I fear that our combined bad luck will spoil our rendezvous in no time."

"You can't be serious!" With your luck and his fame, you would find your pictures and videos strewn all over the internet if you were insane enough to accept his proposal.

He smiles in resignation, murmuring that you're now more of a prude than you were this morning, and ignores the passersby to kiss you again. For a moment, time stops, and you allow yourself to go with the flow, to cast all caution to the winds to resume your relationship against impossible odds. But no sooner did the tourist group rush to their hanami party spot, where they are welcomed by a ponderous woman with two giant picnic baskets, and the road is free again, than your fickle seducer releases you and casually steps aside. In answer to your startled gaze, he only tilts his head and looks down at you with his faintly amused, distant smile.

To all appearances, the notorious playboy has simply dropped you like any of his female acquaintances he has become tired of and you've made a fool of yourself when you took his kisses seriously while he was only messing around. Undecided whether you should be hurt by his shabby treatment or angry at yourself for losing this twisted game again, you chance a long, serious look at his face and discover to your indignation that he is shaking with silent laughter.

"I'd never expected you to be such a resentful, petty… childish jerk!" you say at last, ready to explode when you spot a few women in the vicinity who are already making eyes at him. You used to be the one who attracted attention wherever you went. But now you suspect that you've begun to bore Seiya, who must be just as irritated and revolted by your jealousy as you were by Gin's.

"Childish? You can dish it out but you can't take it, Shiho!" He laughs, and you feel the corners of your mouth curve up despite your resolve not to succumb to his charms again. "You should take a look in the mirror just to see how old you are right now."

"Seventeen or eighteen?" You threateningly raise your brow.

"Don't flatter yourself! Whenever you feel insulted, you resemble Odango's favourite cousin 'Chibi Chibi', who used to monopolize my lap when she was two or three."

He is perfectly aware of the innuendo, you realize, fuming with impotent rage. How could you have thought your stranger to be endearingly innocent when he is actually a manipulative bastard who knows exactly how to use his charm?

"Now that you've had your revenge, I suppose that makes us square!" While you're irked by his...
roguish, smug grin and the fact that he has mentioned Odango—his one and only true love!—again, you feel a sense of elation at hearing your name without an honorific from his mouth. For all his mean pranks, Seiya isn't the small-minded sort of ex-lover who immediately reverts to formal honorifics after the end of a relationship. Maybe you two can be friends some day, as unlikely as it seems.

In response to your comment, he only fixes you with a disbelieving gaze. Noticing that his eyes still have the power to shut down the rational, dependable side of your brain, you grudgingly concede that, just like the reverse, great lovers usually make lousy friends after the last boundaries have been crossed. It won't do either Seiya or you any good if you two slip into an on-again, off-again friendship with certain benefits for the simple reasons that true friendship can't ever be forced and blind love will never die.

If he had dared to entertain any illusions about your feelings for him, you'd have shattered them by now, your attractive companion darkly remarks. "It was only a plush polar bear, wasn't it? Your loss was a mere bagatelle compared to mine."

As he suspected but didn't want to accept because it was a mortal wound to his ego, you can't feel an ounce of real compassion for him although you're always considerate towards Kudo, Seiya sighs. "But since I'm in a generous mood tonight," he impertinently imitates your tone from last night as he fishes a packet of cigarette and a lighter out of his oversized pockets, "I'll forgive you if you invite me over for dinner."

  g.
Part 22: There are certain rules...

There are certain rules... 

There are certain rules a woman should always obey: Don't meet up with an ex-boyfriend you still love, don't make out with him whether in private or in public, and don't ever take him to your place for "dinner" unless you want to plunge headlong into the very plight you've struggled hard to escape from. And while you are prone to break all the rules you've learned in Seiya's presence, Fortuna, who has taken pity on you, supports you for once when she creates circumstances which makes breaking the last rule impossible.

Your fridge is empty, you still have to withdraw cash before you can go to the grocery store, and you can't fetch your card in time because he will be on the way to the airport by the time you arrive home—you tell your ex-boyfriend, who has proven to be a curse you can't shake off. Hence you will have to postpone your dinner date until he returns from New York and Hollywood or simply make do without his forgiveness, which is, after due consideration, the more pragmatic solution.

Meanwhile, stranger-san has lit his cigarette and is now smoking it with a faint half-smile. He gives you a sharp, thoughtful glance when you mention Hollywood and New York, and it occurs to you for the first time that this is the face he usually shows his acquaintances and fans and that he was honest when he told you that he doesn't flirt with strangers as a rule.

"We'll have to skip dinner, then," he winks and gives you another kiss which leaves no doubt about his intentions for the evening, but he doesn't seem inclined to talk about his imminent departure. Last night was special, a unique opportunity for both of you to open up. Now that you've destroyed the rapport, he has retreated into his shell.

"Dream on!" You smirk, hurt by his cool, flippant demeanour. "Why don't you call one of your fans who are standing in line at Two Lights' just to make your acquaintance? One-night stands aren't supposed to last for longer than one night. As far as I'm concerned, our time with each other is over!"

For an instant, his face falls, and he turns away from you as if he were trying to conceal his pain. Bewildered, you extend a hand to stroke his ruffled hair, which is flying in the rising wind. But when he turns round, he only shrugs, flashing you a serene smile from melancholic eyes before he resumes smoking to show you that he doesn't care much.

"You're cold and hard-hearted as always," he dramatically sighs. "Kuroba has been right about you all along."

Distracted by the thought that you may be mistaken about Seiya and have done him wrong—the sorrow in his eyes seems so great and real that you no longer know what to believe—you need to focus for a second to get what his remark implies.

"You've told Kaito…" You grab his elbow and stop dead in your track, unable to form a coherent sentence in your dismay. This morning, Seiya seemed so considerate and decent that you'd never have expected him to be the type that kisses and tell. And it staggers you that you haven't even once considered the damaging consequences of your impulsive actions.

"Since he had to return a book to Taiki, we ran into each other in the studio and he asked me why I looked so burned out. I only told him that I've fallen in love with his ex-girlfriend and that he shouldn't take it personally." He laughs and throws you a mocking sidelong glance as he resumes
walking. "I told him that we went on a date and that you spent the night with me but dumped me directly afterwards…” He swings around to poke at your cheek. "What's with that look on your face? Of course I didn't tell him anything about last night! You really have trust issues, you know?"

"And what did he say?" Ensnared in his trap, you wonder whether he has really said that he loves you or whether you've misheard it because he seems completely oblivious to his choice of word.

"He said that, in all the nights he had to spend on your extremely uncomfortable sofa—" His lips stretch into an amused grin, "—I don't know whether he mentioned the sofa to hide the nature of your relationship or whether it was such an unpleasant experience that it's still haunting him after two years—he had to wake you up from your nightmares four to five times a night and that you mistook him for Kudo every time. You'd hold him and kiss him like you never did during the day and apologize—and then you'd fall asleep and forget about it while he wondered what he had done to deserve such a crappy treatment from you. After two weeks, Kudo asked him why he had disguised himself as Kudo to ask you out, claiming that it wasn't fair to either Kudo or you… You must know that Kuroba didn't have a clue about that proposal gone wrong at Pandora's Box. When he learned about it from Kudo, he naturally thought that you'd been using him as Kudo's substitute because you didn't get the original."

"I didn't use him as Kudo's substitute!" you snap, tired of having to defend yourself for a second time. "Although they look like twins, they're so different from each other that even Kudo and you have more in common."

He gives you a skeptical look before he absently smiles at a pretty brunette in the vicinity, who blushes and pales in response. Furious by his tendency to return other women's inviting smiles as though it were common decency, you move nearer, slow down, and 'accidentally' stomp on his foot with your heel.

"Really? I suppose I can take it as a compliment." Although he winces in pain, he takes your abuse in his stride. "Anyhow… Since Kuroba's pride didn't allow him to go through the drama of confessing to you that he didn't feel loved, he invented a story about Aoko-chan's letters and left so that Kudo and you could sort out your problems after he was out of the picture."

Stopping in front of the same red azalea shrub he admired yesterday evening, he gives your head a few reassuring pats and resumes smoking while you only gaze at the swirl of smoke in silence, lost in your muddled feelings about Kaito's selfless but moronic actions.

"So, in short: Kuroba did love you but he loved his ego more!" He cheerily concludes. "He told me that being with you was like battling Kudo's ghost every night. He wouldn't wish it on his most hated rival."

"How nice of him!" You roll your eyes. "He must love you very much to warn you about me."

"Nonsense! Kuroba doesn't want me to succeed because he didn't! He is the possessive type that gets jealous even after a relationship is over." Flashing you a wry smile, he puts out his cigarette on a trash bin. "In that respect, you two are alike… You don't want to be with me—but you can't stand the thought of me being with another woman either."

He tosses the cigarette stump into the trash bin with another graceful flick of his wrist, and you realize in bewilderment that you don't mind the smoke when you are with him. Along varying degrees of closeness and distance, he has healed you from your old wounds and inflicted new injuries on you in the process—but when all is said and done, you're glad that he has changed your perception of the world. Although he is an unscrupulous heartbreaker and loner who can't really commit, it's hard for you to condemn him.
"I don't care about all your affairs! I only think that leading on so many women isn't a very nice way of life, that's all!" You eye his beautiful profile with studied nonchalance, fighting another stab of jealousy when you picture him with another lover. "The cherry wish tree at Hikawa Shrine will die if you continue to rack up broken hearts like that. Hino-san says that three-quarters of the paper wishes on its branches belong to the women you've dumped."

"You were at Hikawa Shrine?" He blinks at you in surprise before he puts two and two together. "That's why you know about New York! Have you talked to Taiki and Yaten?"

"Only to Taiki-san, luckily. Your silver-haired monster would have torn me into tiny shreds if he hadn't been asleep."

Hesitantly, almost involuntarily, you give him a brief account of your encounter with his friends, omitting Hino Rei's affection for him since you don't want him to turn to her for consolation in his heartache. The wind around you has become cold and harsh, rustling the trees and giving you goosebumps. When you rub your naked arms and ponder the problem of how to explain to him that you've forgotten your cardigan at his place without looking pathetic, he wordlessly takes off his jacket and places it over your shoulders.

"What's with you men and your leather jackets?" You pat his bulging pockets in disbelief. "Your pockets are just as heavy as Kudo's!"

Men usually don't carry handbags like most women do and therefore have to keep all the things they need in their pockets, he retorts as he tucks his ponytail into his frilly shirt, which you chose for him this morning. Admittedly, he is carrying more stuff around than he did last night. "Post-its, notebooks, pen—I'd have given you my number if I hadn't left them home yesterday."

A music notebook, a pen, two pencils, an eraser, paper tissues, a large handkerchief, a tiny box of peppermint, two mobile phones, headphones, keys, a wallet, two pocket-sized screenplays for his next roles, a packet of cigarettes, a lighter, a multi-function pocket knife, sunglasses… He even keeps two mini make-up sets, make-up removers, a comb, two shawls, a cap, and two wigs in his pockets so that he can change his disguise at any time.

"What's this?" You coolly ask, studying the round, feminine handwriting on the pink piece of post-it you've fished out of his pocket.

"A phone number," he evasively says.

"Do you need it?"

He silently shakes his head, and you ceremoniously rip the note into four squares, which you crumple up with immense satisfaction before you toss them into the trash bin.

"Sorry, but I can't resist decluttering!"

In response, he beams, laughs with delight, and pulls you into another kiss, which you return after a moment of hesitation. Despite his ability to hurt you and annoy you to no end, he feels like a paradise which you've known and lost and which you can't resist to explore over and over again.

"Do you know that you're quite impertinent? Now that I'm thinking of it, we aren't together anymore and you haven't even—"

He shuts you up with another kiss and runs his fingers through your hair, deepening the kiss when you part your lips. Once again you notice that he prefers nonverbal forms of communication to words, and it's of great consolation to you that his touch is still warm and loving despite his cool
"Why do you smoke when it can ruin your voice?" you ask after you two have resumed walking. He didn't smell of smoke last night so that you're surprised to discover that he is actually a smoker.

He usually doesn't smoke and only does it to get into a role, he tells you. "For Sherlock Holmes, I'll have to smoke cigarettes as well as pipes. I need to get accustomed to both so that I won't mess up and look like an amateur on the set." Since he always quits smoking after wrapping up the last scenes for a film, his voice doesn't really suffer.

"I hate smoke!" you remark, and sigh when you realize that your voice sounds more bitter than intended. "Gin used to chain-smoke in our apartment and never cleaned up... I might as well have kissed an ashtray!"

After offering you a mint and taking one because you shouldn't go through the agony of kissing a smoker again, he shows you his silver lighter, on which "Igarashi Shizuka" is engraved. The lighter, the box of peppermint, and the cigarettes actually belong to his agent—Shizuka-san, the dark woman he was talking to before he caught you stalking him.

"Your agent?" On second thought, the snippets you've overheard of their quarrel begins to make sense. "It's interesting that she kisses you and calls you 'darling'... Also, I didn't expect her to be such a striking, young woman."

"She is very good-looking," he indifferently agrees and flashes you a wicked smirk. "And I bet she will look the same in thirty years since I've never seen her without make-up." Regarding the kiss you saw: Shizuka-san, who calls all of her protégés "darling", has grown up in France like Taiki, Yaten, and him, and kisses all of her friends and even her acquaintances as a greeting.

While you're skeptical about Seiya's claim that she doesn't harbour any romantic feelings for him, you give him the benefit of the doubt, especially since you know that theatre people are much more physical than the average person.

He smiles when you bump against him in an attempt to evade a particularly klutzy man, and offers you his arm again like he did last night. It's a conciliatory gesture, which weighs more than his no-strings-attached kisses. He seems to have forgiven you for the way you left him although he can't really trust you yet.

"Why have you two been fighting?" You squeeze his arm. "Did she announce your comeback without your consent?" Although you try not to sound desperate, your voice has taken on a will of its own.

"I said I'd consider reviving Three Lights and accept the roles if she changed the date of our comeback to July instead of December," he admits. "But I didn't expect her to go ahead and tell the press about it before I'm absolutely sure."

After eavesdropping on his conversation with "Shizuka-san", you've begun to nurture the hope that Seiya will decline the movie offers to stay in Japan. You've secretly entertained the illusion that he will be trying to remain in your vicinity because he has fallen in love. But while parts of your deductions seem to have been right, it's impossible for you to foresee his actions and guess what he is thinking. In contrast to Kudo, who is straightforward and dependable and whom you can read like an open book, stranger-san is a mystery you doubt you will ever solve no matter how hard you try.
"Aren't you feeling cold?" You notice with a pang of conscience that he has just taken a red shawl out of a pocket of his jacket, which you're now wearing, and is now wrapping it around his neck. He looks tired and much paler than when you two first met, and you wonder whether he is going to be sick.

He doesn't mind the cold since he likes the cool weather—he brushes your concern aside and wraps his second shawl around your neck with a teasing smirk. He is only trying to hide his face in case the paparazzi get the idea to look for him in Ueno-koen.

Ignoring the fact that he should be returning to his apartment to pack his luggage, you two stroll along in the evening's last light, stopping at random picturesque spots to kiss although neither he nor you try to verbally redefine your relationship. There is the universally accepted notion that it is wise and grand to accept tragedy with grace and move on, but now you doubt that the grandeur of upholding one's honour is worth the sacrifice. You can suddenly imagine Seiya and you drifting around the world for years, maintaining this indefinable entanglement with ease. As long as he and you keep this relationship secret, it could last forever.

He buys both of you okonomiyaki, tea, and sakura mochi at a food stall, and you two end up holding hands after "dinner". In front of Benten-do, which you've passed for the second time and which is now illuminated by strings of green and golden lights, the thought of inviting him into your apartment and keeping him there for the night or at least until he misses his flight to New York flashes through your mind. But then you recall the cherry wish tree at Hikawa Shrine and scrap the idea out of hurt pride.

"Can you tell me what time it is?" A stylish, tall blonde lady in beige approaches Seiya with an alluring smile. "I'm waiting for two friends who're supposed to meet up with me at half past six for yozakura." With a flamboyant gesture of her arm, she directs your attention to the glowing lanterns on the cherry trees, the full moon, and the starry night. "The sun has already gone down but they haven't come yet…"

His grasp on your hand tightens as if he can feel your mounting anxiety.

"I'm not wearing a watch, sorry."

Following an irrational urge to conceal your watch from her, him, and yourself, you quickly hide your wrist in his pocket when she turns to you with an artificial smile on her lips. "But the sun is still above the horizon," you coolly tell her. "Your friends still have a few minutes."
Part 22: But the sun...

But the sun…

But the sun is no longer above the horizon, the lady argues, gesturing towards the deep lilac sky, whose scarlet clouds have turned violet and fuchsia. Although the sky is still ablaze with its fire, today's sun has already died—and what you see is only the afterglow, the light which remains after the sun has gone down.

Disturbed by the determined glint in her eyes and the meaningful look she flashes Seiya before she continues to smirk at you, you pull him away from the temple and the creepy stranger, who keeps staring after you two. Tonight you feel even more anxious and paranoid than you felt yesterday evening, and her words have given you the feeling that she was alluding to Seiya's departure although she was only talking about the weather.

Since time is limited and you don't know how to address the real problem—Seiya's departure for New York—your mind comes up with other, less important questions: questions which should be of no importance to Seiya and you like why the crows had given Tenoh-san's mother such a cruel death and whether Seiya has really pulled the plug to Kakyuu's life support system.

"Why have the crows murdered Tenoh-san's mother in such a barbarous way?" you ask Seiya as you two are strolling back to the bench. Any other traitor you've heard of has either been executed in the gas chamber or received a bullet. You can well remember the Organization's policy of ending a troublesome codename members' life with one single bullet in the head—a difficult task, which only perfectly trained shooters like the crows could manage.

"Because she was the one who opened Pandora's Box," Seiya gravely says. While he doesn't want to condone what the crows have done, he'd like to tell you about the history of the Organization from his parents' point of view.

In the beginning, the Organization was a benevolent, heroic syndicate, which was why not only his parents and the crows but all of the codename members believed in it. After developing the Night Baron to gather information and to protect "Pandora's Box" (No. 3)—the storage of this world's truth—the "Sherringford Society", a secret Sherlock-Holmes-loving vigilante club of scientists, actors, musicians, martial artists, and hackers, set out to save victims of circumstances like prostitutes who had been sold by human traffickers, prisoners who had been wrongly convicted, homeless people who had been propelled into poverty by their government's corruption or bad management, and children who had been abused or abandoned by their parents... As it grew, the society which would later become the "Black Organization" began to raise orphans to give them a better future and a happier childhood than what the children could expect from the orphanage. To finance their operations and to pay their members, the leaders used the information in Pandora's Box to blackmail the filthy rich, immensely powerful one percent of the world's population, who were either terrified of losing their face or had good reasons to believe that an exposure would lead to their downfall.

With time, the Organization's philosophy took shape. The Boss and the seven crows, who were appalled by the information in Pandora's Box, began to believe that they needed to devise a grand plan to save the whole world and to free humanity from its self-made misery. Humans, so they argued, had always had a tendency to self-destruct. No government, no matter how benevolent or cruel, despotic or democratic, intelligent or dumb, had ever managed to stay in power and to ensure its citizen's security and happiness. Stupidity and sloppy thinking, the true rulers of the world, had
always won in the end—the eternal comical tragedy of humankind's downfall, which could be prevented if the Organization managed to defeat Time…

G.

Time—so Gin taught you when you were small—was indispensable for humans to learn and to change. The ability to develop and master new patterns of behaviour much faster and better than any other species on earth was the greatest strength of the humans, who possessed an unrivaled brain. But this sort of learning required that you had the luxury of security, knowledge, material resources, and time—which only privileged people had. And since even the most privileged people were unable to learn from their friends' and enemies' experiences and regularly got distracted by the sheer endless possibilities in life, the most important, most understated resource in life was time.

Time, our best ally, was also our greatest enemy at the end of our lives. Unlike fanatic religious leaders who helped foster (and who capitalized on!) the lunatic, suicidal wish to find peace in death always try to make us believe, the ancient Greek knew that Death wasn't the solution to our problem. Otherwise the Greek wouldn't have mentioned Death as one of the evils in "Pandora's Box". Death is not a solution but rather an enormous obstacle to humankind's quest of happiness: If only humans could live forever, the wise ones would have enough time to pass on their knowledge!

If only humankind didn't multiply at dizzying speed to secure its survival, we wouldn't have to deal with environmental problems and overpopulation. If there was no threat of dying at all, there would be no need for religion itself—for all religions were much more concerned with the survival of the humans and more interested in an eternal afterlife than in their elusive, usually idiotic, deities! If only all the adults who were clearly dumb and immature—at least ninety percent of the world's population?—would forever stay kids, the truly intelligent, responsible, mature people would get a chance to save the world and teach the immature ones how to use their brains!

Look at all these pathetic cowards... how they all wear the same things and stick to their little groups during breakfast as if they'd die a painful death if they were alone! Gin had sneered when he visited you for the first time in New York. How many students of your age were even able to choose their clothes independently, without being manipulated by the ridiculous ads they imbibed every time they watched TV? They kept a safe distance from you because they could feel that you belonged to a completely different species. You will have to get accustomed to loneliness since solitude is the Gods' punishment for the few human beings they envy.

On the other hand... The dumb kids might be blissfully oblivious but not much happier than you, he mused. True friendship or even kinship seldom existed in this world—and the most rickety bridges were often maintained for life while the strongest emotional ties could be severed on a whim. Even at school, you could sense the gulf between the different social groups. In the Organization, however, all members were treated as equals regardless of their family background, race, culture, social status, sex, sexual orientation, charms, and looks—and only the ones who had repeatedly proved to be extremely competent and dedicated were honoured with a cocktail codename.

G.

The Werewolf in Man is the savage, powerful inner idiot every human being has to fight—and the Silver Bullet is the only weapon that can effectively kill it by reversing the Stream of Time. A few years after its foundation, the Organization changed its name, and the leaders called themselves "Anokata and the seven crows", Seiya continues. They chose these birds not only because of the well-known children's song but also because of the characteristics of the crow.

It made sense that humans liked pigeons and peacocks but hated and feared crows, his mother once
said. Humankind had always preferred the imbecile follower and the flashy airhead to the loyal, tough, intelligent one. Crows were met with superstition and fear because they were ruthless, industrious, strong, and extremely smart. In contrast to many other birds, crows could adapt to all weathers and defend themselves as individuals, in monogamous pairs, in small families, and in large groups. Capable of love and empathy and hate, they mated for life, protected and taught their young, helped their parents raise their siblings even after they had left the nest, shared their knowledge among their peers, and used all the tools they could get to find food in winter even when many other birds have died or flown south. Crows were also known to bring the people who fed them gifts. If you hurt one of the birds, however—and their excellent memory for faces enabled them to nurse a grudge—not only the crow you had angered but also its peers would hunt you down.

"That's why the codename members wore black. It was only meant to be the colour of the seven crows at first, but the other codename members liked the idea of being crows so much that they all voluntarily wore it."

The Organization grew stronger with every passing day. The second generation—most of them orphans who wouldn't have had a real chance of being adopted if they had stayed in the orphanage—had been raised with love and attention and had enjoyed the best education the Organization could give. Politicians, terrorist groups, and even the secret services began to fear the people in black. The data in Pandora's Box was moved to the Organization's cloud, which was protected by the Night Baron, while the most important files, which the crows tried to memorize, remained on the hard disk. Anokata ordered the crows to build a ship, which was also named "Pandora's Box" (No. 1) because it contained the laptop with their most important files. It was hidden beneath the subterranean passage under the Werewolf Cliff so that no one but Anokata and the seven crows could find it. After all, they had to prepare for the unlikely scenario that the secret services of the governments they blackmailed would try to destroy their organization.

Naturally, while everyone enjoyed the privileges the Organization offered, not everyone showed the same dedication as the codename members when it came to work and fighting. Many members were also paranoid about their personal security, claiming that not only the secret services but also terrorist groups could infiltrate into the ever-growing group. Hence the crows decided that only the codename members deserved to know about the Organization's goals and the Silver Bullet. Anokata and the seven crows and the first codename members, who had been parts of the old Sherringford Society, were also the only members who knew about Pandora's Box and the Night Baron.

The Organization's leaders, who had made the greatest sacrifices to uphold their standards and to protect the Organization, continued to save lives and to develop the Silver Bullet stealthily, secretly, without claiming any rewards or accolades. They only killed in self-defense during their operations and never resorted to violence even towards the people they blackmailed. You could say the Organization was "just like Haruka-san's prodigy group" with the difference that the Organization was much larger and consisted of like-minded people from different cultural backgrounds, who were willing to make the supreme sacrifice for their goals. The crows, who met up to vote at "Pandora's Box" (No. 2)—the log cabin which led to the secret subterranean passage where the ship (Pandora's Box No. 1) was hidden—whenever an important decision had to be made, didn't use secret ballots because they were of the opinion that an open discussion could only happen when every single member had the backbone to voice their opinion.

"I've given the three Pandora's Boxes numbers because I'd always mix them up," Seiya dryly remarks.

As the research on the Silver Bullet continued and the first cases of age reversal in the rats
occurred, utopia finally seemed within reach. Anokata and the first six crows were on the same page and the Organization flourished—but the seventh crow undermined the whole system by deciding that she knew better than all the others what the Organization needed.

It started so harmless that the others didn't intervene at first. Not only children but also older teenagers were suddenly rescued from the streets. Not only prisoners who had been wrongly convicted but also those who had received a slightly harsher sentence than what they deserved were suddenly freed. Unfortunately, it wasn't only a phase and didn't stop at this initial stage. The Organization should be even more benevolent than it had been, the seventh crow thought. After all, humans were prone to make mistakes... And when everyone deserved a second or even a third and a fourth and a fifth chance in life—who were we to decide which criminal deserved to be saved?
Instead of executing her immediately as they would have done to any other traitor twenty years later, Seiya's parents tried to reason with the seventh crow behind closed doors. She should learn to abide by the rules lest she ruined the Organization, they warned her. Apart from draining their resources and making it increasingly difficult for the Organization to balance its budget, her actions also endangered the whole system since it was impossible for the other crows to work efficiently if one of them simply changed the rules without the others' knowledge. They applauded her for her generosity and her courage—and in a better world, they would allow her to save every single soul on earth. However, utopia hadn't arrived yet! It wasn't wise to overestimate one's own power—and the Organization couldn't afford to take care of (and watch over!) so many criminals who were accidents waiting to happen or rather ticking time bombs waiting to explode.

Then the rules should be changed so that the crows could detonate the loudest ticking bombs in time, the seventh crow suggested. Traitors should be disposed of immediately so that the Organization could focus on the members who were able to live up to the Organization's standards. It wasn't ethical to ignore so many victims in need for fear that ten percent of them could turn out to be rotten apples past saving. As for the money they needed: the Mafia, the Yakuza, and all the terrorists groups and the governments and banks and big names they blackmailed had more than enough to spare. Instead of taking insignificant crumbs from them, the Organization should be more daring and make more lucrative deals with rival groups, who were all more than willing to pay a handsome sum for sensitive information!

If she really had the courage of her own conviction, she should openly propose all these solutions at Pandora's Box and listen to the other crows' opinions instead of going behind their backs, Seiya's parents replied.

When the seventh crow introduced her ideas to the other crows during the following meeting at Pandora's Box, she received a wholesale rejection. What she proposed was starting a war in order to save the scum of the earth, the other crows answered. Although they couldn't deny that—under extremely fortunate circumstances—individuals with a strong personality could change, the danger of the scheme outweighed its merits. The seventh crow's suggestion that they could create a system of multiple subgroups like Anokata and the seven crows—in which every "boss" supervised seven subordinates, each of whom, in the same way, supervised seven subordinates—was greeted with derision. It would create the sort of bureaucracy that crippled democratic Western nations, the other crows said. And giving the bosses the right to execute a traitor without a trial would foster violence and corruption.

"Let me guess: Although all of them voted against it, she went ahead with her plan."

"Well, she was very much like Haruka-san, from what I've heard. And she was so extremely hard-working that all the other crows had to work overtime to clean up the mess she had made."

That's why they came up with the "red card", Seiya continues. Since scolding her and warning her didn't work, they needed a formal punishment for a wayward member of their select circle. Inspired by the Mafia's Queen of Spades and the red penalty card in sports, they gave the seventh crow a custom-made red Queen of Spades (as opposed to the black Queen of Spades in card games) as a warning that they would have to execute her if she continued to endanger their organization.

When she fell in love with her fencing teacher, they were all relieved. Finally, the maniac got
herself a life so that she could stop the folly! All the six crows agreed that the seventh crow's altruism was a compulsion the poor woman couldn't suppress. And since the best psychologists of the Organization stated that you couldn't cure someone who didn't want to be cured and that there was no medicine against her condition, they had to accept her as she was. For a while, they viewed it as a burden of love.

The situation escalated when they found out that Jean Black, her new boyfriend, was a double agent and also had a relative holding a high rank in the FBI. She either had to break up her relationship like any other codename member who had accidentally dated 'the enemy' had done or at least keep it on a casual, no-strings-attached level. She wasn't allowed to move in with her lover since—even if she kept her mouth shut forever—he was so close to her that he could stumble over Pandora’s Box by coincidence.

Of course she passionately defended her relationship, claiming that she had finally found true love and that a love like theirs should always be free. She was going to marry Jean and raise one or two kids and pursue her private happiness because it was her right—a human right the Organization always accepted. Therefore—under the watchful eyes of the other crows, who were disgusted by the hypocritical wretch, who had often demanded that the codename members under her jurisdiction left the love of their life whenever it was inconvenient for the greater cause, citing "those who come together in passion stay together in tears"—the Boss formally kicked her out of their syndicate.

"That's when she received the second red card, I suppose? The card announcing her execution?"

Seiya slowly shakes his head.

"Of course not."

At first, the crows were only happy that she was gone although they knew that they had to continue watching her lest her boyfriend caused trouble. It also took them months to determine the scope of the havoc she had wreaked since they were distracted by James Black, whose secret agents and informants in the Chicago Mob and street gangs had become mixed up in several shady deals with the new members of the Organization. After the first hurried executions, the crows were gripped by paranoia when they discovered that Tenoh-san's mother hadn't only freed and fed and educated all the criminals she could dig out but also given some of the smarter specimens a cocktail codename behind Anokata's back. It was then that the first suggestion that she should be shot immediately was put forward and rejected.

"My parents argued that she was harmless now that she was expecting Jean Black's daughter—especially since she knew that a second red card would mean certain death. Maybe my mother pitied her because she was planning to become a mother herself. In contrast to Yaten, Taiki, and me, Kakyuu was a planned child, you see…"

It was a pain to track down all the new codename members Tenoh-san's mother had named since she refused to give away their identities. She felt responsible for those members and was afraid that the crows, whose patience had worn thin, would execute them without a trial to protect their Organization from the Chicago street gangs and the FBI. But the crows, who had to work days and nights to impose some order on the chaos again, managed to locate the whereabouts of the new codename members after an extensive investigation even without her help. Once again the proposal that Tenoh-san's mother should be executed with all her new codename members, whose loyalty only lay with their "saviour" or with the Organization's money instead of the greater cause, was put forward. The crows mistrusted the new codename members, most of whom were lone
wolves who blackmailed and robbed and stole purely out of selfish interest and who might be willing to side with the street gangs or the secret services against their Organization.

This time, the proposal received fifty percent of the possible votes: three votes out of six—as the Boss had yet to designate another codename member to take on the position of the seventh crow. Since Anokata's vote carried the double weight of a crow's vote and Seiya's parents still opposed to an execution, Tenoh-san's mother wasn't executed although she received a "last warning".

What happened afterwards was a miscalculation on both sides, Seiya tells you as you two arrive at the bench where he and you met each other yesterday. Terrified by the warning, which she mistook for the proof that the crows were ready to snap and execute her and her family soon, Tenoh-san's mother began to search for new allies among the national motorcycle police, many of whom had trained the crows without knowing their identities. She also implored Jean Black to ask for James Black's help and hunt down Anokata and the seven crows to kill them before they could kill him and her—but her boyfriend, who reasoned that they shouldn't endanger their peaceful life by committing so many murders, suggested that she give away the crow's identities so that his cousin could watch them, arrest them, and bring down the Organization.

Fearing that the Organization would strike faster than the government, Tenoh-san's mother refused to work with the FBI while Jean Black, who could understand his girlfriend's fears, didn't try to talk her into revealing her secrets. And the situation would probably have calmed down if it hadn't been for Tenoh-san's mother's decision to draw the agents motards on her side. Driven into a corner just when the Silver Bullet was nearing completion, the crows were forced to eliminate all the motorcycle police officers who refused to join the Organization and showed no interest in becoming a mediator. Since the crows didn't know how much Tenoh-san's mother had revealed to her new allies, they took out all the people she had met up with in private and put pressure on the blackmailed politicians and judges to jail the closest friends and colleagues of the officers who were known to be indiscreet.

"You must know that the CIA and the FBI had already tried to infiltrate the Organization at that time—a move which wouldn't have been possible if Haruka-san's mother hadn't assigned criminals who had connections to the Chicago Mob a codename rank. Since they had put her under constant observation, the crows had also found out that she had tried to convince her boyfriend to kill them. Of course it was impossible to prevent her execution this time. When the proposal was made, all the six crows voted for it."

Listening to his lovely low voice while smiling at the elderly couple at the pond, who are beaming at you and casting him curious glances, you acknowledge with a pang of guilt that even a terrible tragedy like Tenoh-san's mother's fate only left a slight ripple on the surface of this world's history—a fragment of a colourful and poignant but ultimately incomplete story. Before your inner eye, you can see the crows gathering in front of the fireplace, debating on when and where to carry out the execution of the crow they all hated. The second red card, a red Ace of Spades, was designed and sent to Jean Black's place. They were going to execute her some day—it announced—although she wasn't going to die yet…

There was no sense in punishing a child for her mother's sins, the Boss decided. Hence the former seventh crow should be allowed to raise her daughter until Haruka was seven. According to the Organization's psychologists, seven was the beginning of the end of a girl's childhood. Eight-year-olds no longer depended on their mother's caresses so that having only a father and a nanny should
just about do.

The following years brought momentous changes. Seiya's parents completely fell in love with their daughter when she was born. The beautiful red-haired girl with her shy, endearing smiles, who never caused real trouble and seemed so content with herself and the world that she might as well have descended from heaven, was named Kakyuu, which meant "Fireball"—an extremely bright, exploding meteor, the radiant shooting star that was going to bring hope to the dark, cold world...

Kakyuu was kept on their private isle among sweet osmanthus trees and rose bushes and weeping willows and treated like all princesses should be treated—for her parents had begun to fear the crows, whose paranoia and frustration had slowly morphed into cruelty. Whenever they were in France or Chicago, they would take her with them and leave her with her nanny and their most trusted bodyguard in their luxurious suite, where she would play with the three children they had adopted: three little boys of the same age, who were only one year younger than her.

No one knew where they had come from—the three babies who had been abandoned at the same shrine on the same day, who had bright opalescent eyes and angel's voices which entranced all the adults who heard them (even when they only burbled and screamed as all babies did in the beginning). Seiya's parents immediately adopted them and treated them like their own child, and the nanny claimed that the three children of unknown heritage were a gift from heaven—the reward for Anokata's dedication and hard work so that they could find joy in their children while bringing the world the childhood it needed.

The day of light, when the old world would die and the new one would be born, was near, as a codename member had already tested the newly developed drug on herself and turned into a young woman although others who had followed her example died. The Organization knew all the necessary ingredients for the Silver Bullet. The tricky task was to determine the amount of the ingredients needed for an age reversal without endangering the person who took it.

g.

Then, out of the blue, the head scientists who overlooked the project died in an accident. Thorough investigations were carried out to find the traitor who had meddled with their car. In the end, it seemed that the mistake had been made by the scientists themselves. Immersed in their studies (they were the type of people who would abandon their own children to focus on work), they had rushed to the lab to test a new formula and ignored their chauffeur's warning that the brakes should be replaced since they appeared to be malfunctioning.

All hopes for a fast development of the Silver Bullet was gone—wiped out by a freak accident—and the Organization went through a time of unrest when more codename members, whom the six crows hadn't named, emerged. Corruption was rampant; the new members who had been accepted into the Organization although they had been recruited by the former seventh crow were arrogant and dissatisfied; the blackmailed people, who were sick of paying ever-increasing exhorbitant sums, became rebellious; and the secret services grew dangerous, as their motivation to bring down the Organization only increased with time. Personal friendships and feuds interfered with work. When the seventh year since the second red card was handed out approached, the crows were ready to tear Tenoh-san's mother to pieces.

She had singlehandedly ruined their Organization, brought them the dregs of humanity so that they would be swamped with never-ending problems, destroyed the moral order by giving them the sort of trouble which could only be solved by executions, and still continued to live a happy, cozy family life in the warm nest Jean Black had built for her and their pretty blonde daughter while they—the true heroes and heroines who had had to give up their loves, abandon their families, and
eliminate their friends (in some cases, the murdered agents motards and the crows they had taught had been close friends before the mess)—were forced to live in constant stress and fear.

They waited until the day of her wedding, watched the ceremony and even the party afterwards, and waited patiently until everything was over before they kidnapped her daughter. On the seventh crow's pillow, they left her the last red card: a red print of the seven crows' emblem on the back of a copy of Van Gogh's "Starry Night"—the artistic depiction of humankind's eternal longing for what some people would call peace or salvation or forgiveness, for stars in the night sky always symbolize the everlasting, unattainable beauty of the universe.

You can see all the images vividly although you rather wouldn't—images which Tenoh-san conjured up when she described her mother's execution to you. The seventh crow—a proud woman—had begged for her daughter's life. She would accept any punishment no matter how severe, she pleaded, as long as they spared her husband and her child.

Although she was in no position to negotiate with them, the crows listened to her plea. Haruka was to be spared if she promised to tell her father that her mother had exchanged her life for her family's safety. Perhaps they only intended it to be a formal exchange—a deal. Or perhaps they wanted the seventh crow to know that her death would destroy her family even if they didn't hurt the child. Whatever they intended—to Tenoh-san, it was all the same: All she saw was a group of men and women in black, who dragged her into a cave and who murdered her mother while she was staring at the scene through the gap they had left open to "give her air and light". Then they carried her back to her father's house—or rather one woman did: an elegant lady in black, who smelled of a warm, sweet, very distinctive perfume.

Contrary to your expectations, the story doesn't end here.

After the execution, which his parents didn't support but couldn't prevent, things went downhill. The crows were losing hope of finding the Silver Bullet in this lifetime since no scientist in their Organization could decipher the notes the head researchers had left behind. They were also positive that the CIA had already managed to infiltrate their Organization. Double agents and traitors and loyal followers alike were struggling against the new bureaucracy and the terror, which had replaced camaraderie and compassion among the younger members. Executing all the new members was impossible in this time of upheaval, in which the Organization needed every single member available. However, it wasn't only a costly and complex but also an impossible undertaking to separate the wheat from the chaff.

After killing the seventh crow, the crows started to place the blame squarely on Anokata, who had been "too weak". If only the Boss—who had turned into a doting fool after becoming a parent—had agreed to eliminate the troublemaker in time, they could have prevented this chaos.

On a sunny day in July, the day before the seventh birthday of Anokata's youngest child, the crows drove to the isle where the Boss resided and brought a small present—a bomb, which they smuggled into his children's room. Unfortunately, the youngest son of the family was a curious and impatient kid, who couldn't wait to see what he guessed to be a Jack-in-the-box in the mysterious package. Having listened to all the mystery novels his Sherlock-Holmes-loving parents had read out loud to him, however, he found the ticking sound from the package most alarming.

The crows were all shot without a trial, for the Boss, who had lost their trust in the unmanageable bunch of assassins, decided that this was only killing in self-defense. A new group of "seven crows" was picked from the most loyal, most capable members of the second generation, who replaced the first-generation crows so completely that they didn't only take over their jobs but also
their code names. From then on, each crow was obliged to choose a secretary to work with, as the Boss had begun to believe that only people who were able to work efficiently in pairs would develop the necessary social skills to work in a group.

"As we both know, that approach didn't succeed either," Seiya concludes in resignation. "They weren't much better than the 'real' first-generation crows despite their happy childhood and the good education they got. If anything, they were more snobbish because they believed themselves to be shiny messiahs who were going to bring the world eternal peace…" He trails off when he meets your gaze. "What's wrong?"

"You said the first-generation crows had all been replaced…"

After all, they couldn't be trusted after that failed coup, Seiya explains, puzzled by your distress, as you seemed calm enough only a minute ago. All the first-generation crows who had tortured and executed Tenoh-san's mother had been shot and replaced with other codename members. To all the other members of the Organization, the change went unnoticed since the crows only had contacts to the highest codename members and the age gap between the first two generations was small. This piece of the Organization's history, which was only stored in the hidden files in the real Pandora's Box (the laptop), was only accessible to Anokata, who—to protect the Organization from the mistakes of the past—had turned into the hard, pitiless, authoritarian ruler whom only the highest codename members of the "revived" Black Organization were allowed to know.
Part 24: There it is...

There it is...

There it is, the tiny detail which has torn a hole into the flimsy fabric of my perfect universe. Just when I believed to have solved it at last, the mystery evaded me.

For a moment, I allow myself to indulge in the idea that it was a fiendish plot Tenoh-san (and Kaioh-san?) had hatched in order to persuade me into helping them take revenge on that person before I dismiss the far-fetched theory. Tenoh-san may have been eager to steal Pandora's Box and eliminate the crows when we were both students at Infinity, but she was clearly reluctant to fight against the Organization after committing herself to a life partner and a child. Her fear of endangering the people she loved during a half-baked attempt at shooting the crows and her fury when I suggested that we take out our opponents with my painless drug were real. M Jean Black, too, clearly believed that the crows whom we were fighting were the same people who had murdered his wife. The truth, however unpleasant, may be simpler than all the conspiracy theories I had concocted in my mind: Due to Anokata's secretiveness when it came to the Organization's first idealistic phase and the story of the first "seventh crow", which was to them a failure they didn't want to be reminded of, Tenoh-san didn't know that the six crows who had murdered her mother had already been shot by the Boss, who had been less willing to execute her mother than Tenoh-san thought.

After surviving the bomb attack on their family and executing the first-generation crows, Seiya's parents kept the new seven crows apart by dispersing them and assigning them different branches of the Organization. The age gap between the original crows and the second-generation codename members who replaced them were so small that the new "first-generation" crows must have been the same age as Tenoh-san's mother, who was the youngest of the real first-generation crows. In a few cases, they must have been even older than her, as the first-generation codename members didn't only recruit orphans but also homeless people. All these things must have contributed to the fatal misunderstanding, which wasn't cleared up because unlike the first codename members, the later "generations" didn't socialize outside work.

Tenoh-san was seven when her mother died—and her memory of the tragedy must have consisted of a few startlingly vivid images, feelings, and sensations but also scores of gaps, which her imagination had to fill in. How frustrated must she have been after infiltrating the crows and stealing a backup of the files on her mother from Pandora's Box just to learn that they only contained useless information she had already known! The answers to the questions she had were stored in a hidden folder protected by the Night Baron, to which only Anokata had access. The development of the Night Baron copy, which Meioh-san had already started before I applied for Infinity, however, was so excruciatingly slow that time was running out for the Organization's last "seventh crow". Hence she immediately jumped at the chance when she realized that she could worm the information out of that person's lovely, naive child—the Black Organization's sheltered princess, whom Three Lights had introduced to Odango and her friends after rescuing her from her overbearing mother.

Following the downfall of the Organization, M Jean Black committed suicide while Tenoh-san continued to help the victims in her own radical way: blackmailing the judges and the lawyers. No one can tell why Jean Black cut his wrist, as the popular fencing teacher didn't care to leave a suicide note for his few relatives and many friends, all of whom genuinely mourned his passing. A
nicer, more tender-hearted person like Ran would choose to believe that he had taken his own life out of guilt or had succumbed to the depression he had never been able to shake off after his wife's death. But I prefer to believe that he, following my advice, had left the world with a smile because he had finally avenged her murder and no longer had the will to live. Believing himself to be the only winner of a fight which had brought both his enemies and allies nothing but pain, having successfully destroyed the Organization and exacted his revenge on Anokata and their crows without ruining his spotless reputation or dirtying his beautiful long-fingered hands, the duplicitous jerk happily stole out of this empty world to join his only love in death, abandoning his daughter for his deceased wife once again.

Despite our current disagreement over my obsession with Seiya, which I believe to be the last great, fateful love of my life while Tenoh-san believes it to be a "foolish, ill-fated, tragic, doomed" venture upon a lasting relationship, which could never stand the test of time (whenever Tenoh-san gets agitated over other people's business, she tends to chuck adjectives about), I sincerely hope that Tenoh-san will never find out that none of the crows we had poisoned so cruelly had played a part in her mother's murder. Tenoh-san's sense of justice and her firm conviction that she has made the right choice have until now protected the "distant ruler of heaven" from all the nightmares which inevitably plagued lesser mortals. In this case, the saying applies that ignorance is bliss. I must admit I've always had a soft spot for Tenoh-san even during the few moments in which she seriously misbehaves whereas I can't feel a scintilla of pity for all the "innocent" crows, who hadn't murdered Tenoh-san's mother but had cowardly voted for Akemi-nee-san's execution.

And yet I know that, if I were in Purgatory or on a similar post-death trial, I'd have lost my case even before I can muster the nerve to fight. Perching on a wool-, linen-, or silk-covered boulder on Mount Olympus, surrounded by the curious bunch of first-generation and second-generation Greek gods that Tenoh-san likes, (disheartened by my hopeless situation but tipsy and emboldened by the ambrosia they had given me!), I would tell Zeus or Jupiter or whoever presides over the meeting my honest opinion that the true villains of my story are neither Gin and Anokata nor Tenoh-san and me but the gods themselves: the hardened, resentful, incompetent bosses, who had unleashed Death and Pain and Sorrow and Hope upon the unsuspecting world when they used Pandora. Secure in the knowledge that, once dead, I cannot be eliminated again, I would proudly march off in the direction of Styx even though I would wonder what my trial had really been about. Did I create bureaucratic or administrative hassle by flooding the underworld with twenty-six people whose time on earth wasn't officially over yet? Or did I break a cardinal rule of the universe by reversing the flow of time when I created the Silver Bullet for the so-called "Black Organization"?

Perhaps all those offences are only bagatelles in the eyes of our rowdy Greek gods, and my true crime was my inability to live up to their expectations when I failed to develop my great potential. Like many other lives, mine has been full of disappointments and missed chances, personal failures and broken promises. Only during the last twenty-four hours, when it was already too late to salvage either the remnants of my past love for Kudo or the future Seiya and I could have shared, I've begun to value my limited time.

In the deepening...

In the deepening twilight, on the bench where we first met, my stranger and I are making the most of our time together by spending it in the best way we can considering the circumstances. Exchanging scandalous, longing kisses (which would ruin my reputation for good if the paparazzi
caught them on video to sell them to the gutter press), we inform each other during the short breaks we take to catch our breath on all the happenings which occurred while the other person was away.

"Odango has been searching for you. I saw her on the bus…"

In spite of my effort to sound casual, the edge of jealousy is clearly audible. If she were really serious about her decision to limit their frequent semi-romantic dates—a peevish voice in my head remarks—she wouldn't have met up with him so soon.

He doesn't even miss a beat.

"I know. I've already met her. She has returned to Hikawa Shrine to wait for me there."

Even to my infatuated, delusional ears, it doesn't sound like he has resolved to stay in Tokyo with me. Brushing aside the dark, sobering thought that unlike Kudo, Seiya doesn't tie himself (or let himself be tied) to one place (and one person?) even when he falls in love, I make a superhuman effort to focus on other feelings to distract myself from my growing disenchantment.

Unfortunately, my negativity—a tiresome, overprotective childhood friend—easily finds another feeling to latch onto: ever since I talked to Hino Rei and saw the cherry wish tree at Hikawa Shrine, jealousy has been gnawing away at the fragile trust I have unthinkingly placed in a stranger who is by reputation promiscuity incarnate.

"How well do you know Odango's friends?"

Fairly well since they were classmates for a whole year—before Kakyuu's accident, which caused Three Lights to drop out of school. "Rei-chan" went to a Catholic all-girls school but hung out with the others at the Crown game centre whenever she didn't drag her friends to Hikawa Shrine for joint study sessions. Usually he doesn't believe in the preposterous idea that five heads are better than one—Seiya dryly remarks—but in this case, he must admit that Odango would never have passed her finals without her friends' efforts. Apart from sacrificing a large part of her free time to her vigilante group, Odango was so easily distracted by the simple joys of life—tasty food, nice weather, pleasant company, time-consuming hobbies—that she failed at the most simple academic tasks. She was also often late because she overslept, and she could never work up the motivation to memorize her Kanji.

Although I wonder whether Odango's weakness for the comfortable middle-class life played a role in her decision to marry her fiancé instead of eloping with Seiya, I'm more interested in Hino Rei.

"How is 'Rei-chan' like? She seemed rather frank and fierce…"

Very frank and very fierce, Seiya agrees. He likes her very much although he finds her scary. Alarmed by my pensive mood, he throws me a curious, slightly anxious look. "What happened? Did she try to have your guts for garters because Odango has told her how you dumped me?"

Hino-san only informed me about his past affairs, I tell him as I free myself from his embrace. It's best not to get too attached to a man who can pack and leave at any moment. How could I believe that I've finally learned to make good use of my time so that I can saunter past all the steep slopes of life with a placid and benevolent smile like a smug, enlightened female Buddha? Living is like doing household chores: just when you think you've finally mastered the skills and can relax, the dirt will accumulate and you will have to clean up the mess again.

To my indignation, my stranger bursts into laughter while tiny teardrops are glistening in his impeccably innocent, impossibly blue eyes—and I'm so piqued by his reaction to my (fully justified!) anger and insecurity that I feel tempted to yank at his ponytail again. In fact, I'd already
have succumbed to the urge and committed the public 'spousal abuse' if I hadn't caught sight of the elderly couple, who are preparing to leave because they've run out of bread crumbs and either given up waiting for their friends or been scared away by our open display of affection.

"What are you laughing at? For your information: I despise people who deceive others for their own selfish pleasure, and it's definitely not flattering to be the thousand-and-second or thousand-and-third one-night stand of a notorious womanizer!"

The only thing he has lied about—or rather omitted and sidestepped—was his family background, Seiya insists. And he only hid it from me last night because it wasn't only his but also Taiki's and Yaten's secret and because he couldn't dump such sensitive information on a woman he didn't know well. As for his supposed affairs, he honestly doesn't know why Rei-chan claimed that three quarters of the paper wishes on the cherry tree belonged to his past one-night stands. He has never even kissed anyone before me unless I classify the one farewell kiss he gave Odango, all the greeting kisses he gave his mother and Kakyuu, and the extremely chaste cheek kisses he did for a few awkward ads during his time as a teen idol under "kissing". He can assure me that my lips are the only ones he has ever touched, and he is actually relieved that I didn't notice how inexperienced and nervous he was.

Trust is hard to be revived once it has been killed—or rather the seed of mistrust is hard to remove once it has been planted into fertile soil. As I retrieve the image of Hino Rei's proud, sincere demeanour from a closed drawer of my mind, I recall that she also said that Seiya is "the greatest actor alive" and that "when he is in the mood, he even believes his own lies…"

"It's your word against Hino-san's, isn't it? And unlike you, she doesn't even have a motive for lying."

In response, he gives me a long, exasperated look—the sort of gaze I had often inflicted on Gin whenever his jealousy began to irritate me. Never would I have imagined myself in the role of the possessive lover who doesn't only control the partner's love life but also probes into the details of their past affairs. On the other hand, I can't stand being manipulated! If he is not only promiscuous but also a duplicitous lying cheat, I'm not going to apologize just because he has genuinely fallen in love with me.

Rei-chan doesn't have a high opinion of men in general, he sighs. Perhaps she really believes all the fanciful stories the reporters—fiction writers who base their stories on real people and events—have made up about him? "Or she was angry at you for dumping me and only tried to punish you a bit." After all—he muses—Rei-chan seems to have a very keen sense of justice.

It's all right—I try to appease him. "As difficult as it is, I'm going to believe you for now. I couldn't check the facts at the moment even if I wanted to."

Just like me, he isn't fully satisfied with this half-hearted call of truce, for he shoots me another dark look, stares into the water, and gloomily remarks, "I don't know why I have to justify myself! If our sexes were reversed, you would be the dissolute, heartless jerk!" It's him, who has been mistreated—he claims—beguiled by blatant lies about everlasting love and lifelong commitment and then tossed away like an old rag just because I can't accept his family.

"You've forgotten the 'seduced and used'!" I coolly add, mimicking the jerk he has just called me. "Seduced and used and deflowered by a complete stranger—you poor, poor innocent no-longer-virgin!"

"Oh, I absolutely didn't mind that part!" His lips curve up in reminiscence, and he cheekily tips me over with visible enjoyment, catches me and places my head on his lap to kiss me again. "You can
use me as often as you want," he murmurs against my lips between two kisses. "Taiki would claim that I've developed Stockholm syndrome but I think I've always been a perfectly willing victim."

"See, that's the difference between men and women!" I smirk up at him. If he were a woman, he would automatically be burdened with all the possible outcomes of last night. "As things are, you can be so carefree because you can focus on the pleasure without fearing any repercussions." Of course he would feel the consequences of an unwanted pregnancy eventually, but it's not biologically hardwired into his subconsciousness. Virgin or no virgin, a woman will always suffer more from an affair's social and emotional and physical reverberations, which is why the same situation reversed doesn't necessarily mean that the man will suffer as much as the woman would do.

"Your theory sounds a bit too convenient, doesn't it?" Seiya surveys my face with renewed curiosity. "But there is a certain logic in it... Why do I have the feeling that you will always win an argument even when you're in the wrong?" He pinches the tip of my nose, which only proves to me that I'll have to fight hard to regain the upper hand now that he has dared to overstep the boundaries like a badly brought up Doberman.

Rubbing my nose, I cast my mind back to the moment when he offered me a place on his bench, and linger over the thought that the stranger's innocuous, friendly gesture didn't happen yesterday but years or even decades ago, long before our tentative friendship, courtship, marriage, honeymoon, separation, and reunion. Rather than twenty-four hours, it feels like twenty-four years of my life has passed. And now, after seven years of absence, divergence, mild extramarital flirting, longing for our past, and mourning the future we could have shared if we hadn't let the world come between us, we have met up for a second attempt at romance, facing the question whether we could overcome all the obstacles and give our relationship another try.

"I'll always win because I'm more intelligent than you," I tell him as a matter of fact, whereupon he puts on a dejected face for me. "But don't worry..." I give him a conciliatory kiss. "Intellect isn't the most important thing in life."

As unfair as it is, I grudgingly add in my mind without telling him, he will always win in the end just because he is so infuriatingly beautiful.

"I've asked Odango about your handbag," Seiya suddenly remarks, breaking the comfortable silence, into which we two have lapsed after watching the last tints of gold and scarlet drain out of the horizon. The sky is now a vast, tranquil silk painting, on which semi-transparent layers of violet and purple clouds are dotted with tiny, almost invisible stars. Like an eerie spectre, the moon is hovering over us with its deceptively blueish light in the lilac afterglow, reminding me of Taiki-san's comment on the roof terrace that we can never see the moon's red light due to the nature of our own perception.

"There was no handbag on the seat next to her when she woke up," he proceeds with a bewildered expression. "Odango said she would have noticed a Fusae handbag if it had been lying there because she loves the brand."

A hazy memory, unreal as a dream which has already passed, rises to the surface of my consciousness as a sharp pain shoots through my body, and Seiya's lap, where my head is still resting, begins to feel oddly like a slightly damp pillow, on which my head is firmly fixed. Before my eyes, the blazing sunset with its hurtful, glaring gold and copper and red—colours of a pre-iron-age war scene—emerges once again as the handbag slips out of my hand...

Grasping at his motley-coloured shirt, I blink away the last remnants of the vision, an afterimage of yesterday's sunset, with a peculiar sense of urgency. To my relief, the creepy sensations instantly
disappear when my stranger shifts his position and draws my attention back to the immediate present, which is scented by his faint fragrance of orange blossoms and kinnokusei. In my state of heightened awareness, I even detect a soft note of wild roses in the familiar fragrance, an ingredient I've only discovered after one day.

"I must have lost the handbag before getting on the bus or after getting off the bus," I dismissively remark. "It really doesn't matter anymore." Irritated by his tendency to bring up Odango, whom I suspect to be the only woman he has ever given a nickname, I pull myself into a sitting position and run my fingers through my hair to restore a part of the order in my life, which he has thoroughly messed up. He grins about my gesture although a tinge of sorrow has stolen into his gaze. And I realize with chilling clarity that kisses don't equal commitment because, at a certain moment of our story, which I can't pinpoint (I suspect it to be the moment he accused me of not caring about him at all), he has made up his mind to leave... and that if I proposed that we tried out our paperless marriage anew, his answer would be an unequivocal "No, thank you".

"Kudo and I have talked about the Kakyuu case," I can hear myself saying, referring to her in an insultingly impersonal manner as I surrender to the wish to hurt him a bit—to tear down his serene smiling face because he seems oblivious to the fact that his nonchalance is killing me. Although he claimed that he has moved on after a phase of mourning and might even believe what he said, I've begun to believe Taiki-san's assertion that she was the one open wound in his life which would never form a scar. As if to confirm my suspicion, he slightly moves away from me and retreats into himself, murmuring a barely audible, "Ah, have you, I should have known..."

"It was impossible to hide anything from Kudo, you know, as incredibly observant as he is. It was unpleasant for both of us, but he has simply deduced the whole night from the few marks it has left on me."

He leans back and regards me gently, with his steady, thoughtful gaze, which jars with his easy smiles and impulsive hugs and kisses, and I get up from the bench to rest my foot on the low railing like he did last night as I inform him about Kudo's warnings, Kudo's depiction of the case, and my deduction. For unknown reasons, I firmly believe that Seiya is not going to hurt Misa in revenge for ending Kakyuu's life. And it only dawns on me that I've unwittingly exposed her to him during my narration of the case when he flashes me an amused smile and points it out to me.

"I could walk to her place and wring her neck just because I believe what you've just told me. Or I could shoot her and burn down her place! You should be more careful, especially now that you know about my family background," he mocks. "I could run amok and commit unspeakable crimes just because I trust you and you've made a logical but faulty deduction."

I can tell that he despises both Kudo and me at the moment, just as he despised his brothers, the two closest people in his life, when they tried to force his comeback in order to help him get over me. The downside of his childlike purity is his tendency to run away from all the things he dislikes and to fight when he doesn't really have to fight. And I regret for an instant that I've picked a senseless fight with him over Kakyuu when I remember that he is going to New York in ten minutes or less and that the pretty, cold bastard—despite all my kisses—is abandoning me!

"You don't look like you could kill anything but ants, and I can't imagine you to hurt Misa just as I couldn't imagine you to be Kakyuu's murderer." For lack of a repartee, I'm offering him a tacit truce although I'd rather strangle him and shoot him at once. But instead of saying something charming to salvage the situation as I've hoped, he only tugs at the jacket I'm wearing, pulls out his packet of cigarettes in full knowledge of how much I hate the smoke, and studies me with his mysteriously dark eyes, which are now almost navy or indigo in the shadow of the swarm of seabirds gliding by.
"A good detective shouldn't let her feelings interfere with her work. And it's better for both of us if you don't have such a high opinion of me."

With a knowing smirk (and without aiming), he throws the packet of cigarettes into the trash bin next to the bench near ours, scaring away a small rat, which has been devouring a piece of bread under a cherry tree. And I'm once again overcome by the urge to kiss him after wishing him to die a violent death, which must be the reason why it takes me a few seconds to grasp the implication of what he has just told me.

In a flash of brilliance—in one of these lucid moments which have become rare since yesterday's sunset—Kudo's words that Seiya had been drumming away his sorrows like a maniac a whole week before Kakyuu's death echo in my head while the image of the potted cyclamen, the symbol of farewell and death, emerges before my inner eye. Clues which I would never have dismissed if I hadn't been so thoroughly infatuated with Seiya and so busy inserting myself into Misa, the hopeless dreamer who was (and still is) obsessively in love with Taiki-san, to listen to Kudo, who is almost always right! Something is wrong about the case, just as Kudo said, but the truth was different from the one I believed to have seen.

"Did you really pull the plug to her life support system?" I ask, turning revoltingly straightforward in my eagerness to unravel the mystery. "If you really did it, why didn't you tell Kudo the truth although he didn't even ask you to turn yourself in?" I sit down on the bench again and lean towards him, waiting for his explanation with barely controlled impatience. While I couldn't care less about the moral aspect of the deed, I flatly refuse to believe that my amiable, good-humoured would-have-been boyfriend could have done it.

Seiya regards me with a distant, resigned gaze, and I wince at the realization that to him, Kudo and I are hyenas or, even less flatteringly, blowflies feeding on his pain. Within a day, I've done at least three unforgivable things in his eyes: I've alienated him from his brothers, left him after promising him lifelong companionship, and poked my nosy finger into a miserable, traumatic episode of his life, whose memory he doesn't want to refresh, while trying to prevent him from embarking on a promising world-class acting career.

"I'm going to tell you if you want," he pleasantly offers, "but you'll have to promise me that you will never, ever, reveal it to Kudo!" He leans in to kiss my cheek, a gesture which cuts me to the quick. "Even if you two ever end up in a boring traditional marriage and you begin to wish that we two were having an affair behind his back or you had married me instead, you're not allowed to spill the beans."

This time, the broad hint that he is just not that into me anymore has become an elephant that can't be ignored. And we are sitting together in this wreckage of a love we both still enjoy too much to give up but can't save from all the wedges which have been driven between us when the evening light is fading from the sky. We don't have much time for a lengthy confession and a discussion of the case since he has to get ready for his flight, he admits at last. His super-competent flower-loving brother is negotiating the payment for his future roles—offers he will probably have to accept since he needs a well-paying job if he doesn't want to go broke by the end of this year.

"After the Organization went down, so many people were on the run, totally ruined, or out of work... I couldn't watch so many friends of my family commit suicide over a utopia my parents have created."

Sunsets are never the same and yet always alike—just like love, which is always the same ever-changing shape shifter. It has induced even the most intelligent and most sensible people to make the greatest sacrifices and commit the most treacherous acts, disregarding morality, tradition, and
society's rules. But even in its strongest manifestation, there are problems which love alone can't solve.

"Well, you can't live on air and love only, I suppose," I lightly remark, holding on to the key to his apartment while in my other hand, the scrap of paper Taiki-san has given me feels like a block of stone. There is absolutely no logical reason why Seiya should give up this opportunity for a fickle stranger who has ditched him after a few hours. And perhaps I should feel flattered that he is struggling hard to stay sensible and focus on work instead of throwing away everything he has built up in life for a woman he doesn't know.

We are all obsessed with love while we are in love—I try to convince myself before I break down and confess the reasons why I've dumped him so callously after one night—but how many couples are lucky enough to experience a happy ending? This all-consuming passion doesn't only influence but also controls our lives like a cruel, petty tyrant, steering it towards bliss or destruction while we blindly abandon ourselves to an arbitrary chemical reaction. After waking up from another love-induced stupor, former lovers often wonder whether Amor had only shot them out of spite. And yet I wish I could drag Seiya to another place and another time or simply turn back time to this morning, when he wanted this relationship as much as I did. Now that it's more or less over for him and reality is suffocating me like a plastic bag I can't get off my head, I've almost forgotten all the sensible reasons why I've voluntarily ended it.

g.
Part 24: The morning sun...

The morning sun has climbed high above the tree tops of the ginkgo trees in Ichinohashi Park, but the sky is still glowing in a soft, dusky purple hue. Perching on the sofa at the window like Hakuba's peregrine falcon on a high cliff, you silently watch the three Kou brothers as they're doing housework. Taiki-san, whom you've secretly dubbed "Stick" although "Mr Stringy" would have matched him more, is cooped up in the small kitchen among five waist-high vases of roses, preparing ramen for the gyoza with the chilling, detached efficiency of the original Victorian Sherlock Holmes. Seiya, whose speed seems to dwarf Tenoh-san's, has already collected the shards and washed the bloodstained mop and is now scrubbing the floor for the second time while Yaten-san is lounging languidly on the white bench like a mermaid stranded on the beach. Evidently, the oldest Kou brother is not only the most difficult but also the laziest of the three.

All the three brothers are still visibly agitated about their agent's presumptuous attempt to talk them into making their comeback in December instead of July. And you briefly wonder why they're so disproportionately worked up about Shizuka-san's decision before it dawns on you that seven months are a rather long timespan for a musician. Three Lights must be angry about having to slave themselves to death until Christmas (instead of July next year?) to make the extremely tight deadline their inconsiderate agent has set.

The most important (and the only relevant) information which you've extracted from the whole exchange was that your new boyfriend looks irresistible even when he is up in arms and that he respects your relationship enough to talk with you before making a decision which would have a significant impact on his future. Given the circumstances, you wouldn't even have minded if Seiya had decided to return to the stage and the wide screen without consulting you in advance. He and you have just started going out together while the debate over Three Light's comeback has been going on for what must feel like aeons to a long-suffering fan. Even though Seiya and you are now in the obsessive stage of love in which locking yourselves up in his apartment and leaving the bedroom only to fight starvation and dehydration once or twice a day sounds like the ultimate way of life, you're sensible enough to know that one can't shut out the world forever.

Be that as it may, shutting out the world must be a breeze with a man who, to all appearances, has thoroughly mastered the lost art of enjoying a great life while staying a great person. Your stranger may not be the perfectly normal nice man your mind has conjured up when you tried to imagine your ideal husband—but as a boyfriend, he has surpassed all your expectations and amazed you more than once by granting your wishes even before you yourself knew them. Of course he must have hidden vices and annoying quirks just like anyone else—dropping damp clothes into the laundry basket or forgetting to switch off the light in the bathroom after leaving it, for instance, can become a motive for murder in the long run. In many aspects, Seiya also reminds you of Tenoh-san with his abnormal speed and his cavalier attitude to social norms while you have none of Kaioh-san's limitless patience and tolerance. But having to cope with love's inevitable challenges is nothing compared to what you had to go through with Gin—the hell when two people with radically different principles, code of ethics, and moral values were suddenly faced with the reality that attraction and romance could only last for so long whereas the Herculean task of negotiating who was going to do the laundry and who was going to do the washing up would never end.

On Pandora's Box (the ship), after pocketing the remote control for Pandora's Box (the laptop), you calmly stepped back and aimed the Browning in your hand at your enemy's head, ready to fire the two bullets which had missed their target again. Pushed beyond endurance, you couldn't care less
about the consequences as long as you didn't endanger your allies for your revenge. You could take care of the activated Pandora's Box later, having over two hours left before the countdown ended. Hattori and Kudo might suspect you of cracking up and shooting your "ex-husband" in your fury, but they wouldn't ever go as far as searching you for incriminating evidence.

To your annoyance, your recalcitrant husband chose the same moment to swallow the poison and instantly relaxed, giving you a lovely smile you had seldom seen on his face while you were together. Intrigued, you squatted down beside him and shuddered when he grabbed your hand, running his bony fingers along your knuckles and wrist with the searching, ghostly touch of a dying man. You had been prepared for a gory spectacle of bullet-ridden limbs and wounds gushing blood but definitely not for the disquieting side effects of your painless, undetectable drug, which hadn't only relaxed Gin's muscles and smoothed out the lines between his brows but also wiped out his hatred and resentment before it sedated him. Without his usual smirks and scowls, he looked peaceful, almost kind. Watching him fade away, it was impossible not to be reminded of better times—when he was still the epitome of beauty in your eyes. And you discovered in horror that you could still hear his husky, reassuring voice at your ear and smell the fragrance of kinmokusei in his hair as he gave you the key for Pandora's Box and told you to forget about the incident with the red-haired girl.

The first night together, despite the pain and the sense of loss, was far more pleasant than the last night, when boredom and irritation accompanied you into your sleep even though he had made an effort to be gentle. But there had been many other enjoyable days and nights in between, which your mind had chosen to blot out after Akemi-nee-san's death—endless hours of laughter and delight when Gin and Sherry were roaming the streets of Osaka and Kyoto or strolling along salty beaches together. You had buried his legs in the sun-warmed sand and covered his hair with layers of fresh snow until he snapped, massaged his stiff neck and shoulders on the hotel bed while he told you particularly mean and embarrassing anecdotes about the Organization's highest members, and made love to him on the damp grass and on the dew-covered moss in various forests without caring about your best dresses and your health, all of which were ruined by the sharp twigs and pebbles and the ubiquitous dirt and the cold air. Looking back, you couldn't even tell when all those things ceased to matter in the equation and only assumed the importance of water drops in the desert—too little to revive illusions and hope and just enough to make the thirst feel unbearable.

Seconds later, when Kudo returned to the scene, he was greeted by the sight of you holding Gin's hand and checking Gin's pulse with streams of tears running down your cheeks, looking the very image of the tragic, grieving lover. In view of this heartbreaking sight, it was no wonder that not the slightest doubt of your innocence would enter his mind. Since Hattori and Kudo had to fish you out of the sea after you were washed aboard and the ship exploded at the scheduled time before they could return to secure Gin's corpse, they carefully omitted the presence of "the second crow" from all their reports. To the few people they trusted whose minds were too sharp to be fooled like Hakuba and Akai, you had only shot Gin in self-defense and suffered a mental breakdown after he died.

On recovering from your pneumonia, you were excused from all formalities and interrogations and covered from all sides by a well-meaning, protective veil of white lies. Thanks to Meioh-san's Night Baron copy, which Tenoh-san had sent to Gin's mail addresses and which had erased all the data on his phones and laptops soon after it was opened, no trace of your trap remained. From time to time, you wonder what Kudo would have thought if he had found your message and what went through Gin's mind when he took the bait and opened the door to the log cabin. It's impossible for you to ask either man, as your "ex-husband" is dead and you can't tell your detective the truth, but you can always imagine…
We both know that you can never kill me—but I can give you the formula to the Silver Bullet. In return for the ideal drug, which reverts all victims to the size and the mental age of a toddler without endangering their lives, I want you to erase my files in Pandora’s Box and return to me my savings from the time I worked for the Organization.

I'm going to bring you an inferior version of my drug, which I'm going to alter for you after making sure that you're not trying to trap me. As you can tell, I've met someone I like and grown tired of this nomadic lifestyle. If Anokata and the seven crows agree to grant me freedom and amnesty, I'm going to support the Organization for a last time before leaving "the family".

Let's put aside old grudges and meet up for a last reunion before we go our separate ways. I'm going to tell you the time and the place in three days—after you've had enough time to ponder my proposal.

Poor naive little Sherry, who had become extremely foolish and careless after falling in love! But she had always been so hardworking and (at least academically) so brilliant despite her inability to deal with reality and the pragmatic aspects of life that Gin couldn't dismiss the possibility that she successfully completed the Silver Bullet for the Organization. If truth be told, he was looking forward to seeing her face again, which had become blurred in his memory during her absence. He must admit he was curious about her new man as well—the impetuous crook who had dared to shoot the tranquilizer needle at Gin on the rooftop of Haido City Hotel and who had helped her flee from Gin every time they met. From the look of things, the wanton woman was still infatuated with the guy after three years on the run, overlooking the obvious truth that it was only the thrill and the danger which had lengthened the dizzying first stage of love in which a couple would ignore all the red flags, shut their eyes to each other's vices, and move mountains to bridge their differences. Should he give them both a slow, painful death after taking the Silver Bullet from her, or should he let them go in peace to figure out by themselves that romance, however true and intense, would never last?

For in love, there was never a happy end. One day, she would suddenly push the mop towards him and declare that she couldn't take it anymore, that their life together was a never-ending torture, which she could no longer endure, and that he had to change radically if he didn't want her to leave whereas just the day before, she had treated his wounds and cooked for him and scrubbed their apartment without complaint, danced with him for hours in his favourite jazz club until her heels broke, shared a bath and a bottle of wine with him and even watched the samurai movie he liked so much, and let him push her down onto their heated parquet floor and make love to her for almost an hour until they fell asleep and she had to wake him up at dawn to drag him into bed with her. The following morning, when he woke up with a migraine, in a terrible mood because he had to meet up with this nutcase of a professor and then execute a traitor in a train, she had already cleaned the bathroom and prepared them breakfast. After she made the bed and aired out the apartment and did the dishes and got dressed while he was watching her from the armchair with silent approval, he drove her to her lab and kissed her passionately, lovingly, in the car before they parted. Who would have thought that it was the beginning of the end when she turned round for the last time to run her fingers through his long hair and tell him to stay safe? Take care of yourself for me—I love you so much, she had said.
Part 24: Done...

Done...

"Done!" Seiya declares in satisfaction after putting away the cleaned mop and the water bucket. His anger at the date his agent has set for Two Lights' (and his own?) comeback has faded, but you can still see traces of melancholy in his faraway eyes, which don't meet your gaze.

"Why don't you have breakfast with us first and iron my dress later?" you suggest when he carries the ironing board he has taken from the corridor closet into the bedroom. "I'm already so late that a few minutes more or less don't count."

He briefly considers the idea and then beams, transforming back into the carefree stranger of yesterday evening. "All right," he agrees, "maybe I shouldn't tackle your frilly dress on an empty stomach!" After closing the door to the bedroom, he pulls Yaten-san up from the bench. "I feel bad for your detective, though. Let's hope he is so exhausted that he is still fast asleep when you return."

Stranger-san belongs to the enviable people whose dark moods are like summer rain clouds, which disperse as fast as they've appeared and leave behind a flawless blue sky. His brothers, on the other hand, are apparently the nervous type. No sooner did they hear Seiya's passing reference to Kudo than both of them start and exchange brief, horrified glances.

"So you are the woman Seiya met in Ueno-koen!" Taiki-san, who has just stepped out of the kitchen with four bamboo place mats, comments. Although he is only older than Seiya by a few months, he looks years older due to his careworn expression. "I suspected it because he usually doesn't tell us about the strangers he has met." Casting his two brothers in the corridor a meaningful glance, he dryly adds, "But from the things he said about you, I got the impression that you were in love with Kudo Shinichi-san."

"Oh, she is," Seiya declares, shocking you with his raw honesty. "But it didn't prevent me from asking her out on a date—" he gives you a wink, "—which went far better than expected."

"Kudo and I are only friends," you quickly proclaim after punishing stranger-san with a menacing glance. "We've been friends for years, though, which is why he doesn't mind crashing at my place."

"She is lying!" Seiya tells Taiki-san with a straight face. "You can check it by hacking into her phone since she has used his birthday as her lockscreen password."

"You've touched my phone when I wasn't looking?" you snap, too indignant at the mental image to grasp his intention.

"Ah, so my guess is right?" Your unmanageable boyfriend flashes you a self-satisfied smirk, which reminds you oddly of Kudo's whenever Kudo has deciphered a clue.

"Kudo Shinichi!" Yaten-san, who wasn't in the least amused by your blunder, echoes as he continues to eye you with dread. Is he so terrified of Kudo because he was the seventh crow? Or is he only apprehensive of the detective who has investigated Kakyuu's death and suspected his youngest brother? Taiki-san, too, still looks deeply worried although he stays remarkably composed. Seiya is the only man who appears totally unfazed by your connection to Kudo...
Which is odd, if Seiya was the person who pulled the plug—and it would be even more peculiar if he was the seventh crow. All evidence seems to suggest that he was neither the culprit nor the man on the bike. But since his carefree attitude might be just an innate character trait or a special talent and not proof of his innocence, you decide not to count him out during the investigation…

For the whole situation has turned since you learned that Kakyuu was the redhead girl. Although you were neither interested in Kudo's case nor in the identity of the blue-clad biker before learning who Kakyuu was, finding out the truth about Seiya has assumed crucial importance. After one serious relationship which has failed so spectacularly, you've learned that in a long-time, requited love, the real enemies aren't beautiful rivals and nasty family members but one's own shortcomings, bad habits, and ignorance. Gin and you had fought each other instead of supporting each other after the first flush of infatuation wore off—Seiya and you, however, are going to team up to live happily ever after.

g.

"What a shame! Your lyrics for our next album would be great if she and you had never met."
Yaten-san gazes into the distance with melodramatic despondency, tucks his arm into Seiya's, and lets his youngest brother escort him into the living room like a wounded comrade or a sickly wife. Feeling your jealous gaze on him, he turns his angelic face towards you to flash you a challenging smirk. The Talented Mr. Shortie will be a force to deal with!

"Now that Seiya is in a happy relationship, he is going to write horrible poetry," agrees Taiki-san, who has just made a new pot of coffee.

"Bawdy poetry?" you inquire, whereupon your boyfriend finally meets your gaze and smiles.

"That would be good!" he quips.

"Just obscure ramblings or sappy lines—tooth-rottingly sweet stuff no one over fourteen is interested in," Taiki-san elaborates as Seiya helps Yaten-san sink down on the sofa next to you. Over the years, they've learned to cope with Seiya's ups and downs, Seiya's perfect flower-loving brother explains. Whenever Seiya is suffering from unrequited love, his lyrics are hard to beat. Whenever Seiya believes his feelings to be requited, however, Taiki-san—who is usually too immersed in his monographs to care about song lyrics—has to take over their lyrics so that they won't embarrass themselves in public with the mawkish poems Seiya shamelessly presents to them.

"Love is only good as long as it's unrequited! When it's requited, it makes people pull life sentences to pander to each other's every whim," Yaten-san coolly observes as he beholds the vast sky, where the morning sun has begun to colour the dusky violet clouds gold and red. When he runs his fingers through his long silver hair and tilts his head to study you with narrowed eyes, whose pale colour under ambient lighting has shifted to a bright emerald green in the morning light, he almost resembles young Gin in his best times. Giving in to his compulsion to rhyme, he darkly adds, "Unhappy lovers can distract themselves with work until the feelings are gone while people who are happily in love seldom get anything done!"

The words which might as well have come from your mouth only a few hours ago sound foreign and nonsensical from another person's lips. Contemplating Seiya's pretty foster brother with a healthy dose of detached pity, you wonder how a person who has been endowed with so many talents, such good looks, two supportive foster brothers, and such wealth and fame and popularity has become so caustic and bitter at such a young age. Was it the life on the streets after they ran away from home? Was it Kakyuu's death, or a secret unrequited love, or—if he was the seventh crow—his role in the downfall of the Organization?
"You've mixed up the fan letters you brought me last time." Ignoring his oldest brother's gloomy musings, Seiya hands his diplomatic middle brother the love letter you've left on the table. "Look, 'Misa' professes her love for you through Shakespeare sonnets!"

"Misa... That Misa?" Yaten-san, who has leapt from the sofa at unanticipated speed, peers over Taiki-san's shoulder at the antique-pink card, which Taiki-san is holding between his index finger and thumb as though it were a potentially poisonous flower. "How many letters has she already sent you since you gave her that private performance?"

"Hundreds... over two thousand," Taiki-san calmly replies. His voice, usually sonorous and dramatic, drops until it becomes eerily quiet. Although he has gently let down the girl and rejected her advances more than once, she keeps writing him once or even twice a day.

Compassion, anxiety, and guilt flit in turns across his face while he is studying the card—and it dawns on you that he must have replied to her letters at first without expecting her crush on him to escalate, which surprises you. All the three brothers seem to share a certain naïveté when it comes to women just like the penchant for pranks and the musical talent, which makes you wonder whether their overprotective parents had allowed them to play with any girl apart from their own foster sister.

"So she is really Misa-chan, the little girl who was so sick she couldn't watch our concerts?" With unconcealed sibling pride, Seiya informs you that Odango had asked Taiki to visit "Misa-chan" in hospital because the dying girl's last wish was to see her favourite idol live, whereupon Taiki skipped a rehearsal to sing the girl on the deathbed the song they had dedicated to Kakyuu. Since Taiki didn't want to set a precedent, however, no one but Odango, Seiya, and Yaten would have learned about it if Odango hadn't blurted it out to all her friends on the following day...

"But it seems Misa-chan's sickness wasn't as serious as she claimed since she obviously didn't die afterwards," Yaten-san viciously remarks. "Instead, she recovered and turned 'Pestering Taiki-sama' into her new life goal! And here I thought girls only take advantage of Seiya because he always has too much sympathy for strangers." Pleased with himself for the jibe, he flips his well-groomed silver ponytail and shoots you a malicious grin showing off his pearly white fangs, which only makes him look like an aggressive, jealous little kitten.

"No, she was really sick," Taiki-san uneasily protests. "She didn't feign it at all!"

"Ah, just accept her already so that she finally stops spamming!" Shortie rolls his beautiful opal-green eyes. "The silly girls! I trash all their letters in front of them and they'll tell me I'm adorable, just imagine!"

"Ishihara-kun is a really nice and extremely smart girl," the reluctant recipient of Misa's love letter asserts. "I can't understand how she has become so obsessed with me that she behaves like a fanatic groupie."

No sooner has he heard her name than Seiya, who has just placed the few fan letters and presents he wants to keep into a wooden chest near the fireplace, whirls around to gaze at his middle brother. His blue eyes have taken on the expression of a sheep-herding Border Collie or rather a white tiger who has discovered a prey in the dark. "Ishihara Misako?" he asks.

"You mean 'Misa-chan' is Ishihara-kun, who worked at Mizuno-san's hospital?" Yaten-san, too, is staring at Taiki-san in surprise. "Why didn't you say anything back then?"
It was an embarrassing situation, Taiki-san asserts. He didn't tell them anything since he wanted them to keep their neutral behaviour towards the girl.

"Both of my brothers—" Yaten-san dramatically throws his palms into the air as if he were surrendering to the injustices of life, "—are too kind! As you can see, neither of them can keep these terrorists of fans at arm's length or fight them."

You were going to respond that he couldn't be as successful as he thought either if the women kept sending him yellow roses and love letters and found his insults endearing, but something you just spotted in Seiya's eyes intrigues you so much that you completely lose interest to bicker with Shortie about his fans. Your new boyfriend seems to have made a discovery which amuses and troubles him at once, and since his discovery must be linked to Ishihara Misako, who once worked at Mizuno-san's hospital, you deduce that it must have something to do with Kudo's old case. Perhaps Seiya feels elated at the thought that he has finally solved a mystery which Kudo couldn't solve and discovered a detail which could prove that Three Lights are innocent even though he is distressed to learn that he has unintentionally shielded Kakyuu's murderer.

g.

"I'm sure Seiya will be a terrible boyfriend. Don't ever complain that I haven't warned you! He is the type that will cheat or bail after the first two weeks: curious, reckless, always craving excitement and novelty…"
anything he says seriously!” Ignoring the death glares from the armchair, he places the ramen on
the table and plants a kiss on the top of your head.

"'Nice' is definitely not in Yaten's vocabulary," Taiki Kou, who is carrying the remaining two
bowls of ramen, agrees. "But—" Stick fixes his bright violet gaze meaningfully on Seiya's face
before delivering the blow, "—at least he is not a congenital liar!"

After bickering with each other about whether Seiya is always lying or not (stranger-san is
convinced that he seldom, almost never, lies—certainly not more than the average person—while
his two brothers assert that he always does, as he has a special way of evading the truth), the three
of them finally put their differences aside to have breakfast with you. To your great amusement,
you notice that they differ from each other even in their treatment of food. Taiki Kou eats slowly
and deliberately, in absolute silence, chewing every bite as long as possible. Yaten Kou eyes each
piece of gyoza cautiously before biting into it with pursed lips, evoking the image of a child that
has just decided to try out a dish it has always hated. Seiya magically turns the simple act of eating
into a cinematic masterpiece, looking ravishing as he is enjoying his meal. Floating on the high
clouds of all-consuming infatuation, you briefly consider filming him to keep a miniature version
of him in your phone.

"All jokes aside!" After getting bored watching Seiya and Taiki-san clear the table and serve coffee
and tea, Yaten Kou sighs and checks his side-swept bangs in a pocket mirror. The sides of his
smooth, straight hair are cut like a chin-length bob while his long ponytail at the nape of his neck
is held by a satin band similar to Seiya's, and you secretly wonder whether Shortie would resemble
Gin more if he wore his hair down. "I'm only warning you because I'm the opinion that you should
enter a relationship with your eyes open!" He reluctantly turns his attention away from his own
reflection to gaze directly into your eyes. "Since my little brother seems to have shown you all of
his good traits last night, I'm going to inform you about his bad ones now."

"I don't have any," your stranger-san confidently claims, "unless you count the drums whenever
I'm frustrated…"

"And the bad poetry…" you smirk, squeezing his hand under the table.

"And the travels, and the fights, and the pranks, and the attraction to dangerous sports," Taiki-san,
who has just brought the tea from the kitchen, adds.

"Fights?" you raise a brow at Seiya without letting go of him. He is so amiable and so relaxed that
it's impossible for you to picture him in a fight.

"I've never started a fight," he says ambiguously, much to your surprise, as you've expected him to
deny his brother's allegation.

"And never lost one," Taiki Kou dryly says, "if one doesn't count your little skirmishes with
Haruka-san."

"I didn't lose," Seiya frowns. "It was a draw!"

Irritated by the interruption, Yaten-san sighs again, takes a deep breath, and languidly runs his
delicate, perfectly manicured fingers through his silky hair. "Whenever Seiya has too much free
time, something in him snaps, and he sings and dances all night or goes on a pub crawl—preferably
in disguise!"
"That was seven or eight years ago!" Seiya protests. "I haven't gone on any pub crawl for years!"

"Whenever he is on tour or immersed in a role, he is a workaholic of the worst type—sings songs in his sleep and lives in his head for weeks without letting anyone in."

"Do I really sing in my sleep?" Seiya looks pleasantly surprised, almost intrigued.

Taiki-san chuckles and rises from the chair again.

"Sometimes!" He gives Seiya an affectionate pat on his arm and disappears into the kitchen.

"Yes, you do, creep!" Shortie elegantly raises his cup to his lips and daintily takes a sip of his tea.

"I think I can live with that," you muse.

"We also often have serious trouble with Seiya's unhinged groupies," adds Taiki Kou from the kitchen. "He doesn't know how to discourage them because he is a natural flirt, and—"

"That's a downright lie!" Seiya protests. Turning to you, he emphatically adds, "Until I met you, I've never, ever, even considered giving a woman I just met my phone number."

"Can't you shut up and let him finish his sentence?" Yaten Kou shoots his youngest brother a withering look.

"Clean up your own backyard!" Seiya kicks at Yaten-san's leg under the table, places a quick kiss on your temple, and joins Taiki-san in the kitchen to do the washing up.

In a pitiful attempt to provoke your jealousy, Yaten-san proceeds to inform you about Odango's best friends, who may have had or still have a certain weakness for his youngest brother. Amused, you listen to him in smug contentment, secure in the knowledge that none of them pose the slightest danger. You can even commiserate with Yaten-san, as giddy people in love have always irritated you to no end. There is something inherently frustrating about the sight of passion if you aren't in the throes of it. It must be the envy of a sensible human being who knows that great pleasure usually comes at the cost of rational thinking.

"I don't believe Seiya can be faithful—with the love scenes in all the movies he will be in, especially not when he gets carried away by his roles, which happens all the time because he isn't mentally stable. Once he returns to the stage, swarms of girls will throw themselves at his feet again, and you'll be surrounded by rivals and haters whenever you go out. They're going dissect you until there is nothing left, and you don't look like the type that enjoys living in a goldfish bowl."

Shortie pauses to see whether his words have had any visible effects on you and—noticing that you don't seem in the least perturbed—adds triumphantly, "Also, he has been obsessing over a married woman for years. He is still going out with her whenever possible."

"He has been talking about her all night," you murmur as you pull your features into the most vulnerable expression you can muster. "But he told me they've already ended it—and he has promised to take me to Paris or Venice after our wedding."

"He told you he was going to marry you?" Yaten-san blanches. Although he is making an effort to remain skeptical, the horror in his eyes prove that your natural acting skills, sharpened during your phase as Haibara Ai, have not become rusty in the past three years.

Seiya, who has stuck his head out of the kitchen, readily blushes, looking the paragon of innocence
as if you two had really planned to marry. "We're going to do all the cute cliché couple things," he takes it up a notch. "Moonlight and music and stargazing!"

"God, that's horrible," Taiki-san murmurs.

"I'm feeling sick," Yaten-san agrees. "You two alone in Paris or Venice…" He huffs condescendingly. "Without Taiki around to take care of your finances, you'll be broke by the end of the month."

"That's what agents, secretaries, and housekeepers are for. They're paid for dealing with the bureaucracy so that I can enjoy my life!"

"They'll empty your apartment and your bank account and get you into jail for tax evasion the first time they get a chance! You're so trusting that they must be a saint not to steal from you."

"I'm going to deal with the practical aspects of living, then," you suggest. "We're going to Paris for our honeymoon, then move to Venice, where we renovate an ancient palazzo together and buy a boat. Afterwards, when we're broke, we can still return to you and take over your club so that you can focus on your career."

"You've heard what she said," stranger-san gravely says. "I've always had a weak spot for girls who know exactly what they want."

"Can't believe I fell for this!" Yaten-san runs his fingers through his bangs in annoyance while Taiki-san, who is leaning against the kitchen door, grins at you for the very first time.

"I must admit I like the idea of going to Venice," Seiya contemplates. "It's certainly not the most sensible thing to do, but it sounds great! We'll do it immediately if you want to."

"I'm afraid that's true," Yaten-san sighs. "This," he waves his hand in a gesture which encompasses the whole fantasy of an impromptu elopement to Venice, "is so much like you."

Although they aren't blood-related, it's obvious that they're a real family—the thing you craved as much as a shipwrecked person craves water when you were in the orphanage. Akemi-nee-san and you only had a few hours for each other once a month, but those few hours had been enough to give you the sense of security which you could only have when you felt fully accepted despite all the sharp edges of your character. You had Akemi-nee-san, the Professor, and the Detective Boys, but the Organization was the closest thing to family most codename members who had been adopted by Anokata ever had, you realize, dwelling over the peculiar thought that—assassination missions aside—to Anokata, who was Gin's surrogate father, Gin might just have been a normal child.
Through the tinted glass

Through the tinted glass of the large window, which Taiki-san has closed after airing out the apartment, the outside world looks like a monochromatic study in blue. Recalling Kudo's assertion that one can learn a lot about a person by studying their apartment, you let your eyes roam the living room to search for clues. In front of the quaint open fireplace and the heavy wooden chest where Seiya keeps his fan letters and presents, new piles of fan post, which Two Lights must have brought, are propped up against two full trash bags where the discarded love declarations of complete strangers mingle with lingenries, homemade chocolate boxes, and plush animals. Shizuka-san, whom Seiya is going to send the bags for safe disposal, could make a living selling the unwanted flowers and presents if she wanted to.

An escritoire and two high book shelves occupy the entire wall and the corner next to the fireplace. There are two fountain pens, two bottles of ink, and a pile of pocket-sized notebooks on the escritoire, which surprises you, as you would have expected Seiya to write with a ball-point pen. A few pencil stubs, mechanical pencils, erasers, and stacks of colourful post-its are neatly stored in a very decorative open cardboard piano with silver keys, which also functions as a sort of paperweight. The high book shelves are packed with paperbacks, pocket-sized screenplays, and sheet music. At eye level, an antique teapot adorns a series of study scores, its copper hue contrasting with the indigo scores of Schubert's "Unfinished" and Mozart's "Requiem".

"It's not a teapot, it's an incense burner," Yaten-san sardonically remarks, gloating over his victory like a petty little child when he deduces from your exasperated expression that his guess was right.

"It does look like a teapot," you insist.

"Everyone mistakes it for a teapot the first time they see it," Shortie admits with an air of reluctant generosity. Although you can't claim that he has grown fond of you, he seems to make an effort to accept the reality that he is going to see you with his youngest brother from on. When he shows his pleasant side (and you suspect that right now he is as nice as he can be towards a complete stranger), Yaten-san bears a slight resemblance to Seiya as well as to the flower-loving middle brother. It isn't only the opalescent eyes or the curve of the lips—a peaked, clearly defined Cupid's Bow—or the similar shape of the head and the nose, which convince you that they must be related in some way just like Seiya believes. All the three brothers (even the staggeringly tall Stick) have the same effortless grace and poise and articulated musculature, reminding you more of ballet dancers than athletes or fighters—and none of them has the aura of a Black Organization member.

So who of them was the seventh crow? Yaten-san, who would fit Gin's description of "the stereotypical bad boy," is the most likely candidate, as he is about the same height as the blue-clad biker and the only Kou brother who seems rude enough to honk at Kakyuu in front of a café. But Seiya resembles the biker more with his quick, precise movements and gestures while Yaten-san is so luxuriously languid, not to say apathetic, that you can't picture him as the man who, according to Kakyuu, always behaved as if he were chased by someone.

On the other hand, you can't imagine Seiya to honk at Kakyuu when it would have been more in character for him to park the bike in the vicinity and join Kakyuu and you at the table. Now that you visualize the situation, you can even see him ordering a can of coffee and a whole chocolate cake before asking you whether you were the girl in the white lab coat, whose phone number had been forced on him by her own sister after the Christmas concert. People change with time,
however, and even the height can change drastically after eight years. That summer, Seiya was only sixteen or seventeen, and sixteen-year-old boys can still grow by leaps and bounds unlike most girls of the same age.

"How tall were you when you started your idol careers?" you ask Yaten-san in the silliest, nosiest manner you can muster. At the same time, you try a harmless, sweet smile, which turns real as you succeed to imagine Shortie as a little kitten or—even better—a white poodle with a teddy bear cut.

"All the three of us were much shorter back then," Yaten-san replies after shooting you another mistrustful, cautious glance. "But our heights in relation to each other has always been the same. Taiki has always been the tallest ever since we were toddlers; Seiya's body always knew how to reach the exact height which our tyrannical society believes to be perfect and desirable; and I…" He heaves a weary sigh, which sounds honest for the first time.

"You've always been stingy with your energy, or conserved it for a better purpose," Seiya, who has just finished doing the dishes and seems eager to help, proposes. Both Yaten and he have grown a lot since their idol days, but especially Taiki shot up so unexpectedly that it was amazing how well he adapted to it without developing a stoop like most tall people. It was only inconvenient whenever Taiki walked with Yaten, who was as tiny as a petite girl until he turned twenty-one and grew a few inches. Perhaps Yaten was sick of being mistaken for a woman and asked by rude strangers why "she" had chosen such a tall boyfriend or worse, how they managed to overcome their dramatic height difference. What did they do when they kissed? Did Yaten have to stand on tiptoe and crane "her" neck while Taiki stooped, or did Taiki have to kneel down?

With that mental image, the Talented Mr. Shortie vanishes from your list of potential candidates for the elusive seventh crow. Even though he wasn't a giant, the man on the bike was at least as tall as Yaten-san is today—which leaves only Taiki-san or Seiya on your list. Calling to mind Seiya's remark that you have a much more dangerous taste than him, you reluctantly admit to yourself that he must have alluded to the fact that you were once in a relationship with the second crow and were now flirting with the former seventh crow after two failed romances with a magician and a famous detective. Does Seiya know that Kaito was Kid the Phantom Thief? He knew about Haibara Ai and APTX as well as Infinity and Tenoh-san's group before you two met. If he was the seventh crow, he must know about Pandora's Box as well.

A wave of tremendous, albeit absurd, relief sweeps over you as it dawns on you that Seiya wouldn't ever condemn you for eliminating Anokata and the seven crows when he himself has played a central part in Tenoh-san's vendetta. After all, it was the seventh crow, who had to distribute the pills to most of the respective victims, as Tenoh-san's allies couldn't possibly have approached the highest members of the Organization and survived long enough to poison all of them. Just like you, Seiya was a traitor and a murderer out of necessity; but unlike you, he hasn't let it break him or rob him of his zest for life. While this makes him a far more dangerous man than you thought him to be, it also makes him the perfect match for you, as outrageous as it sounds. If this were a dream, he would be Gin and Rye and Kaito combined, or a male, straight Tenoh Haruka, who is single and faithful and focused on you alone… Or a more artistic, more compassionate, and less self-righteous Kudo Shinichi, who knows how it was to belong to the Organization…

A night in Paris—the night after you gave Tenoh-san the box with the twenty-five pills—emerges before your eyes, and you can almost feel the agreeable languor of sleep creep up on you as Kudo entered the bedroom. Before he left for the bathroom, he and you had bickered about his odd jealousy whenever the sons of the agents motards paid you more attention than urbane politeness dictated. You desperately try to behave like the ideal husband, Kudo-kun (you had intentionally included the suffix you used for him at the beginning of your friendship in order to sound exactly
like Haibara Ai once sounded), but you always fail whenever you try too hard. Or is this how you
would behave if we were really together? To irritate him even more, you had ridiculed Ran's taste
in men and their tentative relationship, claiming that the poor wonder woman with her great
caracter, her cooking skills, her deadly karate, her large doe eyes, and her hourglass shape is
forever stuck in an unsatisfying relationship with a possessive, socially challenged, unmusical,
clumsy workaholic detective with a cowlick, who can't even distinguish the waltz from the tango!

If you find me so embarrassingly inadequate—Kudo remarked in a cutting voice as he got into bed
even though he must have noticed that you were about to drift off—you should at least tell me how
your ideal of a boyfriend is. Apparently, you have standards which no man in the world can ever
meet so that you will have to search for him in another world and resign yourself to a single life in
this one!

You yawned and cracked one eye open to behold him, taking in his smooth short hair and his
antenna-cowlick, which looked like a delicious piece of dark chocolate in the reddish light of the
lamp on the bedside table. For no logical reason, he was hurt by your harmless teasing and pouted
like a husband who had made the greatest effort to please his wife but only received sarcasm and
derision in return and who was now fed up with his troubled marriage. He was so immersed in his
role that it had begun to shape his real world, in which you should only be his good friend and ally
while Ran was the girlfriend he was going to marry. For a weak moment, you decided to let
yourself get carried away as well—to imagine an alternative reality, which could have been real if
a few things had been different…

I like being single—but I suppose it doesn't hurt to fantasize about the ideal lover once or twice.
Well, he should be easy-going and extremely confident—not the jealous type at all, you smirked at
your detective, whose frown was deepening. He would have to be intelligent and charming, of
course… or why not ingeniously talented and absolutely fascinating? Dreams are supposed to be
great, not mediocre! It would also be lovely if he could sing and dance and cook, although I'd
accept him if he didn't satisfy all of the requirements but worshipped the ground I walked on. I'm
not going to compromise when it comes to his character, though. I want him to be independent but
also caring, smart but also loyal, proud but not really vain—someone who can be both gentle and
fierce, who will protect me or at least try to protect me whenever I need him but who also lets me
breathe…

You had spoken in a sing-song voice which clearly conveyed that you weren't serious, but a part of
you had been conjuring up a more attractive version of Kudo, who was yours alone. If Kudo had
been born into the Organization, received a different education, and fallen in love with you first, he
wouldn't ever look at Ran because he was loyal and you would be all he needed!

Sounds just like me, Kudo mused, looking satisfied and positively puffed up as his frustration was
 evaporating. I can't cook and I can be a bit possessive when I feel threatened, and I can't dance or
sing—but you said you would accept a few shortcomings and idiosyncrasies if he worshipped… he
trailed off when he realized that he was stepping on dangerous ground and that someone else was
waiting for him at home.

But I'm not done yet, you added as you turned away from him, towards the window where the
shadow of the honey locust loomed. He wouldn't have any female childhood friends or past or
present lovers who are so conventionally lovely that I can't compete! In fact, I would like it if his
love life was just as pathetic as mine before we encounter each other. He might even have siblings
or know how losing a family member feels like. He wouldn't ever let anyone or anything prevent
him from being with me because he will be perfectly, hilariously, unimpressed by social norms,
and having my love would always suffice because society always strangles love and this is
supposed to be an ideal world, after all—
Listen, Kudo interjected, and you could sense the anxiety and uncertainty in his voice as he was struggling with himself. Haibara...

The sound of the familiar name cut you to the quick, and you realized in detachment that you couldn't imagine Kudo to be "Shinichi" either.

He would know how failing the people who trusted him feels like, perhaps because he, too, was seen as a traitor by the people who once raised him and loved him. You know, if you had grown up in the Organization and were single and better-looking and nicer and more sensitive and artistically talented, you'd have had an outside chance if I was lonely and bored and had enough time on my hands for a fairytale love-at-first-sight romance.

You could tell from the look on Kudo's face that you had successfully ruined the mood, and yet you couldn't stop at this stage, when the walls you had to build were still incomplete and fragile. The chemistry between us might be lacking, though. And in the long run, the spark goes out and even the greatest love dies, you soberly remarked, like flowers and trees and anything else which lives, you know... That's the danger all infatuated people face when they dare to take the plunge. Watching him turn away in angry silence, you pulled the duvet over your chest and concluded before you closed your eyes, But love will always remain a dream if you don't act on it. A touch never lies, unlike ambiguous words.
Part 24: Love and hate are only...

Love and hate are only separated by a thin line. This old adage doesn't necessarily apply to everyone but definitely to Yaten, albeit in reverse to the typical scenario of lovers who despise each other after a failed relationship—Seiya informs you as he puts away the last clean chopsticks. Somehow Yaten has managed to insult all their friends when they first met, but the girls wore him down after five or six months at the latest.

"He has changed his attitude towards you a bit too soon, though, which is extremely worrisome." Seiya gives his oldest brother a suspicious glance. Alluding to Three Lights' past arrangement with Kakyuu, he adds with a wink, "Don't you dare to work your charm on her! I'm definitely not going to share this time!"

"I hope you don't mind taking this box of gyoza home. Kudo-san must be hungry when he wakes up," offers Taiki-san, who pointedly ignores his brothers' banter about whether monogamy is natural to humans or whether it's only a dated custom, whose hypocrisy has reached its peak in our time. "Your friend and Seiya clashed the last time they met because he accused Seiya of committing euthanasia without having a shred of evidence." Stick darts you a fleeting, shrewd glance to check whether Seiya has told you about his run-in with Kudo and—after satisfying himself that you must know parts of the story—continues in a gentle voice, which has an almost soporific effect, "I hope he has changed his opinion in the meantime and won't try to revive the case since Seiya has a rather quick temper and we don't need any drama before our comeback."

Despite his watchful, fiercely intelligent pale eyes, the smile he gives you now is as entrancing and bright as a ruffled water surface illuminated by the silver moonlight. And it strikes you that Yaten Kou must be the dog that barks but doesn't bite whereas Taiki Kou is the sort of canine friend that will strike the moment you believe yourself to be out of danger.

"Why are you toadying to the wannabe snoop?" Yaten-san, who has overheard the talk, snaps while Seiya studies his two brothers and you with a quizzical expression. "If I were you, I wouldn't let anyone who makes a living from sticking his nose into other people's private affairs taste my cooking!"

"You aren't Taiki—and no one who knows you wants to taste your cooking," Seiya points out with mild amusement, and the morning would probably have stayed pleasant if it weren't for Yaten-san's sudden deluge of complaints about detectives in general and Kudo Shinichi in particular. As if accusing Kudo of intruding into other people's domestic affairs weren't enough, Yaten Kou—whose cattiness dwarfs yours in your most moody moments—is intimidatingly eloquent and knows a plethora of derogatory terms, which he happily uses for his rant on Kudo's supposed incompetence.

Kudo has solved so many cases by now that no one can call him incompetent without sounding like an utter fool—you explode. He may have to invade other people's privacy to do his job, but he goes out of his way and risks his life to help the victims instead of worrying about his precious hair or how much sun and sleep he needs every day! A celebrity's life is, by comparison, rather hedonistic and empty, isn't it? Earning a fortune by supporting the insipid, sensational entertainment industry and exploiting shallow, characterless girls who squeal whenever they see a pretty face or a few cutesy gestures can hardly be considered more meaningful!

A deafening silence follows your self-righteous, moralizing speech as all the three brothers fix you
with a long, thoughtful gaze, and Seiya's face clouds over for a second before his eyes brighten and he chuckles and you wonder whether you've only imagined his reaction.

"That's exactly what you once said about the whole idol business!" he reminds Shortie, who only huffs in reply. "It's the same what Taiki said when he refused the 'Johnny Bond' film offer! I can't disagree either." If he didn't love the stage and the job didn't pay so well, he would never consider a comeback.

Seiya recounts with a certain glee how Yaten had whined about the inane advertisements they had to film until they earned enough to buy a private jet, and afterwards Yaten wondered whether being an idol was just another way to fend for oneself in a corrupt system. It's glaringly obvious to everyone in the room that your boyfriend is only trying to salvage the situation with his excited chatter although he was stunned by the vehemence of your reaction and your aggressive, offhand statements. In contrast to Yaten-san, who is muttering to himself that Seiya is going to have a "very supportive wife", Taiki-san only scrutinizes your face in absolute silence as the last trace of warmth drains from his piercing eyes. Waiting until Seiya has finished his anecdote, he flashes you another smile—a perfectly civil one this time—and murmurs something in a low voice into Seiya's ear, which you can't overhear due to another acerbic comment of the Talented Mr. Shortie.

"Now I know why you refuse to share the girl this time," Yaten-san coolly observes, addressing only Seiya as if your presence is no longer of any importance to him. "You're already sharing—and you have so little of her that it barely suffices." Turning his gaze on the antique incense burner, he absently adds, "But it doesn't hurt to enjoy it as long as it lasts. Generally, relationships of famous film stars end in separation or divorce."

The three Kou brothers are now all penned up in the bedroom, where Seiya must be ironing your dress. Since stranger-san laughed and asked his brothers to hush their voices when Yaten-san groaned, "Seiya will never outgrow his elementary school days," you deduce that Seiya must look a ridiculous sight ironing your lacy dress—an impression strengthened by Taiki-san's assertion that now is "definitely not the right time to make such an effort to court a woman!"

"She has the aura of an unlucky charm!" Shortie obligingly continues the barrage of accusations Stick has started. "Whenever people are so unhappy that they can't find a motivation to live, they begin to attract disaster like a misery magnet! She is only interested in you because you're the total opposite!" Like all people who're accustomed to working themselves up into a state, he grows increasingly agitated with every sentence. "From what I've seen and heard, she only loves her stuffy snooper and will dump you the very moment he says the words to her.

"From what I have seen and heard, she loves me, too." The smile you can detect in Seiya's voice softens the blow for you although you're still deeply disturbed by his brothers' withering scorn and loathing for a woman they barely know, who has only committed a few faux pas. "And he doesn't even want her since he has another girlfriend and is going with her to Osaka—"
"So that's why you agree to play the consolation prize for her, because she 'loves' you, too? It's natural that she thinks she loves you since all depressed people are drawn to you like the moth to the flame! They all try to throw themselves at you and live off you like bloodsucking vampires. And when they're done they'll throw you away as if you had never been more than a nice shiny toy for them! It was almost the same with Chiba-san, wasn't it, with the only difference that she wasn't such a loose girl? She literally fell into your arms because she was neglected by her clueless boyfriend. But when her beloved 'Mamo-chan' returned from Oxford, she simply dumped you and ran back into his arms again."

Oddly enough, the face in the bathroom mirror does remind you of a vampire with its pale complexion, bloodshot eyes, and swollen lips—a lovely (albeit not conventionally pretty) reminder of last night's escapades. And yet you're sure that you haven't exploited Seiya in any way. The image of you hurling yourself into Kudo's arms and kicking Seiya to the curbs as soon as your detective is available is just as absurd as these manga series in which the protagonist—despite being surrounded by intensely interested, extremely attractive suitors—keeps pining for her heroic but absent love interest for eight hundred or more chapters.

"I'm starting to wonder whether you two have personal reasons to talk me out of this." Notwithstanding Two Lights' diatribes, stranger-san's voice still sounds perfectly pleasant, lacking the tiniest trace of anger.

"She is so difficult and so bitchy that no one will ever get the idea to steal her from you—not even that cretin of a detective!"

You've got to hand it to Shortie! There is a certain integrity in his unapologetic, persistent nastiness. As unpleasant as he is, he is also unflinchingly frank compared to his smooth middle brother.

"It's interesting to hear you out of all people call her 'difficult and bitchy'!" Seiya remarks. "She is funny and exciting and one of the nicest, prettiest women I've ever met—and fascinating and extremely intelligent into the bargain! The chemistry between us is also unbelievably great… absolutely, divinely… perfect!"

"I can imagine!" Stick cuts off Seiya's enthusiastic exclamations with an exasperated sigh. "Even your vocabulary has become unbearably sappy since last night! Please spare us all the graphic details!"

"The only thing which bothers me is that she is much too good to be true." Stranger-san, who is remarkably undeterred by his brother's insult, sounds genuinely puzzled, as if you were really the ideal woman in his eyes. "There must be a catch somewhere—and I'm going to find it and deal with it as soon as possible."

In answer to Taiki-san's comment that this seemingly perfect relationship has more than a catch—Kudo Shinichi, their family, and time—and that it begins at an extremely inconvenient stage in Seiya's life because Shizuka-san has become so desperate that she threatens to make their comeback public as soon as possible, Seiya nonchalantly replies that their agent will have to wait. "She can't simply proclaim that I'm going to return to the stage when I'm still not sure about it."

"If your girlfriend is the reason why you don't want to come back with us, it would be the most immature and unprofessional thing you've ever done!"

"I told you I'll have to discuss this with Shiho first! I can't simply disappear for months and let her wait now that we're together."
"There is the phone and the internet—if only we didn't have to avoid both for serious talks. It's impossible to disappear nowadays if a girlfriend really wants to contact you, though. I bet the overwhelming majority of boyfriends would love to pull a vanishing act on their girlfriends if they could."

"And what's with all these talks of marriage?" grumbles Shortie with the impatience of a child who has been silenced for too long. "You said you wouldn't ever let anyone put you into a straightjacket! She is just the type of woman who will do it, and if you ever divorce her, she'll take the shirt off your back. Let's face it, you aren't cunning enough to handle a woman like her!"

They simply can't leave him alone, and you begin to admire your new boyfriend for being so immersed in whatever he is doing at the moment (ironing your dress?) that he doesn't seem to mind their nagging.

"After all these years and after this appalling mess with Chiba-san, one should expect you to have internalized the few principles we decided to adhere strictly to in life!" Stick dramatically sighs. "But no—of course you absolutely had to turn 'breaking rules' into your speciality!" You can finally hear the puffing sound of a steam iron now, which is odd since you didn't hear it before.

"Nonsense!" stranger-san retorts with his usual stoicism. "I've never said I wanted to adhere strictly to anything. I'm not going to behave as if I were in prison."

"You did promise our parents to stick to the hard and fast rules whenever you were allowed to go out!" Taiki-san reminds him. "Don't ever trust strangers, no matter how pretty!"

"Ah, but even our parents must have been strangers to each other once—and I made that promise when I was four or three."

"It doesn't matter!" Yaten-san chimes in. "'Don't ever share your personal fragrance with anybody!' She smelled of your personal fragrance, idiot! What you did is treason, which could have endangered the whole crew! Ten years ago, you could have been executed for this!" Judging from the gross exaggerations, the Kou brothers are having a blast, and you smile at their melodramatic tone parodying the mystery live action series on TV.

"I remember them giving out perfume samples to their closest friends," Seiya recalls. "They even asked Kakyuu and you to do the illustrations on the labels whenever they wanted it to look special."

"They always changed the formula a bit whenever they did that," Taiki-san coolly reminds him. "They never shared their personal fragrance."

"The fragrance of a perfume always changes on your skin and mingles with your natural scent, anyway. Even if everybody on earth were using my shampoo and wash gel, no one would smell so much like me that someone who has a trained nose and pays attention to the scent wouldn't notice."

"One little error or a stuffy nose is enough to disprove your theory!" returns Taiki-san. "Most importantly, you've broken Rule Three, which should never, ever, be broken—not even in afterlife, mind you, if afterlife existed!"

"So what? Just shoot me!" Seiya chuckles while Shortie and Stick recite in unison Rule Three: "'Don't fall in love with the enemy!'"
Part 25: They leave the bedroom...

They leave the bedroom…

They leave the bedroom directly afterwards, as Seiya seems to have finished ironing your dress and is now packing the ironing board away. "Enemy" is a rather strong term for a stranger who just happens to be a good friend of the detective they feared, but you don't give it a second thought since it fits the semi-serious, histrionic tone they used during the conversation. Scanning the bathroom for something you cannot name, you take time to behold the sea of yellow, white, and scarlet roses in the bathtub. Taiki-san must have put them there immediately after his arrival.

For the first time in your life, you're aware of the fact that different roses release different scents. The liquorice fragrance of the golden-yellow roses blend with the spicy perfume of the white roses and the quintessential damask scent of the red roses into an intoxicating concoction refined by the aroma of Seiya's shampoo, which is wafting from the translucent blue carafe on the shower corner shelf. Feeling faint with dark foreboding, you mentally go through the happenings of the last hours to make sense of your feelings. Your anxiety can't have been caused by Seiya, who is as attentive and pleasant as a boyfriend can be; and yet you've felt this deep, ever-growing unease since the first time your interest in him changed. Your alarm must have been provoked by his fragrance, which resembles Gin's so much that it rekindles all your memories of Gin.

Gin's eau de toilette, too, must have been a homemade perfume since he kept it in a flask with a hand-drawn label, which only displayed an illustration of a sweet osmanthus shrub but not the name of the shop or the brand. For a moment, you consider the possibility that it was a customized perfume of the seven crows or that Seiya's parents had sold their creations in the shop where Gin bought his fragrances before you dismiss both theories. If the scent had belonged to the seven crows, it wouldn't make sense for all the three Kou brothers and Kakyuu to wear it while the Organization still existed. The possibility that Gin had bought it from Seiya's parents remains although it would be too extraordinary a coincidence. On the balance of probabilities, there was no connection between Gin, Seiya's parents, and the seven crows at all—and the combination of orange blossoms and sweet osmanthus just happened to be in fashion when Gin bought his eau de toilette.

"What do you think, Seiya, whom would she save if both the sleuth and you were hit by a car or hanging onto the edge of a cliff?"

This juvenile question naturally came from Shortie, who has returned to the living room with his two brothers but is now strolling through the corridor into the bedroom again. Curiously enough, Seiya is running back and forth between the bedroom and the living room, where he opens and closes drawers; and his two brothers keep tailing him like lovesick puppies who have nothing else to do.

"Him, of course!" Seiya contemplates the situation with masochistic glee. "At least out of habit if not out of love. We've known each other for a few hours while she has known him for years. I doubt she would happily push me over the edge of the cliff, though."

He is definitely not the type that evokes sympathy and protective feelings in others, he adds, parenthetically. Most probably, Shiho would immediately save Kudo while he would simply save himself—and thus the little problem would resolve quickly and satisfactorily for everyone.

"I can already see the pattern of your relationship," Taiki-san moans in defeat. "She will take everything you can give while you will get nothing from her in return."
"I'm not going to discuss what I get from her with you since it's none of your business!"

"Our present situation is too complicated! This will never work out, Seiya!"

"Nonsense! I don't expect anything to miraculously 'work out'! I'm going to work for it just as hard as I'd work for a performance or for a movie!"

"I hope you know that this movie won't end before you die if you really plan to stay with her—"

"—which makes it such a great, interesting challenge! I'm going to be the best husband sans papers—or even with papers—you can imagine!"

Comparing Seiya to Gin is like comparing a sunflower to a daisy—or, more fittingly—a falcon to a hyena or an eagle to a vulture. For all you know, you only keep thinking of Gin because stranger-san wears a similar fragrance and is an acquaintance of Tenoh-san—two coincidences which trigger the memory of the one mystery you couldn't solve: How could Gin know about Tenoh-san so that he could attach her name to the mail which would have been sent to the blackmailed people if you had backed up the files as planned?

Before you said your goodbyes at the graveyard, you had informed Tenoh-san that Gin had "muttered" her name before he died (which was the garbled version of the story you had to tell her since you couldn't possibly tell her the truth after choosing her life over the lives of so many people). She only shrugged it off as a lucky guess and claimed that her vigilante group wasn't unknown to the crows although the Organization was too busy fighting more dangerous opponents like the secret services and the terrorists to waste time with her. Don't take this lightly since there must be a traitor among your friends, you implored her. But while Tenoh-san agreed that she would have to look into the matter, she refused to share further information with you after your partnership ended. For better or worse, you didn't have the psychological make-up for any sort of vigilante work—she asserted—and it was better for both of you if you focused on mending your life instead of dabbling in matters which didn't concern you.

There was no denying that she was right. The "Distant King of Heaven", who loves her ostentatious name, is clearly capable of defending herself—knowing her, the traitor wouldn't have time to make their last will and testament before she found them. You were also thoroughly sick of conspiracy and death. All you wanted was peace and change. You were going to forget about Paris and Pandora's Box and start a new life as the former prodigy Miyano Shiho, who had "stayed indoors after leaving Infinity due to chronic health issues" and who, on recovery, had decided to give up her promising scientific career for a quiet, comfortable life.

After the relationship between Kudo and Ran grew so serious that she more or less moved into his mansion although she returned to her father's agency every other day to take care of the drunken slob, you gradually let go of your hopes and consoled yourself that you had atoned for your crimes in this way. Every now and then, you would dream of the Cupid you had dropped into the pond at Monet's House. In your dreams, the Cupid's eyes were of the same intense blue as the Blue Lagoon which Tenoh-san offered you the last time you visited her seaside house… before you sent her the antidotes to the custom-made poison, which you had yet to complete, as the poison was much harder to create than the antidotes, which were only a slight modification of the antidote you were going to give Kudo…

"Can I come in?"

When you open the door, your stranger enters the bathroom with the air of a vampire who has been invited into a potential victim's house. The analogy is inevitable, as his first action after closing the door behind himself is nibbling at your neck and your ear. This new kissing addiction is most
worrisome, Seiya admits. He should apologize for his brothers instead of assaulting you at the first opportunity.

"Taiki and Yaten are usually mistrustful against strangers but not hostile. I even had the impression that they liked you very much before you bashed the hedonistic idol life to defend Kudo."

He has addressed the issue without a trace of rancour. And when you offer a grudging apology for your rant, he gives a dismissive wave and chuckles in remembrance. His brothers are overprotective and need to take things easy for once, he remarks. They are also insufferable snobs, but they are the sort of people you want to have around when you're in serious trouble.

"I don't know what I'd have done on the streets without them. Taiki forced us to learn all the math problems and poems and novels he knew by heart while Yaten took care that we were all as clean as cats. We were the best-educated and best-groomed street musicians the world had ever seen!"

"And what did you do?" you ask as you wrap your arms around his neck. He already feels strangely familiar, more like a husband than a boyfriend of less than four hours.

Nothing, Seiya admits. He only sang and enjoyed the weather, or observed his surroundings and imitated the people he saw. Before your inner eye, you can see him stroll along the river bank, laughing about the many absurdities he encountered in life and returning the smiles of the people passing by.

"You took care that you three stayed the happiest street people the world had ever seen," you suggest, whereupon he flashes you a wry smile.

"'Happy'…" he echoes with unexpected irony before he smiles. "Well, we were certainly as happy as we could be under the circumstances."

The longer you know Seiya, the more you're convinced that your life together will be great. Mistakes will immediately be forgiven, conflicts will instantly be addressed and resolved. Serious misunderstandings will never arise, and slight misunderstandings will never turn into an issue. Being with him feels so right that you're already dreading the day this relationship must end. After all, even the happiest couple will eventually be separated by death unless they're lucky enough to leave this world together.

Your chapped lips burn for an agonizing second when you two kiss, before the sparks of pleasure ease the pain. Although your hunger for each other has momentarily been sated and the desire for a physical union has made way for a less feverish—though not less addictive—sense of belonging so that you two are now kissing at a luxuriantly slow speed, you can swear that you've never felt anything close to this.

For the first time in your life, you believe that the Ancient Greeks' explanation of romantic love was right. Their figurative language was closer to the truth than the cynical modern theories on infatuation (or worse: "limerence"), which are used to kill off the first flicker of love in gullible people. Humans have each been split into two halves, which should never be reunited so that they can be easily controlled and won't become too strong or wild. And even though their paths almost never cross and they can't find each other in life, the two pieces of a whole will be searching for their love until they die.

...
Once upon a time...

Once upon a time Zeus (or Jupiter, as the great Boss in heaven was called by the Romans) split the disobedient, self-assured creatures with two faces, four arms, and four legs into two parts, which were then separated and condemned to spend their lives in search of each other. The Boss might not have been so cruel if the complete human being had not been so perilously strong and independent. Who would have been able to stop the humans if they had decided to conquer both the underworld and heaven?

One could argue that in their completeness, most humans were peaceful and kind. But Zeus is known to be a narcissistic, paranoid, debauched jerk—the sort of celebrity that is too greedy for praises and fan presents from his fearful supporters to grant the humans their well-deserved freedom.

To be fair, managing the masses of incomplete humans is already difficult enough. Controlling the complete humans with their terrific double brains might have been impossible. Jupiter's lightning bolts could have been absorbed and redirected. Apollo's (or Apollo's) sunlight would have given the humans solar energy. Ares (or Mars) would have lost against so many formidable opponents despite his brute strength and violence. Amor or Cupid, with his abysmal shooting skills, would have missed most of the targets. Aphrodite (or Venus') charm would have been ineffective against the humans, who—in their complete form—would have been immune against her irresistible magic girdle...

The only god to escape from Mount Olympus unscathed would have been Hermes (or Mercury), the quick-witted, fast-footed messenger in winged sandals, who would have been too smart to engage in a losing fight. Most probably, he would have soberly assessed the chances of winning and chosen to scam and hide until Minerva (or Athena) wisely hoisted the white flag announcing that the battle was over.

And yet it's hard for the humans to resent the great Boss when the search for love can be so wonderfully gratifying in its own right—even with the knowledge that the efforts to find the missing puzzle piece, which completes you, will prove futile. Notwithstanding the disappointment and anguish when once again the seemingly perfect partner reveals all the fissures and blemishes which clash violently with yours, or the one you love leaves you for someone else, who can satisfy their needs more, or when Amor's arrow misses again and love stays unrequited—humans will always be searching for love or a substitution of it, driven by the memory of completeness and the need to fill the void which remained after their other half had been torn away.

"Who are you thinking of?" your husband sans papers asks you between two kisses, languidly drawing the word "who" in mock jealousy.

"Greek gods!" Since you haven't figured out how to simultaneously speak and kiss, you have to keep your answers short and pithy.

"Why Greek gods?" He draws a dangerous, meandering trail of kisses down your neck while locking you in an embrace which makes Rodin's The Kiss look harmless by comparison, but you can't bring yourself to stop him.

"Because Tenoh-san once told me that she liked them. They're the type of gods you could play poker with."
His breath tickles you when he laughs, and if you weren't already in love with him, you would fall in love with him now. In a world where most people chase after the elusive phantom of happiness, which the spiritually inclined call nirvana or heaven or paradise, people like Seiya are almost as rare as the blue rose, which can only be produced with a genetic modification or a dye.

"So we're gambling with the gods right now?" The warm light of the lamps on both sides of the bathroom mirror and the green tiles are reflected in his eyes, tinting them a liquid curaçao blue when he gives you an amused smile.

"No, only I am gambling." You rake your fingers through his hair with undisguised delight. "And you are the card in my hand!"

"Well, since you might need me to win against those pesky gods, don't let go of what you're holding!"

Time seems to slow down again to flow at a speed at which the trickle of sand in an hourglass would resemble the gliding motion of autumn leaves in the wind, and you can tell even without glancing into the mirror that you two are intoxicatingly, vertiginously beautiful together. Closing your eyes as waves of bliss sweep over you with every new wandering kiss, you absently note that the Miyano Shiho of yesterday would have been scandalized—especially since his troublesome brothers are presently stalking in and out of his apartment, bringing him even more fan presents and roses to free space in their own apartment, as they've informed you two through the closed bathroom door. But yesterday's Miyano Shiho didn't have much fun in life whereas this Miyano Shiho could beat both Zeus and Hades at their own game and have an excessively good time.

It's fascinating how love has completely deactivated the rational part of your brain, comments a cool voice in your head, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Yaten Kou's. You're irrationally, foolishly besotted with a stranger you've just met, letting yourself fall into the grip of an unhealthy obsession you can't control. Depicting your story as an Ancient Greek epic, you naively believe that you can overcome any obstacle as long as he stays by your side. From the top of the world the paths will only lead downwards. Greek gods are known to curse arrogant humans. And you've been warned that you shouldn't gamble!

Once in a blue moon—even though the chance of this happening is smaller than winning the Spanish Christmas Lotto and the gods do their best to prevent the two halves of the complete human being from appearing at the same time and place—the two parts belonging to the same whole will accidentally meet. What happens afterwards is something no oracle can accurately predict, but it's extremely unlikely that the gods will let such an insolent couple stay together when they endanger the balance of the universe and threaten to take the god's power away.

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A kiss can mingle souls if it's done well—or at least that's what the French once believed when they coined the passionate kiss "soul kiss". And though you would have defined a kiss as a voluntary exchange of sebum, body salts, and armies of bacteria via mouth a few hours ago, you're all for the French way of describing it now. Before Seiya, kisses were moderately pleasant, sometimes highly entertaining to a certain degree whether they were enjoyed for their own sake or—as they usually were in Gin's case—as a prelude to more intimate activities. Incompatible couples can deceive themselves into believing that chemistry is immaterial to a committed, serious relationship—in fact, no other species is as skilled in the art of self-deception as the humans, who can will themselves to hate what they love and to love what they hate if they deem it necessary. To survive in a society which attempts to dictate whom you should love and how you should love, hypocrisy is a useful skill.

It takes only one single experience for the illusion to collapse, however. The life-changing incident could be a kiss or just a single touch from a person who seems to have been specially created for you, and afterwards nothing will be the same again. Like a gourmet cook who has finally found the right ingredients for the perfect dinner menu, you instinctively know that you will never be able to make do with an alternative again after knowing the ingredients you need.

Now that you're in their shoes, you can suddenly sympathize with all the literary and non-literary couples that have brought doom upon themselves and others when they, foolishly giving in to their irresistible, unwavering, self-destructive attraction, gravitated towards each other at the speed of comets zooming towards the sun. Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere, Heloise and Abelard... No doubt their lives would have been easier and happier if they had never met the lover who would bring about their downfall—but wouldn't that have been the greatest tragedy of all? In your case, Kakyuu's spirit is still lingering on in this apartment like a ghost no exorcist can ever lay to rest. And maybe Seiya would leave you immediately if you told him about the accident which destroyed the girl he loved so much that he ran away from home for her sake. But the dead can't talk and you feel very much alive—strong and energetic and determined enough to protect another secret for your entire lifetime.

Therefore you've left the refuge of the bathroom to face his brothers again after throwing on your dress, which has shrunk after being dried and ironed but fits you now perfectly. You've resolved to do your utmost to get along with your partner's family, his friends, and even his employers and colleagues. In a long-time relationship, compromises and concessions are inevitable.

"It's taken her long to get dressed!" Yaten-san, who is nursing his injured foot on the sofa, graces you with a curl of his lips although he still refuses to address you directly.

"Not as long as it takes you to trim your brows," Seiya reminds him.

"I see you've lost interest in verbal conversation since last night," Shortie observes, eying you with another disparaging smile. "But you can at least tell her about the Hollywood remakes—especially since you're going to reprise your roles in both of them unless Taiki and you swap roles with each other."

But he hasn't even made up his mind to accept the roles yet—Seiya refuses with a distinct lack of interest in the matter before helping Taiki-san divide the masses of roses, which his brothers have left on the carpet, into different vases and even buckets. He is going to inform you about them.
later, tomorrow or tonight after dinner.

"The sooner you tell her about it the better," Taiki-san adds with the expression of a player about to
deal the trump card, "If she can't deal with the love scenes, you two need to agree on how far
you're allowed to go without endangering your relationship."

"A real actor doesn't let his girlfriend decide over what he will do for a role," Yaten-san asserts. "If
the movie needs an explicit love scene, he will do an explicit love scene! Those scenes don't mean
anything to us, anyway. You do them and get over them when they're finished." Turning to you for
the first time after your diplomatic gaffe, he cheerily adds, "In Seiya's case it could be a problem,
though. He works like a crazed fanatic on the set, especially when he needs to distract himself from
the blues caused by his 'Odango'! I can already see him fall in love with the female lead just for the
role."

"Don't be silly!" Seiya hurls a bouquet of yellow roses at his oldest brother, who catches it with the
air of a long-suffering wife accustomed to catching all the items her husband throws at her. "If I
ever agree to do such a scene, I'll just bring it behind me as fast as possible!"

The honeymoon phase is clearly over. And as reality sets in, you realize with a sense of dread that
your perfect man doesn't only have irritating brothers, flirtatious beautiful colleagues, a demanding
and possessive agent, and throngs of fanatical lovelorn admirers but also a most unfortunate
passion for acting, which will be difficult to reconcile with your idea of exclusivity and
commitment. Ideally, you should mime the supportive girlfriend and declare that you don't mind
steam love scenes with gorgeous (and probably adoring film partners) in the least: I trust you.
You can simulate all the things that happened between us last night with other women as long as
you stay 'professional', whatever that means! I'm not going to watch all your rehearsals like a
jealous pet! And we two are going to be really cool about this and crack jokes about these scenes
afterwards before you move on to the next movie and the next love scene…

Unsurprisingly, you can't bring yourself to put on an act. Surprisingly, Seiya has picked up your
tension like an exquisitely sensitive instrument and reacts without delay.

"I don't really have to do any love scenes," he remarks. "I wouldn't be the first actor who puts such
clauses into his contracts: no love scenes, no nudity, no kissing whatsoever!" He proceeds to
distract you by informing you of the Hollywood remakes, in which Three Lights, who have grown
up bilingual, are going to reprise the roles they played in their first two live actions, one of which
was *Detective Boy Holmes* and the other *The Red Ninja*. All the love scenes for his roles can be
removed because they are redundant, he claims. And he doesn't even know whether he will accept
the roles since he doesn't like the new scripts and doesn't want to spend most of his time abroad on
the set when he could just stay here.

Although his move has backfired, Taiki-san displays no sign of annoyance or disappointment. One
could almost believe that he was only oblivious or ruthlessly blunt and that the triumphant look
you spotted in his eyes just a few minutes ago had less to do with schadenfreude and more to do
with his purely intellectual joy at having anticipated the complication and brought up the issue in
such an elegant manner.

"Well, then," he says after Seiya and you have briefly discussed the advantages and disadvantages
of a long-distance relationship and concluded that you two have to look for another solution if he
accepts the roles. "I think they'll let us change the scripts like they did when we filmed the live
action series. But I wouldn't reject the offer if I were you since opportunity doesn't knock twice!"

Sometimes it does, Seiya retorts with a wink at you, which earns him another exasperated sigh from Yaten Kou.
"This has become too dumb for my taste!" Shortie flips his ponytail and, ignoring his injured foot, saunters gracefully towards the corridor. "I'll be upstairs to weep for the days when your brain still worked! Are you going to our rehearsal today or would you rather spend the whole day staring at her?"

"I wish I could do that! But Shiho must return to Kudo to say goodbye to him before he goes to Osaka, so she only has time after six. We're going to meet up afterwards for dinner."

Shortie's and Stick's thoughts have become so tangible that they might as well have been printed in bold neon-red letters on their foreheads: That's a fine girlfriend you have—you two have been with each other for a few hours and she would rather spend the day with another man!

To their credit, both of them spare you another drama and only slip into their shoes in silence. Returning your slippers to Seiya to put on your sandals, you wonder whether you're the same woman who used to straighten her dress and check her hair every other minute to make sure that her appearance is in order. You may be dishevelled but you feel gloriously beautiful, almost as stunning as the sunset last night. Shortie and Stick may bully you as much as they like if it makes them happy!

Through the window of the living room you can see that the sky has become overcast again. And while the rain doesn't come down in torrents, it's too heavy for you to go out without a raincoat. Seiya, who has just helped you into your cardigan and put on his jacket as well, suggests that you two walk on foot. "We only need an umbrella for you," he remarks and brightens up when his gaze falls on the parasol in the umbrella stand. "It's a bit small. But since the wind has dropped, this makeshift umbrella will do!"

"No, it won't!" Yaten-san, who has instantly shaken off his apathetic air, has lunged forward to prevent Seiya from taking the parasol and is now guarding the umbrella stand with the attitude of a white wolf who hasn't been supplied with a prey for too long. His voice is so low that your mind needs a few seconds to piece together what he has hissed: "I can't believe that you'd ever give it to another woman!"

Your stranger, who has run out of patience at last, regards his oldest brother with a long gaze, which can be translated as, "Move aside!" while Yaten Kou's scowl can be interpreted as, "Only over my dead body!"

"It's just a parasol, Yaten!" Seiya reasons although his eyes are flashing with anger and his voice has taken on the icy equanimity you can hear in Kudo's voice before Kudo goes to pieces. "It wasn't even her favourite parasol to begin with, and I'm sure she would give it to Shiho if she were here!"

"Maybe," Shortie coolly counters. "But she'd never have given you to her! Shall we pretend that she is still alive and kick your girlfriend out after giving her an umbrella? Or shall we let her go home without an umbrella instead? The rain will most probably do her good—because then she will have to get changed again when she comes home to her pathetic sleuth!"

No sooner did Yaten-san finish his sentence than he is smashed against the wall, hitting his back against the lowest hook. Contrary to your expectations, he doesn't even try to retaliate but only gets up and readjusts his suit with a melancholy smile before he catches the parasol Seiya flings at him with the nonchalance of a person who has anticipated Seiya's reaction.

"Just add this to her memorabilia and shut up for once!" Seiya snaps; and you jump at the sound of his voice, which conveys the extent of his fury all too well. "You can even burn anything which belonged to her and collect the ashes if you want! I'm not going to turn my apartment into a shrine!
You're free to stay away if you can't deal with it! If you miss her so much that you can't live, just lock yourself up in your apartment and die!"

To your surprise, Yaten Kou's eyes well up with tears; and he suddenly looks so vulnerable that your frustration with him evaporates away. Simulating all of Seiya's possible reactions in your head, you wonder for a moment whether you should intervene. But since you're the last person whose help Yaten-san wants and you don't know how to react, you stand rooted to the spot, hoping that both Seiya and Yaten-san will calm down before the situation worsens.

"You can have my umbrella," Taiki-san suggests, places a hand on your upper back and another hand on your elbow, and gently ushers you out of the apartment towards the stairs. "When two brothers quarrel, the third rejoices!" he announces and raises his voice at Seiya, who is staring after him and you with a puzzling expression of fear and fatigue, "Don't worry, I've only abducted our guest to show her the roof terrace. We'll come back later, after you two have finished killing each other!"
Through the floor-to-ceiling windows of Yaten-san and Taiki-san's vast penthouse apartment, you can admire the intricate, labyrinthine stone paths outside without exposing yourself to the rain. Cherry trees and plum trees are already in full bloom, burdening their slender twigs with heavy white and pink blossoms. The azaleas have bloomed early as well—in brilliant shades of red, whose splendid masses are only punctuated by specks of brown twigs and green leaves. Kinnokusei shrubs and trees—ever-inconspicuous, evergreen—line the stone paths enclosed by arches of wisteria, which haven't bloomed yet but will turn the garden on the roof terrace into a lovely maze of fragrant clouds in April and May, when the wisteria blossoms cover the arches with their drooping curtains in soft shades of purple, pink, or white. Although the plants have been cared for well, the trees have only been lightly pruned and the shrubs haven't been sculpted into any discernible shapes. Taiki-san and Yaten-san are either too lazy to prune their trees or prefer a look of wilderness for their roof terrace.

The two-storey penthouse apartment, on the other hand, isn't only luxuriously furnished but also almost spotlessly clean—a rare sight for an apartment inhabited by two men in their mid twenties. The hardwood floor is heated and the white walls are adorned with oil paintings and limited prints, most of which depict landscapes and seascapes although there are the occasional impressionist studies of dancers and martial artists during training. Adjoining the living room upstairs are a vast library (consisting mostly of encyclopaedias, art books, and classical literature, judging by what you can see through the open door) and a music room with a giant black concert grand, a wall of guitars, and even a set of drums.

"Do you all play the piano?"

"I play it fairly well—well enough to accompany our songs. But Yaten and Seiya are both excellent pianists. I dare say they could play the piano professionally if they practised more."

"They have many talents!"

"Almost too many! It's never good to possess too much of anything."

To your relief, Taiki-san doesn't blame the quarrel between his hot-headed brothers on you. Instead, he adopts a positive, almost conciliatory approach. After showing you the music room, where film posters line the three walls which are not fully covered by Three Lights' guitar collection, he ushers you into the library, where a single hardcover with ink illustrations is lying open on the oval wooden table in front of the lace-curtained window. On closer inspection, you discover that the illustrations, all of which feature plants, have been drawn by a skilful artist who must have been highly experienced in calligraphy.

"Has Yaten-san done these?"

"No, Yaten prefers watercolours and markers. These were done by Kakyuu. Yaten often copies her drawings to study them."

You can no longer bear the thought of Kakyuu, who has begun to overshadow you, for the few hours you've spent with Seiya suddenly seem fleeting and insignificant compared to all the years she had spent with him before the accident destroyed her life. Yet her drawings intrigue you so
much that you eagerly accept Taiki-san’s offer to show them to you. Gingerly, he leafs through the sketchbook by touching only the sides of the smooth, heavy watercolour paper with the tip of his long bony index finger, taking care to be slow enough for you to read through a page before turning it. All the illustrations, without exception, were gorgeous even though you can find tiny mistakes typical for spontaneous ink sketches here and there. *Weeping Willow: healing, immortality, flexibility, tolerance. Orange Blossom: purity, innocence, marriage. White Chrysanthemum: candour, friendship, honesty…* Although you wouldn’t call yourself a specialist in flower language, you know most of the flower meanings. *Ginkgo: endurance, vitality, duality, hope. Honey Locust: tenacity in the face of adversity. Wild Rose: simplicity, life, protection. Kinmokusei: nobility, memory, truth, fairy tale, "the golden tree of life..."

Some flowers have consistently positive or negative connotations while others are highly ambiguous, Taiki-san observes. The camellia, a positive flower, stands for humility and discretion but also admiration, passion, perfection, longevity, or good luck, and is often used as the symbol of an ideal love. Cherry blossoms, which the Japanese used for propaganda during World War II, can signify great accomplishment but more often represent the fragile beauty and evanescent quality of life, as the short-lived sakura blossoms are seen as a reminder of the passing nature of all things and the value of time.

Morning Glory, another flower of duality, symbolizes the bond of constricted love—for example in Chinese folklore, a pair of lovers can only meet for one day once a year due to a cruel decree of the angry gods. Morning Glory can also stand for a never-ending love whenever it was used on Victorian gravestones. But in certain cases the flower can also symbolize unrequited love or, in Christian beliefs, mortality like the cherry blossoms.

"Nothing beats the ambiguity of the cyclamen, though," you remark, reading the page Taiki-san has just opened aloud, *"Cyclamen: sincere affection or true love but also departure, sorrowful resignation, farewell, or death—signifying that all good things will eventually end."*

"The red ones are often likened to bleeding hearts," Taiki-san explains before moving on to the next page. "This one has both positive and negative connotations as well: *Azalea: temperance or self recognition but also fragile passion; often given to a lover to tell them to stay beautiful, Take care of yourself, for me."*

"*Often given to a woman, it says," you darkly correct him. "It's always the women who are told to take care of themselves for their men, at least in our culture—never the men who have to take care of themselves for their women!"

"When Kakyuu copied the meanings from her flower books, she didn't change the original wording, perhaps because she wanted to cite the sources correctly." Taiki-san smiles at you for the first time since you two left Seiya's apartment. "It's true that most men don't take care of themselves for their women—not to the same extent as they expect the women to do for them.” His smile broadens. "But in this case, I can assure you that Yaten did anything within the realms of possibility to take care of himself and stay beautiful!"

It's easy for you to see how Misa has become obsessed with Seiya's elegant flower-loving middle brother, whose imposing looks, dramatic voice, and extremely sharp intellect are accompanied by an air of perfect inaccessibility despite his gentlemanly attitude—a deadly combination for vulnerable, romantically inclined girls. His sudden bouts of temper or humour, which occasionally break through his cool shell like the first flower buds through barren spring branchlets, can be immensely attractive to a certain type of woman as well.

And yet you can acutely sense the skilled strategist behind the polite, pleasant mask. In his quiet
and unobtrusive way, Taiki-san is far more intimidating than the cranky oldest brother, who has revealed himself to be more fragile than you thought. Calling to mind the moment in Seiya's bedroom when you told Seiya that you would rather fight Yaten-san because Taiki-san was too tall for you, you wonder whether the Fates have thrown loaded dice or Fortuna has cheated when she distributed the cards. After all, they've given you Seiya's opponent and Seiya the opponent you wanted.

"Do your brothers fight often?" you ask Taiki-san as you two return to the living room. Perhaps you would have waited for Taiki-san to address the matter if you weren't still shaken by Seiya's outburst, which you would never have expected from such a relaxed, gentle man. But Tenoh-san, who blows up like an atomic bomb whenever someone pushes her buttons, can appear unassuming and mild-mannered as well when she is not provoked. Apparently the two of them are even more similar to each other than you thought.

Almost never, Taiki-san assures you. His brothers only clash when they can't accept that they grieve in different ways for Kakyuu—and even then the fight escalates very seldom. "But this fight isn't about Kakyuu although seeing Seiya giving you her parasol was too much for Yaten to stomach. Seiya and Yaten are very close."

You don't comment, careful not to give him an opening, and he pauses for effect before clarifying his statement: Seiya isn't just an obscure acting talent with "a pretty face" and "cutesy gestures" like your (admittedly accurate!) depiction of most idols. He can become—or maybe he already is—the singer and actor of our generation, at least in Japan. If he wants to, he can become one of the greatest singers and actors of all time—"that is, if he stops sacrificing himself for needy damsels in distress who use him to replace some unapproachable love interest and leave him as soon as they figure out whom they really care about!"

As you feared, Seiya's perfect middle brother is the sort of guardian that will maul and kill any intruder who poses a threat to his family with an apologetic smile on his face. Before you can defend yourself against his accusation, he narrates to you the story of "Seiya's now happily married friend Odango, who innocently met up with Seiya over the years whenever Seiya flew across continents just to see her, which happened at least once or twice or even three times a week." In Taiki-san's version of the story, Odango initially went out with his brother to distract herself from the relationship problems with her fiancé; and even though she visibly struggled with her new feelings for Seiya, she pretended to have felt nothing but friendship for him when her fiancé returned.

Depressed and lonely women always fall in love with his younger brother—Taiki-san claims—and while Seiya usually manages to flee from them before love turns into obsession and obsession morphs into hatred, the tragedy of Seiya's life is that he is generous to a fault just like Kakyuu and their parents, who could never resist helping other people. Since none of the deceased had met a good end and Taiki-san and Yaten-san can't watch Seiya walk down the same path, they have to make sure that their brother will be in good hands when he gets himself a girlfriend—with which Taiki-san means to say that your hands—"needy damsel in distress!"—are not good enough!

"Your parents are no longer alive?" Although you've already deduced this from the way Seiya talks about them, you decide to redirect Taiki-san's negative energy to another lane to escape the damage in case the volcano, which must be lying dormant under his calm exterior, erupts. After all, you can well remember Seiya's warning that when his flower-loving brother is in his psycho-mode, he is the most impetuous and irresponsible of the three of them.
They both died a few years ago, Taiki-san informs you, over one year before Kakyuu.

"May I ask what they died of?" Perhaps the question is too personal for the very first encounter between strangers, but Taiki-san is your brother-in-law sans papers, so to speak; and you've decided to milk the topic for all it's worth so as to avoid the talk about Seiya and you.

Suicide, he coolly says, much to your dismay. The cancer struck so suddenly and so violently that Three Lights' robust, lusty foster parents were practically wasted overnight. They weren't the youngest couple, as they were already in early middle age when they expected Kakyuu, but they both had a weakness for drama and grand gestures so that they cheerfully incinerated their isle and all animals and servants on it when they learned from their personal doctors that the tumours had spread too widely to be defeated.

"Maybe they were murdered by an aggrieved employee just when they were about to die of cancer although that would have been too bizarre a coincidence! Most probably, they just wanted to celebrate their deaths by parodying the lavish disaster movies which were so popular back then."

Taken aback by his icy cynicism when it comes to his own parents, all you can do is to make a puny attempt at offering your condolences in form of an unimaginative "I'm sorry". Your genuine sorrow at the terrible tragedy fails to make an impression on Taiki-san; so he only acknowledges your reaction with a slight tilt of the head. He is sorry, too, he dryly remarks, but less for his parents than for Seiya, who has inherited the family business from them without having the slightest inclination to run it and who has been struggling for years with the disgruntled senior employees, who didn't know what to do with their lives after the company went out of business. Seiya should have let those people fend for themselves—but like all depressed people, they flocked to him, and he couldn't resist giving them a hand. Fast forward to now—after Seiya has financially and emotionally supported them for three years—most of them are still unhappy and out of work while he is strapped for cash and about to go broke at the end of this year at the latest unless he finds an extremely lucrative job like the main roles in the two Hollywood remakes, which you will hopefully not talk him out of accepting.

"I'm not trying to talk him out of anything!" To show Taiki-san that his brother and you are a perfect match since you would even have supported Seiya's decision to help his parents' former employees, you tell him that those people needed a chance and the assurance that they wouldn't be left alone when they were in distress—both of which Seiya has been able to give them.

"A chance? Giving someone a chance doesn't mean to take people who can't walk by their hands and accompany them through life!" Taiki-san's gaze lingers for a moment on the wisteria arches framing the maze of his garden. "Most people I know are like climbing plants! If you save their lives only once, you will have to save them over and over again!"

He flashes you another smile, one which looks perfectly genuine despite its peculiar tranquility although he seems suffused with sorrow at a thought his own comment has triggered. His foster parents were great people, he tells you in a quiet, conspiratorial tone of voice. Intellectuals with great charm and great dreams and great faults. They dared to dream of world peace and eternal happiness for all; and it wouldn't have been so disastrous if they had contented themselves with dreaming instead of trying to pursue their dreams at the cost of their children's happiness and the lives of their employees.

It seems that Seiya's parents, who had been so wealthy that they possessed a whole isle (had they been blackmailed by the Organization as well?) didn't only leave this world in a dreadful way but also ruined their large company before they died. For once you feel lucky for not knowing your own parents, for not having to love them and to feel ashamed of them because they, too, had
followed their impossible dreams and ruined their lives in the process, dragging both Akemi-nee-san and you down with them.

Is world peace really so complicated—Taiki-san ponders—or can't we ever achieve it because it's much too simple? "My father always said that we should live in the present, plan for the future, and let go of the past. The world would be a better place if all people valued their time, cared for themselves and their families and friends, stopped searching for the right answers in oracles, and let all their gods die." Taiki-san shakes his auburn head in remembrance. "But in reality, things never work like that. There are always strings and baggage on you—remnants of your culture and your upbringing and all your past experiences."

Still, one can enjoy all the cross-purposes in life, he adds. He has learned to think more and to feel less, to turn even the greatest tragedy into a comedy!

To commiserate with Taiki-san and befriend him, you inform him that you once belonged to the Black Organization because your parents were the Organization's head scientists. Even if Taiki-san is not the seventh crow—who he might be—you surmise that he must know about Infinity, Tenoh-san's vigilante group, and Tenoh-san's attempt to bring down the Organization through Seiya. He silently listens to your summary of your life story (your role in the Organization, your education at Infinity, your escape, and your encounter with the Professor and Kudo) with rapt attention but doesn't betray any emotion, much to you surprise. Talking to him almost feels like reading a curriculum vitae aloud, which you've written to apply for the position of his brother's wife sans papers. Only when you reveal to him that your sister, too, is dead because she was shot by one of the Organization's crows, Taiki-san instinctively moves away from you and regards you with an expression of dread in his cool, inquisitive gaze. He must be quailing at the thought of having an ex-criminal as his potential sister-in-law, you think. And it strikes you that the ease you feel in Seiya's presence has made you careless, as you've told Seiya's dangerous middle brother more than you wanted.

"Have you told Seiya about your sister as well?" Taiki-san asks you with a curious edge of panic in his voice.

"I have—although I haven't told him how she died yet."

"Maybe you shouldn't tell him about her at all," he coolly suggests although he keeps his tone polite and his voice mellow. "Seiya doesn't need this sort of drama before his comeback!"

Stick is surely puzzling, running hot and cold! And since you don't know how to deal with him, you decide to come straight to the point.

Listen, I usually don't hook up with men I don't know and discuss marriage with them after one night! Your brother is the exception to the rule since we two hit it off right when we met, almost as if…

"Almost as if you two were 'soul mates'?" He looks thoroughly amused at the idea. "I gather you know that the term was coined by an old concept of love which goes back to Plato's *Symposium*! Two parts of a whole separated by Zeus, condemned to spend their lives in search of each other…" For a discomfiting moment, he gazes out into the roof garden to ponder the thought. "The idea is not as romantic as it sounds—it only says that love is ultimately imperfect and will hurt the most when it's closest to perfection."

Although he has seen that you've grasped his implication, he concludes with a smile as if he were congratulating himself for defeating you with your own words, "If we take this idea a step further, it implies that circumstances—the gods, in this case—will always prevent soul mates from ending
up in a happy, stable relationship. Hence, if you ever encounter a person you believe to be your soul mate, you'd better flee as fast as you can before it's too late!"

You follow him into the music room in a daze, unable to respond because you know that he can use anything you say against you, when he once again surprises you by citing the classics.

"Folly, thou conquerest, and I must yield!

Against stupidity the gods themselves fight in vain."

Smiling down at you with an almost genial expression in his limpid violet eyes, he adds with a mischievous grin, "It's a quote from Schiller's The Maid of Orleans! You can rely on things which never change!"

This time it takes you a beat to grasp what he has said and another beat for the relief to set in. Disturbingly, you can sense that you're dealing with a person who is far more brilliant than yourself—a smarter, cleverer, darker, more intellectual version of Kudo, who would have no qualms about crushing the people he regards as his enemy. Unlike Yaten-san, Taiki-san can lean back and wait for your demise like a spider in its web or wipe you off his chess board with a single move depending on his mood. And the question is not how to win against this modern Professor Moriarty when you have to fight him because you can only lose but how to get on his good side and win an opponent like him over.

g.

It must be hard for Yaten-san to see another woman in Seiya and Kakyuu's apartment—you graciously condone Shortie's hostility in order to show Taiki-san that you're above petty resentment against his less pleasant brother while he is leading you through the giant music room, where you can have a look at Three Lights' impressive collection of film posters and musical instruments. "After all, Seiya loved Kakyuu so much that he left home for her sake, just like Yaten-san and you."

Unnerved by Taiki-san's blank stare, you inform him that Seiya has told you about the reason why life at home had become so unpleasant that Three Lights left. At the same time, you recall that your stranger has also admitted to you that he has held back a few things although he believes that the person who has much more to hide is you…

"Are you sure Seiya has told you that we ran away from home because our parents opposed to the relationship between the three of us and Kakyuu?"

Strangely enough, Taiki-san seems utterly baffled, just as baffled as you are by his implication that their parents didn't mind their eccentric notion of love at all. Grabbing you by both your shoulders to fix you with a disbelieving gaze, he hangs on your every word as you amend your assertion.

"Well, he didn't say it literally… But since he said that life had become unbearable at home due to your parents' overprotectiveness, I automatically assumed—"

Their parents were indeed very protective, Taiki-san admitted, but perhaps their protectiveness was justified since more than a few attempts had been made to abduct Kakyuu and Three Lights when they were small. It was especially terrifying when those attempts were made by their own bodyguards. Hence Kakyuu was only allowed the freedom of the house and the garden while her brothers were free to roam the isle as long as they didn't leave it. Seiya sometimes managed to steal a boat to leave the isle and sing in jazz bars in disguise—but that wasn't the reason why Three Lights left home.
"Yaten and I stuck by Seiya after our parents gave him an ultimatum and he chose to leave." To your stupefaction, Taiki-san appears to be wrestling with his words. "It wasn't easy since we weren't allowed to take anything with us apart from the clothes we were wearing. Sheltered as she was, Kakyuu would never have survived on the streets. But our mother told us she'd let Kakyuu go if Seiya made it…"

Their parents (who were obviously much crueler and more despotic than you believed) asked Seiya to marry Kakyuu and take over the family business, but Seiya never wanted Kakyuu—at least not in the way he wanted Odango and you, Taiki-san explains. Seiya is so anxious whenever Yaten grieves for Kakyuu because Seiya still feels guilty for her death. To Seiya, she is the one wound which will probably never heal, as it's impossible for Taiki-san to talk him out of the fixed idea that she would never have got into an accident if only he had listened to their parents and married her.

As tragic as it is, the knowledge that Seiya has never loved Kakyuu romantically is a weight off your mind. Meanwhile, your attention has been distracted by a curious detail you've spotted on the old film posters on the wall. You've seen Kakyuu's name in Kanji on the first page of her sketchbook and noticed that it meant the Light of a Fireball, which is a bolide—an extremely bright, exploding meteor. Two Lights' names, however, have been written in Katakana in the Western order (Yaten Kou, Taiki Kou) on all the posters you've seen on the streets. In contrast, the posters on the wall, which must belong to the earliest posters featuring Three Lights, display Three Lights' names in Kanji in the order in which Japanese names are usually spelled: Kou Taiki, Kou Yaten, Kou Seiya, in The Z-files of Detective Boy Holmes…

Kou Yaten: The Light of a Night Sky. Kou Taiki: Atmospheric Light or, if one reads the syllables of his first name separately, Great Radiance. Kou Seiya: The Light of a Starfield… Three Lights' parents were so keenly interested in astronomy that they had given all their children names associated with a starry sky. On second thought, Yaten-san's name serves as a pun summing up all his sibling's names, as his name is also the collective term for all the starlights in the night—including the light from distant, almost invisible stars; the light reflecting off the molecules in the atmosphere; and the scattered light caused by dust particles in the atmosphere, through which meteors and fireballs can be detected…

Letting your thoughts drift to the night in Paris when Kudo and you were stargazing on the veranda while "Vincent" was playing inside, it dawns on you that "Seiya" is also the homophone of "starry night". Your boyfriend has a wonderful name, you think in fondness, ignoring the peculiar sense of foreboding, which has cast its shadow over your love for him again. The light of a starfield, or the light of distant stars invisible to the human eye, which brightens even the darkest night so that there will never be a pitch-black sky; or the light of a starry night, the light of hope—but you refuse to follow this meandering trail of thought to the end when it will only remind you of Pandora's Box.
It has stopped raining when Taiki-san and you leave the music room, but he suggests that he show you the painting collection before you two go for a walk on the roof terrace to give his brothers another twenty minutes "to kiss and make up". They both work like a clock in that respect although neither of them wears a watch, he claims. His frail older brother won't voluntarily carry anything but chopsticks (and that only during meals) while his younger brother, who is as fit as Paganini's fiddle, is still so disgusted by the inhuman schedule in Three Lights' early idol days, which he associates with calendars, clocks, and watches, that he never wears a watch either.

Yaten-san carried a mobile phone before he trashed it last night, you point out, skipping the redundant taunt that you believe Shortie to compromise his principles so that he could bother Seiya at any time.

You shouldn't assume that Yaten carried his mobile phone on his own, Taiki-san chuckles. He actually had to keep it for Yaten like anything else which Yaten needs but can't tote around himself. "If he were a sniper, I'd even have to carry his rifle," he adds with a boyish grin, which would resemble Kudo's if it weren't so impersonal and distant in its indisputable loveliness.

"Does your agent really follow Shintoism, or has she chosen the colours of your roses just for the symbolic gesture?" you ask Taiki-san as you two are beholding three contemporary oil paintings depicting Three Lights onstage by the illustrious Yumeno Yumemi, whose dreamlike illustrations jar with her pragmatic shoes and nerd glasses. Seeing Three Lights together makes you realize how much of their appeal Two Lights would lose if Seiya refused to return to the band. He was the driving force that bound them together; and without the magnetism of his sheer presence, Yaten-san's enchanting beauty and Taiki-san's mysterious elegance seem to belong to empyrean realms, floating in the highest stratosphere but failing to evoke the desperate, instinctive love the fans reserve for their more attractive brother.

Shizuka-san—a practical, shrewd woman with an unfortunate predisposition towards hysteria—follows Shintoism with the lax attitude of people who have been born into religious homes but show no personal religious inclination, Taiki-san informs you. Consequently, she only uses her knowledge of Shinto mythology to enhance her protégés' reputation and to promote the spiritual values she believes to be necessary in an insecure world.

Sensing that you have a very sketchy knowledge of Shintoism, Taiki-san explains to you the concept of the san hikari, the three lights of Shinto. Inspired by Three Lights' family name "Kou", whose Kanji means "light", Shizuka-san suggested that Three Lights throw three roses, whose colours represent the sun, the moon, and the stars respectively. The truth—or the magnitude of cosmological existence—is bound in the three lights: sun, moon, and stars. Red is the colour of the sun, whose energy and heat is the main source of life and growth and creativity. Since the universe can't exist without the sun's primal force according to Shintoism and the sun is seen as the principal light, Shizuka-san assigned Seiya, the song writer and lead singer of the band and also the happiest, liveliest of the three Kou's, the red rose.

The moon's waxing and waning—Taiki-san continues after showing you the way to his study, where a giant oil painting of the sea and the moon adorns the corner furthest from the window—represent the cycles of life and the non-linear process of growth—the silent development which only happens in solitude and darkness. Despite being less radiant and attractive than the sun due to
its lack of light and warmth, the moon is just as indispensable to the growth of all life in nature.

He fails to include an explanation of why Shizuka-san assigned him the white rose representing the moon, and you suppress the urge to ask him directly because you can imagine Shizuka-san's reasons. Was his white rose the reason why he bought Kaioh Michiru's *Serenity in Blue* (also called *The End of the World*, according to the label next to the painting), you ask him instead, indicating the painting in front of you.

No, he bought it for a completely different reason, he says with an amused smile but doesn't elaborate. And you stay transfixed in front of the painting for a moment to behold the sea, whose waves are anything but serene while the full moon seems curiously calming with its pure, gentle white light, which casts fanciful shadows on the masses of clouds scudding across the night sky.

The deity of the stars in Shinto rules over the ocean—Taiki-san tells you—and the moody ebb and flow of life governed by what people like to call "destiny" is represented by the stars. Hence the three roses the Kou brothers throw stand for the three celestial forces which govern over any human life and affect the destiny a human being is supposed to fulfil according to the philosophies of Shinto.

"It's one of the few positive concepts of how life should be nurtured so that it assumes some significance. The same applies to relationships as well."

Coming to life in heat and light due to primal needs, waxing and waning in cycles and growing at night and in sleep, protected by the right actions and the right timing to flow to its final destination in the unpredictable, mercurial currents of destiny… Ideally, love should be the same—you silently agree. But in reality, love will seldom if ever live up to this ideal.

The roses, which were initially meant to celebrate life, have been mistaken for romantic tokens by the fans. Fights erupted over the flowers the first time Three Lights threw them so that Shizuka-san briefly considered selling a small bouquet of three roses to each person in the audience. Since it would be too expensive and devalue the roses Three Lights threw, however, she eventually dropped the scheme.

"I heard from Tenoh-san that Kudo-san tried to secure the top-secret files of the Black Organization for the police but lost them during the storm," Taiki-san unexpectedly says, darting you a piercing glance before refocusing his attention back to *Serenity in Blue*, which, on closer inspection, depicts an impending storm in the middle of the moonlit sea. Kudo-san should have learned the files by heart instead of relying on technology too much, Sticks adds with a smirk. Speed-memorization is a much- underrated skill although it can be troublesome to have an almost eidetic memory.

He must be the seventh crow, you think, as he has just mentioned Tenoh-san and alluded to the mnemonic techniques the highest codename members were required to master. Among the three brothers, Taiki-san looks like the most likely candidate for the seventh crow with his sudden fits of impatience, which border on rudeness, and his cold, calculating nature. His hair colour—a deep shade of auburn darker than yours—can hardly be described as "blonde", but it makes sense that Kakyuu asked you whether you had seen a blonde man if Taiki-san had worn a wig to protect Kakyuu.

Taiki-san would have honked at Kakyuu if he had seen her immersed in a conversation with a stranger he preferred not to meet; Taiki-san would have taken Kakyuu by the hand to lead her to his motorbike; Taiki-san would certainly have had the guts to vote against the other crows for his idea of justice even though he would have unscrupulously betrayed and murdered his boss and his closest associates while pretending to be their ally. Seiya is unlikely to be the seventh crow for so
many reasons—but all the details would suddenly make sense if Taiki-san was the seventh crow.

All of a sudden you feel the urge to talk about Pandora's Box—to inform Seiya's cool but supportive middle brother (perhaps you were wrong and Taiki-san resembles Mycroft Holmes more than Moriarty) about all the things which have gone dreadfully wrong due to Kudo's foresight and a small change in plan. In the beginning, fate had seemed surprisingly benevolent. You had been extremely stealthy when you slunk away from the pension where Hattori, Kudo, and you stayed; and your remedy for insomnia, which you initially created for the Professor and which you had mixed into Kudo's and Hattori's hot chocolates, should have been strong enough to make the two master detectives sleep soundly until the sun set on the next day. You found the Beretta Tenoh-san hid for you in the forest even in the pitch dark as planned and waited for Gin at the spot Tenoh-san marked. Her well-chosen hiding place allowed you to see both the Werewolf Cliff and the log cabin, whose underground passage Gin was going to open.

Your first mistake was to underestimate Vodka's Herculean toughness. The useless brute was weakened but not killed by your poison, as Tenoh-san informed you on the phone, so you were going to face two opponents instead of one. Couldn't she come to your assistance, you asked her calmly, controlling your mounting panic. Of course she could, Tenoh-san retorted, but then she would have to shoot Kudo as well to protect her family since your shiny knight was hard on your heels! Your fancy pills don't ever seem to work properly, my little kitten!

A few minutes later, your detective made his heroic appearance by moonlight—not alone but accompanied by his Osakan friend, who had seen through parts of your scheme and purposely thrown up his dinner as well. Neither of them were in a charitable mood after the self-inflicted abuse you had made them go through, but both of them had sufficient energy left to ignore any whisper of conscious self-awareness and to deliver a sermon on how you should work together as a team instead of facing the danger all by yourself. You're so predictable, Kudo had the temerity to claim. Your tendency to sacrifice yourself is like an obsolete built-in kamikaze-function which no sensible talk can shut off. You don't even care about what would happen to me if you died for the files—and that just when we've finally brought down the Organization!…

You miraculously managed to convince Kudo to hush his voice before Gin appeared on the dot, and opened the door to the log cabin. But Kudo, impulsive as he had always been and would always be, followed your ex-boyfriend into the cabin for fear of losing hard evidence despite knowing that Vodka must still be lurking outside.

What happened afterwards happened in a matter of seconds. The three of you were tailing Gin on his way to the ship when Vodka attacked you from behind, aiming at you but shooting directly at the spot where Kudo's head would have been if you hadn't reacted in time. Vodka's aim had always been abysmal, but you were trembling with fear because, despite your apprehension, you hadn't expected him to be so deadly in his blundering incompetence.

Hattori, who had been fast enough to reach Vodka before the latter could shoot at you for the second time (Hattori's reflexes had been sharpened by years of serious kendo training while Vodka's speed of reaction couldn't beat that of a sleep-deprived slow loris), knocked out your wild card of an adversary and bound and gagged him with Kudo's help. And thus your only souvenir of the encounter with Vodka's Browning was a superficial flesh wound even though the loss of blood could have been fatal if you had been in a child's body. What would have happened had you decided against taking the antidote before your trip to Pandora's Box? The choice would have led to a completely different outcome of your story because there would have been no quarrel but also no romance in Paris—only a critically wounded Haibara Ai, who would have needed medical help so that Kudo would have had to abort the mission instantly.
Despite the complications, the Pandora's Box mission would have ended well if you had shot Gin instead of wounding him, you conclude. But without the drama at Pandora's Box, you might never have met your stranger…

"Kudo knows nothing about the real Pandora's Box," you inform Taiki-san to gauge his reaction. "All the files he found in the main computer were useless, so he didn't make a real effort to save them before the ship exploded."

Taiki-san doesn't show the slightest indication of surprise at the revelation—and you're now almost certain that he was indeed the seventh crow, who, cautious as he is, only doesn't reveal himself to you in case he is mistaken about your role in the enterprise. Hampered by the same caution and mistrust, you tell him about your attempt to backup the real files "for the agents motards" without touching on the issue of the poisons and the scapegoat you had to eliminate. You've used Meioh Setsuna's Night Baron copy to remove the data on Kudo, Hattori, and you from the email which the alert system would have sent to the blackmailed bigwigs if you had backed up Pandora's Box, you admit, but the copy couldn't compare with the real Night Baron so that you had to wipe out Pandora's Box to prevent the email from being sent after the final countdown.

"What did the Night Baron copy do?" To all appearances, Tenoh-san hasn't told Taiki-san about the Night Baron copy, which was odd if he had really been the seventh crow as you deduced.

"It was supposed to remove the names of all the people who entered the cabin, but it didn't work as it should have, so Kudo's name was still attached to the email." In truth, the Night Baron copy did exactly what it was supposed to do: it deleted all the names and particulars of the people who entered the cabin but the name and particulars of the first person who entered Pandora's Box—in this case everything but the particulars of Gin, your invaluable scapegoat.

"It's a pity Tenoh-san didn't ask me to develop a copy for her." Taiki-san smiles at the thought. "I'm sure I'd have succeeded. My virus would have been a better and faster version of the Night Baron if she had given me enough time to work on it." On second thought—he muses—perhaps Tenoh-san was right when she decided not to ask him since he would most probably have refused to support her group. "I can't trust Tenoh-san," he coldly explains. "I've never understood why Seiya helps her out whenever she asks him to! She is like the wind… changing her direction and her temperature whenever it suits her!"

As it turns out, Stick is not the seventh crow. And while you're wandering through the maze of kinmokusei and wisteria on the roof terrace, whose stems and leaves are glazed by a broken layer of raindrops shimmering in the morning light, you realize without the expected surge of relief that prudence—your old enemy and ally—has just saved you from making a dire mistake. Without appearing particularly understanding, Stick has the kind of aura which only natural psychiatrists have; and you were about to give away Tenoh-san's and your secret to him despite knowing that you can't predict his reaction.

You should have read and memorized the files in Pandora's Box before deleting them, Taiki-san insists, stressing the importance of memorization again, whereupon you ask him whether he has learned most of the books in his library by heart as you suspect. He can recite all those books and not only them, he asserts; and all the books he has read are still available to him whenever he chooses to remember them although even he forgets details from time to time.

Forgetting is an important skill as well, he thinks aloud, his dramatic voice softened yet again by his particular tranquil brand of sorrow. In certain circumstances, forgetting is even more important than remembering. "I can't forget well," he asserts without false modesty. "I'll never forget a grudge—and even if I wanted to, I'd never forgive. If anyone hurts the people I love, I will torture
them over and over again and be so competent at it that they won't even manage to die before I want them to!"

The implicit threat—*your life, dear future sister-in-law, will be a living hell if you dare to hurt my little brother!*—has been uttered with such nonchalance and gentleness that it sends a chill down your spine. He has bought *Serenity in Blue* (or *The End of the World*) because he appreciated Kaioh-san's rendering of the moon's light, he adds as if the talk about the painting were only an afterthought and not a dizzying change of topic. Although the moon's white light possesses a reddish tint (which Kaioh-san, divinely gifted and prodigiously skilled as she is, accurately painted and which you could see if you covered the moon's surroundings with a white sheet of paper), the viewer will usually believe it to be blue. It's the nature of our perception, which can't recognize the colour of a detail without including the colours of its surroundings and which will always favour the overall impression.

"Does it matter if moonlight is red if the viewer will interpret it as blue? If you were the moon, which colour would you prefer—the true colour, or the colour other people will see whenever they look at you?"

There it is, the test you've anticipated and feared when he ushered you out of Seiya's apartment, which is more obscure and indirect than you would have expected it to be. For an agonizing moment, you let your eyes linger on the azalea and cherry blossoms, whose colours, too, would change in the moonlight until they are perfectly unrecognizable. If you were the moon, you tell Taiki-san, you wouldn't care about anyone's colour perception.

"If I were the artist or the observer, I would want to know both, though," you amend. "It's important to see both sides of the truth, don't you think so?"

"It's the harder way to live," he smiles; and while you can tell that he has come to a decision regarding you at last, you can't tell whether you've passed or failed this time.

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Part 26: Descending the stairs...

Descending the stairs...

Descending the stairs to Seiya's apartment, you discover that Taiki-san was right: Seiya and Yaten-san must have "kissed and made up" in the meantime, as they're standing on the threshold together like a loving married couple preparing to go for a routine morning walk. Shortie even manages to conjure up a rueful smile, which instantly transforms him from Snow White's stepmother to Snow White herself. Clutching the parasol in one hand and the incense burner in the other, he looks like a fairytale princess (you bet Shortie would feel the pea through twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdown beds!) who has just received her fairy godmother's long-awaited present on her twenty-fourth birthday.

"I've told your girlfriend about our family," says Taiki-san to Seiya after acknowledging the loot in Yaten-san's hands with a fleeting glance. "You only need to fill the gaps. I think it may interest her how hard you've been struggling with our parents' former employees ever since the family business went bankrupt." To your surprise, his searching gaze travels from Seiya's to Yaten-san's face. "I think she deserves to know all the details. What do you think, Yaten?"

Like the head of the family (or the deity of the stars, who rules over the ocean and decides over each human being's destiny by governing the ebb and flow of life), the oldest brother lets his moody gaze rest on your face for a moment, hesitating as though he had to decide over something as grave as your time of death, before he gives a dismissive wave.

"Do whatever you want—I'm washing my hands of this!" Joining the flower-loving middle brother at the stairs, Yaten-san turns to Seiya for a last time. "Tell her everything if you must—but don't blame me if you're single again within less than an hour!"

With that, he leaves, climbing the stairs to the penthouse apartment with light and steady but cautious steps—the only indications of his injury. You believe to recognize a pitying look in his cool feline eyes when he opens the door and steps inside, but he has turned away so quickly that it might have been only a trick of the light.

"Please do talk about the Hollywood remakes so that we can tell Shizuka-san your decision when she visits us in the studio this afternoon. She went into hysterics when you didn't return to the club last night! It took me three glasses of Starry Night to shut her up." Flashing you a victorious smile, Taiki-san pleasantly adds, "Starry Night is a Chardonnay with Poire William eau de vie and Luxardo Maraschino liqueur—very aromatic! You can also make a Starry Night with sparkling rosé and Van Gogh Açaí-Blueberry Vodka. Since there are many different Starry Night recipes with different ingredients, a Starry Night cocktail can vary in taste, colour, and cloudiness. It's a true chameleon, so to speak, which should always be served chilled. There are white, red, violet, and blue Starry Nights. I especially like the Starry Night Martini with Stoli Citrus and Blue Curaçao! Since it contains Blue Curaçao, it's of the same intense, iconic blue as the more well-known Blue Lagoon. We always garnish our Starry Night with a lavender rose bud. Maybe you'd like to try it out in our club someday when you have time—if you haven't tried it yet."

If looks could kill, Taiki-san would be dead, murdered by your boyfriend's impossibly blue eyes. The revelation doesn't come as a surprise, however, as you've already eliminated all the other choices; and the knowledge that Seiya must have been the seventh crow doesn't disturb you in the least. On the contrary, you feel strangely relieved—as if you had just been sentenced to death but escaped through a hidden tunnel leading to everlasting freedom.
"Since I really love Blue Curaçao, I'm sure I'm going to love the Starry Night. I might as well try out different versions of it until I find the one I like most. Thanks a lot for the invitation!"

Seiya, who has been watching your reaction to his brother's words in silence, looks just as relieved as you're feeling. Apparently, he has been anxious about your response, which is understandable, taking into account the unfortunate coincidence that you're a friend of "the detective who has brought down the Organization" and have also been in a less than satisfying relationship with another crow.

"The spare key!" he demands after Taiki-san bids you goodbye. And when your boyfriend of four hours slips the key, which Taiki-san has grudgingly handed him, into your pocket with the words, "I'm not going to accept the roles unless you promise me that you will join me on the set within one or two months", you're walking on air again—floating away on skies of rainbow-coloured clouds and gazing down at all the unease and trepidation Stick has evoked with an indulgent expression on your face. Poor Taiki-san, who is only concerned about his youngest brother's unhealthy infatuation with a complete stranger! You would be just as apprehensive as him if you were in his shoes, especially since said stranger is also in love with the same detective who has declared said brother to be the culprit who has pulled the plug to Kakyuu's life support system...

And yet, when your beautiful stranger and you are walking on foot to your place, gliding through a soft, diffused morning light and sweet fragrance of spring roses which would have inspired Shakespeare to write another sonnet cycle (Seiya said he would like to show you the way from his apartment to yours to steal more time with you before he returned you to Kudo), you are seized by a grim sense of foreboding, which manifests itself in the mounting ache in your stomach and turns into pangs of agony at the sight of Tsukino-san's café on the other side of the street. Here Seiya must have jumped from his monstrous bike, waited in front of the open door, and honked rapidly at Kakyuu, with whom he drove off without a greeting or a backward glance at you—a girl he had already met at Infinity. The scene doesn't make sense to you, as you can clearly imagine how it would have been if Seiya had starred in it: Stranger-san would have entered Tsukino-san's café with a smile and greeted the waiter and the waitress. He would have joined Kakyuu and you at the table, winked at you, and—ignoring all the people around you—pecked his foster sister on her cheek before ordering himself a cup of coffee. Afterwards, he would have studied the stranger who looked oddly familiar. "I think we've met somewhere. Was it at Infinity during the Christmas concert? Your sister has even forced your number on me—imagine that!"

Pure conjectures, idle speculations! Ignoring social conventions, your boyfriend has just grabbed you on the street for a lingering kiss and only stopped when you two arrived at the traffic lights, which have already turned green. Since it's impossible to think rational thoughts when you have to fight your light-headedness like a roaring drunk, you abandon yourself to your sensations—his scent of sweet osmanthus, which fills you with a sense of nostalgia by turning spring into autumn; his warm lips and breath on the back of your hand when he sneaks you random kisses; his hand you're now holding, which feels like a cozy hand warmer in the cool spring morning.

"So you were the seventh crow, weren't you? You said you supported Tenoh-san's group even though you weren't part of it." Even to your own ears, your voice sounds hopeful, almost urgent, as you two are strolling past Tsukino-san's café with your fingers entwined. "Don't worry, I was a codename member myself! I don't mind if you once belonged to the Organization."

While you can't imagine Seiya to be the seventh crow, you almost wish that he was after the palaver his brothers caused. If Seiya was the seventh crow—so you keep telling yourself—he and you would have fought on the same side with the same allies and defeated the same enemy with your combined efforts. You two would have lied to each other about Kakyuu but your deceptions would have cancelled themselves out. Generous as your stranger is, he will forgive you for an
accident you didn't want to (and maybe didn't even) cause. Eventually, he and you will be linked by an even stronger bond—by the same tragedy, which has connected your lives like the invisible, indestructible red string of fate. Things would be absolutely perfect if Seiya was the seventh crow…

"No, of course I wasn't," says your new boyfriend and future life partner in genuine surprise. "What are you talking about?" Bewildered, he stops at the picturesque bridge in front of you to look you in the eye. "I thought Taiki has told you everything. Don't tell me he has only played a prank on you when he showed you our terrace!" He smiles, shaking his head at your question. Apparently, he would have been greatly amused by the misunderstanding if he hadn't noticed that you aren't feeling well.

"Cold sweat again!" your stranger observes after touching your forehead, and spontaneously kisses your temple. Hopefully you haven't caught a flu, he remarks while pulling you into a comforting embrace, leaving his arm around your waist while you two continue to stroll across the bridge and he directs your attention to the shimmering turquoise depth of the water below. "In that case, I'd have to play the role of your grandmother and tuck you in tonight—not my favourite part, I can assure you!—but you can choose where we sleep, your place or mine…"

Meanwhile, you recoil in horror from the realization that he isn't lying to you at all—and the truth, which you've feared but not dared to express, is coiling around you like a poisonous, deadly snake. With a sinking feeling in your stomach, you recall the things Taiki-san has told you about their family and become aware of the fact that there was something you didn't comprehend—that your seemingly reasonable deduction must be faulty because it was based on a mistaken assumption.

"How old is your bike?" you ask Seiya on impulse, whereupon he marvels at your rapid change of topic. "When did you buy it? I think I've seen you on it before, years ago. It's been nagging at me for hours!"

"As old as the hills," he claims, accompanying his words with a nonchalant wave. "I was searching for a bike back then, and Haruka-san absolutely wanted to get rid of the clunky beast because she preferred the latest Suzuki Hayabusa. Hence I took pity on it and have been using it for the last three or four years. I can't comprehend why Haruka-san dislikes it so much. It's a custom-made, street-legal version of a Dodge Tomahawk for two people and was once featured at many motorcycle shows. Many motorcycle enthusiasts are still trying to buy it from me."

That was the missing puzzle piece you needed—the answer to why a man like Seiya, who doesn't show much interest in any means of transportation, would buy such a flashy, extravagant monstrosity of a motorcycle.

Tenoh Haruka's windswept blonde hair was glimmering in all shades of colours in the Parisian twilight; the blue-clad biker didn't want to enter the café to meet you; Once was more than enough, Tenoh-san said…

Under different circumstances, you would have lingered over the thought that the highest codename members must have proven their loyalty to the Organization, wondering how many sacrifices Tenoh-san must have made, how many treacherous acts she must have committed against her own vigilante group to win Anokata's trust and the position of the seventh crow despite her family background—but right now you couldn't care less about Tenoh-san and your revenge, which has cost you more than you can pay. All you can see is Seiya, who, leaning over the bridge, is beholding the scenery around him with smiling eyes. Greek Gods are known to wait until you've forgotten about them before they claim their right. And when the memory of Monet's House and the blue eyes of the Cupid in your dreams emerge from the back of your mind, it strikes you that...
the quarrel at Pandora's Box might not have been Athena's real price.

g.
When memories are too painful to be relived, it's best to delay the soul-searching until you can't delay it any longer. Once again, I shrink in horror from the moment when all the reasons why I can't ever be happy with my stranger materialized from the mist of blissful ignorance and haunted me like the vengeful snake-haired Furies or Erinyes with bloodshot eyes—the embodied self-cursing born from blood and pain. Safe in my conviction that I had been punished enough for the poisons I created, I had forgotten that Greek Gods are just as flawed and unreasonable as humans and that you have to pay them back with interest if they grant you a favour.

Since time is running out (Shizuka-san is going to give him a call when she is done with packing), he won't bore me with all the medical explanations and will only inform me about what Kakyuu would have had to endure in life if she had survived—says stranger-san, who is now standing at the low railing in front of the pond, resting a foot on it like he did during our first real encounter. He reminds me more of a celebrity husband who is about to go abroad to work on the set of a new movie than of an ex-boyfriend who is about to pack and leave—a thought which consoles me enough to help me focus on the story he is telling me.

It wasn't the usual heart-warming, award-winning, ticket-selling story of a stunningly beautiful young redhead in a wheelchair, who would eventually learn to walk again with the power of love. Kakyuu wouldn't only have been unable to perform the most basic acts of living like eating or going to the loo for the rest of her life—she would also have spent every waking moment in terror because she would have lost most of her spatial orientation.

She wouldn't have been able to write and read; she wouldn't have known how to open doors because she wouldn't have figured out how to handle a doorknob; she would have felt dizzy in her armchair or in her bed even if she hadn't been moving at all. She would have suffered from sudden seizures in which she could have bitten off her tongue. Since her hippocampus was damaged beyond repair but not damaged enough to spare her the pain, she would have been stuck in her past memories—almost unable to create new ones—but her pain and fears and nightmares would have been so horrible that she wouldn't have been able to survive without being on drugs for twenty-hours a day. Like most patients who suffered from the same condition, she would have tried to kill herself but wouldn't have succeeded because she wouldn't have known how to do it even if she had had the tools.

Since this was certainly not what Kakyuu would have defined as living and murdering Kakyuu after she had already woken up from her coma was too gruesome a task, Three Lights decided to end Kakyuu's suffering by tempering with the alarm system and deactivating the life support machine when they learned that she was "recovering". It was child's play for a hacker like Taiki to deactivate the alarm, but when it came to the question of who should pull the plug of the life support machine, it became clear that none of the three brothers were eager to do the deed, which was why they decided to draw lots.

"And you tricked your two brothers so that the task of pulling the plug would fall on you?" Although it hasn't escaped me what a great team Three Lights makes, I've also noticed that Seiya is their driving force and likely the one who has to pull the chestnuts out of fire.

"How did you deduce that?" His amazement at my lucky guess is most flattering; and since I've learned from Sherlock Holmes' mistakes that a magician should never reveal his or her tricks, I
only flash my stranger an enigmatic smirk.

"Because I'm Sherry Holmes—and because I've learned to read your mind just like you're reading mine."

"One day, we two will have mastered our mind-reading skills so that we can skip all the talking."

He gives me a little wink, which reminds me of the one he gave me when we talked about Stinger and Infinity, whereupon we both fall silent to smile at each other. A green flash, like the one that usually occurs when the sun dips below the horizon, momentarily alters the colour of the world around us—and it wouldn't have surprised me if the sun, which has fully disappeared behind the horizon by now, had chosen this moment to rise again. I could have told my stranger that I would always enjoy listening to the sound of his voice even if he were blabbering nonsense—but I refrain from telling him, as he would have deduced that I was getting meaner and meaner towards him just because my feelings for him have deepened with time.

Taiki and Yaten would never have been able to live with their guilt after deactivating Kakyuu's life support system—Seiya soberly remarks—which was why he had to do it for them. The plan was deceptively simple. Three Lights were going to visit Kakyuu for the last time and do all the things they always did as a way of bidding adieu to the girl they loved. Afterwards, Taiki-san was going to manipulate the alarm system, and Seiya, the last foster brother to visit Kakyuu, was going to pull the plug. Seiya was also going to inform Mizuno-san about the mercy killing so that no one else would be suspected and let Mizuno-san, who was intelligent enough to be jury and judge, decide what to do with her knowledge.

"She would have had to share her knowledge with the investigators," I remark.

He didn't fear detection, my stranger asserts. If Kakyuu had survived, she would have suffered for the rest of her life. Apart from a few years of imprisonment or hard labour, nothing could really happen to Seiya, who was convinced that he would have hijacked the prison just as he had hijacked the "family business" his parents had left. The sentence would have been more lenient than what he could receive for leading an organization that plotted to overthrow the government—which was actually considered treason and could earn him a flatteringly harsh punishment like the death penalty.

Overcome with grief and the horror of the situation when the date of Kakyuu's death drew near, Seiya sought solace in his drums, which he tortured so often that the landlord of the studio thought he was going to perform again. After bidding farewell to Kakyuu with a pot of cyclamen, the flowers of true love, sorrowful resignation, and death, Seiya ran in and out of the hospital for a few times because he tried hard to pull the plug but couldn't do it.

On the sterile hospital bed, surrounded by tubes and cables, Kakyuu must have looked like a modern incarnation of Sleeping Beauty with the difference that she wouldn't have been woken up by a kiss even if Seiya had tried. Although my stranger knew that it was ridiculous to expect that his princess would recover, he clung to the tiny flicker of hope that she wouldn't suffer as much as the specialists had predicted. It was impossible for him to end her life when she didn't even look like she was suffering.

"I thought that even the best specialists could make mistakes although I had already consulted ten specialists or more."

Unable to pull the plug but also unable to stay away, Seiya went for a walk before returning to the hospital for a last time to ask Mizuno-san again how the chances for Kakyuu's mental recovery were, whereupon he received the same answer as always. If she woke up, Kakyuu would probably
survive but stay permanently impaired for life since all the most important parts of her cerebral cortex and especially her hippocampus had been damaged beyond repair. An arm or a leg could be replaced but not a brain, and the greatest tragedy of the situation was that Kakyuu wouldn't only be an empty shell of her former self. Kakyuu would have possessed most of the memories of the girl she once was without having the capacity to become that girl again.

"I returned to Kakyuu to deactivate the life support system because it was the most sensible thing I could do for her—but it was like a spell I couldn't break! Kakyuu was pale but looked so peaceful, as if she was only fast asleep; and I simply couldn't pull the plug although this damn 'Beep, beep, beep' of the life support machine was driving me insane!"

"What did you say? The 'beep'…"

"The beeping sound of the equipment! You know these annoyingly high sounds, which the washing machine also makes? I'd rather die than endure the racket as a patient in intensive care! Taiki had deactivated the loud alarm which would have gone off when the life support system was disabled, but of course we couldn't have tempered with the life support system without risking detection before I could pull the plug. And this nasty 'beep, beep, beep'—" he taps the steady rhythm of the beeping sound, which I can hear faintly but clearly in my inner ear, on the back of his hand before he grabs his head in pain at the memory, "—was unbearable!"

Deep, faraway voices and shuffles accompany the beeping sound in my ear, but since I'm not particularly interested in hospital sounds, I blend them out to focus on the beautiful voice of the beautiful man in front of me.

"I had already removed all the fingerprints on the life support machine so that no one else would be suspected, but I still couldn't pull the plug. Meanwhile, the beeping sound had become so maddening that I didn't want to stay there any longer. Hence I did what I always did when I was saddled with a task I didn't really want to do…"

"You threw a coin?"

"No, I delayed."

"Ah, you procrastinator, you!"

He grins and tilts his head to blow me a kiss before his eyes light up at the remembrance.

"I told myself that if I couldn't do it—maybe I shouldn't do it! It was better to delay it than to make a hasty decision."

Thus Seiya went home and collapsed into bed to sleep on it. He didn't even talk with anyone so as not to let others influence his decision.

It was already evening when Seiya was woken up by the obstinate ringing of his phone. Taiki-san was calling Seiya to say that Kakyuu's death had been discovered and that Kudo Shinichi must be on the way to Seiya's apartment. Seiya shouldn't say anything without their lawyer, whom Shizuka-san had already ordered to come, and since the police hadn't received the permission to search the apartment yet, Seiya should play dead until the lawyer arrived. Seiya told Taiki-san that he didn't deactivate the life support system, which left Three Lights with a mystery of who the real culprit was since Taiki-san and Yaten-san, who were at the library and the hairdresser's, couldn't have pulled the plug either.

"But you said that you were the one who deactivated Kakyuu's life support system!" I exclaim,
scowling in indignation at the realization that my stranger must have deceived me by pretending to be the culprit despite being innocent.

"Did I?" He smirks, shooting me a mocking, teasing glance, for which I could kick him. "No, I didn't! I only said it would be better for us if you didn't have such a high opinion of me when you claimed I couldn't kill anything but ants. You should see me with cockroaches—to my enemies and pests like cockroaches, I can be a cold-blooded, merciless mass murderer!"

He would have pulled the plug to Kakyuu's life support system sooner or later, Seiya asserts, as he still considers his hesitation a weakness. If Kakyuu had woken up, he would certainly have been the one who ended her suffering. As things were, Seiya was only bewildered by the news and devastated by Kakyuu's sudden death, which he, unlike Taiki and Yaten, wasn't prepared for since he had expected to see her again after delaying his decision to pull the plug.

"After Taiki's phone call I got up, showered, and sat down at the desk to ponder what to do with myself now that Kakyuu was gone. It shouldn't make a difference to me since she had been in a coma for so long, but somehow it did. I was struggling with the realization that she was no longer alive—that we would have to bury her or cremate her and that I would never see her again." His face clouds over with deep, overwhelming sorrow before he knits his brows and his blue eyes assume the colour of ice. "That's what I was doing when your detective came."

"I was oddly relieved when Kudo turned up on the doorstep: finally there was someone I could talk to—a famous detective who would help me solve the mystery of Kakyuu's death! Of course I've heard of Kudo Shinichi before—who hasn't? I didn't resent Kudo for 'bringing down the Black Organization'—it wasn't his fault that we happened to be on opposite sides of the fight. Since he was a great opponent, I expected him to be a great ally. I was glad that there was another human being in my apartment because I didn't want to be alone but also didn't want to deal with Taiki's and Yaten's grief when I already had enough on my plate."

After ushering Kudo into the living room, stranger-san offered Kudo a drink, which Kudo declined with the comment that he disliked alcohol and preferred tea. Hence Seiya made tea for both of them (bourbon vanilla and peach, said my stranger when I asked him what flavour he chose) and asked Kudo to make himself comfortable in the armchair or on the sofa, which Kudo declined as well.

"He preferred to stand since he could study his surroundings better that way—so Kudo told me—and he seldom sat down at a suspect's place because he had to react swiftly if he was attacked. Weird guy—I thought—but since everyone had their pet quirks, I just accepted it and we began to talk about Kakyuu."

On the spur of the moment, my stranger and fairy godfather turns away from me and, closing his eyes, snaps his fingers twice before spoiling me with the most amazing transformation I've ever witnessed. When he whirls around to shoot me a cool, analytical, dissecting gaze, I can swear that Kudo is standing here, as I will always recognize my dearest guinea pig's presence after having studied him for so long.

"Since I'm in a hurry, I'm going to keep this short!" Seiya declares in Kudo's voice, imitating Kudo's pronunciation, manner of articulation, melody of speech, and gestures from memory so well that he might as well be Kudo. "First, only you and your foster brothers had a motive to pull the plug to Kakyuu-san's life support system—caring for a severely impaired person is a great challenge, and sometimes the relatives of the comatose patients who won't fully recover upon waking up from their coma want to spare their loved ones a life in dependency. But since Mizuno-
san entered Kakyuu-san's room during one of your visits and we can safely assume that Mizuno-san would have noticed if Kakyuu-san had already been dead at that time, I deduce that neither of your brothers were in the hospital when Kakyuu-san died: both of them have an alibi while you were the only one on the crime scene!"

Stranger-san pauses for effect, darts me a Kudo-Shinichi-smirk, and then paces up and down again to continue his denouement.

"Second, since Kakyuu-san was still alive when you visited her, you're the only person who could have pulled the plug apart from Mizuno-san and Ishihara-san, both of whom have absolutely no interest in your foster sister's death because their reputation and the reputation of the hospital would have been severely tarnished by it! Third, you've played the drums 'like a maniac' for a whole week before Kakyuu-san's death, as I've learned from the landlord of the house where you and your brothers have your secret private studio—the place where I found your two brothers and where your agent expected me to find you!"

Flicking his wrist as though he were wiping a speck of dirt off his jacket, my stranger gives a perfect Kudo-Shinichi-chuckle. "You're known to be hedonistic and lazy in artistic circles, but playing drums obsessively is your way to cope with grief. No, I didn't have to snoop around: it was kid's stuff to get the information out of your scarly supportive but also dangerously talkative agent." His warm, husky voice has softened just like Kudo's voice usually softens whenever Kudo is hampered by a tinge of sympathy, but when he proceeds with his speech, both his voice and his gaze have cooled and hardened. "You've been grieving for Kakyuu-san for a whole week before she died because you knew in advance that she wouldn't survive your next visit! You didn't want her to suffer the life of a mentally and physically impaired, and you would have loved to shut off life support for her—but since the probability was high that she was going to wake up from her coma, you weren't allowed to do it!"

Although Kudo can be brutally honest and also lacks compassion when it comes to criminals (which must be a vocational disease since he has met too many of the most despicable specimens of the human species throughout the years), this insulting behaviour doesn't sound like him at all. It takes me a moment to recall that Kakyuu died on my birthday out of all days and that Kudo must have been in a hurry because he tried to make it on time for our date. In retrospect, one could say that Kudo has handed me his defeat as a birthday present without knowing.

"While I was waiting on the sofa, pouring him tea and listening to his deductions, he was pacing up and down and studying the shelves with an expression of annoyance and utter boredom," my stranger continues in his real voice. "It was obvious that he was eager to finish this case so that he could finally get away. Maybe he was only tired and irritated by the lack of hard evidence or by the simplicity of the case, which was no challenge for a detective like him—but I was exhausted as well! There was no reason why I should confide in a detective who made no secret of his lack of interest in Kakyuu and his contempt for me—a person he had never met!—and I was repulsed by his habit of checking his watch compulsively as if every single minute he spent in my apartment was one minute wasted on a senseless, unprofitable case of euthanasia."

Before my eyes, I can see the two loves of my life sharing this scene, which resembles a tragicomic vignette of misconmunication more than the denouement in a mystery movie: My stranger, despondent and puzzled after Kakyuu's mysterious death, is sitting in front of an exquisite tea set (which might have belonged to Kakyuu) and two full tea cups (which are getting cold), staring in disbelief at the blundering, overrated master sleuth, who is pacing the living room like a restless hunting dog while rattling down all the details of the case like an unfeeling case-solving robot would have done… My detective, meanwhile, is checking his watch every other second because he is eager to get away from the notorious playboy, womanizer, and second-rate murderer, whose
only task is to confess the simple act of euthanasia to the other suspects so that poor Kudo Shinichi, who has once again stumbled over a blasted easy mystery while he would rather be with his lovely albeit difficult date, can finally wrap up the case and return to Haibara Ai’s place…

According to Kudo’s version of the meeting, Kudo had found my place empty before he visited the suspect he believed to be the culprit. Keeping in mind Kudo’s reaction to my comment that he had sent me Kaito as replacement for him, I can safely infer that Kudo knew about Kaito’s intentions towards me—Kudo said that Kaito had done his research on me well, and even a socially challenged man like Kudo couldn’t have overlooked the yellow rose with orange-red stripes I received from Kaito at the goodbye party after the Organization was dismantled. Therefore Kudo must have guessed that I was on a romantic date with Kaito while he was stuck at Seiya’s place—a situation which must have troubled my detective more than he had expected.

At long last, my resentment against Kudo evaporates—leaving me with a sense of lightness and peace I haven’t known for a long time. The knowledge that my detective might have suffered just as much as I did from the distance we had put between us even when he was in a fairly happy relationship was the cure I needed—the last fragment of the truth I’ve hoped to find.

"Kudo wasn’t only in a rotten mood—he also behaved like a diva worse than Yaten! After listing all the clues which led him to me, he glanced at his watch again, sighed, shook his head, and groaned—probably at the utter waste of time when he would rather be anywhere but here!—before he dramatically turned to me and barked, 'In view of the compelling evidence…'" For a moment, my stranger freezes before he (or rather Kudo!) whips around with a flourish to scowl at me with hostile, piercing eyes and to point his accusing index finger into my face. '"…and from the fact that once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth," stranger-san spits out each word individually, his beautiful face contorted with revulsion just as Kudo’s whenever Kudo convicts a particularly disgusting murderer, '"is—"' my faux-detective pauses for effect again and takes a deep breath before he dramatically hisses, '"…you!"'
Part 27: Despite myself...

Despite myself...

Despite myself, I laugh, whereupon stranger-san, who is still caught up in his role of "Kudo Shinichi the mystery-obsessed sleuth", raises a quizzical brow at me.

"Sorry!" I raise my hands to appease Kudo No. 2, as my laugh must have been an unwelcome interruption to his performance. "I've never noticed how awkward Kudo's speech would appear to a suspect who is actually innocent!"

To my infatuated eyes, Kudo's dramatic way of presenting his deductions has always seemed most impressive: concise, efficient, memorable, tinted with a dash of romance—a combination of Holmes's sardonic wit and Poirot's flair for the theatrical. Even Kudo's few mistakes, which are inevitable because he is only all too human just like me, doesn't take away from his accomplishments. To Seiya, however, who encountered Kudo under the most unfortunate circumstances and who has been declared culprit by Kudo even before Kudo bothered to try his tea, Kudo's attitude was barely tolerable.

"Since I didn't reply, your detective continued to strut about the living room in stony silence. And when I began to sip my tea because I was at a loss for words and seething with anger—I felt the wish to destroy something in view of the great detective's blundering incompetence!—he sat down in front of me to fix his cold, hostile gaze on me with a disapproving frown, which expressed his indignation all too well, while I wondered how he got the preposterous idea that he had the right to express his withering contempt for me here, at my apartment, when he didn't even care enough about my case to give it an hour of his precious time!" Stranger-san instantly reverts into Kudo again to deliver Kudo's lecture on murder and love, gesturing in the air like Kudo does whenever Kudo is especially concerned about getting his point across. "How could anyone kill the woman they claim to love? I could never do it no matter how much I wanted to be free! If you really loved her—or at least believed to have loved her—your crime would be even worse! Your only excuse is that you must have thought you were helping her to escape an ordeal which was even worse than death!"

Shedding the part of my detective within a fraction of a second, my stranger kicks at another pebble, sending it straight into the pond, which is now glittering in all shades of green, red, and lavender like a liquid fairytale mirror.

"Long story short: I escorted him out of my apartment without saying much—I can't even remember whether I've commented on his theory at all—or even at the window right then! Under different circumstances, I might have laughed at his inept handling of the case or pitied him for it, but that night I was thoroughly sick of his condescending attitude and his smug face! My world was in ruins but the great Sherlock of the East didn't care—to him, it was just another easy case! Kakyuu was dead—I was still trying to grapple with the reality that I was never going to see her again. I knew how hard it would be for Taiki and Yaten—especially for Yaten! I knew I had to let go if I wanted to stay sane, but there was nothing in my apartment which wasn't connected to her. I told myself that I had to keep myself occupied. If Kudo wasn't interested in the case, I'd rather try to solve it alone."

It's peculiar how different the same scene will look from another angle, with a different lighting solution and set to a different background music. While the novel of my life is dear to me because it's filled with my individual interpretation of the world—the only version of the truth which
matters when all is said and done—I must admit that, like most unhappy narrators, who have no energy left to deal with grief that isn't their own, I've skipped and glossed over the many clues which would have helped me comprehend the world of the people I loved. Hidden in the gaps are the many different versions of the One Truth, a chameleon which will continually be changing its taste and colours like that person's favourite cocktail. Kudo and I have been circling each other for years without touching, forcing ourselves to take the difficult and conventionally right decisions at the cost of our own happiness as if our feelings for each other could be taken for granted. Whenever the obstacles seem insurmountable and one isn't even sure that one's feelings are being reciprocated, it's easier to do without the connection one craves and endure a life of self-defeat than to take the plunge and fail. Recalling Kudo's frustration with me and his emotional outbursts, I'm sad to see that now that our time has run out and love is lost, I will never know how our story would have sounded from Kudo's point of view.

My stranger will never learn about my version of the truth either—neither about how our chance encounter has simultaneously saved and ruined my life nor about what a crucial part he has played in my story. Our relationship has become rather unbalanced, for he has helped me find the answers to my questions while I've only given him a mystery in return. I wonder how many errors are littering the book of his life or the book of Kudo's life—fundamental misunderstandings which will never be cleared up when the time for the epilogue comes.

Usually, Death will be knocking at one's rickety front door or rattling at one's dilapidated windows for years or decades before it arrives at last—tormenting the inhabitants of the house and warning the future corpses so that they can get their matters in order. But sometimes Death will come swiftly and unexpectedly, like a fall or, even more horrifying, a subtle slide down the gentle slope at the place which was once used for what Tiziano Scarpa coined the torture by hope: the fourth pillar of the Doge Palace, where the Venetians were said to give the prisoners condemned to death the very last chance (or rather the very last illusion of a chance) to escape their execution.

I prefer to call fourth pillar of the Doge Palace "the Torture of Hope"—not only because it sounds better than "Torture by Hope" but also because I believe that hope is not the tool but the torturer. Resignation is breeze without hope—to me, it's not death but the losing fight for happiness in times of despair which is truly terrifying.

"Why didn't you agree to marry Kakyuu when your foster parents asked you to do it?" I ask Seiya, as it's still a mystery to me why he didn't agree to marry Kakyuu if he loved her so much and she was deeply in love with him. They would have been the perfect couple who had met as children and spent their adolescence together. Seiya wouldn't have been kicked out and wouldn't have fallen in love with Odango, who is now married to someone else. Even if Odango were the loveliest woman on earth... Kakyuu was graceful and talented and one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen.

"I simply didn't want to," my stranger says in a low voice as though he is facing a terrible truth. "She thought that I didn't care about her enough to marry her—but I did love her. Perhaps she was too good."

Maybe he wasn't aware of it while she was still alive, but Seiya must have loved Kakyuu more than he was able to express—adored and admired her with the pure, selfless love which seldom exists between lovers and partners but only between siblings or comrades who had gone through hell together or grown up with each other. It was a love which would have lasted forever but would
never have ended in a functional marriage. A physical union, as tender as it can be, always has an aggressive, wild side to it—perhaps because a certain amount of wilderness is necessary for survival in nature.

Platonic love, which will eventually transcend one's adoration for one person into a love for all which is beautiful, doesn't require (and might even repel) any physical release beyond a hug or a chaste kiss. In contrast, the mysterious chemistry which hurls complete strangers into each other's passionate embrace can compel even experienced agents to reveal confidential information to the enemy. Romantic love, a combination of both, will always torture and hurt its victims—a truth which the ancient Greeks must have known when they feared Amor or Eros, the irresponsible prankster whose flaming torch or arrow lit the flame of love in the hearts of humans and gods.

Perhaps marriage is such a feat because one—or rather two, who are chained to each other by society's tyrannical manacles—would have to perform the sheer impossible balancing act of oscillating between all types of love and continuing to cherish what they have with each other even when (or especially when?) the currents of life are unpredictable and rough. And yet some people prefer being stuck with a stranger on the same bench and staying there until death do them part to watching the sunset all alone.

Fastening my gaze on the horizon, which is now a lambent purple band of light glittering with distant stars, I fight down the impulse to ask Seiya whether he will accept the movie offers since the reasons why he mustn't decline them should be self-evident to any halfway sensible person. Procrastination is an art, says the stubborn voice in my mind. Just push it away from you! Forget about it as long as you can, don't look at your watch! Just stall for time and filibuster Fate's victory by delaying the inevitable!
Part 28: But who is the...

"But who is the…"

"But who is the culprit?" you ask your stranger instead. After all, you can’t have only imagined Seiya’s reaction to Misa’s family name. Indefatigable as he is, your precious singer must have investigated Kakyuu’s death and found evidence against Ishihara-san although he couldn’t guess her motive until he learned that she is Taiki-san’s sonnet-loving admirer and "Misa-chan", the girl whom Taiki-san has given a private concert when she was in hospital.

"You're dying to know it," observes your stranger with an amused smile, "but I'm not going to tell you!"

After presenting you his version of the case, he has returned to the place beside you on the bench. The full moon in the night sky above the purple band of light, which hasn't undergone any changes during the last few minutes, is to your eyes a perfect blue. And when he leans over to pull you into his arms with a reassuring grin, what happens is a pas de deux which you two have practised together so often that one single gesture will trigger an automatic response. He and you are locking lips again although it's neither the time nor the place for this sort of pursuit. Or maybe it is the right time and place since the multitude of lanterns and strings of lights in the trees have created the illusion that the stars are tantalizingly within reach. You can easily fool yourself into believing that you only need to climb a cherry tree and extend a hand to touch them.

It's incomprehensible to you how anyone could prefer a one-night stand to an enduring relationship. Kisses and caresses are like wines which age well and will only improve with time. Although you feel so exhausted that you might as well be a woman of Miss Marple's age when Miss Marple solved her final cases and your stranger doesn't look as energetic as he looked last night either (a little more sleep would have done you two good), kissing him has become second nature.

"Why don't you want to tell me?" you ask him with a yawn. You would have loved to lay your head on his lap again, but for some unclear reason, you don't want to lie down at the moment. You're terrified by the idée fixe that you will fall asleep the moment you lie down and close your eyes—because intuition tells you that when you wake up, if you ever wake up, he won't be there.

"Because I wouldn't ever dare to talk down to Shiho Holmes!" He fixes your eyes with a challenging gaze. "Why don't you just deduce the identity of the culprit on your own?"

Seiya is definitely not the normal, nice, manageable man you've been searching for, but since it's a universally known fact that what you get from life is seldom what you expected to receive (and what you're gravitating to is sometimes different from what you think you need), you might as well make the best of it.

"Well, since you're aching for me to give you a demonstration of my razor-sharp deductive reasoning, Moriarty, I'm going to do it!" Putting on your haughtiest smirk, you flip your hair and cringe when you realize how much you must resemble Shortie. "After throwing my detective out of your apartment instead of doing the sensible thing—telling him the truth so that he could help you!—you drank up all the tea and stuffed yourself with whatever Taiki-san had left in your fridge because you hadn't eaten anything for a whole day and were practically starving—"

"No, I was starving, but the fridge was empty because Taiki, too, was affected by our plan to deactivate Kakyuu's life support—and I don't think I'd have been able to keep anything in my
stomach that night! I did finish the tea, though, and added a glass of Manzanilla sherry for the calories—"

"You drank wine on an empty stomach?" Although you've only known each other for a day, you have to fight the urge to put him on a healthy diet.

"It was only one glass—and sherry is the perfect wine to drink before a meal!"

"Except that you skipped the meal and the snack!" To your dismay, you realize that yours would have been a tumultuous relationship if it had worked out. You've been together, or rather been separated, for a few hours and you're already bickering about his alcohol consumption. "It's an age-old rule about imbibing alcohol," you insist, "one should never drink on an empty stomach lest one wants to get intoxicated at the speed of a bat out of hell!"

"Nonsense!" Unruly as he is, your would-have-been husband doesn't let himself be guided by you. "I was accustomed to that daily glass of sherry, and even Haruka-san has to admit that I have a very high level of alcohol dehydrogenase! I've never been drunk in my life—in contrast to you!" Pleased about your shocked expression, he flashes you a wicked smirk.

"Tenoh-san has told you!" you chance an inspired guess.

"Of course."

"What a horrible chatterbox! You two are worse than elementary school girls!"

"And you aren't?"

"Touché."

Since only Mizuno-san or Ishihara-san could have pulled the plug to Kakyuu's life support system unless someone from the outside had managed to enter the private hospital unobserved, you reason that your stranger must have visited either of the two women during his investigation. He could have called on Mizuno-san first because he seemed to know her better than Ishihara Misako—or he could have saved the talk with Mizuno-san for later for the same reasons. Most probably, Seiya visited Ishihara Misako first because Mizuno-san was unlikely to be the culprit, being the owner of the hospital and the doctor who must have been opposed to shutting off life support for Kakyuu, which was why Three Lights planned to deactivate the life support system by themselves.

"You met up with Ishihara Misako because only she could have been the culprit—there was no reason why Mizuno-san should suddenly pull the plug to Kakyuu's life support system, especially since she would have had so many chances to let Kakyuu die without risking the reputation of her own hospital. Did you have to flirt with 'Misa' or to bully her? Anyhow, Misa must have confessed at some point because you wouldn't have dropped the case if she hadn't; and chivalrous as you and your brothers are—even though Yaten-san can hide it well—you three decided to shield Misa by keeping silent on what you knew."

Since he is listening to your deduction with rapt attention but doesn't show any inclination to comment on it, you proceed with your educated (and hopefully lucky) guess. "Luck was on your side since Mizuno-san, after a talk with her daughter Ami, who was a friend of Taiki-san's, decided to withhold her statement about seeing you with the handkerchief in Kakyuu's room. She was even going to hide from the investigators that she had opened the door to Kakyuu's room and noticed that Kakyuu was still alive and the life support was still plugged in during your visit. It seemed like
the best solution because Ishihara-san and Three Lights would be suspected but no one would be convicted of homicide. Even Kudo, who had other cases to worry about, indirectly supported you by dropping the investigation."

"Impressive, Miss Holmes!" Seiya regards you with an admiring smile, "although there are a few details you've guessed wrong. I didn't have to flirt with 'Misa' or to bully her—by the time I entered her apartment, she had already worked herself up into a terrible state. She was so nervous that it took me a whole night to calm her down." He blushes at the sight of your disapproving frown. "Of course I didn't do it that way—how often do I have to repeat to you that I hadn't even kissed anyone before you? All I did was talking to her and pouring her nonalcoholic drinks! It was ridiculous since she was Kakyuu's murderer and I thought I'd gladly wring her neck the moment I was sure that she was guilty, but there we were: she seemed honest when she told me that she did it out of pity—and it was hard for me to condemn her for something I'd have almost done myself."

According to Misa, Misa had never even considered pulling the plug to Kakyuu's life support system before she saw how much Seiya and his brothers suffered. Since she was a passionate gardener and was also well versed in flower language, it was easy for her to guess that Seiya was trying to deactivate Kakyuu's life support system but couldn't. Ending Kakyuu's life was an emotional, hasty decision partly driven by her wish to be useful to her favourite idols and partly driven by her empathy with Kakyuu.

Misa saw herself as a martyr, who would sacrifice her future to save Kakyuu from a fate worse than death; and since the alarm didn't even go off when she pulled the plug, she could delude herself into believing that she had received a sign from above, which assured her of the integrity of her action. Without life support, it was only a matter of minutes until Kakyuu died in her sleep. Only after the interrogations, when Misa had returned to her apartment and relived the events of the day once again did Misa realize that she had compromised her principles, ended the life of her patient, and harmed her idols in a moment of mental instability.

"I was incensed at Ishihara-san's actions since it was my task to pull the plug to Kakyuu's life support system and not the task of a fanatic fan, especially since Ishihara-san had also robbed me of the chance to see Kakyuu again. But at the same time, I was convinced that Ishihara-san only wanted to help. She had also suffered so much and was so afraid of Mizuno-san's reaction that I didn't even feel the wish to take revenge on her."

Like Seiya, Mizuno-san didn't feel the need to punish Misa either when Seiya and Misa talked to her. Before she haphazardly ended Kakyuu's life, Ishihara Misako had been a reliable and affectionate nurse, who had gone out of her way to aid the recovery of her patients. Keeping her at the hospital so that she could continue her work and be an inspiration for the less enthusiastic newcomers was probably better than ruining her life and Three Lights' reputation by handing her over to the investigators, who would have had to enforce the law.

Mizuno-san wasn't an automaton—she must have had her own crisis of conscience as well, must have struggled with her burden as a doctor, who wasn't allowed to let her patient die despite knowing the lifelong suffering her patient would have had to endure after waking up. Some people believe that ending a life is the greatest sin and that any suffering was better than death. But believing is not knowing—and even if she were deeply religious (which she isn't, so Seiya claims), Mizuno-san must have doubted. In the end, one will always have to make a choice without knowing the consequences—Mizuno-san might have thought—and sticking to a law or a book other people wrote long ago is far crueler than looking at the present situation and muster enough courage to decide on one's own.

What would have happened if Misa hadn't pulled the plug? The tiny flicker of hope that this case
out of all cases could end with an unexplainable miracle—that this should be the one exception which proved the rule, might be the reason why people will keep fighting for happiness against all odds. The darker the future looks, the stronger people will cling to hope, disregarding the voice of reason telling them that Hope, with its enchanting voice and its irresistible smile, might be their adversary and not their ally.
"Maybe you will become…"

"Maybe you will become a great detective eventually," your stranger remarks, absently ruffling your hair, which the wind has messed up, "that is, if you stop seducing your poor suspects and dumping them afterwards during their anguished declaration of undying love for you."

He has a sheer limitless capacity to mock himself, building Babylonian towers with walls of jokes and smiles which will keep the rest of the world off him.

"As a singer, you should know that one should refrain from saying 'something stupid' during the very first date!" you retort in a not-so-subtle allusion to Frank Sinatra's last hit.

"I suppose that's something I had to learn the hard way," he darkly contemplates, much to your heartache. To distract yourself from the topic, you grab at the first lifebuoy you can find to return to the safe shore—in this case the sonnet-loving Misa, who has left you with a mystery that only Seiya can solve.

Why was he startled to learn that Ishihara-san was Misa, the girl who has been sending Taiki-san love letters ever since Taiki-san visited her in hospital, you ask Seiya, as you can't think of a plausible reason for the reaction you had witnessed.

"Ah." Your stranger looks irritated by your change of topic but also slightly embarrassed by the question, which is most bewildering. "Suddenly, everything made sense when I learned about her love letters—her dreamy expression whenever she watched us, her eagerness to please us, even her interest in gardening… She was very shy and nervous whenever I talked to her, but I never got the idea that she could be in love with Taiki."

"Do you think she could have murdered Kakyuu out of jealousy?"

No, he doesn't think so, Seiya says. He is fairly good at reading people, and Misa probably knew that Taiki's love for Kakyuu was purely platonic (the nurses in Mizuno-san's hospital actually thought that Kakyuu was Yaten's girlfriend since Yaten visited her so often). But since Misa always blushed crimson whenever Seiya opened his mouth, Seiya was under the impression that…

"Ah, I see!" Your grin widens as you recall his amusement and distress. "You're so full of yourself, you arrogant, conceited heartbreaker!" You have to laugh at his crestfallen face. "You automatically assumed that Ishihara-san was in love with you!"

It was only natural for him to assume that she was in love with him since almost all women fall in love with him sooner or later, your stranger bravely defends himself. Just as Kudo is accustomed to attracting murderers and corpses wherever he goes, he is accustomed to running from fanatic admirers and leaving trails of broken hearts on his way. Once a lovesick girl burned down the rented apartment he shared with Taiki and Yaten before Kakyuu was allowed to leave Kinmoku Sei, and more than one girl has sent him suicide notes after being rejected. He is glad none of the rejected women have ever tried dangerous stunts on the street like ramming him with a car or manipulating his motorcycle.

"Did you come here via bike?" Although you know you must sound like a paranoid wife caring for
a careless and reckless husband, you can't resist adding, "I see you've left your helmets on the seat again!"

He has left the bike in the car park a few streets away from the intersection, says stranger-san. As always, he has left the helmets on the seat since no one has stolen them until now.

"You put too much trust in your fellow humans!"

"And you too little, which makes us each other's perfect match!" he quips. The throwaway remark, which might mean nothing to him, is too lovely not to be commented on, and you thank him with another kiss, regretting that you haven't thought of counting all the kisses you two have shared during a single day so that you can revel in your new-found luxury. Since it's the quality which really counts although the quantity shouldn't be dismissed as being insignificant, you settle on his lap to make sure that the excellent quality of your kisses won't suffer.

"What did Odango and you talk about?" you inquire afterwards, as the question has been on your mind since you learned from Odango's friends that Odango has gone to Ueno-koen to meet him. "Did you tell her about us?"

"I'd have told her—but Shizuka-san, who had learned about it from Yaten and Taiki, had called her and told her first." Odango said she wasn't happy about the news as she once thought—he evasively says, which probably means that Odango must have been quite upset about what she perceived as infidelity—but naturally, there was no bad blood between them. Shizuka-san even tried to use Odango to persuade Seiya to accept the movie offers, but Odango, being the great friend she is, informed Seiya about his agent's scheme.

"Shizuka-san is right that I should talk to the producer and the film director, though—just to get an impression of what the remakes are about before I accept or refuse the roles. I'm not very optimistic when it comes to the scripts—everything I've seen until now only convinces me that the old series was better. The changes—turning Moriarty into an evil sociopath without any redeeming qualities and Irene Adler into Moriarty's pawn and Holmes' damsel in distress, for instance—are all for the worse although the budget is sky-high. I don't know how high my salary would be—but in any case, it would be so high that it will be hard for me to refuse."

If he accepts the roles, he will be extremely busy preparing for them and for his comeback in July, which he will probably have to accept as well since he doesn't want to abandon his brothers (although they would deserve it after announcing his comeback without his consent). First he will have to finish all the songs for the comeback, which will be a great challenge, then he will have to work on the film music for the movies and try to change the script while touring around with his brothers, which means he will do nothing but sleeping, eating, and working during the next couple of months before he gets a break to recharge. And after a short holiday, which he will use to catch up with friends, the whole vicious circle will start again…

Even if it weren't for the barely contained excitement in his voice, you would have recognized the feverish gleam in his eyes, which reminds you of the look in Kudo's eyes whenever Kudo comes across an especially intriguing case. Although Seiya happily rants about the cut-throat world of show business in Japan and mocks Hollywood's terrible screenplays, his love for the work he would be doing if he returned to the stage and the wide screen shines through his facade of nonchalance like sunlight peeping through the fine meshes of the suffocatingly small mosquito net in which you're trying to cage him.

At Infinity, you once had the chance to watch a rehearsal of *Le Baiser de la Fée—The Fairy's Kiss*—a ballet based on Andersen's fairy tale "The Ice Maiden". In this interpretation of the bleak fairy tale, the Ice Maiden wasn't the personification of a cold, unfeeling society that separated the
two lovers from different social backgrounds but the overpowering, terrifying creative muse with her beguiling smiles and her vice-like grip. It was the artist's curse to fall under the Ice Maiden's perilous spell—and you can already see yourself in the role of the abandoned bride, who will be mourning his death in the night before the wedding, when his muse finally comes to claim him.

The fatal kiss the muse bestowed on the gifted artist during his childhood has made him uniquely vulnerable to the muse's call. And while her fiancé is being drowned in a storm by the cold-hearted Ice Maiden, all the bride can do is to watch his futile struggle from the shore...

"We can meet up during your breaks," you suggest after bribing him with another kiss, unscrupulously using your charms to chain him to you, before you remember that Three Lights are going to stay in New York for the next years. "You can visit me whenever you return to Japan, and we can go for a walk together," you add in a firm, emotionless voice while fighting the sickening feeling in the pit of your stomach. Seiya might have flown to Japan for his dates with Odango—but that was after his time as a teen idol. If he revives his career now, he won't even have time to think of you.

"Of course, we can go for a walk together whenever I return to Japan," he echoes; and you can see in his faraway eyes that he has heard the same words once, years ago. To make matters worse, you can well recall what he told you during your breakup. He was dumb enough to run after a woman who didn't love him for eight years—you shouldn't worry about him because not even he was dumb enough to do the same thing again.

Your time together is running out and you have to act fast, urges a voice in your ear. It's not the voice of reason but something else—a dark foreboding which warns you that if you let go of your stranger now, you're not going to see him again. You're too old for superstitions, however, and can ignore the nagging, pulsating ache in your stomach to behave like a sensible grown-up, who can and will always do what she must.

"Lo and behold, your flower-loving brother gave me this piece of paper and told me to pass it to you when we met at Hikawa Shrine!" You grudgingly leave Seiya's lap to rummage in the pocket of your dress for Taiki-san's note. "It's in US dollars, not in yen!" Lying out of fear is not the same as lying to gain a personal advantage; and since your stranger will learn about the salary sooner or later, you might as well show him the note now, when you're present to see his reaction.

Driven by fear and impatience, Orpheus has turned around to see Eurydice's face at last—and that despite knowing that good timing is absolutely vital for love. From bitter experience, you know that Hades (or Pluto, as the Romans called him) will win, as usual. But like the prisoners condemned to death at the Doge Palace, you can't resist taking your chance at the Torture of Hope, knowing the odds are that you will fail and be executed soon.

This is the last version of the "Ghost at Twilight" —And like the other versions, it's neither complete nor true.

All versions lie even when they tell the truth
—And there are missing fragments, which shall be hidden from you.

The cold was washing over you
—The sky assumed the colour of blood.
Your handbag had fallen out of your limp hand
But you couldn't let go.
Someone special depended on your painkillers,
Which only you could make
—And being the responsible scientist you were,
You couldn't leave before knowing he wouldn't suffer.

The sunset lingered on as Time began to stretch,
To give you twenty-four hours of Eternity
—And the Ghost rose and hurried into the park,
Towards the bench where he would be waiting for her.

The last twenty-four hours have been the Gods' game
—The Torture of Hope for the one day you received.
You've defended your case in front of the gods,
Supported by the innocent children you've wronged.

You've been travelling through the present and the past, roaming Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Paris, rummaging through the twenty-three years and eleven months of your life for an answer to the questions, for the One Truth…
or for justice…

Pluto and Jupiter are your formidable opponents.
Kronos has asked Time to run in circles for a day.
Tyche has shuffled, reshuffled, and distributed the cards,
The Moirai have thrown the dice,
While Themis is presiding as the judge.

Demanding an ally for your impossible quest,
Pointing out that two against one is unfair,
You wished for good company to share your loneliness
—Another Ghost at Twilight, from another universe.

Hades and Zeus both couldn't leave the game,
As both are The Boss in their respective realms.
Venus and Amor laughed while Ares shook his head.
Tyche rolled her eyes—but the seventh voter nodded.

Mercury vetoed that you're breaking The Rules
—For two halves of a whole couldn't be together again.
Nemesis told Zeus to turn him into a wild card.
And you accepted—without knowing who he was.

Kaito, Hattori, one Joker, and Jean Black are Jacks.
Kakyuu, Akemi-nee-san, Odango, and Kaioh-san are Queens.
Kudo, Gin, Rye, and Hakuba are Kings.
Ano Kata, their crows, and the Professor are Aces.

Hotaru, Odango, Hakuba, and Tenoh-san are Hearts.
Jean Black, Kaito, Rye, and your guinea pig are Diamonds.
Hattori, Gin, half of the court cards, and the crows are Clubs.
Akemi-nee-san, a few of the court cards, and Ano Kata are Spades.

The Game of Life doesn't come with a manual.
And figuring out the gods' rules is an impossible task.
Their dice are all loaded, all the cards have two sides,
A few cards are doubled—and some change as time passes.

g.

Your Ace of Hearts is a Jack of Hearts,
A card that won't change but has been taken by Pluto.
Your King of Hearts is an Ace of Diamonds,
Another fixed card which will never change for you.

g.

Your Queen of Hearts is an Ace of Spades.
Hades has already played her and won.
Your Jack of Hearts is a King of Diamonds.
This card has been added to your hand in Round One.

g.

Your stranger and his brothers are the San Hikari,
The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars in the dark
—The most beneficial or the most harmful wild cards,
The highest trumps or the most powerful excuses,
The chameleons that can turn the game around,
Depending on the rules
And on luck…

g.

Ares and Aphrodite are still watching the game
—While Amor, the traitor, has been supporting you in secret.
Felicitas, too, has often tried to help,
But Nemesis and the Erynyes have always interfered.

g.

Hades has played almost all of the Aces,
The King of Spades, and the highest Queen.
As his brother took four court cards, Zeus drew all the Jacks.
You know you are losing—but there are still wild cards left.

g.

Bonding with each other as strangers in the night,
Chasing together after the answer to the same question.
Apollo has forged you your highest possible trump:
His mirror image—so that nothing will harm you.
A temptation beyond your wildest dreams,
An impossible love that will cause you pain
—The alternative partner, whom you shouldn't have met
For you made your choice during another sunset.

g.

Protecting you both from Dolor or Algos
While fatally wounded by Amor's golden arrow.
Your nameless stranger was your highest trump
—Until Fortuna reshuffled the cards,
And the Fates threw the dice anew.

g.

Hades cheated while Zeus was looking away
—And helping a ghost isn't Aphrodite's job.
Athena was not present while Themis is blind,
And Amor, the heartless prankster, even applauded.

g.

Late in the game, before the final round,
Athena or Minerva comes breezing in.
Joining Felicitas, she gives you sound advice:
"Beware of the Queen of Spades—and don't be too nice!"

g.

Jupiter could have had Five of a Kind
—The highest hand
If wild cards had replaced Queens as well.
Now Jupiter has a Full House
And Hades a low Straight Flush.
You need an Ace to win royally
—Get out your Joker and rush!

Hermes thinks you've been sufficiently warned.
There are two ghosts here—but only one can stay.
Even if one wins, the other one will fade,
For the whole human being would endanger the gods' universe.

Parting from him in the ending twilight,
Knowing you can never, ever, win against Time.
And Nemesis smiles as the twenty-fourth hour passes,
While Ares is angry at you for losing to the past.

The truth, in this world, can't be expressed by words.
And a frail greenhouse flower can't live in an imperfect place.
On the horizon, the last ray of sunlight fades,
And the other ghost returns to his time and space.

This version of the tale doesn't have a happy end,
And you will forever be searching for him in vain.
Your sorrow, however, is both pain and bliss,
The exquisite suffering that only love can cause
When having seen the beloved is already enough.

This is the last version of the "Ghost at Twilight"
And like the others, it's neither complete nor true.
The full truth will always be hiding in the gaps,
And this version, too, shall be hidden from you.

On the horizon, the sun can no longer be seen. The last band of purple light is still lingering there, a reminder of what you've lost. A few birds are sailing across the sky, dark apparitions, whose mirror images are flitting across the pond shimmering in all shades of green, blue, silver, and gold.

He will return to the stage and the screen and—there is no doubt about it—resurrect his great career, which has never really ended. But your future is shrouded in mystery, hidden behind the dense veil of time. The last twenty-four hours have been so surreal that you wouldn't be surprised to learn that this was only a dream during the last breath of your life. You've recalled past moments of sorrow and happiness, seen one-time loves, friends, adversaries, and allies, made peace with yourself and the world, and tried to solve the mysteries of your life. You've been waiting in Charon's boat with a wild card in your pocket, lingering for a moment on Styx or Acheron to gaze back at the world of the living for the last time.

The faint, regular beeping sound has restarted again—a chilling reminder of the steady, uninterrupted, ceaseless flow of time.

Or perhaps you've been on Chiba Mamoru's operation table and will survive—for Miyano Shiho is a cat with seven lives, who will cheat both Time and Death and even the Bosses of the underworld and heaven!
The colour of tonight's moon is a bright sapphire blue, you absently note. It must have been caused by an abundance of dust particles in the atmosphere that are just the right size to scatter the red light. But if the sun, the moon, and the earth were aligned during a total lunar eclipse, the same blue moon would turn into a red "Blood Moon".

It's startling how much one's mood is affected by the setting and the light—how easy it is to harbour wild hope when the moon is so blue. After studying the two numbers on the piece of paper for an eternity as if he couldn't believe what they're saying, stranger-san gives you a curious joyless smile, which raises your hope that he will dismiss the voice of prudence to stay with you.

"It's almost indecent to earn so much," he remarks, eyeing the note with caution. "But it would solve almost all my problems, I suppose—and all the former members of the Organization who are now out of work and broke will be relieved to learn that they can stay at home and sulk for another year."

Why is he still supporting them, you ask him, whereupon he tells you that he is still doing it just because he can. He knows that most of them won't ever change, but some people only need longer than others to get back on their feet. Apart from that, most ex-codename-members aren't better or worse than the average office worker out there.

"On the other hand, they're old enough to take care of themselves, and I don't think any of them will die without me now that the worst is over," Seiya muses as he surveys your face for your reaction to his words. He doesn't have to accept the offers—he tells you—although he will have to find another job which pays enough for him to get by if he stays in Tokyo. In artistic circles, finding a job which pays is no mean feat—you remind him—but he tells you that he can sell the bike to buy more time until he gets another offer, apart from writing songs for his brothers and doing gigs in their club. People are practically begging him to sing again, it's not like he would starve if he stayed here…

If money were the only issue, you would simply solve it by offering to support you both; but as things are, you know that Seiya wouldn't accept your offer. To him, you're an unreadable stranger with a highly suspect attitude to love: a woman who would let him kiss her and love her but who would also ditch him on a whim—who has displayed a callous disregard for his feelings when she cut him off in mid-sentence during a love declaration which must have cost him all his courage; a woman who would spend the night with a complete stranger but isn't interested in a lasting relationship. His native intelligence must have told him that this can't be more than a passing fling—which is the label any man with brains would give the thing between you and him. Even if the fee weren't exorbitant… He loves the stage and the screen—and there is absolutely no sound reason why he should give up the chance of becoming world-famous and starring in two blockbusters at the same time to chain himself to a woman who doesn't love him.

"It's an extremely tempting offer, isn't it? Even if they don't let you change the script."

It's an offer he can't easily refuse, he grudgingly admits. To tell the truth, he would have accepted it long ago if it hadn't been for Odango…

For the regular walks with her, he has delayed the decision despite knowing that he might miss a once-in-a-lifetime chance—and you can tell that, now that she has perfunctorily dumped him to
save her reputation and her marriage, he is not going to make the same mistake again. Whatever have passed between him and her shouldn't have anything to do with you—but of course it does. Failed loves are so memorable because the sharp and jagged edges of their wreckage will linger on, cutting the feet of the hapless new lover who will have to struggle with the task of building something enduring on the ruins their predecessor has left behind.

"Odango has left the equation now, hasn't she?" you ask and, fearing his answer, continue before he can reply: "But you're still not sure whether you should accept the movie offers, why?"

He casts you a dark gaze as if the reason why he is still unsure about his decision is so self-evident that it needs no further clarification while you wonder why he can't just ask you to go with him to New York if he doesn't want you to wait for him here. It also hasn't escaped you that, in this situation, a marriage license would solve all the bureaucratic problems that could arise. You could easily get a visa to join him in New York if you were his wife.

"I was about to accept it last night," he tells you—and since it sounds like the kind of talk you can't have while one person is standing and the other person remains seated, you return to the place beside him. "But then I walked past your window and saw you there…" He looks puzzled, as if he were mystified by his questionable decision to let a complete stranger undermine his hard-earned independence—something he had only let Odango do. Smiling at the memory, he stretches out his long legs until his shoe touches the large trunk of the cherry tree. "We two got along so well—we might as well have been together in a past life."

Since the raw honesty in his voice and the unapologetic romanticism of the statement make an embarrassing hybrid unfit for this cynical age, he adds flippantly to draw your attention away from his blunder, "At least that's what Odango would claim! She seriously believes in fate, you see."

"I'd rather not believe in it under these circumstances!"

Realizing that destiny, if it exists, isn't particularly supportive of a relationship between you and him, he adds with an exasperated sigh, "The circumstances aren't ideal, I know! I can understand that you fled the moment you learned about my family background, but I thought we could just let the past rest. Both my parents are dead—neither of them can hurt you anymore."

Of course they will continue to hurt you—you would have liked to protest. On every Christmas, when Three Lights mourn for them! You will never dare to follow Seiya to Kinmoku Sei whenever he decides to return to the isle for a visit; and every time their names come up, you will be tortured by stabs of terror which will hurt infinitely more than the invisible blades Andersen's mermaid had to step on! But it would be hypocritical to depict yourself as the victim when you're clearly the villain in Seiya's life. Like a faceless but ever-present nemesis, you've brought him destruction and pain whenever you appeared on the scene.

"Taiki-san said that moonlight has a reddish tint," you suddenly tell your stranger, who knows his middle brother well enough to cast you a worried glance, "but the observer often believes it to be blue."

"Yumeno Yumemi told me about it once." Seiya smiles at the remembrance. "A moonlit landscape is notoriously difficult to paint because in moonlight, all colours change. You can only observe it and paint it afterwards from memory. Michiru-sama often painted it. Yumeno Yumemi, who never dared to paint it, often envied Michiru-sama for her courage."

"You knew Yumeno-san personally!" you observe—and the night you encountered the famous illustrator for the first and the last time comes to mind, bringing back memories of the bouquet of red camellias Kudo had bought for Ran but, as Ran's train was delayed, ended up giving to you. He
had often accompanied Yumeno Yumemi to the train whenever she came to Tokyo because she was Kakyuu's friend and art tutor, Seiya recalls. Although they weren't close because Yumeno Yumemi always pushed him away whenever he tried to befriend her, he liked her very much.

"She pushed you away because she was very much in love with you but knew that you weren't in love with her," you think aloud, marvelling at the amazing coincidence that the man whom Yumeno-san was waxing lyrical about must have been Seiya. "I met her once on the train to Morioka, after you had seen her off although you were in disguise and unrecognizable in your woolly hat, your black sunglasses, and your thick coat... That was before I took the antidote—and since I was in a gloomy mood, she said she would like to introduce you to me."

"Let me guess: you told her you would pass!"

You lean in for a lingering kiss, leaving the question hanging in the air; and when your lips touch again, it comes upon you that he and you must have been missing each other all your lives. On several occasions, your paths must have nearly crossed in Tokyo, Kyoto, and even Paris although it was only a fleeting glance, a long black hair, a melody, or the scent of sweet osmanthus in the air. Like the hidden side of the coin you've thrown, or the one person in the universe you aren't allowed to be with, he has always passed you unnoticed as though the string of fate, which once connected you two, had been severed and tied somewhere else for the sole purpose of keeping him away from you.

"What did Taiki try to say with his remark about the colour of moonlight?" Seiya asks between two kisses. "Taiki doesn't like digressions! If it hadn't served some purpose, he wouldn't have mentioned it to you."

"He asked: 'If you were the moon, which colour would you prefer—the true colour, or the colour other people will see whenever they look at you?'"

It has become increasingly harder for you to continue the conversation since stranger-san's kisses have become distractingly intense, tempting you to throw your notion of decency, integrity, and truth overboard for a life in which all your lies and your guilt will be washed away by deep, enormous, endless pleasure.

"And what did you say?" He tilts his head to study you with his hypnotic magician's eyes, giving you the sort of gaze that make people sell their souls to the devil.

"I said I wanted to know both sides of the truth!"

"It's the harder way to live!"

"Taiki-san said that, too! In some respects, your flower-loving brother is very much like you!"

The moon changes its colour all the time—Seiya claims—it doesn't matter at all which colour it is, but the light of the moon is usually reddish although the observer believes it to be blue. Yumeno Yumemi said there are truths you can only try to figure out in retrospect—like a moonlit landscape, which no one can paint from observation.

You do wonder how your story will look in retrospect, years or decades after the last chapter has been written. While it's incomprehensible (and unacceptable) to you how something which feels so sinfully good could ever be wrong, there is the possibility that Tenoh-san is right, as always. Only time can tell whether this will be like kinmokusei—a winter-hardy shrub that will bloom every year anew and give off a scent which will haunt you for life—or whether this will remain a greenhouse lavender rose, enchantingly beautiful and alluring in its exquisite, unworldly
gorgeousness but too fragile to survive in nature.

"I'm not like Yumeno Yumemi," Seiya remarks as if he has guessed the direction your thoughts have taken. "I'm not interested in capturing moonlit landscapes at all, in analyzing my impressions and storing them away so that I can ponder over a pale copy of them afterwards. I don't need to share something which belongs to me alone with others who won't be able to love it like I do." He runs his warm fingers through your hair before he lets his hand rest on your neck; and his hot breath tickles your ear when he places a teasing, seductive kiss on your jawline. 'I'd rather live! Is it really important what other people think? I like the moon so much that it can be pitch-black for all I know.'

"Has Odango graced you with a love declaration of any sort?" you inquire after another kiss, making an effort to sound humorous and nonchalant. As ridiculous as it is, you're still upset over his passing remark that she is going to wait for him at Hikawa Shrine.

Of course she hasn't, he tells you with a flicker of amusement in his eyes, and his quizzical gaze implies what he doesn't bother to put into words: Odango is happily married and has made it clear to him that she is planning to remain married to the same man for the rest of her life. Even if she were secretly in love with him, admitting it to him would be most inappropriate from her point of view.

"I don't think I still want to hear it from her," he contemplates. "It would be like receiving a birthday cake much too late—months or even years after you've stopped craving it."

Hearing these words from him makes you feel strangely devastated and elated at once, as if you had just received your lover's ultimate sacrifice for your love despite knowing that he will be doomed for all eternity.

"Actually, she has only wished me luck for my plight with you, saying I'll need it since you sound so complicated." A wry smile tugs at the corners of his lips before it turns into a cocky smirk. "Aren't you a little bit in love with me?" he asks, half-jokingly. "If you don't mind, we can do the field experiment and elope together just to see how long it will take you to kill me over a petty tiff."

We can go anywhere we want, do anything we want to, live the life we've always wanted to live—I'm sure that our life together will be great...

Although I'm racked with guilt, the one thing I'm sure of is that I love you...

In a way, the two of them are so alike, as if they were the same gem in different cuts or two different cocktails with the same ingredients although Seiya, for better or worse, seems to contain a much higher percentage of alcohol. So you are going to receive a pledge of commitment at last—albeit from another person than the one you loved.

"We should really marry to teach my brothers and Shizuka-san a lesson," your stranger continues as he stuffs Taiki-san's piece of paper into his jeans pocket as though it were another receipt from the grocery store. "I bet Haruka-san will chew the steering wheel of her favourite Ferrari in a fit of rage when she learns that you've returned to me after breaking it up!"

Haruka-san, who has returned to Tokyo to catch up with friends, unexpectedly gave him a call this afternoon, Seiya informs you. Taiki or Yaten must have told Haruka-san about Seiya and you since she claimed that you're still so fixated on your detective that he will never stand a chance. "She has offered me a joint concert and even helped Shizuka-san announce my comeback—imagine that!
She even agreed that they cut a few seconds of her own music on the radio to squeeze in the news. Maybe she only thinks that you're too good for me—but with friends like her, I don't need enemies."

In a fairy tale, Kaito's Queen of Spades would have predicted this death of trust—the moment when the ally, whom you've considered your good friend and for whom you've sacrificed so much, shows you clearly that she wouldn't hesitate to turn on you. The betrayal of a friend, albeit for the soundest of reasons, stings almost as much as the betrayal of love. Another card in your life has been turned; and you should give up now since you've spent enough time with Tenoh-san to fear her as an opponent even more than you value her as an ally.

And yet you can feel it in your bones: the decisive, visceral moment in your fairy tale when Cinderella will confess the truth and tell her personal genie or fairy godfather that she no longer wants the prince but the one whose light and warmth has suffused her mundane life with magic by giving her the glass slippers; the instant when the mermaid shakes off the witch's evil spell, reclaims her voice, and acquires both her eternal soul and love. But, either out of fear, misplaced loyalty, or the selfish desire to stay the ideal woman in his eyes, you can't bring yourself to say anything and the moment passes.

"I suppose I can take your silence as a 'No' or 'Not yet',' he soberly comments. "Since I don't want to give up, I'll just pretend it's the latter.'"

For a moment, the game has turned again—as it always does whenever your wild card is concerned. You dictate him your number, which he saves into his address book and one of his notebooks after turning it into a mnemonic code—an automatic process, which must be a remnant of his strict upbringing. Afterwards, when he draws you close for another lovely, long kiss—the kiss of death to all your sensible plans—you allow yourself to hope again, to pin your faith in the impossible dream that he will ignore his flight to stay here.

"We could just keep the things between us as they are," you suggest, emboldened by the familiar, effortless intimacy. "There are perks of not seeing each other every day—of not going through the mind-numbing tedium of the daily grind with each other. It will be exciting to meet up in disguise whenever you return from the set, and I could get a thrill out of keeping our rendezvous secret!"

You two don't even need to tell his friends and brothers anything, you proceed, knowing that this can only be a temporary solution until you figure out how to deal with Tenoh-san.

He raises an inquiring brow at you and laughs in exasperation, reminding you that you wanted neither a love affair with no strings attached nor a drawn-out long-distance relationship this morning when the topic was raised.

"For a year or less it would be just bearable. But I'd prefer it if we could attend all the mind-numbing, nerve-racking social events with each other!" When are you going to finish your studies—he asks you—and what are you going to do afterwards?

"I'm not sure if I'll ever finish them since I already have a degree—these days I'm tempted to leave university since I'm sick of studying for redundant exams! Kudo is going to set up his own detective agency in Beika; and since he has asked me for help and the part-time job at the pharmacy isn't enough to wear me to a shadow, I've agreed to give him a hand."

In an instant, the air becomes so thick that you could cut it with a knife. Stunned by his lack of reaction to your reply, you only watch your stranger in silence as he closes his eyes. When he slowly opens them again, after what seems like a decade, his gaze has hardened although his eyes are now suspiciously bright, shimmering in your favourite shade of Blue Lagoon in the evening
"So Kudo is not going to Osaka?" he asks while those blue eyes, which have darkened to a deep midnight blue after the flash of emotion, fix themselves on yours with mute, black despair.

"No, he is going to end his relationship tonight since he can't bring himself to love her anymore. It seems that, after only one night on my extremely comfortable sofa, he has rediscovered the perks of sleeping alone."

"Ah, I see," Seiya says slowly, enunciating each word with frosty clarity, as though a horrible realization had just dawned on him. "Good luck to Kudo and you, then!"

"I really didn't know anything about it last night since he made up his mind this morning," you hastily try to put your stranger straight, as he obviously believes that he has been used and discarded now that Kudo has become available again. Your mind-reading skills must have improved dramatically, as you can clearly see his thoughts materialize before your eyes: your defensive behaviour at his place whenever Kudo's name was mentioned; the brutal way in which you cast him aside after your very first date; your question whether he has received any love declaration from Odango, which implies that you actually received one from Kudo; your refusal to continue your relationship officially—an indication that you want to avoid the hassle of ending a committed relationship and moving out of a shared apartment in case you want to leave him for someone else; all the throwaway comments you've jokingly made about preferring Kudo to him, which would have weighed little if he were still certain of your feelings for him like he was this morning but which have now been magnified and aggravated by the misunderstanding during your breakup and the countless derogatory remarks he must have endured afterwards from Yaten-san and Taiki-san…

"Also, it's nothing romantic, just a friendly partnership! I'm only going to assist Kudo whenever he needs a hand and I have time. Knowing him, he is planning to turn me into his secretary and mother and doctor combined, who has to handle all the bothersome daily tasks necessary for survival so that he can hunt his criminals." Since your words don't seem to change anything for your ex-boyfriend, you add to clarify the situation, "I do love him still, in a way—but the romance is more or less gone, alas! I could even talk openly with him about his past proposal without feeling much."

His distant gaze is still gentle but darker than the darkest night sky; and the stone he has just skipped bounces rapidly off the water surface until it arrives on the other side of the pond, leaving a pattern of growing and dwindling ripples. In a post-infatuated bout of clarity, it dawns on you that Seiya can be excessively stubborn in these situations and winning him over when he has resolved to shut you out of his world might be harder than placating Gin had ever been.

"Don't give me false hope!" A less attentive observer would have missed the barely discernible trace of bitterness in his mellow voice, but you've become so tuned in to him during the last twenty-four hours that the sheer sound of it causes a stabbing pain. "It's only a question of time until that changes, I suppose…"

He has a completely wrong picture of the situation, and you know instinctively that no lie of yours will ever cause him to change his mind. Evidently, a few things Gin once taught you were right although you had to find out the truth on your own. Love is as volatile as Pandora's jar when one believes to have been dismissed and betrayed, and yet a perfect love can only thrive in one's fantasy, where reality never bites, where time never flows, and where the circumstances are ideal.

As long as you can't give your stranger a plausible reason why you've left him after only one night, his suspicions will remain. And while you're still debating with yourself, trying to invent a
persuasive argument which won't ruin his life unlike the naked truth, you can feel how he retreats further into himself, putting a distance between him and you.

Turning away from you, he bends down to pick up a bright red azalea blossom, which someone must have recently plucked and thrown away.

"What are you going to do tonight after I'm gone?" His tone has become light and consciously, painfully nonchalant. As you feared, he is trying to merge the casualness of a one-night stand with the love he still feels for you to find a balance.

"I don't know, it depends..." you murmur, imitating his non-committal tone and the answer he gave you this morning when you asked him about his comeback. For a moment, you try to imagine what would have happened if it had not rained, how long it would have taken you two to confide in each other and become lovers if you had spent the whole night in Roppongi in a club or at Two Lights' under the watchful and jealous gazes of his brothers and his friends and Igarashi-san. Once a love has burst into your life like a natural force which ruthlessly wrecks everything in its path, it's impossible to imagine that it might not have happened under different circumstances, that it was simply a natural development fostered by a string of lucky (or, in this case, unlucky) coincidences and not by fate's red string.

"I know you're planning to seduce Kudo someday," he wryly remarks as he sticks the azalea blossom he has just picked up into a buttonhole of your dress. "But I hope that you won't do it tonight... Even if you don't mourn our relationship, you could at least feel a scintilla of guilt for the way you treated me this morning."

"Why should I?" You raise your brow at him, uncertain whether he has just decided to give you up or accepted your proposal to continue your relationship long distance. "I remember you really enjoyed it. And the last part of it was just the right treatment for your humungous ego."

Your stranger chuckles and then laughs, giving you a genuine, contagious laugh without resentment.

"Touché!" He sighs in defeat and smiles again. "You win, as usual! I've tried but I couldn't even touch the drums... No one has ever crushed me like you did this morning!"
Part 29: The bridge is eerily...

The bridge is eerily evocative of the Japanese bridge at Monet's Pond; and stranger-san's eyes are as shockingly blue as the eyes of the phoenix, the mythological bird of resurrection and time. Taking in the disarming smile of your new boyfriend with fresh eyes, it occurs to you that the "defeated" Black Organization has only become more potentially dangerous. Like a dormant undersea volcano which may erupt at any time, the Sherringford Society, led by an Anokata of Seiya's charisma, would easily win the popular vote.

He honestly doesn't intend to conquer the world like his parents did—at least not in a violent way, Seiya claims while you begin to wonder what "honestly", in his dictionary, means. When the Organization went down, he would have loved to ignore the fact that his parents had chosen him as their heir to their estate and their "family business", but it was impossible after his name had been mentioned in his parents' will. Stepping down as ano kata and leaving the Organization to one of the most ambitious and influential codename members was impossible since Three Lights would have been assassinated by the new Boss of the Organization—a necessary move to eliminate the threat of a possible rebellion from the codename members who preferred to be led by Anokata's legitimate heirs. Even before it went down, the Organization had been in a complete shambles for some time thanks to the moles the secret services had planted. Seiya actually considers himself lucky to have survived the first year after the downfall of the Organization, when half of the codename members tried to supplant him as leader.

His hands, slender and graceful, rest languidly on the bridge's balustrade. Deceivingly gentle hands, which evoke images of vintage pens, paint brushes, musical instruments, and beautiful women. Certainly not the hands you would have imagined for someone who has grown up in that person's household, someone who knows how to handle lethal weapons like other people handle chopsticks and silverware.

You remember asking Gin once whether he had aspirations towards becoming the next Anokata, whereupon Gin sneered at the very thought of it. Too dangerous even for his taste, he said. Maybe he would have to accept the responsibility someday if the Boss couldn't find a better successor, but no one in their right mind would voluntarily take over the job, as the life of a crow was stressful enough. Nevertheless, there were idiots who would kill for so much power—and the next Anokata had better be someone who could dispose of their enemies with a charming smile and conquer kingdoms with delicious nonchalance since surviving long enough to earn the members' respect during this time of upheaval was going to be an acrobatic feat.

Being the second crow and having to deal with the pack of wolves, as Gin called the Organization's roque members, had turned Gin into the sort of paranoid misanthrope who would only sleep with a loaded Beretta at hand. Seiya, on the other hand, seems perfectly fine after taking over his parents' "family business"—an observation which should worry you more than it does. On second thought, your stranger bears an uncanny resemblance to a rare wolf with blue eyes and black fur, which reminds you of the cautionary tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" and the lesson you've forgotten: Beware of the nice strangers you encounter on the way! Don't stray from the path! Don't accept tempting offers from complete strangers! Don't ever let attractive strangers who roam the city at night approach you unless you want to be devoured and ruined!

In Grimm's version of the tale, Little Red Riding Hood is rescued by a woodcutter—you tell your wolf—who is amused by your quirky change of topic but follows your train of thought with the
same keenness with which Sherlock Holmes pursues the scent of mystery. In Charles Perrault's more realistic version, Red Riding Hood is gobbled up by the gentle, amiable, dangerous wolf, and there is no happy ending.

In a modern tale by Angela Carter, Red Riding Hood handles the situation with aplomb by seducing the werewolf—he tells you with glee—and the two of them sleep soundly in each other's arms after Red Riding Hood has won the beast's trust in a savage marriage ritual, which is exactly what he is trying to do since, in his version of the story, he is innocent Red Riding Hood and you're the dangerous red wolf, the alluring, wild, beautiful stranger!

Innocent? You pretended to know nothing about the cocktail code names when we met at Infinity, you pathological liar!

Your anger, delayed by the shock at your latest discovery, has flared up at last. It had been easy to dismiss love as an expendable old-fashioned jacket when you weren't ensnared in it and had only considered it for a fleeting moment—long enough to decide that it would be more troublesome than helpful and short enough not to lose your autonomy to something so capricious and ephemeral. You can well recall your thoughts in Paris when you dropped the Cupid into the pond. Back then, love was linked to Kudo's name, and it was easy to sacrifice something you had never had a taste of to the safe future you had chosen. Never would you have imagined that the wise patron goddess of heroic endeavour would take you by your word—that now, when you're embroiled in the sort of love affair which cost Tenoh-san's mother more than her life and ruined Anna Karenina, Guinevere, Juliet, and Isolde (or whoever those literary heroines who lost their head and their peace over a stranger were), Pallas Athena will descend and claim what you once valued so little.

He didn't know anything about the Organization, Seiya insists, looking the very epitome of innocence and candour. Well, he did know that his parents planned to shrink most of the world's population with the help of a new wonder drug; he knew that they blackmailed powerful people and that they were surrounded by bodyguards, who were armed to the teeth for twenty-four hours a day—but he would never have expected them to name their codename members after wines and cocktails! When Seiya met you and Tomoe at Infinity, he thought that "Gin" was a real name or a nickname, perhaps because "Gin" was a name he knew from novels and screenplays. Even when Tomoe rambled on about "Vermouth" and "Vodka" and "Rum", Seiya believed the cocktail names to be an invention of the mad professor. It took him long to figure out that his parents weren't only wine enthusiasts and borderline alcoholics but also the type of zany eccentrics who would name the members of their vigilante club after alcoholic drinks. How should he have suspected it? His parents didn't tell their children anything about their organization.

"You had a cocktail code name yourself!" you grimly point out.

No, he didn't! When Three Lights returned to Kinmoku Sei to fetch Kakyuu, their parents let slip that they had intended to give all of their children "Starry Night" as cocktail codenames after abdicating their responsibility as Anokata since the future Anokata and third-generation crows needed code names as well. Seiya's cocktail was the Starry Night Martini with Stoli Citrus and Blue Curaçao, an allusion to his blue satin band and the lemon twist with which he liked to scent his drinks.

The Blue Curaçao must be an allusion to his eyes—their colour during the moments when his emotions are running high; but like all people who are too immersed in exploring the outside world to gaze at their own image, Seiya is completely oblivious to it.

The last thing he wanted was being tied down by a radical vigilante group for life, your stranger
assures you. He would have done almost anything to escape his parents' legacy. But during his time as a teen idol, the information that Three Lights were Anokata's heirs were leaked; and Seiya spent the days toiling like a slave on the set of *Detective Boy Holmes* (Akane-san should have been jailed for working him to death and blaming all the troubles on the set on him as if he were the embodiment of evil!) and his nights hunting traitors (his parents called them "werewolves") who wanted to have Three Lights' heads. Once the Chicago rebels even kidnapped Yaten—an offence Anokata didn't take well. A journalist wrote that the sight of the bodies gave the investigators of that case nightmares.

"*Detective Boy Holmes*—that's why you played Young Moriarty!" It's just like him to be so cheeky.

That was a coincidence. Akane-san chose him for the role, and he was so amused by the parallel between his and Moriarty's life that he worked hard to become the ultimate Moriarty—an effort which Akane-san, being the eternally dissatisfied slave driver she was, didn't appreciate.

Different thoughts race through your mind at once, competing with each other like bullet trains on dedicated tracks that run parallel to each other. Tenoh-san didn't trust you enough to tell you the truth… Seiya doesn't call Anokata "the Boss" like Gin did but always refers to them as his "parents"…. Three Lights and Kakyuu must be the four children Tenoh-san mentioned…

But if that was the case—why are Three Lights still alive? And Tenoh-san couldn't seriously have intended to poison Kakyuu, who was already in a coma at that time? There might have been other "children"—after all, Three Lights plus Kakyuu equal one pair of Anokata plus two third-generation crows. Tenoh-san was another third-generation crow, which meant there was space for four future third-generation crows.

In a fit of morbid curiosity, you try to picture Three Lights playing with the "four children" like Kudo and you used to play with the Detective Boys. The images unavoidably trigger other images you would rather not dwell upon. Your headaches have returned, but since the daily dosage of two APAH capsules usually suffices, you haven't taken APAH with you.

Did the seven crows have children?

From the look on his face, you can infer he is fascinated by your seemingly random jumping from topic to topic.

I don't think so.

To all appearances, Three Lights and Kakyuu were indeed the four "children", but Tenoh-san's conscience didn't allow her to poison them as planned. It would explain why Tenoh-san was able to live happily ever after with her family despite her ruthless scheme to murder three of her friends' best friends and a woman who had been in a coma for years.

"So you claim that you didn't know anything about the code names although you've been groomed by that person?"

Seiya looks taken aback by your choice of word. Never has the thought occurred to him that he and his siblings had been "groomed" to become third-generation crows and Anokata's heir.

"They were my parents, Shiho!"

Gin had been adopted by Anokata as well, you inform your boyfriend. One way to secure the loyalty of the highest codename members was to raise them—to familiarize them with the
Organization's ways from their early childhood on so that being a crow will seem as natural to them as breathing and eating.

He didn't know about Gin, but he can assure you that Three Lights hadn't been "groomed" by anyone. They all enjoyed a very happy albeit very sheltered childhood on Kinmoku Sei, the isle where their parents had been hiding.

"It also depends on how you define 'sheltered' since I definitely got more freedom than the average Japanese fifteen-year-old would have received in the same situation," he amends. "Still, it was too little for my taste. In retrospect, I really pity my poor parents. They always made an effort to be the best parents to us while we never saw all the things they had done."

"All the things they had done? They had kicked you three out although you could have starved or frozen to death! That's what they had done to you!"

He shoots you an amused sidelong glance as if you were the one who hadn't grasped the situation.

"Ah, they were only angry and drunk when they threw me out, and we three took their insults too personally. After things calmed down they tracked us and begged us to come home, but Yaten and I were too proud to go back and Taiki sort of tagged along."

As much as Seiya's generosity and recuperative abilities impress you, his delusions about his "parents" and his unwavering filial love for them are extremely alarming. In his opinion, "Anokata-mama" and "Anokata-papa", as Three Lights affectionately called the Boss, were great parents who cared for their children well. They might have had a wicked sense of humour and an explosive temper combined with an inclination to manipulate and to mock others, but they were never abusive or neglectful.

You two resume walking—and embracing, for his arm is circling your waist—as if nothing had happened. In stranger-san's opinion, not his family background but his job is the greatest obstacle between you and him—and you two discuss the pros and cons of you visiting him on the set while you two continue your relationship long distance ("Do you really want that?" "No, I don't!" "Why don't you just come with me?") as if the identity of his parents and the existence of their "family business" were of no importance. Anokata-mama and Anokata-papa would certainly have become the stereotyped overbearing in-laws from hell if they were alive, but as things are, you won't have to deal with them at all, Seiya cheerily asserts before he begins to tell you about Kinmoku Sei—the "Kinmoku Star"—the isle of his childhood where sweet osmanthus and wild roses grew in abundance. He had often trained with Kain, their most trusted, most loved bodyguard, whose task was to watch over Kakyuu. Strangely enough, the same bodyguard learned about his malignant brain tumour on the same day on which Seiya's parents learned about theirs.

"Taiki claims our parents had always had a weakness for drama—but I could never comprehend why they burned down the isle when they learned that they were dying. It was their policy to avoid senseless destruction, and they kept strictly to it even when the Organization went through bad times. All the sweet osmanthus trees and shrubs, all the weeping willows they loved so much, their Hope for Humanity roses, even the three dogs they named after us and the servants and bodyguards who had been absolutely loyal..." His voice drops at the remembrance.

Before your inner eye, you can see a version of how things could have transpired—how Tenoh-san, upon leaving the villa where she kept her suffering hosts-turned-prisoners during the last day, was suddenly roused by the faint fragrance of sweet osmanthus in the air. A traumatic experience can sensitize a person to an image, a sound, or a scent. "Charade", a song of love and farewell to you, is to Tenoh-san a portent of death; and what smells like paradise to Seiya and his brothers and you will remind Tenoh-san of hell. She had put up with it for so many years without giving herself
away—but she no longer possessed the motivation and the ability to control herself after her time as Anokata's seventh crow had passed. Although it was the end of December, the most resilient kinnokusei shrubs still sported a smattering of dying blooms—reddish-golden, at night turquoise shimmering gems carrying the warm, sweet scent of autumn…

You shiver, and Seiya rubs your arm, offering you his jacket, which you decline.

He loved their old nanny as well, your stranger tells you, although she was a scarily devoted Christian and always read her protégés Andersen's fairy tales with a wagging finger—sappy, dark tales with disastrous endings which have never, ever, made sense to him, you see, as he isn't a fan of Andersen's puritanical Christian sentiments and the preposterous idea of sin. The girl with the red shoes is punished for her vanity and her love of dance; the mermaid in Andersen's semi-autobiographical tale had to suffer because of her (or rather his) homosexuality (Seiya would never have guessed the meaning of the mermaid's missing human hips and legs and thus couldn't make sense of the unexpressable love the mermaid had to endure until Taiki explained the background of the tale to him). It would have made sense if Andersen had tried to criticize the society he had to live in, but in many of Andersen's tales, people voluntarily give up their goals and sacrifice their happiness in exchange for an eternal soul—whatever that was supposed to mean. It has always amused Seiya why so many religions—and not only religions—punish people for the things they love as if all the world's spiritual and political leaders were terrified of happiness and freedom and the inevitable problems which come with it. The only Andersen tale Seiya really likes is "The Princess on the Pea", the story in which Andersen pokes fun at the ridiculous demands of high society…

Meanwhile, you two have reached the flower shop where Kakyuu bought her bouquet of roses. And there, right in front of you, is the corner where you had been waiting with Gin in Gin's Porsche, watching the entrance of the inconspicuous flower shop with the quirky name "An & Ail's Intergalactic Speaking Flowers".

What are we doing here? Are you going to buy me a flower?

"Do you want me to get you a flower?" Your new boyfriend asks without letting go of your waist. "Which one do you like most?" His gaze flickers over the colourful conglomeration of flowers in the window display before it returns to you and lazily, thoughtfully travels from your lavender dress down to your mauve sandals.

"I don't know. They're all gorgeous! I'm not in the mood for red, though. What about getting me something in blue?"

Something in blue to match your Study in Blue. Nothing like the red roses on Gin's bedside table or the red camellias Kudo once gave you before you went to Tenoh-san's place to ask her for her assistance. The scarlet rose beside Kakyuu's crushed body, the cyclamen in Kakyuu's sketchbook. Kakyuu's hair, which was of a more intense, more vivid red than yours… Red flowers have begun to remind you more of destruction and death than of love and passion.

"Anything you want, Milady!" He gives a theatrical bow, waving an imaginary hat in his free hand—the sort of bow which male ballet dancers and actors give during the curtain call. "Just say the word!"

"If you can give me a blue rose, I'll marry you!"

It was an impulsive, sad attempt at a joke, demanding the impossible wedding present as if you were the princess in the fairy tale while you resemble an ogre more, Milady! Indeed, your story is unlikely to end tragically and romantically, with the two star-crossed lovers united in death like
Tristan and Isolde's or Romeo and Juliet's. This will be a nightmarish tragedy ruled by fate, ending like Anna Karenina's or even Milady's story if you allow it to continue.

He laughs, accepting your challenge with the unbridled enthusiasm and energy of a master detective who has been out of work for too long.

All right, I'll give you the bluest rose I can find! In return, you'll have to do the paperwork and plan our wedding as soon as you arrive home!

Before he leaves, he gingerly cups your face and brushes his thumbs against your cheeks, gently, soothingly, as he can sense your mounting anxiety. Don't run away, he adds, half-jokingly, with a tinge of panic, before he kisses you on your lips. I've just found the perfect flower for you. Please stay here and wait for me, I'll be back in a sec!

Don't run away from your destiny!

In a fairy tale, your stranger would be his ghost in disguise, hiding the same brilliant, pure soul in a more colourful, whimsical shell. You're on Pandora's Box again, waiting for the countdown to come, dithering over whether or not to accept the love declaration of an infatuated, innocent boyfriend who hasn't got a clue about what you have done.

"What in Iris' name!" the brunette saleswoman squeaks before she coos in a low, deep voice, "Seiya-sama, am I dreaming? You haven't visited us since forever!"

A blue rose? Why, his princess (But where is the mystery woman, and why doesn't she come in?) must be hard to please (Couldn't Seiya-sama have waited for another five years until Chibi Chibi has grown up before he gets himself a girlfriend? This development will break the poor girl's heart!), but Annabelle has blue roses by the score although most of them are dyed, alas…

No, he doesn't want a dyed blue rose but that rose in the corner—the bluest rose without a dye. It's in the same colour as her dress. He also wants it because of its name, but hush, please don't say it out loud since he wants it to be a secret and she can overhear everything.

She is a lucky woman!

She is a dream—too beautiful to be true! He will die upon waking up, he is sure!

They laugh, and he tells Annabelle there is no need to wrap the rose in Cellophane.

Outside, the light has changed. And without the rosy, lavender glow of sunrise, of which only the violet streaks over the building tops remain, the spell of your fairytale romance is breaking.

Perhaps your answer to Taiki-san's question was wrong. Even if your moon was really blue and only appeared red due to its unfortunate position between the sun and the earth, it wouldn't ever be enough for either the observer or the artist. Only the colour of the moon in front of the background it is set against will make any difference on the painting.

For a few hours, it had been a wonderful illusion, a magic trick which brightened your humdrum existence. But now that your ideal lover has turned out to be the price you have to pay and resembles the seductive siren who will lure you to destruction by dragging your corpse down to the bottom of the sea more than the guardian angel who will show you a world of freedom and peace, it's time to quit.

You regret not having a contingency plan for this situation, when a simple "Sorry, I've changed my mind" won't cut it. Pretending that you're not in love with him will be harder than winning a poker
tournament in Las Vegas when your whole being is convinced that it has finally found its missing part, without which it can never feel complete again.

Like in a game of poker, success or failure in life is often determined by sheer luck and the will to succeed. Why should you accept fate's punishment when you've already suffered enough to expiate your crimes? Your suffering won't contribute to anyone's happiness. This time, you will be unscrupulous enough to lie with a smile on your lips. He doesn't need to know anything—you have to protect his happiness!—and you two can be happy together regardless of all the things you had done.

g.
"Here's the blue rose…”

"Here's the blue rose for your picky princess! I bet she can feel the pea!"

"I think she resembles Sleeping Beauty more—surrounded by castle walls of thorny roses, which tortured and killed all her previous suitors!"

As idiotic as the decision seems—you would stay if it weren't for the smile he flashes you when he leaves An & Ail's flower shop, a blindingly dazzling smile, which burns the *fleur-de-lis* into your cold skin, a smile which you'll eventually take from him. Stroking your cheeks and your neck with the lavender-blue flower, whose intoxicating fragrance bewitches your nose, he tells you that he has bought it because "you liked their petals so much"—alluding to the moment you brushed your palm over the heads of the roses in his bedroom.

*Once upon a time, attentive, generous, beautiful Red Riding Hood handed a werewolf with reddish-brown fur the bluest rose of the woods, whereupon the lycanthrope thanked him with a nuzzle and flashed him an apologetic smile. "I think you deserve to know the truth. It's been a harsh winter and I was starving. I've mauled your parents and a few of your people to death. But if you still want to stay with me for life, I swear I'll be good and suppress my wolfish nature to be with you until the end of time!”*

*After recovering from this shattering blow, which had broken his heart and rendered him speechless, Red Riding Hood tossed the rose, seized his hunter's knife, and slew the beast, whose fur he donned afterwards as a reminder of why he could never love again.*

Losing yourself to maudlin self-pity is easy—you know you're embarking on a journey leading inexorably to disaster, walking with eyes open into a fatal car crash or even plane crash without the slightest motivation to escape. You're by temperament cautious, and the recent concurrence of events have only convinced you that you should have fled at the first stirrings of interest even if you believed that a rose would "smell as sweet by a different name".

You wonder if you would have connected the dots sooner, the moment you saw the Kanji of his name, if the original name of the Black Organization hadn't retreated to the back of your mind after so many years. The Field of Stars… The light of hope… "Sherrinford Hope" (or "Sherringford Hope", as Doyle misspelt it in his memoirs) was the name Arthur Conan Doyle originally chose for his great consulting detective before he changed it into "Sherlock Holmes", a name faintly reminiscent of its original meaning.

*Anokata*, the new Sherrinford Hope, even blushes when he hands you the flower. He refuses to tell you its name, however, as though saying its name aloud would devalue its worth.

"Paris!" he says instead, much to your dismay, as the very name of the city stirs memories of the coin you tossed at M Jean Black's house. "Before the Organization went down, I met up with Haruka-san in Paris to negotiate with her and to keep an eye on her father's 'agents motards' friends. Yaten told me you were in Paris at the same time as well. He is sure he has seen you with Haruka-san in a cosmetics store on the Champs Élysées. Pity I was playing the guitar at Quai Montebello and missed you!"

"You negotiated with Tenoh-san?"
He gives you an amused, knowing smile and wraps his arm around your shoulder, pecks you on your temple, and rubs your cheek in a reassuring gesture.

"If you're anxious about me finding out that Haruka-san was one of the crows, don't be! I've known that Haruka-san worked for my parents ever since I met her at Infinity—Tomoe accidentally revealed it to me." Or maybe Tomoe intentionally gave Haruka-san away because he resented her for controlling him—Seiya muses. Did you know that Haruka-san was the crow in charge of Infinity? It must have been difficult for her to juggle her duties as the youngest crow of the Organization and her responsibilities as the leader of another vigilante group.

Your face must have taken on a horrified expression when the full scale of Tenoh-san's double game dawned on you, as your boyfriend runs his warm fingers through your hair and fondles your head the way one would ruffle a cat's fur.

Taiki had hacked into the secret services', the Organization's, and Anokata's computer networks—Seiya's perfect middle brother is scarily competent when he wants to excel at something—so Three Lights were well-informed about the overall state of affairs by the time the band disbanded. When the situation got sticky and the secret services prepared to take down the Organization's American and European headquarters, Seiya wanted to make sure that Haruka-san wouldn't change sides since he never knew where and with whom her loyalty lay.

"I doubt my parents knew. I think they accepted her into their circle of crows because they were impressed by her audacity although they knew they had to keep an eye on her. Perhaps it was their way to redeem themselves after executing her mother? Taiki thinks they liked her because she reminded them of myself—everyone says we have the same temper."

Seiya doesn't believe in the idea of expiation—neither can he believe that Haruka-san has ever believed in it. Both of them are convinced that only two things matter in life: knowing what you want and knowing how to get it; and neither of them believe in redemption since one can't undo what one has done. Seiya couldn't think of any reason why Haruka-san should forgive his parents for executing her mother—either you move on with time or you don't, and Haruka-san struck Seiya as an especially unforgiving specimen of victim. Even if Haruka-san were forgetful and superhumanly kind like Odango, Seiya would have questioned the belief that you could forgive anyone for torturing and murdering your mother in cold blood. To aggravate matters, Haruka-san also had to secure the survival of her vigilante group, which was endangered by her connection to the Organization and the files Seiya's parents kept on them.

Regardless, Seiya came to an agreement with Haruka-san since both of them were looking forward to seeing the "Black Organization" fall. They respected each other—Seiya had often supported and protected Odango and her friends, to whom Haruka-san, Michiru-sama, and Setsuna-san belonged. If this had been the Wild West or sixteenth-century France and Haruka-san and Seiya had tried to settle the matter in a duel to death, neither of them would have lived to see the next sunrise. So why should they eliminate each other in a senseless vendetta when they could make use of each other's skills to survive?

There were as many scumbags inside the Organization as outside the Organization. Hence Seiya didn't mind the "rotten apples", as his parents called them, getting their just deserts. The secret services and the police could canvass, jail, and grill those losers for all he cared, which was going to entertain the investigators and lawyers for a few years. Using the Organization's cloud, Three Lights were going to move the information stored in Pandora's Box to a new Pandora's Box so that neither Tenoh-san's vigilante group nor the blackmailed people needed to fear their governments when the Organization fell.
"I was already on the way to the ship when you deactivated Pandora's Box, which set my parents' backup plan in motion," stranger-san informs you with an amused smile, generously failing to add that your actions have ruined his life. "Their will—a hidden file in the cloud to which the Night Baron was attached so that the email would self-destruct a few seconds after it was opened—was sent to all the high-ranking codename members of the Organization, triggered by the email Pandora's Box sent to the blackmailed people the moment you wiped out the hard drive. Even Taiki was shocked—none of us expected Kudo and his friends to discover the whereabouts of Pandora's Box. My parents had clearly underestimated Haruka-san's father, who had known more about it than he had been letting on."

This is a mistake he would never have made as Anokata, Young Moriarty distractedly muses. He would simply have wiped out all his mortal enemies in a swift strike instead of succumbing to dangerous sentimentality.

By the time the headquarters fell victim to the secret services, the Organization had already relocated to other places. The highest codename members and the crows had "tied up all the loose ends" (taken out the people who knew too much) and distributed code names to insignificant members, who didn't know much about the Organization, so that the members the secret services caught were small fish of no importance; and Three Lights were prepared to smuggle their parents (and their comatose sister) out of the country in case there was a traitor in the inner circle and they were no longer safe on Kinmoku Sei. Seiya often brooded about how to prevent his parents from inciting a revolution since he knew he couldn't appease them with lies and empty promises for years, but he would never have expected to lose them to cancer so that he was forced to take over their organization…

Stranger-san is talking with the careless, cheery insouciance of a somnambulist wandering towards a precipice, forgetting that you're a stranger he has known for less than a day. It strikes you that love is a dangerous disadvantage and you would make a fine spy just as you once made a fine traitor, but the thought fails to give you satisfaction as it might have in other circumstances.

Recalling your conversation with Seiya's middle brother, you're dimly aware of having escaped disaster by the skin of your teeth. *I'll never forget a grudge—and even if I wanted to, I'd never forgive…*

For years, he has been haunted by the paranoid suspicion that the cancer which turned his energetic, rugged parents into lunatics who would burn down a whole isle wasn't natural, that it must have been caused by a mysterious drug since the speed of mental erosion was preternaturally fast—stranger-san tells you when you two pass the entrance of Mizuno-san's hospital. His parents' excellent health might have been affected by the constant pressure of their position as Anokata, which they liked to repeat over and over again so that Kakyuu would worry about them and urge Three Lights to visit them more often—but Seiya couldn't believe that his parents must have been in the final stage of death when he visited them on Kinmoku Sei for the last time, in December, a few days before he went to Paris…

His voice is laced with an emotion you know too well—remorse over a tragedy he believes he could have averted. On the other side of the street are the fountain with the harp-playing Gemini and the flat boulder where you two sat the previous night; but the scene seems as unreal as if it had never taken place now that the streets are alive with vehicles and people.

After the downfall of the Organization, when both Kudo and you were bedridden with pneumonia,
Hattori asked you whether you wanted the party to be in Tokyo or in Osaka, in which case he was going to tell Agasa-hakase to come. Hattori had already asked Kudo, who believed that it was for the best if the party took place in Osaka since the Professor was aching for a change of air after being confined to waiting in Beika for weeks.

Why don't Kudo and you choose the location you want? I don't mind either. Preoccupied with the impasse between Kudo and you, you couldn't even pretend to care.

I'll ask'em te come te Osaka then!

The image of Kudo and you standing together in front of the Professor's grave is still engraved on your mind; and your stomach lurches at the thought that Three Lights must have stood together at more than one grave after the Organization fell. Seiya didn't find a critically injured surrogate father who would pass away in a private hospital, surrounded by the children he loved. The corpses on Kinmoku Sei must have been burned beyond recognition—ashes and other unrecognizable remains of people, pets, and plants scattered about the sea and the isle which Seiya and his brothers called home.

"I wish…"

"I wish I'd seen you when we were both in Paris," your stranger says, returning the smiles of the people on the streets, who turn their heads to gape at you and him. "We would certainly have met if I hadn't felt like repeating the street musician experience."

He caught a cold singing "Charade" at Quai Montebello… Snow flakes swirled around the trees and buildings, settled on his clothes and his face, and piled against the bare tree trunks and against the facade of Notre Dame de Paris, covering the gargoyles in white winter coats and hats as if either Mother Holda or the Snow Queen were having a blast; but the quay was teemed with people on their way to the Christmas markets, and he was paid extremely well.

"Charade?" Your voice is so shaky that he halts in his tracks to gaze down at you in concern.

"Yes, 'Charade'! Do you know the song? My mother's favourite, which she often sang to her best friends." It's about lies and deceit in love—a masquerade which ended when fate pulled the strings and love left while "from the darkened wings, the music box played on..." His mother suffered from the annoying habit of imposing her interests on others, buying them her favourite books, giving them samples of her perfume creations, forcing them to learn her favourite song.

"When we played our charade

We were like children posing

Playing at games

Acting out names

Guessing the parts we played..."

Singing the familiar melody, he instantly sweeps you into his arms, whirling around with you to the haunting, lonely Parisian waltz from three years ago. This time, you two aren't only moving in
sync with each other but also in sync with the music, bending together in the rising wind as if you two were dancing on a swaying ship.

Or rather on a gravel path in a park, as he has led you over the busy street without you noticing. People stop and stare; but this time, they may stare as much as they want. A few of them even laugh and clap. The wind is picking up as if a storm will rise. You're back on Pandora's Box but you don't mind.

"Fate seemed to pull the strings

I turned and you were gone

While from the darkened wings

The music box played on..."

His phone rings, ruining the mood and shattering the dream with its pitiless, brutal realism.

"You should answer it—maybe it's important!"

Your boyfriend flashes you a grateful smile, relieved that you've taken the decision out of his hand as all good (non-jealous) lovers do.

"Ah, Odango!"

He sounds like he always sounds when he talks about her—affectionate in a matter-of-fact way, as if nothing has changed for him and he will love her forever, his girlfriend and her husband be damned!

"She wants to see me as soon as possible—this afternoon at the latest but not now since Mamoru-san is about to come home. It sounds very important but she doesn't want to discuss it over the phone. I can ask her about your handbag when we meet." He throws you a questioning look over his shoulder. "I'll tell her about us if you don't mind."

You don't mind. What's Odango like?

She is just like him, from his description of her, and you begin to wonder why he is drawn to you, or why you're drawn to him if you two have so little in common.

"Do you have many friends?" he asks.

"Not many, but I have a few from my time as Haibara Ai."

Noticing that you aren't going to elaborate and don't propose to introduce him to your friends, he changes the topic.

"Come to think of it, we have mutual acquaintances!" He smiles at the thought. "I wonder what Haruka-san will say when she learns that you and I are together."

You aren't the only person who knows about your crimes, you realize, shrinking inwardly from the people on the streets—nosy strangers who will gape and whisper. You won't only have to deal with fans, reporters, colleagues, and acquaintances, but Seiya's friends happen to be Tenoh-san's allies as well.

You wonder how things could have been if your stranger and you had met earlier—if the timing of your love hadn't been off—and the visions of the alternative future which will never be cuts you
like the thorns of hundred-year-old roses.

"I've forgotten to tell you that Yaten said he was sorry for his behaviour earlier. He has always been impatient and rude, but after Kakyuu's accident, he completely lost it."

Kakyuu got into an accident when a rogue member attacked Haruka-san, or at least that was the version Haruka-san and his parents offered Seiya and his brothers, which must be true since the case was closed and the traitor was executed. Accepting their parents' invitation, Taiki even watched the execution out of intellectual curiosity but reported afterwards that he couldn't feel anything—no pity, remorse, anger, or satisfaction, only the utter futility of it.

"I didn't attend the execution—but I wish I had. I'm sure I'd have enjoyed shooting the little rat!"

His moody eyes have become as cold as Gin's, sparkling as if they were diamonds lit by an icy blue fire—but perhaps it's not fair to compare Seiya to Gin when you could compare him to yourself instead. Your face must have shown the same expression when you practised shooting at Tenoh-san's place.

Haruka-san, who suffered from concussion after the crash, passed out after drawing her unconscious companion away from the street. Cars and bikes drove past them but no one stopped to help. Mizuno-san told Seiya that, if Kakyuu had received help a few hours earlier, she might have had a real chance of recovery.

For a fleeting moment, contempt and disgust flicker in turns over your boyfriend's face, whereupon his bright eyes cloud over just like another pair of eyes you've seen. You wonder what he would say if he learned that one of the people who didn't help Kakyuu was you, that you had been on a date with Gin while she was lying on the pavement.

Slowly—inevitably—like a grizzled, embittered enchantress, the feeling of smouldering resentment you thought you had forgotten rises to the surface. To your irritation, he seems able to feel you withdrawing from him, as he interlaces your fingers and darts you anxious, puzzled glances from piercing blue eyes, which peer into the darkest depth of your soul.

"What intelligent eyes you have!"

"The better to see you with!"

People turn to stare and to throw him wondering glances and adoring smiles, ignoring you as if you didn't exist at all. Walking with Seiya has begun to give you the odd feeling that you're invisible whenever you don't want to be seen—as if you could refuse to interact with the outside world and appear or disappear as you please.

The house with the azalea shrubs draws nearer as you two arrive on the street where you live. Soon your landlady will sprint through the gate with a triumphant smile, secretly congratulating herself for waylaying and apprehending you and your date.

You can feel panic rising when it dawns on you that Kudo can appear at any moment—it would be just like him to launch a hunt for you the moment he wakes up and notices that you're gone. Your detective has never let himself thwarted by a simple lock. If Seiya and Kudo ever cross each other's path again—and they will meet someday if you remain in this relationship—their talkativeness will put both Tenoh-san and you in danger.

Without Watson's knowledge, Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty, nemeses and doppelgängers, might have compared notes:
"Did you suspect that I wanted you to bring down my syndicate?"

"I regret to inform you that I didn't—but I'm sure I'd have noticed if I hadn't been distracted by the woman."

"A Scandal in Bohemia" seemed to insinuate that the real mystery had been overlooked by Watson and neglected by Holmes, who had been so enthralled by the woman that he couldn't really see her. Why was Irene Adler so desperate to marry her lover before noon (and was Irene's noon an allusion to Cinderella's midnight)? Irene Adler's problem was apparently one which a hasty marriage and two tickets to Europe could solve. In your case and in this modern age, a marriage and a flight to another part of the world won't solve anything.

The top layers of stranger-san's hair are dancing in the cool, damp wind, framing his head like sunbeams mirrored in the ruffled water of a lake or a sea.

"You look like an Apollo-logo with your uncombed hair."

He laughs, giving you the sort of smile which makes the whole world disappear.

"I'll take it as a compliment. But it's hard to tame them—I've almost given up on combs."

Nothing can break your spirit like wild hope, Tenoh-san once claimed, opening an illustrated travel guide to show you a picture of the Doge Palace, where the fourth pillar stood glaringly out of line towards the lagoon. There is less space on the platform of the fourth pillar than on the platforms of other pillars—and it's probably only a legend or a lie, but Tiziano Scarpa reports in Venice is a Fish: A Sensual Guide that the Venetians used it to mock the prisoners condemned to death. If the prisoners succeeded to balance from one side of the fourth column to the other side of it without slipping from the narrow platform before they were executed, they were allowed to go free—but of course the chance that anyone managed to do this was so tiny it was almost nonexistent.

It doesn't hurt to grab the minuscule chance if you have nothing to lose, does it? You yawned as you turned away to focus on the map of Paris.

She raised her brow in amusement.

But you always have something to lose, kitten! Your dignity, your pride, your spirit—all the things you want to preserve even when you know you're going to die. Life is about knowing your boundaries and exploring them to change them—not about jumping off a cliff to see if you'll survive. You've only lost when you've given all you've got and still failed because you've never had a chance. Pinning all your hopes on one single card and having it shattered is Death in its purest form.

"Regarding the rose—" Seiya indicates the flower in your hand, burning up and agonizing about the choice of words as if he were proposing to a dragon. "We've known each other for a few hours and I know you only meant it to be a joke… but if you can imagine spending the rest of your life with me just like I can imagine—"

"Well, that was nice!" Raising your hand holding the rose, you flash your stranger an impersonal, genial smile. If this were a game of poker, you would win against the king of gods. "Thanks a lot for last night and the lovely morning. But since I'm not cut out to deal with all the concessions one has to make in a steady relationship, I fear that's it!"

"Shiho!" He refuses to let go of your hand, "I love—"
"Please don't! Please don't call, don't write, and don't stalk me since I don't want this to turn into a case of fatal attraction!"

If this is only about his parents, you two could simply agree to disagree. He loved them and you didn't. Does it really matter?

"Your beloved parents have executed my sister," you could have added, but since you don't want to hurt him more than you already have, you bite back the observation. When it comes to the Organization, it has become difficult for you to differentiate right from wrong, good from bad. During the trial at Pandora's Box, Gin must have protected you by distorting the facts, or your life had been spared by Anokata because you were the Organization's head scientist and they thought that an accident wasn't sufficient reason to execute a codename member.

"Please give me a chance—you liked me enough to stay with me before you met Taiki and Yaten!" His voice is dangerously persuasive and more addictive than a hard drug, tempting you to forget about what you're fleeing from. "I'm sorry if I was too clingy! Let's just go out together without all the talks of marriage! I'm sure that I—"

A scratching sound from above draws your attention and you jump, dismayed at the thought that Kudo has woken up and will find Seiya and you together. A voice in your head tells you to control yourself, but you can't resist and, letting go of his hand and staggering back a step, lift your eyes towards your window.

No need to be terrified since it's not your detective but only the wind, which has knocked a branch against the balcony rail, your stranger wryly remarks, flashes you a self-mocking, distant smile, and takes a step back from you.

"I don't want Kudo to see us together!" You would rather not face the challenge to explain everything that happened between your stranger and you to your detective without giving yourself away.

"I see." His long eyelashes cast shadows over his eyes as he gazes down, beholding the lavender rose, which you're keeping in front of yourself like a magic barrier. He looks desolated, mortally injured by the unexpected blow, but he makes an effort to adjust his face to a more neutral, almost nonchalant expression. "Thank you very much for last night."

Two people can play this game, and your stranger has turned out to be just as gifted at poker as you are.

*Even in the worst situation, a real showman mustn't forget to bow and smile.*

"Funny, isn't it?" he muses and gives a small, detached chuckle, keeping up the smile as if it had been permanently tattooed on his face. "Being dumped after a date is probably normal, but I've been dumped twice within the same night—by two different women!"

The world has brightened around you two, but the colours seem to have dulled. In your peripheral vision, you can see the last trace of the smile vanishing from his eyes as you slip through the gate, which he has held open for you. In the silence between you two, your heart hammers and the beeping in your inner ear resumes, rapidly, urgently, like a warning.

"Don't worry, I won't stalk!" he remarks with a dash of irony when you turn to check whether he shows any inclination to leave. "I'll be all right! I was dumb enough to run after a woman who
'I didn't love you for eight years. No need to worry about me because not even I am stupid enough to do the same thing again!"

"You aren't?" you shoot back, stung by the mocking smile which has just flitted across his face. "I'd never have guessed!"

"Don't kick at an opponent you've already brought down, Shiho."

Your name still sounds like a caress from his mouth, and it dawns on you that he has only joked and smiled and mocked you out of habit, turning on his basic survival mechanism in a situation he can't deal with. Overcome by a sudden urge to cry, you blink back the tears, knowing that you will have time for them later.

"Take care!" you tell him instead. You've opted for compassion and kindness, but words are empty in these situations, and your words come out even more civilly than intended.

"Take care." He imitates your aloof, distant tone, flashing you a guarded smile mirroring your own. "If you really want to dump me, you should go first."

True to his words, he doesn't move but stays rooted to the spot, watching you walk down the azalea-lined path from the gate to the entrance of the house. You hesitate for a moment when you pass the trash can, as the rose and the box of gyoza in your hands are liability you've almost forgotten about. Throwing both away before you return to your apartment so that Kudo won't ask pointed questions would be the easiest solution.

In front of the internal staircase, you lean your back against the closed front door, waiting for Seiya to leave, but the scent of the half-blossomed flower you're holding lingers in the air like an unspoken promise. You've never received a lavender rose before.

You've never been swept off your feet by a stranger, have never been courted and doted on as if you were the queen of the universe, have never trampled on love so cruelly and so intentionally.

We're all heading towards the same destination, writing stories without happy ends. Pain can only last for so long, and you've had a taste of the rewards. Now that you've come so far, you might as well go through with this relationship to its sticky end—Pandora's Box, Tenoh Haruka, and Seiya's parents be damned!

Some cynics believe that the gods are at fault—gods love to be worshipped and thus feel threatened by humans who are too happy. Pessimists, the less cynical ones, prefer the theory that a soul mate is the scale for you to measure the people you meet so that you can rank your prospective lovers according to their resemblance to your soul's missing piece.

A soul mate is a muse who will inspire you to greatness and bring back the memories you need, helping you get back on your feet and saving you when you're lost and lonely—but a soul mate isn't a steady, reliable partner whose task is to accompany you through life. Whenever soul mates meet often enough or interact with each other long enough to recognize each other, disaster will strike.

Time ticks away, accompanied by the beeping sound in your head. Delusional romantics say that you'll feel a strange sense of déjà vu and embark on flights of fancy when you encounter a soul mate.

Red traffic lights which stay red for an eternity; a ball rolling to your feet; a bike steering towards
the cars as the driver evades you and the boy on the street (the idiot is just like Kudo, who believes one doesn't need a reason to save a life!); your hands pushing the little boy towards the pavement; the screeching sound of brakes (you know the bike!); a moment of distraction (have you two met before?); cars which drive way too fast (people who are always in a hurry are also the ones who always come late!); a car crash in slow motion…

The blazing sunset in the distance, which takes your breath away (like another sunset—it's spring, but the sunset reminds you of Gin and autumn leaves and you can still smell the kinmokusei).

They disappear as soon as they come, dissolving into nothingness, retreating behind the veil of consciousness like memories of a dream.

Hotaru-chan once told you her favourite legend during one of your visits at Tenoh-san's house, a story which reminded her of someone she knew: The phoenix, the mythological bird of time with red, gold, or sapphire-blue eyes and purple or reddish-golden plumage, once built a nest from aromatic herbs. In this fragrant nest the bird of dawn, weighed down by the one thousand years on its shoulders, waited for the sun to rise. When Apollo, the god of truth and healing and sunlight, arrived in his chariot, the phoenix faced east and sang him a song.

Mesmerized by the phoenix's voice and its beauty, Apollo paused to listen until the song ended. Then he whipped his horse in motion to continue his journey, and a spark from their hooves struck the phoenix's nest.

The old bird died in the blazing flames. But from its ashes, a young phoenix was born—a stronger phoenix arose. And the reborn phoenix soared high and, after a thousand years, when it was weighed down by the burden of age and couldn't resist the longing to be burned, returned to its birthplace and built a new nest. There it sang for Apollo at dawn and died again in his flames; and thus the phoenix was reborn and soared high again…

_I know you love to play with fire, Sherry._

You stare at the delicate lavender petals, waiting for this reckless mood to pass so that you can move on. Since the feeling only intensifies instead of dying down, you step out into the cool morning air in a daze. Luck is on Tenoh-san's side, as stranger-san has disappeared without a trace. The street is bustling with strangers but conspicuously lacks the one you want to see. After you left, he must have run as if he had been chased by the devil.

Gazing about yourself in bewilderment, registering for the first time that the morning sun has climbed high and is now illuminating your surroundings with its cold, harsh light, you have the vague feeling that you've been on trial and failed the acid test this time.

—g.
After sunset—while the moon and the stars are momentarily obscured by blankets of broken, fast-moving clouds—the world around you two has darkened considerably, leaving only a few translucent violet and fuchsia streaks in the night sky. You thought you had stopped seeing shapes in clouds, but now they bear an uncanny resemblance to reddish, lilac threads of lace—of fate?—adorning the night's dark, mysterious silhouettes.

Black birds (ravens, not crows, judging by their croaky calls and their wedge-shaped tails) are circling above. To a more superstitious mind, they would seem like an omen of death; but to you, they've lost their status as harbingers of doom. A few moths have gathered around the lamps and the lanterns, casting their nervous, erratically fluttering shadows on your bench and on the path behind you two.

"Have you ever told Kudo about the goals of the Organization?" Seiya asks, changing the topic when he notices that you aren't ever going to tell him your reasons for dismissing him in such an offhand manner.

"I've never dared to!"

The insinuation remains unspoken, but his quiet laugh tells you that he has grasped what you haven't spelled out.

"I'm sure my parents would have loved him—Kudo would have moved up the ranks in no time at all! My father told me the secret of happiness was to let go of impossible dreams. Romance was only beautiful as long as it didn't destroy one's life… If only he had been able to do what he had preached! My mother, on the other hand, often told me the story of the phoenix and compared the Organization to it—forgetting the instances in which the phoenix legend wasn't used to illustrate fresh beginnings but futile endeavour. Hope is always the last thing which dies—I still have to appease the highest codename members with lies and crazy schemes to keep them from launching self-imposed kamikaze missions."

Although he has changed into a pair of blue jeans, which are more suited for motorcycle riding than the trousers you chose for him this morning, he is still wearing the frilly shirt with colourful diamond-shaped patches, reminding you of a rather romantic depiction of the Fool or the Magician on a set of tarot cards you once spotted on a crime scene. Only a few hours ago you believed him to be a compilation of all your past loves, but now you can only see all the peculiarities which distinguish him from them.

"How did you survive after I wiped out Pandora's Box?" It's still difficult for you to imagine Seiya in the types of situations in which you had seen Gin.

Before flying to Chicago to meet the highest American codename members, he had downed a whole bottle of sherry—stranger-san admitted. He knew very well he was facing the real possibility of receiving the same treatment as the one the first-generation crows had given Harukasan's mother. It amazed him that no one had tried to assassinate him and his brothers on the way from the airport to the apartment they rented. Apparently, the Chicago faction had its own internal issues; and all Seiya needed to do was to add fuel to the flames so that his enemies would eliminate each other instead of turning on him.
"Of course I was prepared to do whatever I had to do—taking out anyone who stood in my way!—but the scariest thing about the enterprise was that winning was so easy it felt almost effortless: everybody was so tense and paranoid by the time the Organization went down that we didn't have to do much. I shot one codename member—a traitor who had tried to overthrow me—and framed another traitor for it... And hell broke loose before you could count to ten."

He falls silent as he waits for your reaction—presumably expecting a vehement condemnation of his actions or (more likely) the confession that you would have done the same had you been in his shoes. And you begin to doubt that either of you two would be acquitted if you two had to defend yourselves before the divine court of justice which Greco-Roman philosophers often appealed to.

"I shot Gin at Pandora's Box," you tell him instead.

"I thought so," he remarks, unimpressed by the revelation. "You aren't very good at hiding it!" Fixing you with his intensely curious, searching gaze, he asks when you don't elaborate, "Do you regret it now?"

You pause for a moment to imagine a world in which you hadn't created the twenty-six pills and hadn't shot Gin, in which Seiya didn't lead the Organization, and in which Kudo hadn't survived Pandora's Box.

"I don't think so."

He smiles in expectation, waiting for you to continue your story, but it's impossible for you to proceed without giving away too much. And your spirits sink when it strikes you that a relationship between you two would always be like this—a charade which will never end before love leaves.

The sound of his mobile phone startles you two out of the ambiguous silence. This time, the ringing tone is a different melody from the one you know although you believe it to be the melody of Three Lights' first single, having heard the intro before leaving Furuhata's bar after lunch. The radio must have played a medley of the first Three Lights songs during the announcement of the band's return.

Seiya rummages in a pocket of his jacket, which you're still wearing, draws out a small white mobile phone, which must be the one he uses for business connections and acquaintances, and swipes at the screen with a quick touch of his thumb.

You wistfully recall how the same thumb has brushed against your cheek and your lips, loosened the belt of your bathrobe, and drawn patterns on your knee. And the thought that it will take only a few words to bring back this morning and revive the love you've killed suddenly strikes you with unexpected force, pushing the voice of reason into the back of your mind.

"Time's up!" he sighs as he puts his phone away. "I must run now since we still have to fetch Taiki and Yaten. Shizuka-san is waiting for me in front of the park—in Haruka-san's car since Haruka-san has picked her up on the way to my apartment." He stares into the distance, where the twilit silhouettes of the skyscrapers loom like dark, ancient towers, with a puzzled frown. "Since Shizuka-san has told Haruka-san that you're with me at the moment, Haruka-san has asked me to send you her love."

That's it, chessmated by the Queen, you tell yourself with a sense of detachment, too numbed by the news to feel anything. Perhaps you should laugh at the irony that you've often admired Tenoh-
san's unusual swiftness of reaction without anticipating that, one day, you will suffer the consequences of her lightning speed. There is no mistaking what her gesture said. If you don't keep your hands off her friend, your caring but despotic former ally will stay true to her word.

The melody of last night—the song your stranger sang when you heard his voice for the first time—announces the arrival of a new message; and Seiya gives a wry smile after glancing at the screen of his black mobile phone, which he has fished out of the other pocket of his jacket.

Speak of the devil: Haruka-san is going to escort him to the airport, Seiya informs you as he scrutinizes your face with bewildered eyes. Your stranger is more intelligent than he believes himself to be, possessing the gift to see the whole picture and take in all the important details without consciously trying to analyze them. Your terror when you learned about the identity of his parents… your actions at Pandora's Box, which he can't explain… his conviction that his parents would never have incinerated Kinmoku Sei… your sudden refusal to stay in a serious relationship with him… Tenoh-san's desperate attempts to separate you two… You can tell with certainty that he has begun to connect the dots and is only one step away from solving the mysteries of his life; but thwarted by his belief in the essential goodness of the people near him, he is still grappling in the dark—and you would rather die a gruesome, violent death than letting him find the answer.

"Auntie, Uncle!" calls a tall woman in broken English, and the elderly couple, whose presence you've forgotten, join her on the path behind your bench. "It's already half past six—we must hurry!" Together they stride along the path which Seiya and you walked last night, towards the ginkgo trees and the azalea shrubs in full bloom.

Powerless against the forces of the whole universe conspiring against you two, you wordlessly take off his jacket.

"You can keep it if you want!" He looks just as miserable as you're feeling. "We can wrap the contents of my pockets into the shawl."

"Nonsense! Your jacket doesn't fit me—and I don't have space for… redundant stuff… in my closet!" To your distress, you realize that your tone sounds insultingly dismissive and harsh. But he appears to have hardened and grown accustomed to—or indifferent to?—your abuse, as he doesn't seem hurt by your behaviour.

After rising from the bench and slipping on the jacket you've handed him, he turns to gaze at you again. But he doesn't turn around completely, and you wonder whether he is already far away, in New York or on the plane—leaving behind his cold and fickle ex-lover, who has dumped him after only one night, to focus on all the things which truly matter in life. A ghost of a smile steals into his eyes before the corners of his lips curve up, and he gives you the same smile as the one he gave you under the balcony last night, the smile which reminded you of Akemi-nee-san's when you saw her for the last time. Even his smiles, which haven't lost their warmth, tell you it's time to say goodbye.

"You should go home now," he remarks, indicating your naked arms. "You're going to catch a cold if you stay here."

Even in your despair, you have to smile at his quaint, albeit not patronizing, chivalry.

"Are you going to accept the offer?" The urge to pin him down and force him to give you a definitive answer has become irresistible. "I mean the Hollywood remakes."

"I don't know yet," he admits. "What do you want me to do?" He is studying you inquisitively, curiously, with deep blue eyes which suddenly look centuries older than his age.
"I think you should do whatever you think is right," you respond after a moment of hesitation, realizing that telling him to pass up such an opportunity would be the height of selfishness. "Of course it sounds like a great project! Your brothers will be ridiculously happy to work with you again, and your fans will hang themselves or die of heartbreak if you don't come back."

Again you're falling into old patterns, you know—but the words are spilling out of your mouth as if someone else had written the script, and you inwardly curse yourself for digging your own grave as you proceed to list and elaborate on all the compelling reasons for his return. Being nice has seldom done you any good—but love often has a masochistic, idiotic side to it, which compels the most pragmatic people to cut into their own flesh and give themselves up in order to make the beloved happy.

"All right, I'm going to accept the roles!" he testily cuts you off. Seeing your reaction, he adds in a softer voice, "That is, if you don't want me to stay."

Since your voice has stopped functioning, you only keep staring past him across the pond. The ducks have paddled away in the meantime, and the wind is ruffling the deep water, distorting the reflection of the full moon. Reluctant to give up but unable to ruin his future for your selfish dreams, you fall into a long, stony silence before you slowly, laboriously, shake your head.

"Before I saw you again tonight, I thought I'd just wait for you here, hoping that you would return to me if we stayed in touch," he says at last, before he bends down and you raise your head, instinctively offering him your face. Wrapping his arm around your shoulder, your stranger kisses you lightly on your lips, drawing away the moment you feel his familiar heat on your skin. "I'll write to you and call you from New York—but as things are, I'd rather not stay here and watch Kudo and you get married and raise kids together."

He lingers on at the edge of the pond under the cherry tree, gazing down at you with dark, expectant eyes. It may be only wishful thinking, but you believe to see a flicker of hope in them, a hint of indecisiveness. He is waiting for your reaction, hoping for a protest or at least a remark indicating that his deductions are wrong or that you've changed your mind.

The temptation to reach out and take what you want without considering the inevitable consequences threatens to overwhelm you again—its persuasive voice is already whispering into your ear that you can get away with it if only you're smart and unscrupulous enough. In the distance, the last tints of red and gold are draining away from the horizon, leaving a cool, serene blue world behind while the memories of last night and this morning flit through your mind. Although it has lost none of its appeal, your string of memories is now interrupted by other recollections, which alter and modify the colours of your treasured gems like a dreary, ill-lit background rendered in erratic brushstrokes would have done: Gin's empty perfume bottle, Kakyuu's crushed body on the pavement, Rye's silhouette under the hotel window, the newspaper featuring the One Billion Yen Robbery and Hirota Masami's Death, the storm at Pandora's Box, the coin in Paris, the Professor's grave, the pond in Monet's House, Tenoh-san's phone call...

You've tried to conjure up Seiya's reaction to the truth—but no matter how hard you try, you can't even imagine how it will be. Perhaps he would stay with you out of obligation or sympathy—or simply because he would be too attached to you to leave, but the knowledge of how his parents died would break him in the end. As much as you'd like to believe it, you can't imagine a perfect world in which one can forgive one's partner such a deed.

A couple hours—even when each minute has been stretched to its limit and filled with shared memories—isn't long enough a timespan to make a decision which will ruin the life of your partner. Like the flower he gave you, this relationship is still too young and frail for the...
circumstances under which it has to grow; and you've been fighting against yourself for so long that you've become too weak to hurl yourself into a fire again, get burned again, and rise from it again. What you need is something that can withstand a harsh winter or even survive in a waterlogged and contaminated soil—something which doesn't necessarily have to be breathtakingly beautiful and wildly romantic but is steady and tough, surviving all the ups and downs life hurls at it. For you, life itself is hard enough.

"Take care of yourself..." you tell him, realizing at the same time that you're still a coward when it comes to the details which matter. Even if it weren't for the lump in your throat, it would be impossible for you to add the two words which could induce him to stay.

"Take care?" he echoes, exhausted. Then he gazes at you again, with weary resignation, which you've never seen in his eyes before. To you, his silent admittance of defeat is more tragic than if he had cried. But before you can react, he has already left you in fast, hurried strides, fleeing from the night which will be haunting you both. All of a sudden, the knowledge that you might have seen him in person for the last time hits you, and blinded by the tears which uncontrollably well up in your eyes, you can barely discern his retreating figure in the dim evening light.

The last casualty of the last fight or a long-overdue price... Even now, his gait is eerily fast and light—like the airy, weightless steps of a ghost at twilight.

g.

On the horizon, the sun can no longer be seen. The last band of light is still lingering there, a final reminder of what you've lost. A few birds are sailing across the sky—dark apparitions, whose mirror images are flitting across the pond shimmering in all shades of green, blue, silver, and gold.

He will return to the stage and the screen and—there is no doubt about it—resurrect his great career, which has never really ended. But your future is shrouded in mystery, hidden behind the dense veil of time. The last twenty-four hours have been so surreal that you wouldn't be surprised to learn that this was only a dream during the last breath of your life. You've recalled past moments of sorrow and happiness, seen one-time loves, friends, adversaries, and allies, made peace with yourself and the world, and tried to solve the mysteries of your life. You've been waiting in Charon's boat with a wild card and a key in your pocket, lingering for a moment on Styx or Acheron to gaze back at the world of the living for the last time.

The faint, regular beeping sound has restarted again—a chilling reminder of the steady, uninterrupted, ceaseless flow of time...

Or perhaps you've been on Chiba Mamoru's operation table and will survive—for Miyano Shiho is a cat with seven lives, who will cheat both Time and Death and even the Bosses of the underworld and heaven.

You find some consolation in the thought that, whatever may happen to you, the universe will continue to exist. The Detective Boys will grow up, mature, and become independent without needing either Kudo or you. Kaito will entertain the world with the most spectacular magic tricks. And your detective will continue solving cases like a messiah who can't rest, endangering himself and his loved ones, and—so you hope—get everyone out of danger.

Tenoh-san and her family will continue to deal with their enemies in their own way. Undeterred by Odango's secret infatuation with Seiya, Odango and her husband will stay happily married. Unless she meets her own stranger, Misa will keep sending her "Taiki-sama" love letters at least once a day. And Yaten-san and Taiki-san... You'd rather not dwell on your encounter with Shortie and Stick during what could be your last moment on earth, but you believe they will be all right since...
their brother is going to join them for their comeback.

Your beautiful stranger will continue to enthral his audience, turning heads and breaking hearts wherever he goes. Anokata must have foreseen the volatile, blind love he would always inspire when they heard his voice and saw his smile, which was why they named him Starry Night, the embodiment of everlasting, vain hope—the greatest evil or the only blessing from Pandora's Box.
Epilogue: When you finally...

When you finally close your eyes and abandon yourself to your exhaustion, resigning yourself to the reality that most people leave this world alone, you can feel his familiar presence hurrying back to you and force open your eyes. Silhouetted against the flickering green lanterns, the harsh, warm artificial light of the street lamps, and the soft, cool moonlight of the ending twilight, with his hair flying in the wind and his hands half-hovering, half-hanging helplessly beside the bottomless pockets of his jacket, he gazes down at you in silence and you both hesitate.

You know what he wants to say but can't, as words always fail you in these situations as well. Words, in this cynical, tired world, have the tragic tendency to distort the very thing they're supposed to express. The truth often remains hidden in the silence and between the lines, when no word can fill the gaps.

"Have you forgotten something?" you ask at last, a seemingly innocent question, whose mundane and pragmatic character successfully anchors this floating, ever-changing world to earth. "I thought you had to fetch—"

"I'll have to run, I know!" In spite of his words, he comfortably ensconces himself on the bench next to you. "But I think I can steal a few minutes."

The last rays of sunlight are hovering over the horizon, tinting the thin stripe of the starry sky a deep shade of mauve; and you finally remember what you've forgotten, what you've successfully banished from your mind: the wish to wake up from this eternal sleep, to take your life into your own hands and live—even when it's just for another day.

"Say, what would you do if you had very little time left?" Your voice is only a whisper, barely audible to yourself in the rustle of leaves around you.

He has succeeded to surmount all the obstacles on the way—breaking down the barriers between him and you even when you were too exhausted, too moody, or too scared of failure to let him into this Rapunzel fortress you've built. But the last obstacle is an enemy neither of you can overcome. Fate might have been your opponent, but Time has been your most fearsome adversary—the ruthless, merciless, faceless Boss, whose crows will always stay loyal and whose organization will always win in the end. You are proud that you've managed to cheat Time a bit, bending it, stretching it, changing it, stealing it—although you've always known that, eventually, it will get you.

He gives you a nostalgic glance and looks thoughtfully away, into the cool moonlight reflecting off the glittering pond, glowing in a silver-blue hue as the sunlight is fading. The faint buzzing, beeping sound in the distance has grown more distinct, pulsating away the eroding time in an erratic rhythm.

"Unfortunately..." He takes your hand, and his eyes twinkle as the merest hint of a smile curves his lips before he grins. "It's nothing I can do all by myself!"

From the inner pocket of his jacket, he produces a floribunda he has found on the way, claiming its colour is the most perfect blue he has ever spotted. The rose must be of a velvety red or rosé or lavender in daylight—but in the darkness of the ending twilight, snug in your cupped hand and in the shadow between him and you, reflecting the moonlight mirrored in the ruffled water of the
pond, it's as grey as a rose of the bluest blue.

Whatever may happen in your time and space—he and you will never meet again. You run your fingers through his hair and lean into his reassuring warmth, burying yourself in the familiar scent of his skin. The last ray of sunlight on the horizon fades away, and the world dissolves in an indigo haze.

The beeping stops—and the silence falls over the world while you two stay on the bench with each other but don't say a word, defying the last rule of the universe.

   g.a.t.

Your souls are still stuck between Acheron and Styx,

   exchanging caresses, which displease Charon.

The Gods can't agree whether you've won or lost.

   The Court has been adjoined,

   for the voting system

   is crooked.

   g.

The Bosses say you've lost. Minerva says you've won.

Justitia, nonplussed, consults worn scales, which don't work.

   Chronos complains that Time has been cut,

   and Ares is bored silly

   by the abysmal

   lack of

   blood.

   g.

Aphrodite is pleased that you have stuck by your ally,

While Felicitas is sulking, claiming you have ignored her help.

   Amor only laughed and loaded his torch and bow

   —and is shooting at Mercury,

   who has evaded them

   until now.

   g.

Fortuna and Apollo leave after wishing you two luck,
for all the three Fates have fallen asleep at the table.

Zeus is incensed at the general lack of respect.

But Nemesis remarks that Olympus is

badly managed.

As Olympus is burning and all the gods are fighting,

Charon, fed up, resolves to quit his job.

On Styx, under the moonlight,

the boat is cozy and quiet,

and you two kiss,

agreeing that

losing is

right.

G.a.T.

A/N 1:

I've finally completed a long multi-chapter! *glomps SN/Ritz, who has read and commented and chatted with me for years! The woman is just as indispensable just as she is great! I'm easily distracted and have many time-consuming hobbies. Without her, it would have taken me another decade to finish the story.

I'm curious to learn about what you think of the ending, so please feel free to discuss the story with me if you feel like doing it.

Kudos to the patient readers who've managed to follow this until the end despite my extremely slow and irregular updates over the years. Special thanks and virtual cookies to all the great readers who have pampered me with constructive reviews, especially those who have reviewed more than once and those who have supported me regularly! :) The discussions helped me to stay motivated.

I think I really have to expand this old A/N by thanking Muphrid, who has spoiled me with epic reviews and fic-related convos at the time I began to wonder whether anyone but Ritz, who got nagged into reading and reviewing despite having left the DC fandom, would get to the ending. It was the beginning of a wonderful though tumultuous waifuship! XD Grandpa will definitely gets a Christmas present for this.

Also, lots of thanks again to Rae and SN! Rae betaed the first chapters before the four-year hiatus, and SN betaed up to Chapter 19 during the editing stage. Both of them bravely fought against my long winding sentences. Maybe I'll learn to fight them on my own someday. XD
A/N 2:

Editing the first chapters was very hard since there was a four-year hiatus between Chapter 10 and 11, which caused a distinctive change in style when I resumed writing. Ritz was immensely helpful at this stage. (Thanks again, SN!) Afterwards (after Chapter 19), when Ritz seemed exhausted and I felt bad for asking someone else to beta such a long story, I edited the rest on my own. I think it was a good decision since it sped up the editing process, and ending this project helps me to move on to my next WIPs (especially to *Encounter in Venice*, which is the other giant project I hope to finish in this lifetime xd).

Lately, I haven't been very talkative when it comes to my own fics since, even though I still love receiving reviews, I've lost the desire to explain myself. In the end, all the things I want to say are in the stories. I hope the readers who get through them can find something in them to enjoy.

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**A few hints since this story seems to puzzle a few readers:**

Since Ritz once asked me in a review how the maths works when it comes to the ghost-stranger meetings: The maths does work out, but in a way which is different from what the original version of the ghost story proposes. ;)

Muphrid, who is a very attentive reader and also has some knowledge of poker, has guessed most of the plot except for the reason why "he" returned. I'll only say that, in this case, the Index of References might be helpful. :P

I seldom let other people's opinions influence my decisions, but sometimes reviews inspired me. For example Danny Longstride said in a review or PM about the ending that I can do whatever I want, but it shouldn't be the clichéd kissing-under-the-moonlight ending, whereupon I thought: Hey, this is ingenious! I can do this with a twist! It's a fairytale ending! XD

The plunny happened while I was writing the first version of *Encounter in Venice*. This fic was inspired by Ai's run of bad luck in the beginning of the DC series, Seiya's voice (this is an in-joke which only BSSM fans will understand), and the random observation that Seiya and Shinichi have the same initials and similar colour schemes although Seiya's colours are more intense while Shinichi's are brighter and softer. Three Lights' and Kakyuu's names are also too good not to be used for a utopia/dystopia discussion (Naoko Takeuchi is great at inventing names and puns for her universe!). To top it all, it's easy to link "Starry Night" to "One Truth" and to find a connection between Seiya's red rose, which alludes to the sun in Shintoism, and Apollo, the Greek god of truth and sunlight, which is why Seiya is the perfect choice for my version of Moriarty. I also used the opportunity to push the flashbacks I used in *Encounter in Venice* to the extreme and to play with tenses and the unreliable narrator.

I also think Shiho is so much more Sherlock-Holmes-like than Irene-Adler-like although you can see a bit of Irene Adler in her if you squint. Ai's cheekiness and quickness of speed when she is really motivated, also the slightly tomboyish edge to her otherwise feminine character, and the mix between kindness and ruthlessness do remind me of Irene Adler, but Ai's sardonic wit, moodiness, and solitary vein are more Holmes-like. Hence I've turned her into "Shiho Holmes" (or "Detective Ai" or "Sherry Holmes") for one case.

I didn't know (and I wasn't sure whether I really cared about) who Shiho would "end up with" while writing the story although I had different endings in my notes and kept rereading them to figure out the ending the fic should get—but I was curious about the readers' thoughts when it
came to the pairing since it says a lot about which type of couple the readers prefer. There are readers who love Shiho with stranger-san and readers who prefer Shiho with Shinichi (I let the readers vote twice, in an open poll and in a blind poll: Shinichi got two more votes in the first poll while it was a draw in the second). I love both pairings since I think both couple dynamics work well in real life. In the end, I chose the ending I believed to be the most fitting for the character developments and the plot.

I started writing this fic long after writing the first draft of *Encounter in Venice* and took my characterizations from that universe since I wanted to see the same characters interact in a different situation. There were a few premises I wanted to use, and I was curious about how things would develop. The story should explore the limits of verbal communication and question fixed moral codes and accepted patterns of behaviour. Every layer and every new fragment of memory should change the ending and also the meaning of the fic so that the readers can reread it more than once. There would be a reversed Shinichi-Shiho dynamic in the middle of the story, which may or may not change at the end of the fic; a sort-of one-night stand with "the stranger" (I almost chickened out since I expected to lose all my readership after that chapter although I went through with it after working out the pros and cons for the plot); and Shiho's musings on all the things which played an important role in her life. I've been very sick sometimes, and I often wondered how one would live if one had a very limited time.

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**Fic Inspirations for GaT:**

"*The Antidote*" by SN1987a/Ritzen/Ritz: in which Shinichi fails to clear up a misunderstanding

"*Fifty Pills*" by teainapot (juneaddams): If you ignore the one pill Shiho initially made for herself and only take the twenty-five pills intended for Anokata&Co and add the respective twenty-five antidotes to them, you get fifty pills. Also, I have the vague feeling that the phrase "*Scrooge of Beika*" must have been coined by June over a decade ago although I'm not sure when I heard it first.

"*No Strings Attached*" by Hikari-chan/Chitsuki/Tsu: I'm not a Kaito-Ai shipper, but I warmed up to the idea of a fleeting Kaito-Ai romance after reading Tsu's fic (which should have ended differently *shakes fist at Tsu*).

"*Lover's Path*" by Sky Samuelle: Initially, I didn't plan a funeral scene for Agasa. But after reading Sky Samuelle's lovely Shinichi-Ai one-shot (one of my all-time favourites), I just had to add one.

"*With this Ring*" by teainapot (juneaddams): The ending inspired me to write a story in which Shiho would keep Shinichi safe even if it means to sacrifice other people.

**Literary References:**

"*A Scandal in Bohemia*" by Arthur Conan Doyle: Watson to Holmes: "You would have been burned had you lived a few centuries ago." There is also a mini-reference to an adaptation (the *Sherlock BBC* series) when Shiho thinks that love is a "dangerous disadvantage" (which Sherlock Holmes said to Irene Adler in the BBC series)
A Study in Scarlett by Arthur Conan Doyle: the first Sherlock Holmes novel, parodied as a Study in Blue

William Maxwell quote from So Long, See You Tomorrow: "In talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw."

Fernando Pessoa quote from The Book of Disquiet: "Nostalgia for what never was, the desire for what could have been…"

Plato's Symposium: the idea that Zeus has split the human being into two halves, which were condemned to spend their lives in search of each other; also the concept of platonic love, which transcends one's love for one person to a universal love for all which is beautiful

"Folly, thou conquerest, and I must yield!"… Friedrich Schiller quote from The Maid of Orleans: Stupidity as the true ruler of the world; Taiki's translation of the second part of the quote is slightly different from the official translations

A rose would "smell as sweet by a different name"… William Shakespeare quote from Romeo and Juliet: balcony scene; in this case, the name of the rose turns out to be significant; also: a Kudo Shinichi would be just as sweet by a different name? (Seiya's and Shinichi's names begin with the same initials and allude to the truth: one truth, or the truth written in the stars)…
Postscript: Index of References

Postscript

Index of References:

A:

_Acheron_: in Greco-Roman mythology, Acheron is the river of woe, which branches out into *Styx* and _Cocytus_; the connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, the place where the souls are being cleansed from past sins

_Addiction_: Sherlock Holmes' cocaine habits; Shinichi's APAH addiction; the initial stage of infatuation

_Agos/Dolor_: personification of sorrow and grief

_Amor/Eros/Cupid_: god of love, who is often depicted as a cheeky boy or a teenager, whose stray arrows sometimes miss or hit the wrong target; lover of _Psyche_, goddess of the soul; during the wedding between Amor and Psyche, _wild roses_ were scattered by the three Graces

_Aphrodite/Venus_: Hellenistic goddess of love and beauty

_(Phoebus) Apollo/Apollon_: Hellenistic god of sunlight, truth and prophecy (for this reason, ravens are often associated with Apollo), also in charge of healing/sickness, music and poetry; moves the sun across the sky with his four-horse chariot every day, causing sunrise and sunset; is sometimes depicted as an archer with a silver bow; Apollo's sunlight burned the phoenix every thousand years; Apollo was feared by the other gods since he didn't only heal but could also strike from a distance; the sun caused Icarus' wings to fall apart (Icarus fell to his death after soaring too high)

_Ares/Mars_: Hellenistic god of war

"As Time Goes By": song lyrics by Herman Hupfeld (film music of _Casablanca_); a song about love in times of war; "as time goes by", "a kiss is still a kiss"

_Athena/Minerva_: Hellenistic patron goddess of heroic endeavour, gives strategic advice in war but also tends to prevent fights whenever possible

_Azabu Juuban_: Sailor Moon _Setting_

_Azalea_: beautiful but poisonous flower; symbol of temperance, self recognition, or fragile passion; given to a lover to tell them to stay as beautiful as they are: "Take care of yourself, for me."

B:

_Beika_: Detective Conan _Setting_

_Blue Moon_: an exception of the rule as in "once in a blue moon"; even a real blue moon can look red in areas in which it causes a total lunar eclipse; "Blue Moon" is the name of a lavender rose

_"The Blue Rose" by Maurice Baring_: marriage needs careful consideration; the princess, who
asked her suitors to bring her a blue rose, pretends that the rose of the suitor she has fallen in love with is blue

Butterfly: an allegory for Psyche, the Hellenistic personification of the soul (lover of Amor)

Camellia: humility; discretion; ideal love (Pink Camellia: Longing)

"Can't Fight the Moonlight": song lyrics by Leann Rimes

"Charade": song lyrics by Johnny Mercer (love as a game of pantomimes; film music of Charade, in which the protagonist falls in love with a mystery man, who appears dangerous as he changes his identities and who might be the enemy)

Charon: Hellenistic ferryman who carries the souls of the newly deceased across the river Acheron and Styx (the border between the world of the living and the world of the dead)

Cherry blossom: great accomplishment; fragility, evanescence; beauty of life

"Cinderella": slippers; going out for a dance; pretending to be a princess until the time is up and Cinderella has to go home

Chronos/Kronos: Hellenistic god of time

"The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter: a version of Little Red Riding Hood, in which Red Riding Hood survives by seducing the werewolf; compassion with the werewolf; there is a beast in everyone; maturity; coming of age; claiming your desires; coming to terms with your wild side; dangerous Full Moon

Crush: unreasonable, unexplainable attraction; a word with a violent connotation ("to crush", "crushing"); looks almost like the word "crash"

Cyclamen (Shikuramen): sorrowful resignation, farewell, death; all good things will eventually end; sincere affection, bleeding heart, true love

D:

Dodge Tomahawk: extremely fast, extremely expensive, non-street-legal, rather eccentric looking motorcycle; has space for only one driver in real life

Dolor: Algos

E:

Erynyes/Furies: three dog-headed, snake-haired goddesses; embodiment of self-cursing

F:

The Fates / The Moirai: the three incarnations of Destiny

Felicitas: goddess of happiness and good fortune

"The Fox and the Grapes": a viable coping mechanism when there no hope of success so that one
can let go

**Fleur-de-lis:** in Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers*, Milady was branded with the sign of fleur-de-lis as a criminal (her husband, the count de la Fère, hanged her when he saw the sign and, abandoning his estate, became a musketeer under the name "Athos", which refers to the mountain where women were definitely not welcome); a fleur de lis is also the French symbol for royalty (despite its name, it's probably not supposed to be a stylized lily but a stylized iris because in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a fleur de lis was an **iris** and not a lily).

**Fortuna: Tyche**

**Full Moon:** a recurrent image in BSSM; the werewolf curse is bound to the light of the full moon; there are two full moons in the night after the accident and during the sunset on the next day

**G:**

**Ghost:** embodiment of restless dissatisfaction; the ultimate outsider; lonely rebel

**Ginkgo:** endurance, vitality, duality, hope

**H:**

**Hades/Pluto:** god of the underworld, judge of the dead

**Hermes/Mercury:** fast-footed, winged-sandalled messenger

**Honey Locust:** tenacity in the face of adversity

"**Hope for Humanity**": a velvety, deep wine-red shrub rose with a mild fragrance, winter-hardy

**Hunger:** need of substantial food; only satisfied for a short time by sweets; few things are as frustrating as having one's food taken away and given to someone else just when one is about to enjoy it

**I:**

"**The Ice Maiden**" by Hans Christian Andersen: two lovers with social issues separated by death before their wedding; the muse's fatal kiss

"**The Snow Queen**" by Hans Christian Andersen: snow; platonic childhood friends get separated; distortion of the truth by focusing on the negative aspects of things and people

**Iris:** The Hellenistic goddess of rainbow; one of the goddesses of the sea and the sky; the flower was called **fleur de lis** in the Middle Ages

**J:**

**Jesters:** court entertainers in the Middle Ages would be idols today?

**Joker:** wild card which can replace any other card; design is based on the **jesters** in the Middle Ages; in some card games, Jokers are the most powerful cards, in other card games, they serve as an excuse to take a break

**Jupiter:** Zeus
K:

**Kinmokusei / Sweet Osmanthus**: memory; truth; nobility; fairy tale; "golden tree of life"

**Kronos**: Chronos

L:

**Lavender Rose**: love at first sight, mystery, enchantment, discretion, unobtainable love; giving someone the unattainable (the lavender rose is the only natural blue rose since other blue roses have either been genetically modified or dyed); more about them can be found in *The Red String of Fate* (Chapter 8), an alternative prequel to *Ghost at Twilight*, since different lavender roses have different meanings, Shiho misread the meaning of Seiya's present after the talk with the landlady despite having grasped its meaning subconsciously (another misunderstanding which wasn't cleared up in the story)

"The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen: mermaid princess turns into mute girl (whose feet hurt with every step she makes) out of love to the human prince; impossible love which can't be expressed verbally; after her death, the mermaid got the chance to receive an eternal soul by wandering the world as a spirit and making children happy

M:

**Mars**: Ares

**Medusa**: winged, snake-haired Gorgon (a female-bodied monster), whose stare turns the observer into stone; mother of Pegasus, a white winged stallion (which, in Sailor Moon, was also Helios, the keeper of dreams)

**Memory loss**: the ability to create new memories can be lost forever when the hippocampus is partially destroyed (often during an accident); on the other hand, brain traumas during an accident can foster long-term memory (eight years ago I did this or that…) and worsening short-term memory instead (where is the damn phone?; where have I left my keys?)

**Mermaid**: "The Little Mermaid"

**Mercury**: Hermes

**Minerva**: Athena

**The Moirai / the Fates**: the three incarnations of Destiny

**Morning Glory**: bond of love; brief love; eternal love; two lovers meet for one day once a year; love in vain

**Mother Holda**: snow; diligence gets rewarded; do your housework; do the bed every morning so that it snows

"Mr Fox": "Be bold but not too bold…"; curiosity killed the cat; marriage can be deadly

N:

**Nemesis**: inescapable agent of someone's downfall; Hellenic agent of divine punishment; personification of implacable justice, goddess who distributes divine retribution and who curses
arrogant mortals who have been blessed with too many gifts

O:

OCs: The landlady, the landlord, Igarashi Shizuka, and Shizuka's father are all OCs, but Misa is actually a canon side character (the little girl who drew Taiki a picture of a princess). I've only fleshed her out and given her the family name "Ishihara", which rhymes with "Haibara".

Orange Blossom: purity, innocence; marriage

Orange Rose: desire; pride

P:

Phoenix: firebird with a beautiful voice, usually associated with the sun god (Apollo in Greek mythology); symbol of time, resurrection, rebirth; often used as an image of an unconquerable spirit or fresh beginnings but also of futile endeavour and vain hope

Playing Cards: in most games, cards are ranked according to their numbers and court cards are higher than numbers, with the Ace as either the highest or the lowest card

Pluto: Hades

Pond: a liquid mirror

Poker Hands: Full House: three cards of one rank and two cards of another rank (in this case three queens and two jokers, which can replace any cards); Straight Flush: a hand of cards in the same suit in a continuous sequence; Royal Flush: the highest Straight Flush, which consists of a Ten, Jack, Queen, King, and one Ace or a Joker to replace an Ace in the same suit. In theory, Five of a Kind is the highest hand in a deck which has Jokers (Pluto had all the Aces, and Jupiter had a Full House with two Jokers). Jupiter and Pluto would have won if they had been allies, which wasn't stated clearly in the rules, just as the rules appear to include the exception that Jokers can't generally replace Queens, which is why the highest hand in Shiho's game is really the Royal Flush, just as Haruka said.

Poirot: flamboyant detective in Agatha Christie's novels, who presents his deductions like a stage conjurer (assembling an audience, deceiving the culprit and the suspects, delivering the solution with a theatrical flair); Shinichi's way of exposing the culprit is very Poirot-like

Potted Flowers: shouldn't be given to a patient in a Japanese hospital because they're believed to be a bad omen

Price: looks almost like "prize"

Q:

"Queen of Spades": song lyrics by James Young and Dennis De Young (about gambling addiction and fickleness of luck); "The Queen of Spades" is also a famous short story by Pushkin, in which the protagonist loses the card game due to the Queen of Spades

R:

"Rapunzel": edible, light purplish blue flower; image of the high tower or fortress surrounded by
thorny rose bushes, which the prince has to climb to reach the girl, who has been imprisoned by the enchantress who raised her; the prince is blinded when he falls into the thorns of the rose bushes, but his vision is restored by Rapunzel's tears; balance, overprotectiveness, pain and confusion caused by love; compassion, seeing

**Red Riding Hood**: name of a winter-hardy floribunda rose

"Red Riding Hood": well-known fairy tale with many different versions (retold by Angela Carter in "**The Company of Wolves**"); stay on the path; listen to your elders; beware of strangers, especially when they're attractive, friendly, and gentle; alluring protagonist; dangerous men; the most beautiful flowers can't be found if you stay on the path; bringing food to the sick grandma as the heroine's quest; overprotective elders; consummating one's passion regardless of the consequences; **hunger**; **werewolf** curse; losing one's inhibitions during a **full moon**

Red Rose: courage, passion, love

"**The Red Shoes**" by **Hans Christian Andersen**: a pair of cursed new shoes which ruin the vain protagonist

**Red String (or Thread) of Fate**: the red thread that connects destined lovers, who are going to end up together (sometimes against their wishes)

**Red Veil**: In some cultures, brides traditionally wore or still wear red veils on their wedding day. The veils often serve as protection or are supposed to cover their embarrassment (for example in China).

**Rodin's "The Kiss"**: Auguste Rodin's sculpture "Le Baiser", which depicts Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo, who were immortalized in Dante's *Inferno*; the couple fell in love with each other while reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere and were killed by Francesca's jealous husband, who walked in on them

S:

**San Hikari**: The truth is bound up in the three lights of Shinto, which explains the foundation and the order of the universe.

**Scarlet Rose**: inner beauty, unconscious beauty, passion

**Setting**: a combination of BSSM's Azabu Juuban and DC's Beika and the real map of Tokyo; a few changes have been added (the bridge where Shiho breaks up with stranger-san)

**Shooting Stars / Meteorites**: heavenly shield, protection, divine gift, interaction between humankind and the divine (the Aborigines believed that shooting stars helped the souls of the dead to reach heaven)

**Silver Bullet**: means to destroy werewolves

"**Sleeping Beauty**": coming of age; magical kiss; success in love depends on the right timing;
sleeping beauty surrounded by deadly castle walls of thorny roses

"Some Like It Hot": song music from *Some Like It Hot*, but deleted from the movie; movie which Shiho and stranger-san parodied while standing on his balcony

"Something Stupid": song lyrics by C. Carson Parks (Frank Sinatra's last hit)

"Soulmate": the name of a lavender rose

*Squirrel*: crepuscular creatures which are active during dawn and dusk; responsible, caring mothers who will kick their children out of the nest when they're old enough to survive on their own

*Stranger*: stranger than "strange"; a person one has only met once or twice and might have talked with in passing; a possible future arch-nemesis or a possible future lover

"Strangers in the Night": song lyrics by Bert Kaempfert, Charles Singleton, and Eddie Snyder; loneliness fosters love at first sight

*Stranger on a Train*: Anna Karenina and Vronski were lovers who met as strangers at a train station (Shiho was reminded of strangers on a train in the first chapter); *Strangers on a Train*, on the other hand, was a Patricia Highsmith novel about a fateful encounter between nemeses

*Styx*: a branch of *Acheron*, which leads to the underworld

*Suicide*: committed by Anna Karenina, Juliet, Isolde (in Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*); the person who gave Sherry the teddy bear, which she neglected; M Jean Black

*Sunset*: endings, introspection, burst of passion, death; end of darkness; promise of a better future

*T*: 

*The Talented Mr. Ripley*: a novel by Patricia Highsmith with a protagonist who gets away with murder; in this case, it's "The Talented Mr. Shortie"

*Tarot Cards*: hidden in the scenery and various objects like the Wheel of Fortune (the giant wheel at Ichinohashi Park), the Queen of Swords (the Queen of Spades), The Tower (the towers at Infinity), The Lovers (the Gemini statue at the fountain near Mizuno Hospital) etc.; Seiya and Kaito are both The Fool and The Magician

*Themis/Justitia*: goddess of justice, sometimes depicted with scales

*Thornless Rose*: love at first sight

*Three Lights' age*: Their birthdays from the character descriptions in the manga were given without the year (Yaten's in February, Taiki's in May, and Seiya's in July), hence Yaten could be either the youngest or the oldest of the three brothers. Yaten is likely to be the oldest of the three. (On their first day at school, Yaten complained about Seiya behaving like a kid when Seiya tried to win all the games he participated in while Yaten would rather take a nap. Yaten is also the one who always introduces the group first although Seiya is supposed to be the leader ("Penetrating the darkness of the night" is Yaten's speech). Yaten's name (Night Sky) also matches the first sentence of the introduction. Taiki continues Yaten's sentence with "streaking through the atmosphere"—a part which alludes to his own name (Atmosphere). Seiya is the only one whose name isn't literally
connected to his part of the introduction ("resounding truth") although it alludes to it since the truth is "written in the stars" in the BSSM universe.)

**Train:** train of thought; **Strangers on a Train**

**Truth:** Seiya, Taiki, and Yaten's trademark introduction in BSSM: "Penetrating the darkness of the night, streaking though the atmosphere, resounding truth... "; Shinichi's One Truth; the detective's quest in all detective novels is to seek the truth and use the knowledge in a responsible way

**Tyche/Fortuna: Greco-Roman Mythology:**; capricious goddess of fortune, brings either good or bad luck

**V:**

**Venus:** **Aphrodite**

"**Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)**": song lyrics by Don McLean; madness, hopelessness, and suicide

**W:**

**Weeping Willow:** healing, immortality, flexibility, tolerance

**Werewolf:** the beast in man (or woman, in this case)

**White Chrysanthemum:** truth, candour, honesty, loyal love, friendship

**White Rose:** loyalty, sincerity, purity, fleeting beauty

**Wild Rose:** love and adoration; simplicity, life, protection; wild roses were scattered by the three Graces during the wedding between Psyche and Amor

**Wisteria:** mystery; marriage; new life; good luck

**Y:**

**Yellow Rose (fresh):** optimism, friendship, "forget me not"

**Z:**

**Zeus/Jupiter:** king of the gods, god of heaven

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!